

POOR DOCUMENT

THE AMERICAN BARON.

(By JAMES DE MILLE.)

Well, how do you know but that she was there?
By Jove!
And the bells of the sea-moon too?
She would be if she were there, Jove!

Yes, if there wasn't another present, that I was of.
Well, we won't argue about that, beside, I haven't come to the point yet.
The point?

Yes, the real reason why I'm here, when I'm wanted home.
The real reason why? Why, haven't you been telling it to me all along?

Well, no, I haven't got to the point yet. Drive on, then, old man.

Well, you know, continued Hawbury, after hunting all through Canada I gave up in despair, and concluded that Ethel was lost to me, at least for the present. That was only six or seven months ago. So I went home, and spent a month in a shooting-box on the Highlands, then I went to Ireland to visit a friend, and then to London. While there I got a long letter from my mother. The good soul was convinced that I was wasting my life she urged me to settle down, and finally informed me that she had selected a wife for me. Now I want you to understand, old boy, that I fully appreciated my mother's motives. She was quite right, I daresay, about my wasting my life; quite right, too, about the benefit of settling down; and she was also very kind to take all the trouble of selecting a wife off my hands. Under other circumstances I dare say I should have thought the matter over, and perhaps I should have been induced even to go as far as to survey the lady from a distance, and agree the point with my mother's plan. But the fact is, the thing was distasteful, and wouldn't bear thinking about, much less arguing. I was loath to go and explain the matter, and writing was not my forte. Besides, I didn't want to thwart my mother in her plans, or hurt her feelings; and so the long and the short of it is, I solved the difficulty and cut the knot by crossing quietly over to Norway. I wrote a short note to my mother, making no allusion to her project, and since then I've been gradually working my way down to the bottom of the map of Europe, and here I am.

You didn't see the lady, then?

No.
Who was she?

I don't know.
Don't know the lady?

No.
Old, too? Haven't you any idea?

Surely her name was mentioned?

No, my mother wrote in a roundabout style, so as to feel her way. She knew me, and feared that I might take a prejudice against the lady. No doubt I should have done so. She only alluded to her in a general way.

A general way?

Yes, that is, you know, she mentioned the fact that the lady was a niece of Sir Gilbert Biggs.

What! Sir Gilbert Biggs, with a start.

A niece—of Sir Gilbert Biggs? said Dacres, slowly.

Yes, and what of that?

Very much. Don't you know that Minnie Fay is a niece of Sir Gilbert Biggs?

By Jove. So she is. I remember being startled when you told me that and for a moment an odd fancy came to me. I wonder whether your child—angel might not be identical being about whom my poor dear mother went into such raptures. Good Lord! what a joke!

A joke! growled Dacres. I don't see any joke in it. I remember when you said that Biggs's niece was at the bottom of your trouble, I asked whether it might be this one.

So you did, old chap; and I replied that I hoped not. So you need not shake your gey locks at me, my boy.

But I don't like the looks of it. Neither do I.

Yes, but you see it looks as though she had been already set apart for you especially.

And pray, old man, what difference can that make, when I don't set myself apart for anything of the kind?

Dacres sat in silence with a gloomy frown over his brow.

Besides, are you aware, my boy, of the fact that Biggs's niece is begun? said Hawbury. The man himself is an infernal old bloke, and as to his niece—

Heaven and earth!—old old as Methuselah; and as to this one, she must be grandmamma—a second generation. She's not a true full-blooded niece. Now the lady I refer to was one of the original Biggs's nieces. There's no mistake whatever about that, for I have it in black and white, under my mother's own hand.

Oh, she would select the best of them for you.

No, she wouldn't. How do you know that?

There's no doubt about that.

It depends upon what you mean by the best. The one you call the best might not seem so to her, and so on.

Now I dare say she's picked out for me a great, rawboned, red-headed niece, with a nose like a horse. And she expects me to marry a woman like that with a pace like a horse. Good Lord!

And Hawbury leaned back, lost in the immensity of that overwhelming idea.

Besides, said he, standing up, I don't care if she was the angel Gabriel. I don't want any of Biggs's nieces.

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whole of Biggs's niece, in solemn convulsion with old Biggs at their head, had formally dismissed the whole matter, and finally resolved unanimously that she should be mine. Good Lord, man! don't you understand how it is? What the mischief do I care about anybody? Do you think I went through that fiery furnace for nothing? And what do you suppose that life on the island meant? Is all that nothing? Did you ever live on an island with the child-angel? Did you ever make a raft for her and fly? Did you ever float down a river current between banks burned black by raging fires, feeding her, soothing her, comforting her, and all the time feeling in a general fever about her? You hauled her out of a crater, did you? By Jove!

And what of that? Why, that furnace that I pulled Ethel out of was worse than a hundred of your craters. And yet, after all that, you think that I could be swayed by the miserable schemes of a lot of Biggs's nieces! And you scowl at a fellow, and get huffy and jealous. By Jove!

After this speech, which was delivered with unusual animation, Hawbury lighted a cigar, which he pulled at most energetically.

All right, old boy, said Dacres. A fellow's apt to judge others by himself, you know. Don't make any more set speeches, though. I begin to understand your position. Besides, after all—

Dacres paused, and the dark frown that was on his brow grew still darker.

After all what? asked Hawbury, who now began to perceive that another cause besides jealousy was the cause of his friend's gloomy melancholy.

Well, after all, old fellow, I fear I'll have to give her up.

Give her up?

Yes.

That's what you said before, and you mentioned Australia, and that rot.

This time I think of it, said Dacres, dimly, and regarding the opposite wall with a steady yet mournful stare—the more I think of it, the more I see that there is no such happiness in store for me.

Good, man! what is it all about? This is the secret that you spoke about, I suppose.

Yes; and it's enough to put a barrier between me and her. Was I jealous? Did I seem huffy? What an idiot I must have been! Why, old man, I can't do anything or say anything.

The man's mad, said Hawbury, addressing himself to a carved tobacco-box on the table.

Yes, I was. I was mad enough in ever letting myself be overpowered by this big's dream. Here have I been given myself up to a phantom—empty illusion—and now it's all over. My eyes are open.

Old, too! Haven't you any idea?

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Besides, said he, standing up, I don't care if she was the angel Gabriel. I don't want any of Biggs's nieces.

Dacres rose, took a couple of glasses of beer in quick succession, then resumed his seat, then picked out a cigar from the box with unusual fastidiousness, then drew a match, then lighted the cigar, then sent out a dozen heavy volumes of smoke, which encircled him so completely that he became quite concealed from Hawbury's view. But even this cloud did not seem sufficient to correspond with the gloom of his soul. Other clouds rolled forth, and still others, until all their congregated folds encircled him, and in the midst there was a dim vision of a big head, whose stiff, high, curling, crisp hair and massive brow, and dense beard, seemed like some living manifestation of a cloud compelling Jove.

For some time there was silence, and Hawbury said nothing, but waited for his friend to speak.

At last a voice was heard—deep, solemn, awful, portentous, ominous, sorrow-laden, weird, mysterious, prophetic, obscure, gloomy, doubtful, dismal and apocalyptic.

Hawbury?

Well, old man?

Hawbury?

All right.

Are you listening?

Certainly.

Well, I'm married!

Hawbury sprang to his feet as though he had been shot.

What! he cried.

I'm married!

You're what? Married? You married?

I'm married!

Good Lord!

Hawbury sank back in his seat, overwhelmed by the force of this sudden and tremendous revelation. For some time there was a deep silence. Both were smoking. The clouds rolled forth from the lips of each, and curled over their heads, and twined in voluminous folds and gathered over them in impenetrable masses. Even so rested the clouds of doubt, of darkness and gloom over the soul of each, and those which were visible to the eyes seemed to twirl, symbolize, characterize, and body forth the darker clouds that overshadowed the mind.

I'm married, repeated Dacres, who now seemed to have become like Poe's raven, and all his words one melancholy burden bore.

You were not married when I was last with you, said Hawbury at last, in the tone of one who was recovering from a fainting fit.

Yes, I was.

Not in South America?

Yes, in South America.

Married?

Yes, married.

By Jove!

Yes, and what's more, I've been married for ten years.

Ten years! Good Lord!

I'm true.

Why, how old could you have been when you got married?

A miserable, ignorant, inexperienced, dolt, idiot, and that of a boy.

By Jove!

Well, the secret's out, and now, if you care to hear, I will tell you all about it.

I'm dying to hear, dear boy, so go on.

And at this Dacres began his story.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MAN WIFE.

I'll tell you all about it, said Dacres; but don't laugh, for matters like these are not to be trifled with, and I may take offense.

Oh, bother, as if I ever laugh at anything serious. By Jove! no. You don't know me old chap.

All right then. Well to begin. This wife that I speak of happened to me very suddenly. I was only a boy, just out of Oxford, and just into my fortune. I was on my way to Paris—my first visit—and was full of no end of projects for enjoyment. I went from Dover, and in the steamer there was the most infernal, pretty girl. Black, mischievous eyes with the devil's light in them; hair curly, frisky, luxuriant, all tossing over her head and shoulders, and an awfully enticing manner. A pretty old bloke was with her—her father, I afterwards learned. Somehow my hat blew off. She laughed at it heartily and said God bless me to a hundred. Her eyes met. I made a merry remark. She laughed again, and there we were introduced. She gave me a little left hat of her own. I fastened it on in triumph, with a bit of darning, and wore it all the rest of the way.

Well, you understand it all. Of course, by the time we got to Calais, I was head over heels in love, and so was she for that matter. The old man was a jolly old John Bull of a man. I don't believe he had the slightest approach to any designs on me. He didn't know any thing about me, so how could he? He was jolly, and when we got to Calais he was convivial. I attached myself to the two and had a glorious time. Before five days I had exchanged vows of eternal fidelity with the lady, and all that, and had culled her consent to marry me on reaching England. As to the old man there was no trouble at all. He made no inquiries about my means, but wrung my hand heartily and said God bless me to a hundred. Her eyes met. I made a merry remark. She laughed again, and there we were introduced. She gave me a little left hat of her own. I fastened it on in triumph, with a bit of darning, and wore it all the rest of the way.

Her name was not a particularly attractive one; but what are names? It was Aretusina Wiggins. Now the old man always called her Arty, which sounded like the vulgar pronunciation of Harry. Of course I couldn't call her that, and Aretusina was too infernally long, for a fellow doesn't want to be all day in pronouncing his wife's name. Besides, it isn't a bad name in itself, of course; it's poetic, classic, and does not name a ship of war, but isn't quite the thing for one's home and hearth.

After our marriage we spent the honeymoon in Switzerland, and then came home. I had a very nice estate, and have it yet. You've never heard of Dacres Grange, perhaps—well, there's where we began life, and a devil of a life she began to lead me. It was all very well at first. During the honeymoon there were only a few outbursts, and after we came to the Grange she repressed herself for about a fortnight; but finally she broke out in the most furious fashion; and I began to find that she had a devil of a temper, and in her fits she was but a small remove from a mad woman. You see she had been humored and indulged and petted, and coddled by her old fool of a father. Till at last she had grown to be the most whimsical, convulsed, tetchy, suspicious, imperious, domineering, selfish, cruel, hard-hearted, and malignant young vixen that ever lived; and this evil nature dwelt in a form as beautiful as ever lived. She was a beautiful demon and I soon found it out.

I began out of nothing at all. I had been her adoring slave for three weeks, until I began to be conscious of the most abominable tyranny on her part. I began to resist this, and we were on the verge of an outbreak when we arrived at the Grange. The sight of the old hall appeared for a time, but finally the novelty wore off, and her evil passions burst out. Naturally enough, my first blind adoration passed away, and I began to take my proper position toward her; that is to say, I undertook to give her some advice, which she very sorely needed. This was the signal for a most furious outbreak. What was worse, her outbreak took place before the servants. Of course I could do nothing under such circumstances, so I left the room. When I saw her again she was sullen and vicious. I attempted a reconciliation, and kneeling down I put my arms caressingly around her. Look here, said I, my own poor little darling, if I've done wrong I'm sorry, and—

Well what do you think my lady did? I don't know.

She kicked me! that's all she kicked me, just as I was apologizing to her—just as I was trying to make it up. She kicked me when I had done nothing, and she alone had been to blame. What more, her boots were rather heavy, and that kick made itself felt unmistakably.

I at once arose, and left her without a word. I did not speak to her that night, and I used to pass her in the house without looking at her. This galled her terribly. She made the house too close to hear, and I used to hear her all day long scolding them in a loud shrill voice, till the sound of that voice became horrible to me.

Cure. I suppose, however, that I became alienated at once. That was impossible. I loved her very dearly. After she had kicked me away my love still held me. I tried to tell her that I was a man like me that she a common girl, the daughter of a small tradesman, should have kicked me; me, the descendant of Crusaders, by Jove! and of the best blood in England; but after a while pride gave way to love. I tried to open the way for a reconciliation once or twice.

To be continued.

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