

The Black Adder

By FRED M. WHITE

CHAPTER I.

TO the man in the street the name of Jabez McDougall conveyed little or no impression, but in certain circles it was not without weight and due importance. For Jabez McDougall of that ilk was a well-known American millionaire whose fortune had been achieved by dubious dealings in railway shares until the individual in question was supposed to be one of the richest men in the States. The capitalist was by no means a prominent man, except so far as Wall Street was concerned, and when the papers announced that he intended visiting England with a fashionable second wife and brilliant daughter nobody was much impressed with the exception of certain tradespeople in the West End of London. For McDougall was a buyer of curios and an investor in diamonds on an unusually large scale.

For the present McDougall was understood to have taken a furnished residence in Carlton House Terrace until such time as he could buy himself a few palaces in the West, to say nothing of some incidental country mansions. Therefore, when the papers announced that McDougall and his family had arrived in England there was no perceptible sensation amongst the six million odd people who go to make up what is known as London.

One or two of the half-penny papers appeared to be concerned in the knowledge that Carlton House Terrace was not ready for the descent of the clan McDougall when they finally swooped upon these fluttering shores. But, then, that was probably the fault of the house agent who announced to all and sundry whom it might concern that adequate quarters had been found for the visitors at No. —, Toddington Terrace, which, as everybody knows, is one of the most desirable situations West of the Marble Arch.

As a matter of fact, things had fallen out very favourably for McDougall and his satellites. No. —, Toddington Terrace was in the occupation of Mr. and Mrs. Masfield, a childish young couple of means who had suddenly made up their minds to travel, and had therefore placed their beautifully furnished residence in the hands of the agents. It was not exactly quite as palatial as the requirements of McDougall called for, but it was a veritable treasure house of magnificent old furniture, and a conservatory was a winter garden in itself. It was this same conservatory that seemed to attract Jabez McDougall, himself a lover of flowers and a well-known collector of rare and beautiful blossoms; indeed, the New York papers were fond of declaring that McDougall's glass houses had cost him from first to last the best part of two million dollars. It was strange that so hard a man immersed to the eyes in business should have had a hobby like this. But there it was.

The conservatory in question was built out from the back dining-room and stood upon what had once been more or less of a garden. It was fenced in with a mass of steel netting as a protection against destructiveness. For the back part of the house was lonely and on more than one occasion Toddington Terrace had been visited by burglars.

"You can stop right here and now," McDougall said. "I guess this place will suit me like a glove. Down at the docks I've got about a million dollars' worth of rare flowers and ferns, and I calculate I'll get them in here without delay. It seems to me that Mr. Masfield knows what he is doing, for that new arrangement of hot water pipes of his is the finest thing I ever saw."

So it came about that the end of the week saw most of the ordinary contents of the conservatory cleared out and stored away to make room for the bewildering array of tropical flowers and plants which McDougall had brought with him from New York. Why he should have gone to such a vast expense was known only to himself. But, then, most American millionaires have their fads, which might easily be more harmful than McDougall's innocent pursuit.

A few days later and the family were settled down in Toddington Terrace. To a certain extent they were incognito, so to speak, much as Royalty is when travelling abroad without the fuss and ceremony of state requirements. It became generally known that the McDougalls wished to see no one until they were finally established in the Park Lane residence which the head of the household was on the point of buying. All this had only been a matter of a day or two. There was no fuss and excitement, probably owing to the fact that a great foreign

potentate was visiting London, and the papers were fully occupied with the account of his doings. In an effete country like this even an American millionaire has to play second violin to Royalty, and the McDougalls appeared to accept their position with a proper pride and self-restraint.

All this did not prevent the dashing Mrs. McDougall and her step-daughter from indulging in those shopping excursions which are so dear to the feminine heart. Within eight and forty hours of the opening of the campaign in Toddington Terrace, the smart McDougall equipage was known at nine-tenths of the heading business houses in the West End of London. The principals and assistants tumbled over each other to do homage to this new Midas who scattered his money so royally, who paid cash for everything, and who rarely asked personal pointed questions on the subject of prices. The inevitable consequences followed. Long before the week was out the majority of the shopkeepers positively refused to accept ready money from these princely customers. It seemed almost like blasphemy to suggest business on a cash basis. Besides, how much better it was to book the orders at an advance of five and twenty per cent., and no awkward questions asked on either side.

Amongst the firms patronised by Mrs. McDougall and her daughter was that of Tunncliffe and Company, the well-known jewellers in Bond Street. Everybody knows Tunncliffe's, who are equally prepared to supply a simple gold chain or a diamond tiara worth the traditional king's ransom. It was needless to say that Tunncliffe so to speak welcomed Mrs. McDougall with open arms. Their only regret was that they could not do business with the stranger on larger terms, for up to a certain point Mrs. McDougall had been very frugal indeed in her orders. She hinted at what might happen later on, and there the matter rested until a day or two later when McDougall himself walked into the palatial offices in Bond Street and demanded to see the proprietor. Mr. Tunncliffe came forward all smiles to greet the little dried up individual who was popularly supposed to be the master of something like forty millions of dollars. With characteristic bluntness and an evident desire to waste no time Mr. McDougall plunged at once into his subject.

"I guess," he said, "you know my wife and daughter. Seems to me that they recommended me to come here. Unless I have made a mistake I've got no time for this sort of nonsense."

Mr. Tunncliffe hastened to assure his customer that there was no mistake, and that the young and fascinating Mrs. McDougall had already been graciously pleased to bestow her patronage upon the firm. Not, he concluded, that up to now the fair American had been quite so expansive in her orders as he could have wished.

"Well, I guess that's going to be all right," McDougall said drily. "Fact is, I want you to help me. As you know, my wife and daughter are nearly of an age, and between ourselves, I have trouble occasionally in holding the balance between them. If I give one a set of furs, I've got to give the other something handsome in the way of diamonds, and there you are. A sort of jealousy, I suppose. And now on Friday it is my daughter's twenty-first birthday. I calculate I want to do the thing handsomely, and I want you to show me something worthy of the occasion."

"Delighted, I am sure," Tunncliffe murmured. "And now, sir, as to the matter of price, if you will give me your limit——"

"There isn't going to be any limit," McDougall said drily.

CHAPTER II.

Here, then, was a customer after Mr. Tunncliffe's own heart. For the next half-hour or more he occupied his time in pouring out lavishly such a supply of gems as the American had never seen in his life before. They lay scattered about the jeweller's private office. They caught and imprisoned the sunshine till they fairly dazzled the eyes of the onlookers. If Mr. McDougall was properly impressed he did not show it for a moment.

"I guess you have overdone it," he said presently. "And, besides, I've got no time to stand and make a selection. I guess the half hour I've wasted here now means thousands of dollars out of my pocket. And after all said and done, I'd rather have one single flower