

# THE AMERICAN BARON.

(By James de Mille.)

In a short time their eyes were greeted by the appearance of the stranger above the precipice. He waved his hat again. Then he made some gestures, and detached the rope from his person. The drivers understood him as if this had been preconcerted. Two of them instantly unharnessed the horse from one of the sleds, while the others pulled up the rope which the stranger had cast off. Then the latter disappeared once more behind the precipice. The ladies watched now in deep suspense; inclining to hope, yet dreading the worst. They saw the drivers fasten the rope to the sled, and let it down the slope. It did not sink much, but slid down quite rapidly. Once or twice it stuck but by jerking it back it was detached, and went on as before. At last it reached the precipice at a point not more than a hundred feet from where the stranger had last appeared.

And now as they sat there, reduced once more to the uttermost extremity of suspense, they saw a sight which sent a thrill of rapture through their aching hearts. They saw the stranger come slowly above the precipice, and then stop, and stoop and look back. Then they saw—oh, Heavens! who was that? Was not that her red hood—and that figure who thus slowly emerged from behind the edge of the precipice which had so long concealed her—that figure! Was it possible? Not dead—not mangled, but living, moving, and, yes—wonders of wonders—scaling a precipice! Could it be! Oh joy! Oh bliss! Oh revulsion from despair! The ladies trembled and shivered, and laughed and sobbed convulsively, and wept in one another's arms by turns.

As far as they could see through the tears that dimmed their eyes, Minnie could not be much injured. She moved quite lightly over the snow, as the stranger led her towards the sled, only sinking once or twice, and then extricating herself even more readily than her companion. At last she reached the sled, and the stranger, taking off the blanket that he had worn under the rope, threw it over her shoulder.

Then he signaled to the men above, and they began to pull up the sled. The stranger climbed up after it through the deep snow, walking behind it for some distance. At last he made a despairing gesture to the men, and sank down.

The men looked bewildered and stopped pulling. The stranger started up, and waved his hands impatiently to Minnie. The drivers began to pull once more at the sled, and the stranger once more sank exhausted in the snow.

At this Ethel started up. "That noble soul!" she cried; "that generous heart! See! he is saving Minnie, and sitting down to die in the snow!"

She sprang toward the men, and endeavored to make them do something. By her gestures she tried to get two of the men to pull at the sled, and the third man to let the fourth man down with a rope to the stranger. The men refused; but at the offer of her purse, which was well filled with gold, they consented. Two of them then pulled at the sled, and number four bound the rope about him, and went down while number three held the rope.

He went down without difficulty, and reached the stranger. By this time Minnie had been drawn to the top, and was clasped in the arms of her friends.

But now the strength and the sense which has been so wonderfully maintained gave way utterly; and no sooner did she find herself safe than she fell down unconscious.

They drew her to a sled, and tenderly laid her on the straw, and lovingly and gently they tried to restore her, and call her back to consciousness. But for a long time their efforts were of no avail.

She lay there a picture of perfect loveliness, as beautiful as a dream—like some child's angel. Her hair, frosted with snow dust, clustered in golden curls over her fair white brow; her little hands were folded meekly over her breast; her sweet lips were parted, and disclosed the pearly teeth, the gentle eyes no longer looked forth with their pious expression of mute appeal; and her hearing was deaf to the words of love and pity that were lavished upon her.

## CHAPTER III.

THE CHILD-ANGEL AND HER WOE.

Mrs. Willoughby was in her room at the hotel in Milan when the door opened, and Minnie came in. She looked around the room, drew a long breath, then locked the door, and flinging herself upon a sofa, she reclined there in silence for some time, looking at the ceiling. Mrs. Willoughby looked a little surprised at first; but after waiting a few moments for Minnie to say something, resumed her reading which had been interrupted.

"Kitty," said Minnie at last. "What?" asked her sister, looking up. "I think you're horrid."

"Why, because when you see and know that I'm dying to speak to you, you go on reading that wretched book."

"Why Minnie, darling," said Mrs. Willoughby, "how in the world is it to know that you wanted to speak to me?"

"You might have known," said Minnie, with a pout—"you saw me look all round, and lock the door, and you saw how worried I looked, and I've a good mind not to tell you anything about it."

"About it—what it?" and Mrs. Willoughby put down her book, and regarded her sister with some curiosity.

"I've a great mind not to tell you, but I can't help it. Besides, I'm dying to ask your advice. I don't know what to do, and I wish I was dead—there!"

Willoughby, with some alarm. "Oh! I don't mean that; but I'll tell you what I mean; and here Minnie got up from her reclining position, and allowed her little feet to touch the carpet, while she fastened her great, fond, pleading, piteous eyes upon her sister.

"It's the Count, you know," she said. "The Count!" repeated Mrs. Willoughby somewhat dryly. "Well?"

"Well—don't you know what I mean? Oh, how stupid you are!" "I really cannot imagine."

"Well—he—he—he—pro—proposed you know?" "Proposed! cried the other in a voice of dismay.

"Now, Kitty, if you speak in that horrid way I won't say another word. I'm worried too much already, and I don't want you to scold me. And I won't have it!"

"Minnie, darling, I wish you would tell me something. I'm not scolding. I merely wish to know what you mean. Do you really mean that the Count has proposed to you?"

"Of course that's what I mean." "What puzzles me is, how he could have got the chance. It's more than a week since he saved you, and we all felt deeply grateful to him. But saving a girl's life doesn't give a man any claim over her, and we don't altogether like him; and so we have all tried, in a quiet way, without hurting his feelings, you know, to prevent him from having any acquaintance with you."

"Oh, I know, I know," said Minnie briskly. "He told me all that. He understands that; but he doesn't care, he says, if I only consent. He will forgive you, he says."

"Minnie's volubility was suddenly checked by catching her sister's eye fixed on her in new amazement.

"Now, you're beginning to be horrid," she cried. "Don't, don't!"

"Will you have the kindness to tell me," said Mrs. Willoughby, very quietly, "how in the world the Count contrived to tell you all this?"

"Why—why—several times." "Several times?"

"Yes." "Tell me where?" "Why, once at the amphitheatre. You were walking ahead, and I sat down to rest; and he came and joined me. He left before you came back."

"He must have been following us, then." "Yes. And another time in the picture gallery; and yesterday in a shop, and this morning at the Cathedral."

"The Cathedral?" "Yes, Kitty. You know we all went, and Lady Dalrymple would not go up. So Ethel and I went up. And when we got to the top I walked about, and Ethel sat down to admire the view. And you know, I found myself off at a little distance, when suddenly I saw Count Girasole. And then, you know, he—he—proposed!"

Mrs. Willoughby sat silent for some time. "And what did you say to him?" she asked at length.

"Why, what else could I say?" "What else than what?"

"I don't see why you should act so like a grand inquisitor, Kitty. You really make me feel quite nervous," said Minnie, who put her little rosy-tipped fingers to one of her eyes, and attempted a sob, which turned out a failure.

"Oh, I only asked you what you told him, you know." "Well," said Minnie, gravely, "I told him you know, that I was awfully grateful to him and that I would give anything if I could express my gratitude. And then, you know—oh, he speaks such darling broken English—he called me his mees, and tried to make a pretty speech, which was so mixed with Italian that I didn't understand one single word. By the way, Kitty, isn't it odd how everybody here speaks Italian, even the children?"

"Yes, very odd; but Minnie, dear, I want to know what you told him." "Why, I told him that I didn't know, you know."

"And then?" "And then he took my hand. Now, Kitty, you're unkind, I really can not tell you all this."

"Yes, but I only ask so as to advise you. I want to know how the case stands." "Well, you know, he was so urgent—"

"Yes?" "And so handsome—"

"Well?" "And then, you know, he saved my life—didn't he now? You must acknowledge that much, mustn't you?"

"Oh, yes." "Well?" "Well?" Minnie sighed. "So what could I say?" Minnie paused. Mrs. Willoughby looked troubled. "Kitty, I wish you wouldn't look at me with that dreadful expression. You really make me feel quite frightened."

"Minnie, said the other, in a serious voice, 'do you really love this man?'" "Love this man! why no, not particularly; but I like him; that is, I think I do, or rather I thought I did; but really I'm so worried about all my troubles that I wish he had never come down after me. I don't see why he did, either. I didn't ask him to. I remember, now, I really felt quite embarrassed when I saw him. I knew there would be trouble about it. And I wish you would take me back home. I hate Italy. Do Kitty darling. But then—"

Minnie paused again. "Well, Minnie dear, we certainly must contrive some plan to shake him off without hurting his feelings. It can't be thought of. There are a hundred objections. If the worst comes to the worst we can go back, as you say, to England."

"I know, but then," said Minnie, "that's the very thing that I can't do—"

"Can't do what?" "Go back to England." "Back to England! Why not? I don't know what you mean."

"Well, you see, Kitty, that's the very thing I came to see you about. This dreadful man—the Count, you know,"

has some wonderful way of finding out where I go; and he keeps all the time appearing in the very strangest manner; and when I saw him on the roof of the Cathedral it really made me feel quite giddy. He is so determined to win me that I'm afraid to look round. He takes the commonest civility as encouragement. And then you know—there it is—I really can't go back to England."

"What do you mean by that?" "A what?" "A—person," said Minnie. "A man?"

Minnie nodded. "Oh yes—of course. Really, when one thinks of one's troubles it's enough to drive one distracted. This person is a man. I don't know why it is that I should be so worried and so distracted by men. I do not like them, and I wish there were no such persons."

"Another man," said Mrs. Willoughby, in some surprise. "Well, Minnie, you certainly—"

"Now don't, don't—not a word; I know all you're going to say, and I won't stand it; and Minnie ran over to her sister and held her hand over her mouth."

"I won't say a word," said Mrs. Willoughby, as soon as she had removed Minnie's hand, "so begin."

Minnie resumed her place on the sofa, and gave a long sigh. "Well, you know, Kitty darling, it happened at Brighton last September. You were in Scotland then: I was with old Lady Shrewsbury, who is as blind as a bat—and where's the use of having a person to look after you when they're blind! You see, my horse ran away, and I think he must have gone ever so many miles, over railroad bridges and hedges and stone walls. I'm certain he jumped over a small cottage. Well, you know, when all seemed lost, suddenly there was a strong hand laid on the reins, and my horse was stopped. I tumbled into some strange gentleman's arms, and was carried into a house, where I was resuscitated. I returned home in the gentleman's carriage."

"Now the worst of it is," said Minnie, with a piteous look, "that the person who stopped the horse called to inquire after me the next day. Lady Shrewsbury, like an old goose, was awfully civil to him; and so there I was! His name is Captain Kirby, and I wish there were no captains in the world. The life he led me! He used to call, and I had to go out riding with him, and old Lady Shrewsbury utterly neglected me; and so, you know, Kitty darling, he at last, you know, of course proposed. That's what they all do, you know, when they save your life. Always! It's awful!"

Minnie heaved a sigh, and sat apparently meditating on the enormous baseness of the man who saved a lady's life and then proposed; and it was not until Mrs. Willoughby had spoken twice that she was recalled to herself.

"What did you tell him? was her sister's question. "Why, what could I tell him?"

"What! cried Mrs. Willoughby; you don't—"

"Now, Kitty, I think it very unkind in you, when I want all your sympathy, to be so horrid."

"Well, tell it your own way, Minnie dearest."

Minnie sat for some time regarding vacancy with a soft, sad, and piteous expression in her large blue eyes, with her head also a little on one side, and her delicate hands gently clasped in front of her.

You see Kitty darling, he took me out riding, and—he took me out riding, and he—took me to the place where I had met him, and he proposed. Well, you know, I didn't know what to say. He was so earnest, and so despairing. And then, you know, Kitty dearest, he had saved my life, and so—"

And so? "Well, I told him I didn't know, and was stockily confused, and then we got up quite a scene. He swore that he would go to Mexico, though why I can't imagine; and I really wish he had; but I was frightened at the time, and I cried, and then he got worse, and I told him not to; whereupon he went into raptures; and began to call me end of names—spooney names, you know; and I—oh, I did so want him to stop!—I think I must have promised him all that he wanted, and when I got home I was frightened out of my poor little wits, and cried all night."

"Poor dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Willoughby, with tender sympathy. "What a wretch!"

No, he wasn't a wretch at all; he was awfully handsome, only, you know, he—was—so—awfully persevering, and kept so at my heels; but I hurried from Brighton and thought I had got rid of him."

And hadn't you? "Oh, dear, no, said Minnie, mournfully. On the day after my arrival there came a letter, and you know, I had to answer it; and then another; and so it went on—"

"Oh, Minnie! why didn't you tell me before?" "How could I when you were off in that horrid Scotland? I always hated Scotland. You might have told papa."

Yes, he did, said Minnie, with a little asperity. "Did he write?" "Of course he wrote, in the same tone. Well, how did it end?"

"End! It didn't end at all. And it never will end. It'll go on getting worse and worse every day. You see he wrote and said a lot of rubbish about getting leave of absence and coming to see me. And then I determined to run away; and you know I begged you to take me to Italy, and this is the first time I've told you the reason."

So that is the real reason? "Yes."

Well, Minnie, my poor child, said Mrs. Willoughby, after a pause, you're safe from your officer at any rate, and as to Count Girasole, we must save you from him; don't give way."

But you can't save me. They'll come after me, I know. Captain Kirby, the moment he finds out that I am here, will come flying after me, and then, oh dear! the other will come, and the American too, of course."

The what? who? cried Mrs. Willoughby, starting up with new excitement. Who's that? What did you say, Minnie? The American? What American?"

Minnie threw a look of reproach at her sister, and her eyes fell.

You can't possibly mean that there are any more—"

There is—one—more, said Minnie, in a low, faint voice, stealing a glance at her sister, and looking a little frightened.

One more! repeated her sister, breathless.

Well, I didn't come here to be scolded, said Minnie, rising, and I'll go. But I hoped that you would help me; and I think you're very unkind; and I wouldn't treat you so."

No, no, Minnie, said Mrs. Willoughby, rising, and putting her arm round her sister, and drawing her back. I had no idea of scolding. I never scolded anyone in my life, and wouldn't speak a cross word to you for the world. Sit down now Minnie darling, and tell me all. What about the American? I won't express any more astonishment, no matter what I may feel."

But you mustn't feel any astonishment, insisted Minnie.

Well, darling, I won't, said her sister. Minnie gave a sigh.

It was last year, you know, in the spring. Papa and I were going to Montreal, to bring you home. You remember?"

Mrs. Willoughby nodded, while a sad expression came over her face.

And you remember the steamer was wrecked?"

Yes. "But I never told you how my life was saved."

Why, yes, you did. Didn't papa tell you about the heroic sailor who swam ashore with you? how he was frantic about you, having been swept away by a wave from you? and now he fainted away with joy when you were brought to him? How can you suppose I would forget that? And then how papa tried to find the noble sailor to reward him."

Oh, yes, said Minnie, in a despondent tone. That's all very true; but he wasn't a noble sailor at all.

What! "You see, he wasn't going to have a scene with papa, and so he kept out of his way. Oh dear, how I wish he'd been as considerate with me! But that's the way always; yes always."

Well, who was he?" "Why, he was an American gentleman, returning home from a tour in Europe. He saved me, as you have heard. I really don't remember much about it, only there was a terrible rush of water, and a strong arm seized me, and I thought it was papa all the time. And I found myself carried, I don't know how, through the waves, and then I fainted; and I really don't know any thing about it except papa's story."

To be continued.

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