

"AUGUSTA SAYS"

MOST OF THIS PAGE IS MISSING

It was a remarkably awkward thing for me, a quiet and sober old bachelor (somewhere about sixty, not to be too precise), to find myself suddenly in charge—apparently permanent charge—of two charming young ladies, both beauties, one an heiress, and the other of the modern and progressive variety. At first it was the thought of the upset of all my little habits that obtruded itself on my masculine, and therefore naturally selfish, mind. But Winnifred soon betrayed a truly feminine and lovable and coaxing way of making a perfect idol of each one of my little habits, considering them even more than the head-waiter at the club ever does, and I yielded gracefully to her attitude. It is women of Winnifred's type that make men selfish in little things; but in the long-run I fancy they leave the best of it. After my anxiety regarding my ways and habits was allayed, it was the awful moral responsibility that gripped my imagination. But very soon I was made to feel that Augusta had taken the awful moral responsibility entirely on herself. Augusta is the sort of woman that makes a man selfish in big things. She is rigidly critical of his daily conduct; but I suspect that in the long-run that kind of woman has the worst of it. These reflections, however, are only incidental to the main gist of what I am about to relate, which is the story of the wild doings at Ardstronach; for which wild doings, I am sorry to say, every one of the actors now holds that I, and I alone, was and am answerable. In vain do I plead that I am a gentle bachelor of sixty—there or thereabouts, not to be too particular; they say that I have a humorous face, and was cut out for the comic stage. Young people have little or no reverence now-a-days. Even that graceless scamp, my nephew, Tom McNab, alleges that he remembers his father once dropping a hint that I had been a very wild lad in my teens. Well, well, what I did at Ardstronach I did for the best, as it turned out. I know I enjoyed the whole play while the fun lasted; but, as to my being answerable had it not been for those two young women suddenly dropping down on me from the skies, would I ever have left the calm routine of my club existence to take part in any mad doings whatsoever?

First came my niece Winnifred Murray. What could I say? When her flighty step-mother married again there was certainly no home for the poor child in India. I was her uncle and her godfather and her guardian, and to whom else should she be sent? I went myself to meet her at Marseilles, remembering the little lass I had seen off four years before—swollen eyelids, and a wisp of very fair hair tied with a black ribbon. When she stepped off the gangway I received my first shock.

"Why, bless my soul, you are grown-up!" I exclaimed.

She flung herself on me and kissed me, and I was so taken aback that I gripped her shoulders with a hold like a vice, and, holding her off from me, stretched my neck to its utmost—I am not a very tall man. All this was instinctive, and not actuated by repugnance.

She raised two tearful and appealing blue eyes to my face.

"Did you not expect me to kiss you, Uncle Ben?" she cried.

"Well, my dear, you see," I began breathlessly, relaxing my hold, "it is a long time since any woman—"

"I suppose mamma was the last?" she remarked demurely.

I dismissed the subject with a nod.

"You are very like my poor sister," I told her when we were seated opposite one another in the train.

"So father said when I first went out; and that, I think, was why my step-mother disliked me."

Through a cloud of diaphanous veiling she looked at me with eyes like trustful summer stars, and her baby-mouth was soft and pink as a rose, and the wisp of very fair hair had spread out into a halo of glory. She did not look sensible; but she was eminently lovable.

"You are prettier than your mother ever was," I felt bound to add.

"Father said mother was the prettiest," she answered simply.

"Well, you were not even prepossessing when you went out," I reminded her. "You have changed surprisingly."

"Four years added to sixteen makes twenty, Uncle Ben," she laughed. "But you are not in the least changed. I always remembered you, and how your iron-gray hair stood up stubby all over your head, and how you were clean-shaven, and had such a merry twinkle in your eyes, and such a humorous twist to your mouth, and that you were hardly taller than me, and that you wore such big ties, and said such wicked things, and I was sure I should be happy with you, Uncle Ben!"

Well, I can't say it was altogether a complimentary description.

"Still, that's me—I can't describe myself better. I felt my hair and tie as she spoke. Certainly the former did stand stubby all over my head, and the latter was tied in a taller large bow under my chin.

"I hope that you will be happy with me, Winnie," I told her gravely; "but I had entirely forgotten that you were

grown-up, and I had thought of engaging a governess, and taking you to live in the depths of the country."

"At Ardstronach!" she cried, and then she flung herself on me again; and this time I submitted. It is wonderful how soon one becomes used to ways of that kind.

It appeared that she remembered Ardstronach, where she had spent her holidays often; that, indeed, many a time out in India, when the sun was hot and the step-mother was cold, she had thought about it. It had been her mother's early home. Ah! my heart turned to her then—it endeared the little thing to me more even than did the likeness in her to my poor dead sister—to find my niece was a McNab at heart. It is no doubt a ridiculous sentiment in an old bachelor, but I love my family traditions, doubtful enough though some of them be; and especially do I love that old barrack of a place Ardstronach. I know every sweep of the moors—know them when they are purple and honey-scented, and when they are green under the clear spring sky, and when they are white with snows; and I know every bend of our burn that foams down the hillside, and every silver birch and Scotch fir and stunted oak in our glen; and at the opening of the glen there stands Ardstronach, the homestead for over four hundred years of our branch of the McNabs, its white-haired barrels reflected in the silver loch.

"I divide my time between Ardstronach and my club in town, for it grows lonesome when I am all alone there. But as often as I can I have young Tom McNab, my nephew and heir, to stay with me. Tom feels about the place just as I do, and I look upon him as my son. And we are good friends, though he is a foot taller than I, and forty years younger—well, let us say thirty-five, to leave it more indefinite—for are we not both McNabs? Most of the people for miles round bear our name, and their forebears served our forebears; and as we trudge along with our guns, and our dogs to heel, I remember that Tom will have it after me, and his children. All this passed through my mind as Winnie spoke with such right feeling about Ardstronach. So then and there I evolved a grand idea, and, like a fool, I must needs blurt it out.

"If you are very good, Winnie, you shall marry Tom McNab!"

Suddenly, with the swiftness that a snail comes over the head of Ben Strongough, there she was in tears, as if her heart would break!

"You won't force me to marry someone I hate, against my will?" she sobbed.

"Bless me, child! what century do you suppose we are living in?"

"I—I don't know! I never knew any history; but she said you would make me. And I am sure—sure he will be—horrid!"

"Who told you I would make you? I only thought of the thing this very moment."

And then it all came out. It was that flighty baggage of a step-mother, with a tongue as long as my arm. And I had flattered myself that the very obvious idea had originated with me! Where it is a question of marriage, a woman is sure to have the first word as well as the last. Mrs. Murray had known all about Ardstronach, and that I had one nephew, a McNab, who was heir, and that he had no money of his own; and she had known too, it seems, that a good deal of what I have done with me, and that therefore it was desirable for Tom to marry a wife with shakels if he was to keep up Ardstronach and its traditions.

"You go home and marry the McNab cousin," she had told Winnie. Fancy the impropriety of suggesting the idea so abruptly to a sensitive girl! And she had tried to poison Winnie's mind against me by suggesting—Winnie, with her natural naive and child-like trust, repeated it all to me—that I had welcomed her to my home just for the purpose, and that Tom and I were both calculating on her fortune.

"And I meant to ask him to take the fortune and you to keep me!" Winnie sobbed.

I was at a loss to know what to do, so I beat a sort of rhythmic tattoo on her shoulder, as I have seen women doing to infants, and crooned—we were quite alone—"Didums, wasums, thud, where's the puff-puff going?"

She raised her head and laughed at that, just as the sun breaks out over Ben Strongough.

"Then you won't force me to do anything I don't like?" she asked.

"No—but you will like Tom—everybody does," I replied, with great diplomacy.

"And you will let me do everything I do like?" she went on.

"Certainly!" I assured her, thinking the request referred to the same thing from the opposite direction, so to speak.

"Then may I have the governess?"

"The governess?"

"Yes, you said a governess, and I'd like her."

"Bless my soul! Well, you shall have her, then," I promised lightly. It seemed innocent enough, but it is when

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