

A Bargain

Written for The Western Home Monthly by W. R. Gilbert

BERENICE slipped out through the postern gate, down the yew walk, and out into the tangled garden.

Lavender bushes edged the narrow path, and beyond their haze of faint blue stood hedges of sweet-peas, and great clumps of tall hollyhocks.

Behind the riot of color rose the grim grey walls of the castle, here and there clothed with dark ivy and clinging clematis, a splendid outline against a strong blue sky. Every sound, every scent was dear to Berenice Denison. She loved her home with an amazing fervor; loved it the more because at any moment it might be wrenched from her.

What an odious thing it was to be poor—and the eldest daughter!

It had been constantly dinned into her ears during the past twelve months that it was high time she cleared out. There were six sisters younger—all pretty, all portionless, all growing apace.

She had had chances. That was what the family complained of. They knew all about the young Earl of Lomond who had thought himself desperately in love with the new beauty. They knew, too, about the staid Cabinet Minister who had approached the Denisons and asked in early Victorian fashion for their eldest daughter's hand. She had likewise refused a rising young barrister, and a soldier with nothing in the way of means but his pay.

The "right man" had not turned up, though sometimes she saw him as a reincarnation of the boyish sweetheart of

its tapestries and carved ceiling, its treasures of pictures and china, and beautiful old French furniture, Berenice was there standing near one of the windows, a ray of sunshine filtering through tangled roses outside falling on her white gown, on the red carnations tucked into her belt, on her sweet, serious face.

Mr. Williamson halted for a perceptible moment. Berenice felt his eyes on her, and was annoyed.

Then, with simple courtesy, he was greeting her people, and she was included in the introduction.

Sir John took the visitor aside. Anon they vanished to look over the castle—to stay some time in the library, with its wide outlook over undulating park land—while Berenice fidgeted upstairs, and wondered how long the man would give them before he turned them out.

Lady Denison, whose placid fingers were engaged in the piece of knitting which she took up at odd moments, glanced at her eldest daughter—and sighed. It was a sigh she intended Berenice to hear. But Berenice did not speak.

The mother frowned a little. If only Berenice were like other girls, biddable, unassertive, what matchmaking might be done.

The American with his millions would probably need a wife. What more fitting than that a daughter of the former owner of the place should fill the post?

Lady Denison sighed again. And just then the door opened, and back came Croesus and his host.



A Welcome Oasis.

her baby days, for the memory of Humphrey Lingard remained with her, despite the flight of years.

She remembered now the tears she had shed—such bitter tears—when Humphrey came to say good-bye to her. He was a tall boy, then, ready to go out into the world, and determined to make a fortune.

"When I do it, we'll have a real good time," he told her, squaring his young shoulders. "I shall come back then, Vernerice!" (Which was his own special rendering of her name).

But that had happened years ago, and he had never come back.

As the girls grew up, things had gone from bad to worse, and now Sir John Denison was trying to sell the home of his forefathers to a wealthy American who would not stick at the big price asked.

The would-be purchaser was coming down to-day to see the place. It appeared that he fancied Castle Denison; had, indeed, set his heart upon it, and was prepared to write a cheque for the many, many thousands asked.

Somewhere a distant clock struck three. Berenice turned from her contemplation of flower borders and the far away line of blue hills, and went back to the turret door, through which she slipped just as a motor horn hooted aggressively in the gravelled quadrangle, round three sides of which rose the ancient pile of Castle Denison, and beyond which stretched the most wonderful emerald turf, with three age-worn and magnificent cedars as a back-ground.

So it happened that when a tall, broad-shouldered man in the late thirties was ushered into the state drawing-room with

Sir John Denison's rubicund face was one big beam. Evidently the negotiations were progressing favorably, and even if the baronet had asked a big price, it was not enough to frighten the man of millions.

"Well, I think we shall do a deal," said Mr. Williamson complacently. His eyes were on Berenice, who tried to smile and look pleasantly at the arbiter of their destinies. It was rather a pathetic little smile, and Lady Denison frowned again.

"I am delighted to hear it," she said graciously. "Sorry as I am to think of leaving the dear old place, still—"

"I shall take good care of it all," Mr. Williamson assured her. "But there's one thing—the duds I've got will look pretty small in this ancient pile—not enough to fit up more than half of it. I've an offer to make. If I add another ten thousand to the price, will you sell the place as it stands—furnished—with everything as I see it now?"

The Denisons gasped, and looked at one another.

"As it stands!" said her ladyship faintly. "You would allow us to remove—personal things, I suppose?"

"Oh, of course, I mean the furniture, china, and so forth. Think it over—it's a firm offer. What a view you have from this window!"

He crossed the great room, and stood in the embrasure of the window beside Berenice. The perfume from the great cluster of red carnations at her waist reached him.

"You love this place?" he asked her abruptly. At the other end of the room the Denisons were in close converse. To be or not to be was the subject, of course.



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