

POOR DOCUMENT

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Literature.

The Anthropologist's Coat.

(W. E. CULLE, IN "CHAMBER'S JOURNAL".)

It frequently gives one a shock of surprise to observe what small and even ridiculous matters serve to influence a man's development and success in life. Peter Sand, Master of Arts and Fellow of St. Gaston's, was dim-sighted, and failed on one occasion to distinguish between a black cloth and a dark blue. In this act lies the secret of his subsequent development and prosperity.

Three years ago Peter's development had apparently ceased. He lived entirely at the university town of Durbridge, was known as a Fellow of St. Gaston's, and occasionally lectured on anthropology. His friends had once expected a great deal of him, but for some time abandoned those expectations. One of two articles in scientific magazines formed the sum total to the press, and first portions of his great work on "The Epoch of Mastodon" had been written only to be thrown aside. The income from his Fellowship was more than enough for his comfort, and he had never liked society. Gradually he had withdrawn farther and farther into himself, until at the age of thirty-three he looked ten years older, and was a willing and contented recluse. His enemies called him "Fossil," and he was familiarly known among his friends as "Little Peter."

His usual course of life received an interruption one day in the form of a letter from Barron, an old school-fellow who had kept a distant but kindly eye upon Peter for some fifteen years. The Fellow of St. Gaston's read the letter several times before he could comprehend it fully. It appeared that Barron was about to be married, and wished his old friend to attend him as a bridesman.

A notification that he would be expected to act as bridesman could scarcely have caused Peter more distress. He was a groomsmen—at a wedding! It was ridiculous—impossible! To refuse Barron's request, however, seemed almost impossible for he was the last of the almost forgotten circle of early friends. After long and troubled consideration he sent an urgent note, asking the bridesman to come up to Durbridge and explain.

Barron came, a big fellow with a large heart, which even his work as a country solicitor had not succeeded in warping. He was one of those who had respected Peter's learning and had hoped for great things from him. His disappointment was extreme to find shrinkage instead of expansion, retreat instead of attainment. "Dear me, Sand!" he cried, "what's wrong with you? You look so old, and so very grey. Do you go out much?"

"Never," answered Peter, "why should I?"

"Why, because you are becoming a fossil, man," was the candid answer. "You must wake up—you ought to marry."

"What?" exclaimed Peter, astounded; "do I lose my Fellowship?"

Barron sighed, and felt very sorry that the Fellowship had ever been gained. Then he set himself to persuade Peter to run down for the wedding, and to undertake the duties of bridesman. It was to be a very quiet affair, he explained, and the responsibility was simply nothing.

Peter listened and gradually gave way. To the bridesman's amusement, he then began to make exhaustive notes in a pocket-book, so that he might not forget any of his duties.

"Since you don't care for going about much," said Barron, "you needn't come down until the day before. That will be fine enough, and you won't require so much luggage."

"Just my things," I suppose," said the Fellow. "It's lucky that I've had a first-rate new coat lately. It's a blue one."

"Blue?"

"Yes, dark blue. I intended to get black, but I'm short-sighted, you know, and when the patterns were submitted I chose blue by mistake; but it's a splendid thing, and my landlady tells me that it looks very well. I should like to see you credit at the wedding, old fellow."

He uttered the last words so kindly, and his confidence in the blue coat was so touching and childlike, that Barron could not speak the protest that rose to his lips. Besides, if Peter had to exert himself to fit a new coat, he might rebel, and give up the project altogether. So he held his peace, reflecting that there might be no law against blue after all. He did not know how criminal his silence was, for he was but a man and had never been married before.

When he reached home he found cause to regret his silence. The bride to be was supported by the presence of her sister, who had given up a position of ease as a countess's companion to fill the vacant place in the family circle. She had bright eyes and a quick tongue, and did not show such reverence for her new brother as she might have shown. Barron was continually at war with her.

"What is this Mr. Sand?" she asked, pertly. "What is his work?"

"Oh, he is a Fellow," said Barron.

"Indeed! That is very lucid. Is he a nice fellow?"

"He is a fellow with a capital F, Miss Pattie," was the rebuking answer—"Fellow of St. Gaston's College. His work is anthropology."

"And what is that, pray?"

"Oh, skulls," said Barron, "skulls and skeletons, and all that sort of thing. He's wonderfully clever—so clever that the St. Gaston's people give him two hundred a year as long as he remains unmarried. They know that marriage spoils clever men, so they bribe them to remain single!"

His triumph was but a brief one. "Has anybody ever tried to bribe you to remain single, John?" asked Miss Pattie, icily, and John was so demoralized by the thrust that in another moment he had betrayed the secret of Peter's coat.

The minutes that followed were decidedly troubled ones. Dumpty succeeded to incredulity, and indignation to dismay. It was in vain that poor Barron pleaded that Master of Arts and a Fellow of St. Gaston's might wear any coat he liked at any wedding he liked, and even claim to set the fashion. He was told that the idea was an outrage, and that he should have placed his foot upon that blue coat at its first appearance. Miss Pattie declared that she would never, never walk out of church on a blue coat sleeve, and that her brother Charles must be asked to act as bridesman instead of that Fellow. Then Barron said that he would prefer to walk into church with Peter in a blue coat than with any other living man in a black one. So the matter was left in the faint hope that the groomsmen might be smuggled into a more suitable garment on the morning of the wedding.

"It will be a bad thing for him," said Miss Pattie, "if he brings that coat down here."

"Oh," said Barron, "what will you do?"

"I shall simply look at him," was the quiet reply. "That's all."

Barron thought it might prove to be quite enough, for Miss Pattie's eyes had remarkable powers of expressing the cold emotion. He felt sorry for his friends, but was utterly helpless.

On the eve of the wedding Peter came and Barron introduced him to the bride's relatives. While the groomsmen were nervously congratulating the bride, he himself was forced to admit to Miss Pattie that the dreaded coat had come, and would certainly make its appearance in church. Her eyes flashed dangerously.

"Very well," she said, "I know what I promised, and she took the opportunity of working out her vengeance."

This was at supper, and Peter sat facing her. When he addressed her, she answered cold and without interest; if he glanced in her direction he met a look of abhorrence and contempt which even a scientist could scarcely have mistaken. Barron watched the play at first in fear, but afterwards in surprise. It appeared to him that Peter did not suffer the way he should have suffered. He certainly became more silent, but the glances he returned to the enemy were entirely free from confusion.

"You don't seem to hurt him," said Barron, at last. "What is wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong," was the sharp retort. "He is unusually stupid, that is all."

Barron laughed. "Nothing of the kind," he said. "His looking at you continually, and perhaps you notice that his interest is increasing. Don't flatter yourself, Pattie; please don't. He is simply studying the formation of your head for anthropological purposes. Peter has a mania for skulls."

After that blow Barron retreated with honor, and bore the groomsmen with him. They spent an hour before sleeping tugging over the duties of the morning. Peter making further notes in his book, with a face of unexpected interest and earnestness. When this was done, he said:

"That young woman, Miss Pattie, has a fine pair of eyes, John."

"Yes, said Barron, expectantly.

"Yes, I saw her looking at this old coat of mine. It is certainly faded, though I have never noticed it before, and perhaps she thought I intended to wear it tomorrow. I am glad that I have brought my blue one—I am sure she—I mean you—will like it."

What was coming to Peter? Barron gazed at his plesed and contented face in growing amazement. Could it be possible that Miss Pattie had worked this sudden change? Here was retribution, indeed!

"John," said the anthropologist, a little more hesitatingly, a little nervous. "I believe there is an old custom—a groomsmen's privilege—to—to—hem—to—kiss the bridesmaid."

"Eh!" cried Barron; "the bride, you mean, not the bridesmaid. You kiss the bride."

"Oh," said Peter, "the bride, is it not the bridesmaid? I see!" and it seemed to Barron that his face had fallen a little. But his own amazement was so great that he could scarcely take notice. He tried to imagine how Miss Pattie would look if Peter had tried to carry out his mistaken idea of the old custom, and he wished with all his heart that he had left the thing alone. Then he said "Good night" to Peter, and hastened away to his own room to laugh in peace.

In the morning Peter appeared in the dreaded coat. It was a dark blue, and he was so pleased with the effect that he could scarcely take notice. He tried to imagine how Miss Pattie would look if Peter had tried to carry out his mistaken idea of the old custom, and he wished with all his heart that he had left the thing alone. Then he said "Good night" to Peter, and hastened away to his own room to laugh in peace.

congratulated him upon his appearance, and nerved himself to meet the consequences.

The carriage took them to the church, where they prepared to wait in the vestry until the bridal party should arrive. There Barron spent a few anxious moments in reminding Peter of his various duties. It was at this point that a sudden and startling thought occurred to him.

"Peter," he exclaimed, "have you the ring?"

"What ring?" cried Peter, astounded.

"No—upon my word—I haven't!"

The bridesman said something under his breath. He had given the ring into Peter's charge on the previous night, fearing that he might leave it behind him, and up to the present moment that horrid coat had so troubled his mind that the matter had quite escaped him. The ring had been forgotten!

He made a rapid calculation. His house was not far off, and the missing article could yet be obtained. It was true that the bride would arrive directly, but if Peter made an effort he might return with the ring by the time it was needed.

"Run!" he said, "run!" You know where it is—in my writing desk. Run!"

Peter did not wait for further instructions. He caught up the nearest hat—which happened to be Barron's—and rushed out by the side door. There was no vehicle within call, and he could not go in search of one. Clipping Barron's hat over his brow, he ran away through the quiet churchyard, the tails of his blue coat flying behind him. When he reached the house he knocked twice without effect. Then he perceived that everyone had gone to the church, and turned in despair and helplessness. As he turned, he saw that one of the drawing-room windows had been left unshut and slightly open.

There was only one thing to be done. He gave a furtive glance up and down the silent, sunny street, and then pushed the sash higher. There was an awkward scramble, and the hat was crushed against the top of the window. In a moment more he was safely inside.

The desk was found but it was locked. In his agitation, Barron never thought of giving him the keys. Peter looked about him and picked up a poker and with one or two blows destroyed the lock.

There was the ring, all ready in its case. There, also, was Barron's pocket-book, which had been forgotten like the ring. Peter grasped the articles, and was turning to fly, when he found himself face to face with a policeman!

It was a painful meeting. The officer had observed Peter's furtive entry, and had quietly followed. It looked to him a clear case of daylight burglary, and he was one of those obtuse policeman whose convictions it is impossible to move. Peter tried to explain.

"It's a wedding," he cried, "and this is the ring. I came back to get, and they are all waiting at the church. I am the groomsmen."

Then came the tragedy of the coat. This policeman knew all about weddings, for he had often attended at the church doors in an official capacity. He had only served the costumes worn on such occasions, and he had never seen a groomsmen in a blue coat. He shook his head stubbornly.

"That's all very well," he said, "but I can't take it, sir. You must walk to the station with me. It's close by."

Peter saw the argument was vain. The entry by the window, the broken lock, the pocket-book, and, although he did not know it, the blue coat were all against him. By this time the ceremony must have begun, and perhaps they were waiting for the ring. With an exclamation of rage and despair he hurled both ring and pocket-book into the farthest corner of the room.

At the church, however, matters had gone perfectly. Barron soon decided that Peter must have got into difficulties, and then discovered the keys of his desk in his pocket. Making the best of the case, he secured the services of Miss Pattie's "brother Charles," as groomsmen, sent him to borrow a ring from one of the ladies, and then went to meet the bride, fully provided. Everything ran smoothly after that until the whole party proceeded to the bride's home for the breakfast.

From there a messenger was sent to look for Peter, and just as the breakfast had begun the missing groomsmen made his appearance. What he had suffered during the course of his adventures no one would ever know, but there was in his face a mingling of unutterable emotions. He was, however, not disheveled, he stepped into the room and stared about him. But his chief emotion was anxiety.

"Good gracious, my dear fellow!" cried Barron, "where have you been? What is the matter? Come and sit here."

Peter came. He looked at the faces of the bride and bridesman, and saw that all was well. Then he wiped his brows, with a sigh of relief.

"It is all right, then?" he said, huskily. "I have been in a terrible state—thought you couldn't get on without the ring."

He spoke so strangely that a smile appeared on several faces. One of those at the head of the table, however, did not smile. She was looking into Peter's face,

and it was her voice that murmured, "Poor fellow!"

Barron heard it and wondered.

The groomsmen took his seat, and told his curious story. It could not have been expected that the poor anthropologist would be a good story-teller; but here was a surprise for all. Peter had been shaken out of himself; he spoke with simple feeling and indignation; his words, his gestures, moved everyone to sympathy. The scientist had emotions, in spite of science.

"Imagine the position," he said. "The bridesman waiting for the ring which I had been entrusted to get—and the policeman, immovable, inflexible! My dear Barron, I was wild—I would have done anything—I would have given a fortune—I would have given up my Fellowship—to get away—I would."

He paused for breath. Every eye was upon him; every sound was hushed.

"The inspector," he said, "was a little more reasonable, and thus I am here. That policeman must have been a little

kind, I believe. I could not quite make out his explanation; but it seems that one of his excuses for arresting me was my coat—my—my coat! It is most extraordinary!"

Then, of course, everyone looked at Peter's coat, and saw that it was blue beneath the dust. Barron glanced at Miss Pattie, and she, perceiving his meaning, remembered her threat. She looked at Peter Sand once more, for the third time.

There was no ridicule now, no contempt. Peter's face was flushed, his eyes were bright. Miss Pattie saw in his countenance something that caused her own to soften, to change. She saw, perhaps, an old Peter, the one who had been Barron's friend and won Barron's faith and loyalty long ago—the plain, unselfish Peter, who, during the whole of this unhappy adventure, had not given one thought to himself. Or perhaps she saw in his face the Peter of a possible future, when some soft hand—a woman's hand—should have brushed away the dust of his studies, and sent him forth, neat and

burnished, to face the world again. Then Peter, in the silence, looked up also, and their eyes met. For a moment they gazed at each other, and for the second time that day Peter Sand's Fellowship became a small thing. Then the incident was over.

"Well, upon my word!" muttered Barron, who had seen it all. "Upon my word!"

As I have already hinted, everything came about through the blue coat. Had it not been for that, Miss Pattie would have paid no more attention to Peter than to any other fussy scientist, and Peter would never have been led to observe her eyes. Had it not been for the coat, Barron would not have forgotten the ring, Peter would have had no need to break into the house, the policeman would have no reasonable excuse to doubt his explanation. Further, but for the coat, Miss Pattie would not have given Peter that second glance which moved her sympathy for him, nor that third

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