

THE AMERICAN BARON.

(BY JAMES DE MILLE.)

Mrs. Willoughby looked at Minnie in silence, but said nothing.

And then, you know, he travelled with us, and papa thought he was one of the passengers, and was civil; and so he used to talk to me, and at last, at Montreal he used to call on me.

Where?

At your house, dearest.

Why, how was that?

You could not leave your room, dearest, so I used to go down.

Oh, Minnie!

And he proposed to me there.

Where? In my parlor?

Yes, in your parlor, dearest.

I suppose it's not necessary for me to ask you what you said.

I suppose not, said Minnie, in a sweet voice. He was so grand and so strong and he never made any allusions to the wreck; and it was—the very first time any body ever proposed; and so, you know, I didn't know how to take it, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings, and I couldn't deny that he had saved my life; and I don't know when I ever was so confused. It's awful, Kitty, darling!

And then, you know, darling, continued Minnie, he went away, and used to write regular every month. He came to see me once, and I was frightened to death almost. He is going to marry me next year. He used an awful expression, dearest. He told me he was a struggling man. Isn't it horrid? What is it Kitty? Isn't it something very, very dreadful?

He writes still, I suppose?

Oh dear, yes.

Mrs. Willoughby was silent for some time.

Oh, Minnie, said she at last, what a trouble all this is! How I wish you had been with me all the time.

Well, what made you go and get married? said Minnie.

Hush, said Mrs. Willoughby, sadly, never mind. I've made up my mind to one thing, and that is, I will never leave you alone with a gentleman unless—

Well, I'm sure I don't want the horrid creatures, said Minnie, and you needn't be so unkind. I'm sure I don't see why people will come always and save my life wherever I go. I don't want them to. I don't want to have my life saved any more. I think it's dreadful to have men chasing me all over the world. I'm afraid to stop in Italy, and I'm afraid to go back to England. Then I am always afraid of that dreadful American. I suppose it's no use for me to go to the Holy Land or Egypt or Australia; for then my life would be saved by an Arab, or a New Zealand. And oh, Kitty, wouldn't it be dreadful to have some Arab proposing to me, or a Hindu! Oh, what am I to do?

Trust to me, darling. I'll get rid of Girasole. We will go to Naples. He has no stop at Rome; I know that. We will pass quickly away from him, without giving him any pain, and he'll soon forget all about it. As for the others, I'll stop this correspondence first, and then deal with them as they come.

"You'll never do it, never!" cried Minnie; "I know you won't. You don't know them."

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE CRATER OF VESUVIUS.

Lord Harry Hawbury had been wandering for three months on the Continent, and had finally found himself in comfortable quarters on the Strada Nuova, from the windows of which there was a magnificent view of the whole bay, with Vesuvius, Capri, Baiae, and all the regions round about. Here an old friend had unexpectedly turned up in the person of Scone Dacres. Their friendship had been formed some five or six years before in South America, where they made a hazardous journey in company across the continent, and had acquired a familiarity with one another which years of ordinary association would have failed to give. Scone Dacres was several years older than Lord Hawbury.

One evening Lord Hawbury had just finished his dinner, and was dawdling about in a listless way, when Dacres entered; quite unceremoniously, and flung himself into a chair by one of the windows.

Any Bass, Hawbury? was his only greeting, as he bent his head down, and ran his hand through his bushy hair.

Lachryma Christi? asked Hawbury, in an interrogative tone.

No thanks. That wine is a humbug. I'm beastly thirsty, and as dry as a cinder.

Hawbury ordered the Bass, and Dacres soon was refreshing himself with copious draughts.

The two friends presented a singular contrast. Lord Hawbury was tall and slim, with straight flaxen hair and flaxen whiskers, whose long, pendant points hung down to his shoulders. His thin face, somewhat pale, and an air of high refinement; and an ineradicable habit of lounging, together with a drawing inclination, gave him the appearance of being the laziest mortal alive. Dacres, on the other hand, was the very opposite of all this. He was as tall as Lord Hawbury, but was broad shouldered and massive. He had a big head, a big moustache, and a thick beard. His hair was dark, and covered his head in dense, bushy curls. His voice was loud, his manner abrupt, and he always sat bolt upright.

Anything up, Scone? asked Lord Hawbury after a pause, during which he had been languidly gazing at his friend.

Well, no, nothing, except that I've been up to Vesuvius.

Lord Hawbury gave a long whistle.

And how did you find the mountain? he asked, lively?

Rather so. In fact, infernally so, added Dacres, thoughtfully. Look here, Hawbury, do you detect any smell of sulphur about me?

Sulphur! What in the name of—sulphur! Why, now that you mention it, I do notice something of a brimstone smell. Sulphur! Why, man, you're as strong as a lighted match. What have you been doing with yourself? Down inside, eh?

Dacres made no answer for some time, but sat stroking his beard with his left hand, while his right held a cigar which he had just taken out of a box at his elbow. His eyes were fixed upon a point in the sky exactly half-way between Capri and Baiae, and about ten degrees above the horizon.

Hawbury, said he, solemnly, after about two minutes of protentious silence.

Well, old man?

I have had an adventure.

An adventure! Well, don't be bashful. Breathe forth the tale in this confiding ear.

You see, said Dacres, I started off this morning for a ride, and had no more intention of going to Vesuvius than to Jerico.

I should hope not. What business has a fellow like you with Vesuvius—a fellow that has scaled Cotopaxi, and all that sort of thing. Not you.

Dacres put the cigar thoughtfully in his mouth, struck a light, and tried to light it, but couldn't. Then he bit the end off, which he had forgotten to do before. Then he gave three long, solemn, and portentous puffs. Then he took the cigar between his first and second fingers and stretched his hand out toward Hawbury.

Hawbury, my boy, said he again.

All right.

You remember the time when I got that bullet in Uruguay?

Yes.

Well, I had a shot to-day.

A shot! The deuce you had. Cool, too. Any of those confounded bandits about? I thought that was all rot.

It wasn't a real shot, only figurative. Figurative!

Yes; it was a—a girl.

By Jove! cried Hawbury, starting up from an easy posture which he had secured for himself after fifteen minutes of shifting and changing. A girl! You Dacres, spoony! A fellow like you, and a girl! By Jove!

Hawbury fell back again, and appeared to be vainly trying to grapple with the thought. Dacres put his cigar between his lips again, and gave one or two puffs at it, but it had gone out. He pitched it out of the window, and struck his hand heavily on the arm of his chair.

Yes, Hawbury, a girl, and spoony, too—as spoony as blazes, but I'll swear there isn't such another girl on the whole face of the earth; and when you bear in mind the fact that my observation, with extended view, has surveyed mankind from China to Peru, you will be able to appreciate the value of my statement.

All right, old man; and now for the adventure.

The adventure? Well, you see, I started for a ride. Had a misty idea of going to Surren to, and was jogging along among a million pigs or so at Portici, when I overtook a carriage that was going slowly along. There were three ladies in it. The backs of two of them were turned toward me, and I afterwards saw that one was old—no doubt the chaperon—the other was young. But the third lady—Hawbury—Well, it is enough to say that I, who have seen all women in all lands, have never seen anything like her. She was on the front seat with her face turned towards me. She was small, a perfect blonde; hair short and curling; a round, girlish face; dimpled cheeks and little mouth. Her eyes were large and blue; and as she looked at me, I saw such a bewitching innocence, such plaintive entreaty, such pathetic trust, such helpless childlike—I'll be hanged if I can find words to express what I want to say. The English language doesn't contain them.

Do it in Latin, then, or else skip the whole description. All the same, I know the whole story by heart. Love's young dream, and all that sort of thing, you know.

Well, continued Dacres, there was something so awfully bewitching in the little girl's face that I found myself keeping at a slow pace in the rear of the carriage, and feasting on her looks. Of course I wasn't rude about it or demonstrative.

Oh, of course. No demonstration. It's nothing to ride behind a carriage for several hours, and feast oneself on a pretty girl's looks! But go on, old man.

Oh, I managed it without giving offence. You see there was such a beastly lot of pigs, peasants, cows, dirty children, lazaroni, and all that sort of thing, that it was simply impossible to go any faster, so you see I was compelled to ride behind. Sometimes, indeed, I fell a good distance behind.

And then caught up again to resume the 'feast'?

Well—yes.

But I don't see what this has to do with your going to Vesuvius.

It has everything to do. You see I started without any fixed purpose, and after I saw this carriage, I kept on insensibly after it.

Oh, I see—yes. By Jove!

"And they drove up as far as they could."

"Yes?"

"And I followed. You see, I had nothing else to do—and that little girl! Besides, it was the most natural thing in the world for me to be going up; and the fact that I was bent on the same errand as themselves was sufficient to account for my being near the carriage, and would prevent them from supposing that I was following them. So, you see I followed, and at length they stopped at the Hermitage. I left my horse there and strolled forward without going very far away; my only idea was to keep the girl in sight. I had no idea that they would go any farther. To ascend the cone seemed quite out of the question. I thought they would rest at the Hermitage, drink some Lachryma Christi, and go back. But to my surprise, as I was walking about, I saw the two young ladies come out and go toward the cone.

I kept out of the way, as you may suppose, and watched them, wondering what idea they had. As they passed I heard the younger one—the child angel, you know, my girl—teasing the other to make the ascent of the cone, and the other seemed to be quite ready to agree to the proposal.

Now, as far as the mere ascent is concerned, of course you know that is not much. The guides were there with straps and chairs, and that sort of thing, all ready so that there was no difficulty about that. The real difficulty was in these girls going off unattended; and I could only account for it by supposing that the chaperon knew nothing whatever about their proposal. No doubt the old lady was tired, and the young ones went out, as she supposed, for a stroll; and now, as they proposed, this stroll meant nothing less than an ascent of the cone. After all, there is nothing surprising in the fact that a couple of active and spirited girls should attempt this. From the Hermitage it does not seem to be at all difficult, and they had no idea of the actual nature of the task.

What made it worse, however, was the state of the mountain at this particular time. I don't know whether you have taken the trouble to raise your eyes so high as the top of Vesuvius—

Hawbury languidly shook his head.

Well, I supposed not; but if you had taken the trouble, you would have noticed an ugly cloud which is generally regarded here as ominous. This morning, you know, there was an unusually large canopy of very dirty smoke overhead. I knew by the look of things that it was not a very pleasant place to go to. But of course they could not be supposed to know any thing of the kind, and their very ignorance made me rash.

Well, I walked along after them not knowing what might turn up, but determined to keep them in sight. Those beggars with chairs were not to be trusted, and the ladies had gold enough to tempt violence. What a reckless old devil of a chaperon she was, to let those girls go. So I walked on, cursing all the time the conventionalities of civilization that prevented me from giving them warning. They were rushing straight into danger, and I had to keep silent.

On reaching the foot of the cone a lot of fellows came up to them with chairs and straps, and that sort of thing. They employed some of them, and mounting the chairs they were carried up while I walked by myself at a distance from which I could observe all that was going on. The girls were quite merry, appeared to be enchanted with their ride up the cone, and enjoyed the novelty of the situation, and I heard their lively chatter and their loud peals of laughter, and longed more than ever to be able to speak to them.

Now the little girl that I had first seen, the child angel, you know—seemed, to my amazement, to be more adventurous than the other. By her face you would suppose her to be as timid as a dove, and yet on this occasion she was the one who proposed the ascent, urged on her companion, and answered all her objections. Of course she could not really have been so plucky as she seemed. For my part, I believe the other one had the most real pluck of the two, but it was the child angel's ignorance that made her so bold. She went up the cone as she would have gone up stairs, and looked at the smoke as she would have looked at a rolling cloud.

At length the bearers stopped, and signified to the girls that they could not go any further. The girls could not speak Italian, or any other language apparently than English, and therefore could not very well make out what the bearers were trying to say, but by their gestures they might have known that they were warning them against going any further. One might have supposed that no warning would have been needed and that one look upward would have been enough. The top of the cone rises up toward a hundred feet above them; its soil composed of lava blocks and ash intermingled with sulphur. In this soil there were a million cracks and crevices from which sulphurous smoke was issuing, and the smoke, which was but faint and then near when they stood, grew denser farther up, till it intermingled with the larger volumes that rolled up from the crater.

Now, as I stood there, I suddenly heard a wild proposal from the child angel.

Oh, Ethel, she said, I've a good mind to go up—

Here Hawbury interrupted his friend.

What's that? What was her friend's name? he asked with some animation. Ethel—odd too. Ethel, I'm. Ethel! Brunette, was she?

Yes.

Odd, too; infernally odd. But, pooh! what rot! Just as though there weren't a thousand Ethels!

What's that you're saying about Ethel? asked Dacres.

Oh, nothing, old man. Excuse my interrupting you. Go ahead. How did it end?

Well, the child angel said, Ethel, I've a good mind to go up.

This proposal Ethel scouted in horror and consternation.

You must not—you shall not! she cried. Oh, it's nothing, it's nothing, said the child angel. I'm dying to take a peep into the crater. It must be awfully funny. Do come; do, do come, Ethel darling.

Oh, Minnie, don't cry the other in great alarm. And I now learned that the child angel's name was Minnie. Minnie, she cried, clinging to the child angel, you must not go. I would not have come up if I had thought you would be so unreasonable.

Ethel, said the other, you are really getting to be quite a scold. How ridiculous it is for you to set yourself up in this place as a duenna! How can I help going up? And only one peep. And I never saw a crater in my life, and I'm dying to know what it looks like. I know it's awfully funny; and it's horrid in you to be so unkind about it. And I really must go. Won't you come? Do, do, dear—dearest darling, do—

Ethel was firm, however, and tried to dissuade the other, but to no purpose; for

at length, with a laugh, the child angel burst away and skipped lightly up the slope towards the crater.

Just one peep, she said. Come Ethel, I must, I must, I really must, you know.

She turned for an instant as she said this, and I saw the glory of her child-face as it was irradiated by a smile of exquisite sweetness. The play of feature, the light of her eyes, and the expression of innocence and ignorance unconscious of danger, filled me with profound sadness. But there was I, standing alone, seeing that sweet child flinging herself to ruin, and yet unable to prevent her, simply because I was bound hand and foot by the infernal restrictions of a miserable and senseless conventionalism. Dash it, I say.

As Dacres gazed out this Hawbury elevated his eyebrows, and stroked his long pendant whiskers lazily with his left hand, while with his right he drummed on the table near him.

Well, resumed Dacres, the child angel ran up for some distance, leaving Ethel behind. Ethel called after her for some time, and then began to follow her. Meanwhile the guides, who had thus far stood apart, suddenly caught sight of the child angel's figure, and with a loud warning cry, they ran after her. They seemed to me however to be a lazy lot, for they scarce got up as far as the place where Ethel was. Now, you know, all this time I was doomed to inaction. But at this juncture I strolled carelessly along, pretending not to see any thing in particular; and so, taking up an easy attitude, I waited for the denouement. It was a terrible position too. That child angel! I would have laid down my life for her, but I had to stand idle, and see her rush to fling her life away. And all because I had not happened to have the mere formality of an introduction.

Well, you know, I stood there waiting for the denouement. Now it happened that, as the child angel went up, a brisk breeze had started, which blew away all the smoke, so that she went along for some distance without any apparent inconvenience. I saw her reach the top; I saw her turn and wave her hand in triumph. Then I saw her rush forward quickly and nimbly straight toward the crater. She seemed to go down into it. And then the wind changed or died away or both for there came a vast cloud of rolling smoke, black, cruel, suffocating; and the mountain crest and the child angel were snatched from my sight.

I was roused by a shriek from Ethel. I saw her rush up the slope, and struggle in a vain endeavor to save her friend. But before she had taken a dozen steps down came the rolling smoke, black, wrathful, and sulphurous; and I saw her crouch down and stagger back, and finally emerge pale as death, and gasping for breath. She saw me as I stood there; in fact, I had moved a little nearer.

Oh, Sir she cried, save her! Oh, my God, she's lost!

This was very informal, you know all that sort of thing; but she had broken the ice, and had accosted me; so I waived all ceremony, and considered the introduction sufficient. I took off my hat, and told her to calm herself.

But she only wrung her hand, and implored me to save her friend.

And now, my boy, lucky was it for me that my experience at Cotopaxi and Popocatepeti had been so thorough and so peculiar. My knowledge came into play at this time. I took my felt hat and put it over my mouth, and then tied it around my neck so that the felt rim came over my cheeks and throat. Thus I secured a plentiful supply of air, and felt acted as a kind of ventilator to prevent the access to my lungs of too much of the sulphurous vapor. Of course such a contrivance would not be good for more than five minutes; but then, you know five minutes were all that I wanted.

To be continued.

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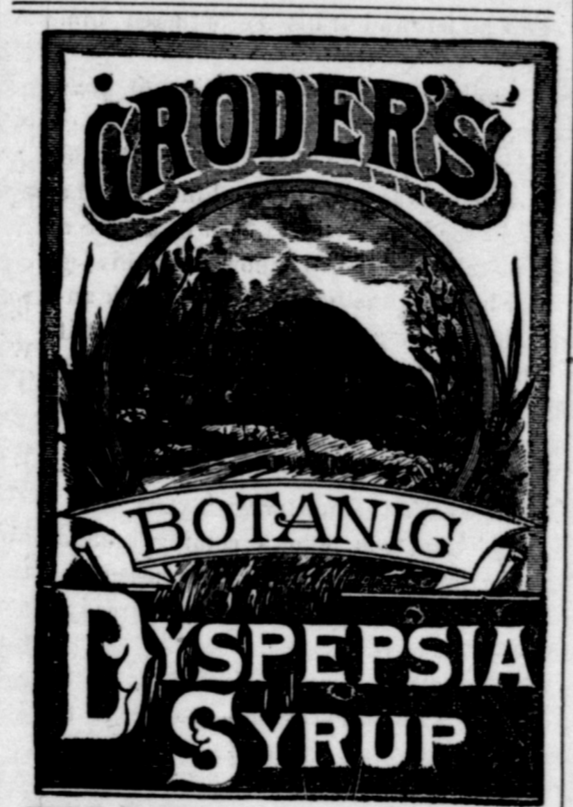
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