

THE BACHELOR'S PROTEST.

(Punch.) Ladies, and all who gaze on me askance, As one that seems to deck his barren life With that cold monument of dead romance A wife, Peace, for you wrong me; now will I disclose, A tale, whose dolorous import gives a claim To tender pity, not, as you suppose, To blame. I have not feared to toe the heeling edge Of Hymen's indeterminate abyss Merely from love of self or narrow Prejudice. I am not proof to Cupid's wanton dart; No armor plates of triple brass confine This morbidly impressionable heart Of mine. Far from it. In the generous days of yore I must have wooed, and made no empty boast, As much as any, and a good deal more Than most. My past is peopled by a perfect throng Of maidens—loved with all a young man's glow— And lost—or more or less forgotten—long Ago, With whom it was my dearest wish to live For better, or—to quote the Rubric's terse And darkly cynical alternative— For worse. And I have urged my periodic suit Not once, nor twice, since I attained my prime, Only to get the Order of the Boot Each time. For somehow all with one consent began To make excuse; with some did wish to wed; Some loved me not; some loved Another Man Instead; Some betrayed sorrow, some a pained surprise; Two, in a tone no man of spirit brooks, Had the audacity to criticize My looks. And I grew wearied of the bitterness rebuff; Time came when in my thirteenth I spoke "I woo no more; it has gone far enough, This joke!" So, ladies, I am cabined by a vow; But soon the Old Year dies, and with the New Comes round Leap Year—it is your turn now To woo!

Juvenile Strategy.

CHARACTERS.

JAMES HENDERSON, A middle aged bachelor. JOSEPH MURRAY, A retired military officer. RICHARD MURRAY, His youthful son. WILLIAM BLACK, Richard's chum. JOAN BLACK, William's unmarried sister. JEMIMA SINCLAIR, A middle aged spinster. SCENE 1.—Somerville, a small town in the North of England. Joan's house. Richard visiting his friend William. Time: A Saturday afternoon. RICH. M.: Hurry up, Bill, or we'll not be in time for the kickoff. What are you doing? WILL. B.: Addressing some blessed circulars on behalf of "The Indignant and Deceitful Old Gentlewomen's Fund." Jo's secretary of the local branch, but I've got to do the work. Like women! Wouldn't have a moment's peace if I'd any more sisters. Lend a hand and we'll get to the football match in time. Why don't you sit down instead of wriggling about and bending that way? You'll write easier sitting. RICH. M.: Rather not. Dad caught me smoking a cigarette yesterday, and it doesn't hurt so much to stand. WILL. B.: Tell you what, Dicky: there's not a more downtrodden race than boys. Here's me and you—ten past—and we get watted as if we were kids. Jo boxed my ears this morning, 'cause I said I hadn't time to spare for her blooming Old Gentlewomen. Jo's ages older'n me—in the sheer and mellow leaves, near forty,—but it's no advantage for me to be an orphan. Get knocked about all the time. RICH. M.: Same here; only my dad's stronger'n your sister. And there's worse coming. Don't remember my own mother, she's dead so long ago; but my dad, the Major, said it was high time I'd another mater to keep me in order. WILL. B.: That's his mean way of telling you he's going to get married again. Putting the blame on you, too. How many circulars have you done? Seven. My lot's thirty-eight. RICH. M.: That comes to forty-three. WILL. B.: You may be a little viper, as Jo called you once, but you ain't much of an adder. It comes to forty-nine. Put out your tongue so as I can wet the stamps. Jo says there's always mickrobbers on 'em. Tell you what Dicky, I think my sister means to get spliced too. I've heard as much, and don't want no blooming brother-in-law to help to whack me. RICH. M.: Who's she after? WILL. B.: Don't talk rot. Men go after the other sects. (Impressively.) But I've been litably informed that that old jossler, Henderson, retired grocer up the hill, is the man to keep a eye on. Old fool! Near forty-five. Who's to be your governor's next? RICH. M.: Can't say for certain. Think he's sweet on that Miss Sinclair Jo knows. As old as your sister she'll be. WILL. B.: Yes. Got a heavy hand, too. It's a blue look-out, Dicky, and something'll need to be done. I've got an idea. See this letter. It's one Jo got this morning

from Jemima Sinclair. Begins "My Dear Joey"—your dad's first name. We'll put it in another envelope and address it to the Major. It'll give him fits. See this other letter. It's Jo's reply to Jim Sinclair. I was to address it. Begins "My dear Jimmy"—old Henderson's first name. We'll send it on to him. He'll get fits, too. You bet there'll be no marriages after this. RICH. M.: Say, Bill, isn't it a bit off side to do this? WILL. B.: P'raps; but we've our own skins to look after. Now, take half of this blooming correspondence, and we'll post 'em while going to the field. SCENE 2.—MURRAY'S house. Time: Evening of same day. JOE. M. (to himself, furiously, after perusing letter): This is insufferable. Gad! I don't know what women are coming to. Their emancipation shrieks and eternal howling for rights were bad enough, but this is beyond the limit of endurance. The intolerable cheek! The insolent familiarity! The implied affection! Gad! I'd like to knock some of these old women's heads together (Re-reading letter.) "My Dear Joey,—I quite expected you would join us last night. As you know, the Somerville Sewing Society (of which I am secretary) meets every Thursday evening in the Public School (X. Class room) at 7.30, and we have now been busily engaged for some weeks, our intention being to hold a sale of work shortly, the proceeds of which will be handed over to the local hospital. Should you find it inconvenient to bring your own knitting, or sewing, or fancy work, material will be available on the premises. My own knitting wool has become rather distasteful to me—I don't care for the colour somehow—so you might let me have some of yours. You may, of course, consider yourself too good for us, but do come, Joey, dear, for my sake; you would be of such assistance.—Yours always, JEMIMA SINCLAIR." Joey! By Jove! I'd drummed the man who dared to address me in that way. As if I were a clown or pantaloon, instead of a soldier who has fought and bled for his country. Fought and bled? Yes. Can I ever forget that sham fight at the autumn manoeuvres when my horse bolted and sent me to grass, with the result that my nose was not only put out of action for months, but was permanently disabled? Bled? Bled! I should think it did. And the man who has wielded his sword on behalf of defenceless women is asked to join them and take his knitting! (Sardonically.) Perhaps fancy work would be more in my line. A sofa cushion or teacosy, or one of those senseless contrivances—tidies, I think—that stick to a man's coat every time he rises from a chair. (More calmly.) Should I take this as a joke and say I'll do some crazy work to be in keeping with the rest of the society? No; better to treat it with dignified contempt. But it has at least done one good thing. I was undecided as to whether Miss Black or Miss Sinclair would prove the more suitable mother for my boy. I have no doubt now. SCENE 3.—HENDERSON'S house. Time: Same evening. JAS. H. (reading letter, in bewildered state): "My Dear Jimmy,—Been so busy lately that I have had no time to devote to your Society, but you may expect me on Thursday evening, first. I'll bring some sewing. Am really very much occupied, dear, with one thing and another, so excuse me for neglecting you. Spent two or three hours yesterday helping to nurse the Jones children, who are down with the measles; but I have managed to spare time for other work as well. D'oyles are getting on nicely. I hope soon, dear, to have more leisure at my disposal, when you will see me oftener. Don't imagine for a moment I consider myself too good for you.—Ever yours, JOAN BLACK. P. S.—Don't feel discouraged on account of your wool. It is a pretty, if rather uncommon, shade." (To himself.) Great Jupiter! What an eye-opener! What a revelation of the risks a single man runs when he indulges in a platonic friendship with a single woman! Jimmy! Great Jupiter! A name that even my sainted mother never used! And here the irrepressible Joan—was coming here on Thursday night to enjoy my society. My Society—with a big S—to show the value she puts upon it. Means to make an evening of it evidently, seeing she proposes to bring her sewing. Possibly I may be expected to pass an opinion on embroidered button-holes and herring-bone stitches. These prattling details, too, of what she has been doing imply a confidence between us that never existed. Most inconsiderate even to suggest coming, under the circumstances. The Jones family are suffering from measles, and she may bring some of them with her—measles, I mean—but who on earth are the D'oyles? Never heard of them, though I know the Joneses. Seems to be some Irish family recovering from an illness, which may be infectious also, just as likely as not. There is, however, one

grateful and comforting reflection to be derived from this extraordinary letter. The fair Joan does not consider herself too good for me—a simple admission, which has a charm all its own. And the P. S.! How true it is that the sting of a woman's letter lies in the postscript! "Don't feel discouraged on account of your wool" Oh, Joan, Joan, how could you? To call my hair wool—what detestable slang! To refer so ironically to its colour—what a gratuitous insult! To pretend to admire it—what unpardonable hypocrisy! Can I help my hair being red? But this is weakness. Self-preservation is the first law of Nature. I am in a state of platonic friendship with other ladies, and who can tell what may happen after this? There is only one remedy—to put myself beyond the pale. Miss Sinclair is a lady I have long liked. She is not in her first youth; no more am I. She would make a good wife; I shall ask her to marry me. (Scathingly.) And when I do so you may rest perfectly assured, Miss Black, that I shall not feel discouraged on account of my wool. SCENE 4.—JOAN'S house. Time: A fortnight later. Afternoon. JOAN B. (to herself): It has come at last. That letter I got from Major Murray this morning, saying he intended to call later in the day regarding a matter which might have an important bearing on his future, can only have one meaning. He intends to—well, I admire the Major immensely, and why should I not marry him if he wants me? It will be best for everyone. Willie is a source of anxiety to me at times, and every year will make him more difficult to manage. He needs a father's firm, controlling hand. The Major will not refuse to let him come with me. I have an ample income for both. What, I wonder, has caused Mr. Henderson's strangely altered attitude to me? We were good friends—never more than friends—but now he purposely avoids me. Called at his house on Thursday evening last week when going to the sewing circle. Meant to ask him to increase his subscription to the Old Gentlewomen's Fund. He can easily afford more than half a guinea. Servant was very rude. Said her master had gone from home for a few days, although I smelt tobacco smoke quite distinctly at the door. He goes down one street if he sees me coming down another. Even went into a ladies outfitting establishment on one occasion when escape was otherwise impossible. Poor man, he needn't run away from me. I don't wish to meddle with him. Only I sincerely trust, for Jemima's sake, that he is not falling into bad habits. I'm sure she's fond of him. But it seems strange he is not able to look one in the face. Major Murray is announced, and enters room. JOE. M. (after brief preliminary talk): Excuse me, Miss Black, coming to the point at once. We old soldiers are blunt and wanting in finesse sometimes. Will you marry me? JOAN B.: If I was younger I might pretend to hesitate and say I was surprised. My answer is yes. JOE. M.: That's right. I like decision of character. Affectation of any sort is distasteful to me. Thanks for agreeing so handsomely to my proposal. My boy will benefit much from a mother's protecting care; and I—I don't mind confessing it—feel lonely at times. Jove! it's good of you to take compassion on an old campaigner like myself. I'm on the wrong side of fifty by a year or two, but have splendid health, a fairly good income, and if I'm not as handsome as I was once, we fighting men require to take risks. That scar, which has permanently disfigured my nose, was received in action. JOAN B.: I shall love you all the more for it. JOE. M. (preparing to leave): I suppose it is usual on occasions like these to seal the compact? Will you give me a kiss? JOAN B.: I'm a passive resister, Joseph. You may take one. SCENE 5.—JEMIMA'S house. Two days later. Afternoon. JEM. S. (to herself, after Henderson's departure): Such a pleasant coincidence. Two days ago the Major asked Joan to marry him, and now James has proposed to me and I have accepted him. We can thus have a lovely double wedding. The dear fellow—James, I mean—has been a long time making up his mind, but better late than never. I once thought he had a liking for Joan. It seems I was wrong. He asked if she was not becoming rather eccentric; wouldn't explain what he meant. Of course, she's not; it's just his fancy. But I'm quite sure the Major is. Met him on the street a week ago, and asked him when he was coming to the sewing meeting. That was all the length I got. He glared at me, turned several shades redder than he is, raised his hat, right about face, and left me looking after him in amazement. What was there in that remark to anger anyone? If he had let me finish, I in-

tended to ask him to give us a reading or something. He recites "The Charge of the Light Brigade" with such spirit, if a trifle incoherently. These old officers do sometimes become rather strange. I often wondered how the Major got his nose broken. Joan tells me it was in a desperate engagement, when he was facing fearful odds. Poor fellow, perhaps the injury to his nose has affected his brain. James gave me such a laugh. He asked quite seriously if I was sure my love for him would never grow less on account of his wool. His hair, he meant. The idea! Of course it is red, the beautiful Titian red that artists love to paint. I told him so, and he was quite pleased. Alas! it will soon enough become streaked with grey. In the meantime, I can choose wall-paper and curtains that will harmonize with the dear old fellow's head. This news is too good to keep to myself. I'll run along to Joan's and tell her. She'll be delighted to know we are both going, going, and will soon be—gone! SCENE 6.—School playground. Time: Following afternoon. RICH. M.: Nice mess you've made of it. WILL. B.: Tell you what, Dicky, if you give me any more sauce I'll punch your head; I'm sick enough of the whole blooming business. RICH. M.: Same here. Met old mother Tompkins on the road to school this morning. She patted my head and said how pleased I'd be to have a new mother. I hate people who pat your heads, don't you, Bill? WILL. B.: Course. It shows they think we're kids what'll stand anything. Jo said the Major would be as good as a father to me. Like her blooming cheek. RICH. M.: I know what that means. Wait till you feel his strap. WILL. B.: He dussn't strap his brother-in-law. It would be breaches of the peace. RICH. M.: You wait. When the Major's monkey's up he don't mind what sort of breeches you call 'em. WILL. B.: It's to be in a month, Dicky. That red-headed old jossler, Henderson, means to be made one for ever and ever, amen, with Jim Sinclair on the day Jo's married. You and me's to be pages. Jo said when we was pages she hoped we turn over a new leaf, then she laughed. I don't see any hing funny, do you? RICH. M.: No. What's pages got to do? WILL. B.: Hold up trains. Only wish it was the same sort of game Arizona Mike and his gang plays on the rolling prairie. RICH. M.: The tuck-in at the wedding'll be all right, Bill; but after that thing'll be worse'n ever. WILL. B.: They'll be worse for you, Dicky, 'cause when Jo marries the Major I'll be your step-uncle-in-law, and step-uncles-in-law don't stand no nonsense from kids like you. CURTAIN. Wife: "The Swintons are going to move out of this neighborhood after being here a year." Husband: "That's strange. All the people are just getting to know them now." Wife: "Yes, that's why they are going."

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