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THE AMERICAN BARON.

(BY JAMES DE MILLE.)

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XXI.

AN EVENTFUL JOURNEY.

On the day following, two carriage rolled out of Rome, and took the road toward Florence by the way of Civita Castellana. One carriage held four ladies; the other one was occupied by four lady's maids and the luggage of the party.

It was early morning, and over the wide Campagna there hung mists, which were dissipated gradually as the sun arose. As they went on the day advanced and with the departing mists there opened up a wide view. On either side extended the dosolate Campagna, over which passed lines of ruined aqueducts on their way from the hills to the city. Here and there crumbling ruins arose above the plain—some ancient, others medieval, none modern. Before them in the distance arose the Appennines, among which were, here and there, visible the white outlines of some villa or hamlet.

For mile after mile they drove on; and the drive soon proved very monotonous. It was nothing but one long and unvarying plain, with this only change, that every mile brought them nearer to the mountains. As the mountains were their only hope, they all looked forward eagerly to the time when they would arrive there and wind along the road among them.

Formerly Mrs. Willoughby alone had been the confidante of Minnie's secret, but the events of the past few day had disclosed most of her troubles to the other ladies also, at least as far as the general outlines were concerned. The consequence was that they were travelling in this way and Minnie knew that they all knew it. Yet this unpleasant consciousness did not in the least interfere with the sweetness of her temper and the gentleness of her manner. She sat there, with a meek smile and a resigned air, as though the only part now left her in life was the patient endurance of her unmerited wrongs. She blamed no one; she made no complaint; yet there was in her attitude something so touching, so clinging, so pathetic, so forlorn, and in her face something so sweet, so sad, so reproachful, and so piteous, that she enforced sympathy; and each one began to have a half-guilty fear that Minnie had been wronged by her. Especially did Mrs. Willoughby feel this. She feared that she had neglected the artless and simpleminded child; she feared that she had not been sufficiently thoughtful about her; and now longed to do something to make amends for this imaginary neglect. So she sought to make the journey as pleasant as possible by cheerful remarks and lively observations. None of these things, however, produced any effect upon the attitude of Minnie. She sat there with unalterable sweetness and unvarying patience, just like a holy martyr, who freely forgave all her enemies, and was praying for those who had despitefully used her.

The exciting events consequent upon the Baron's appearance, and his sudden revelation in the role of Minnie's lover, had exercised a strong and varied effect upon all; but upon one its result was wholly benifical, and this was Ethel. It was so startling and so unexpected that it had roused her from her gloom, and given her something to think of. The Baron's debut in their parlor had been narrated to her over and over by each of the three who had witnessed it, and each gave the narrative her own coloring. Lady Dalrymple's account was humorous; Mrs. Willoughby's indignant; Minnie's sentimental. Out of all these Ethel gained a fourth idea, compounded of these three, which again blended with another and an original one of her own, gained from a personal observation of the Baron, whose appearance on the stairs and impatient summons for "Min" were very vividly impressed on her memory. In addition to this there was the memory of that day on which they endeavored to fight off the enemy.

That was indeed, a memorable day, and was now alluded to by them as the day of the siege. It was not without difficulty that they had withstood Minnie's earnest protestations, and intrenched themselves. But Mrs. Willoughby was obdurate and Minnie's tears, which flowed freely, were unavailing.

Then there came the first knock of the impatient and aggressive visitor, followed by others in swift succession, and in ever increasing power. Every knock went to Minnie's heart. It excited an unlimited amount of sympathy for the one who had saved her life, and was now excluded from her door. But as the knocks grew violent and imperative, and Minnie grew sad and pitiful, the other ladies grew indignant. Lady Dalrymple was on the point of sending off for the police, and only Minnie's entreaties prevented this. At last the door seemed almost beaten in, and their feelings underwent a change. They were convinced that he was mad, or else intoxicated. Of the madness of love they did not think. Once convinced that he was mad they became terrified. The maids all hid themselves. None of them would now venture out even to call the police. They expected that the concierge would interpose, but in vain. The concierge was bribed.

After a very eventful day night came. They heard footsteps pacing up and down and knew that it was their tormentor. Minnie's heart again melted with tender pity for the man whose love for her had turned his head, and she begged to be allowed to speak to him. But this was not permitted. So she went to bed and fell asleep. So in process of time, did the others, and the night passed without any trouble. Then morning came, and there was a debate as to who should confront the enemy. There was no noise but they knew he was there. At last Lady Dalrymple summoned up her energies and went forth to do battle. The result has already been described in the words of the bold Baron himself.

But even this great victory did not reassure the ladies. Dreading another visit they hurried away to a hotel, leaving the maids to follow with the luggage as soon as possible. On the following morning they had left the city.

Events so very exciting as these had produced a very natural effect upon the mind of Ethel. They had thrown her thoughts out of their old groove, and fixed them in a new one. Besides, the fact that she was actually leaving the man who had caused her so much sorrow was already a partial relief. She had dreaded meeting him so much that she had been forced to keep herself a prisoner. A deep grief still remained in her heart; but at any rate there was now some superficial kind.

As for Mrs. Willoughby, in spite of her self reproach about her purely imaginary neglect of Minnie, she felt such an extraordinary relief that it affected all her nature. The others might feel fatigue from the journey, not she. She was willing to continue the journey for an indefinite period, so long as she had the sweet consciousness that she was bearing Minnie farther and farther away from the grasp of "that horrid man," The consequence was, that she was lively, lovely, brilliant, cheerful, and altogether delightful. She was as tender to Minnie as a mother could be. She was lavish in her promises of what she would do for her. She chatted gaily with Ethel about a thousand things and was delighted to find that Ethel reciprocated. She rallied Lady Dalrymple on her silence, and congratulated her over and over, in spite of Minnie's frown, on the success of her generalship. And so at last Campagna was traversed and the carriages began to ascend among the mountains.

Several other travelers were passing over that Campagna road, and in the same direction. They were not near enough for their faces to be discerned, but the ladies could look back and see the signs of their presence. First there was a carriage with two men, and about two miles behind another carriage with two other men; while behind these again, there rode a solitary horseman, who was gradually gaining on the other travelers.

Now if it had been possible for Mrs. Willoughby to look back and discern the faces of the travellers who were moving along the road behind her, what a sudden overturn there would have been to her feelings, and what a blight would have fallen upon her spirits! But Mrs. Willoughby remained in the most blissful ignorance of the persons of these travellers, and so was able to maintain the sunshine of her soul.

At length there came over that sunny soul the first cloud.

The solitary horseman who had been riding behind, had overtaken the different carriages.

The first carriage contained Lord Hawbury and Scone Dacres. As the horseman passed, he recognized them with a careless nod and smile.

Scone Dacres grasped Lord Hawbury's arm.

Did you see him? he cried. The Italian! I thought so! What do you say now? Wasn't I right?

By Jove! cried Lord Hawbury.

Whereupon Dacres relapsed into silence sitting upright glaring after the horseman, cherishing in his gloomy soul the darkest and most vengefull thoughts.

The horseman rode on furthur, and overtook the next carriage. In this there were two men, one in the uniform of a Papal Zouaves, the other in rusty black. He turned toward these and greeted them with the same nod and smile.

Do you see that man, parson? said the Baron to his companion. Do you recognise him?

No.

Well you saw him at Minnie's house. He came in.

No, he didn't.

Didn't he? No. By thunder, it wasn't that time. Well, at any rate, that man I believe, is at the bottom of the row. It's my belief that he' trying to cut me out and he'll find he's got a hard row to hoe before he succeeds in that project.

And with these words the Baron sat glaring after Italian with something in his eye that resembled faintly the fierce glance of Scone Dacres.

The Italian rode on. A few miles further were the two carriages. Minnie and her sister were sitting on the front seats and saw a stranger as he advanced. He soon came near enough to be distinguishep, and Mrs. Willoughby recognized Girasole.

Her surprise was so great that she uttered an exclaimatian of terror, which startled the other ladies, and made them all look in that direction.

How very odd! said Ethel, thoughtfully.

And now I suppose you'll all go and say that I brought him too, said Minnie. That's always the way you do. You never seem to think that I may be innocent. You always blame me for every little mite of a thing that may happen.

No one made any remark, and there was silence in the carriage as the stranger approached. The ladies bowed somewhat cooly except Minnie, who threw upon him the most imploring look that could posibly be sent from human eyes, the Italian's impressible nature thrilled before those beseeching, pleading, earnest, unfathomable, tender, helpless innocent orbs. Removing his hat, he bowed low.

I haf not been awara, he said, politely in his broken English, that yonar lady sippa's bin intend to travella. Ees eet not subito intenzion?

Mrs. Willoughby made a polite response of a general character, the Italian paused a moment to drink in deep draughts from Minnie's great beseeching eyes that were fixed upon his and then with a low bow, he passed on.

I believe I am losing my senses, said Mrs. Willoughby.

Why, Kitty darling? asked Minnie.

I don't know how it is, but I actually trembled when that man came up, and I haven't got over it yet.

I'm sure I don't see why, said Minnie. You're always imagining things though. Now isn't she, Ethel dearest?

Well, really, I don't see much in the Count to make one tremble. I suppose poor, dear Kitty has been so agitated lately, and its her poor nerves.

I have my lavender, Kitty dear, said Lady Dalrymple. Won't you take it? Or would you prefer valerian?

Thanks, much, but I do not need it, said Mrs. Willoughby. I suppose it will pass off.

I'm sure the poor Count never did anybody any harm, said Minnie, plaintively; so you needn't all abuse him so—unless you're all angry at him for saving my life. I remember a time when you all thought very differently, and all praised him up, no end.

Really, Minnie darling, I have nothing against the Count, only once he was a little too intrusive; but he seems to have got over that, and if he'll only be nice and quiet and proper, I'm sure I've nothing to say against him.

They drove on for some time, and at length reached Civita Castellana. Here they drove up to the hotel, and the ladies got out and went up to their apartments. They had three rooms up stairs, two of which looked out into the street, while the third was in the rear. At the front windows was a balcony.

The ladies now disrobed themselves, and their maids assisted them to perform the duties of a very simple toilet. Mrs. Willoughby's was first finished. So she walked over to the window, and looked out into the street.

It was not a very interesting place, nor was there much to be seen; but she took a lazy, languid interest in the sight which met her eyes.

There were the two carriages. The horses were being led to water. Around the carriages was a motley crowd, composed of the poor, the maimed, the halt, the blind, forming that realm of beggars which from immemorial ages has flourished in Italy. With these was intermingled a crowd of ducks, geese, goats, pigs, and ill-looking, mangy, snarling curs.

Upon these Mrs. Willoughby looked for some time, when at length her ears were arrested by the roll of wheels down the street. A carriage was approaching in which there were two travelers. One hasty glance sufficed, and she turned her attention once more to the ducks, geese, goats, dogs and beggars. In a few minutes the crowd was scattered by the newly-arrived carriage. It stopped. A man jumped out. For a moment he looked up, staring hard at the windows. That moment was enough. Mrs. Willoughby had recognized him.

She rushed away from the windows. Lady Dalrymple and Ethel were in this room, and Minnie in the one beyond. All were startled by Mrs. Willoughby's exclamation, and still more by her looks.

Oh! she cried.

What? cried they. What is it?

He's there! He's there!

Who? who? they cried, in alarm.

That horrid man!

Lady Dalrymyle and Ethel looked at each other in utter terror.

As for Minnie she burst into the room, peeped out of the window, saw "that horrid man," then ran back, then sat down, then jumped up, then burst into a peal of the merriest laughter that was ever heard from her.

Oh, I'm so glad! I'm so glad! she exclaimed. Oh, it's so awfully funny. Oh, I'm so glad! Oh, Kitty darling don't please don't look so cross. Oh, ple-e-e-e-e-e-e-ase don't Kitty darling. You make me laugh worse. It's so awfully funny!

But while Minnie laughed thus, the others looked at each other in still greater consternation, for some time there was not one of them who knew what to say.

But Lady Dalrymple again threw herself in the gap.

You need not feel at all nervous, my dear, said she, gravely. I do not think that this person can give us any trouble. He certainly cannot intrude upon us in these apartments; and on the highway you know it will be quite as difficult for him to hold any communication with us. So I really don't see any cause for alarm on your part, nor do I see why dear Minnie should exhibit such delight.

These words brought comfort to Ethel and Mrs. Willoughby. They at once perceived their truth. To force himself into their presence in a public hotel was, of course, impossible, even for one so reckless as he seemed to be; and on the road he could not trouble them in any way, since he would have to drive before them or behind them.

At Lady Dalrymple's reference to herself, Minnie looked up with a bright smile.

You're awfully cross with me, aunty darling, she said; but I forgive you. Only I can't help laughing, you know, to see how frightened you all are at poor Rufus K. Gunn. And, Kitty dearest, oh how you did run away from the window! It was awfully funny, you know.

Not only after the arrival of the Baron and his friends another carriage drove up. None of the ladies were at the window, and so they did not see the easy nonchalance of Hawbury as he lounged into the house, or the stern face of Scone Dacres as he strode before him.

CHAPTER XXII.

ADVICE REJECTED.

During dinner the ladies conversed freely about that horrid man, wondering what plan he would adopt to try to effect an entrance among them. They were convinced that some such attempt would be made, and the servants of the inn who waited on them were strictly charged to see that no one disturbed them. However, their dinner was not interrupted and after it was over they began to think of retiring, so as to leave at an early hour on the following morning. Minnie had already taken her departure, and the others were thinking of following her example, when a knock came at the door.

All started. One of the maids went to the door, and found a servant there who brought a message from the Baron Atramonte. He wished to speak to the ladies on business of the most urgent importance. At this confirmation of their expectations the ladies looked at one another with a smile mingled with vexation, and Lady Dalrymple at once sent word that they could not possibly see him.

But the Baron was not to be put off. In a few moments the servant came back again, and brought another message of still more urgent character, in which the Baron entreated them to grant him this interview, and assured them that it was a matter of life and death.

He's beginning to be more and more violent said Lady Dalrymple. Well, dear, she added, resignedly, in my opinion it will be better to see him, and have done with him. If we do not, I'm afraid he will pester us further. I will see him You had better retire to your own apartments.

Upon this she sent down an invitation to the Baron to come up, and the ladies retreated to their rooms.

The Baron entered, and, as usual, offered to shake hands—an offer which, as usual, Lady Dalrymple did not accept. He then looked earnestly all round the room and gave a sigh. He evidently had expected to see Minnie, and was disappointed. Lady Dalrymple marked the glance, and the expression which followed.

Well, ma'am said he, as he seated himself near to Lady Dalrymple, I said that the business I wanted to speak about was important, and that it was a matter of life and death. I assure you that it is. But before I tell it I want to say something about the row in Rome. I have reason to understand that I caused a little annoyance to you all. If I did, I'm sure I didn't intend it. I'm sorry. There! Let's say no more about it. 'Tain't often that I say I'm sorry, but I say so now. Conditionally, though—that is, if I really did annoy any body.

Well, Sir?

Well, ma'am—about the business I came for. You have made a sudden decision to make this journey. I want to know, ma'am, if you made any enquiries about this road before starting?

This road? No, certainly not.

I though so, said the Baron. Well, ma'am, I've reason to believe that it's somewhat unsafe.

Unsafe?

Yes; particularly for ladies.

And why?

Why, ma'am, the country is in a disordered state, and near the boundary line it swarms with brigands. They call themselves Garibaldians, but between you and me, ma'am, they're neither more nor less than robbers. You see along the boundary it is convenient for them to dodge to one side or other, and where the road runs there are often crowds of them. Now our papal government means well, but it ain't got power to keep down these brigands. It would like to but it can't. You see, the scum of all Italy gather along the borders, because they know we are weak; and so there it is.

And you think there is danger on this road? said Lady Dalrymple, looking keenly at him.

I do ma'am.

Pray have you heard of any recent acts of violence along the road?

No ma'am.

Then what reason have you for supposing that there is any particular danger now?

A friend of mine told me so, ma'am.

But do not people use the road? Are not carriages constantly passing add repassing? Is it likely that if it were unsafe there would be no acts of violence? Yet you say there have been none.

Not of late ma'am.

But it is of late, and of the present time that we are speaking.

I can only say, ma'am, that the road is considered very dangerous.

Who considers it so?

To be Continued.

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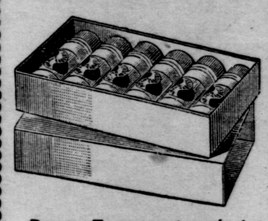

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