

An Heiress from Redhorse

Ambrose Bierce

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CORONADO, June 20th.

I find myself more and more interested in him. It is not, I am sure, his—do you know any noun corresponding to the adjective "handsome"? One does not like to say "beauty" when speaking of a man. He is handsome enough, heaven knows; I should not even care to trust you with him—faithful of all possible wives that you are— when he looks his best, as he always does. Nor do I think the fascination of his manner has much to do with it. You recollect that the charm of art inheres in that which is undefinable, and to you and me, my dear Irene, I fancy there is rather less of that in the branch of art under consideration than to girls in their first season. I fancy I know how my fine gentleman produces many of his effects, and could, perhaps, give him a pointer on heightening them. Nevertheless, his manner is something truly delightful. I suppose what interests me chiefly is the man's brains. His conversation is the best I have ever heard, and altogether unlike anyone's else. He seems to know everything, as, indeed, he ought, for he has been everywhere, read everything, seen all there is to see—sometimes I think rather more than is good for him—and had acquaintance with the QUEEREST people. And then his voice—Irene, when I hear it I actually feel as if I ought to have PAID AT THE DOOR, though, of course, it is my own door.

July 3d.

I fear my remarks about Dr. Barritz must have been, being thoughtless, very silly, or you would not have written of him with such levity, not to say disrespect. Believe me, dearest, he has more dignity and seriousness (of the kind, I mean, which is not inconsistent with a manner sometimes playful and always charming) than any of the men that you and I ever met. And young Raynor—you knew Raynor at Monterey—tells me that the men all like him, and that he is treated with something like deference everywhere. There is a mystery, too—something about his connection with the Blavatsky people in Northern India. Raynor either would not or could not tell me the particulars. I infer that Dr. Barritz is thought—don't you dare to laugh at me—a magician! Could anything be finer than that? An ordinary mystery is not, of course, as good as a scandal, but when it relates to dark and dreadful practices—to the exercise of unearthly powers—could anything be more piquant? It explains, too, the singular influence the man has upon me. It is the undefinable in his art—black art. Seriously, dear, I quite tremble when he looks me full in the eyes with those unfathomable orbs of his, which I have already vainly attempted to describe to you. How dreadful if we have the power to make one fall in love! Do you know if the Blavatsky crowd have that power— outside of Sepoy?

July 1

The strangest thing! Last evening while Auntie was attending one of the hotel hops (I hate them) Dr. Barritz called. It was scandalously late—I actually believe he had talked with Auntie in the ballroom, and learned from her that I was alone. I had been all the evening contriving how to worm out of him the truth about his connection with the Thugs in Sepoy, and all of that black business, but the moment he fixed his eyes on me (for I admitted him, I'm ashamed to say) I was helpless, I trembled, I blushed, I— O Irene, Irene, I love the man beyond expression, and you know how it is yourself!

An Heiress from Redhorse

Fancy! I, an ugly duckling from Redhorse—daughter (they say) of old Calamity Jim—certainly his heiress, with no living relation but an absurd old aunt, who spoils me a thousand and fifty ways—absolutely destitute of everything but a million dollars and a hope in Paris—I daring to love a god like him! My dear, if I had you here, I could tear your hair out with mortification.

I am convinced that he is aware of my feeling, for he stayed but a few moments, said nothing but what another man might have said half as well, and pretending that he had an engagement went away. I learned to-day (a little bird told me—the bell bird) that he went straight to bed. How does that strike you as evidence of exemplary habits?

July 17th.

That little wretch, Raynor, called yesterday, and his babble set me almost wild. He never runs down—that is to say, when he exterminates a score of reputations, more or less, he does not pause between one reputation and the next. (By the way, he inquired about you, and his manifestations of interest in you had, I confess, a good deal of vraisemblance.)

Mr. Raynor observes no game laws; like Death (which he would inflict if slander were fatal) he has all seasons for his own. But I like him, for we knew one another at Redhorse when we were young and true-hearted and barefooted. He was known in those far fair days as "Giggles," and I—O Irene, can you ever forgive me?—I was called "Gunny." God knows why; perhaps in allusion to the material of my pinafores; perhaps because the name is in alliteration with "Giggles," for Gig and I were inseparable playmates, and the miners may have thought it a delicate compliment to recognize some kind of relationship between us.

Later, we took in a third—another of Adversity's brood, who, like Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy, had a chronic inability to adjudicate the rival claims (to himself) of Frost and Famine. Between him and the grave there was seldom anything more than a single suspender and the hope of a meal which would at the same time support life and make it insupportable. He literally picked up a precarious living for himself and an aged mother by "chloriding the dumps," that is to say, the miners permitted him to search the heaps of waste rock for such pieces of "pay ore" as had been overlooked; and these he sacked up and sold at the Syndicate Mill. He became a member of our firm—"Gunny, Giggles, and Dumps," thenceforth—through my favor; for I could not then, nor can I now, be indifferent to his courage and prowess in defending against Giggles the immemorial right of his sex to insult a strange and unprotected female—myself. After old Jim struck it in the Calamity, and I began to wear shoes and go to school, and in emulation Giggles took to washing his face, and became Jack Raynor, of Wells, Fargo & Co., and old Mrs. Barts was herself chlorided to her fathers, Dumps drifted over to San Juan Smith and turned stage driver, and was killed by road agents, and so forth.

Why do I tell you all this, dear? Because it is heavy on my heart. Because I walk the Valley of Humility. Because I am subduing myself to permanent consciousness of my unworthiness to unloose the latchet of Dr. Barritz's shoe. Because—oh, dear, oh, dear—there's a cousin of Dumps at this hotel! I haven't spoken to him. I never had any acquaintance with him, but—do you suppose he has recognized me? Do, please, give me in your next your candid, sure-enough opinion about it, and say you don't think so. Do you think He knows about me already and that is why He left me last evening when He saw that I blushed and trembled like a fool under His eyes? You know I can't bribe ALL the newspapers, and I can't go back on anybody who was good to Gunny at Redhorse—not if I'm pitched out of society into the sea. So the skeleton sometimes rattles behind the door. I never cared much before, as you know, but now—NOW it is not the same. Jack Raynor I am sure of—he will not tell him. He seems, indeed, to hold him in such respect as hardly to dare speak to him at all, and I'm a good deal that way myself. Dear, dear! I wish I had something besides a million dollars! If Jack were three inches taller I'd marry him alive and go back to Redhorse and wear sackcloth again to the end of my miserable days.

July 25th.

An Heiress from Redhorse

We had a perfectly splendid sunset last evening, and I must tell you all about it. I ran away from Auntie and everybody, and was walking alone on the beach. I expect you to believe, you infidel! that I had not looked out of my window on the seaward side of the hotel and seen him walking alone on the beach. If you are not lost to every feeling of womanly delicacy you will accept my statement without question. I soon established myself under my sunshade and had for some time been gazing out dreamily over the sea, when he approached, walking close to the edge of the water—it was ebb tide. I assure you the wet sand actually brightened about his feet! As he approached me, he lifted his hat, saying: "Miss Dement, may I sit with you?—or will you walk with me?"

The possibility that neither might be agreeable seems not to have occurred to him. Did you ever know such assurance? Assurance? My dear, it was gall, downright GALL! Well, I didn't find it wormwood, and replied, with my untutored Redhorse heart in my throat: "I—I shall be pleased to do ANYTHING." Could words have been more stupid? There are depths of fatuity in me, friend o' my soul, which are simply bottomless!

He extended his hand, smiling, and I delivered mine into it without a moment's hesitation, and when his fingers closed about it to assist me to my feet, the consciousness that it trembled made me blush worse than the red west. I got up, however, and after a while, observing that he had not let go my hand, I pulled on it a little, but unsuccessfully. He simply held on, saying nothing, but looking down into my face with some kind of a smile—I didn't know—how could I?—whether it was affectionate, derisive, or what, for I did not look at him. How beautiful he was!—with the red fires of the sunset burning in the depths of his eyes. Do you know, dear, if the Thugs and Experts of the Blavatsky region have any special kind of eyes? Ah, you should have seen his superb attitude, the godlike inclination of his head as he stood over me after I had got upon my feet! It was a noble picture, but I soon destroyed it, for I began at once to sink again to the earth. There was only one thing for him to do, and he did it; he supported me with an arm about my waist.

"Miss Dement, are you ill?" he said.

It was not an exclamation; there was neither alarm nor solicitude in it. If he had added: "I suppose that is about what I am expected to say," he would hardly have expressed his sense of the situation more clearly. His manner filled me with shame and indignation, for I was suffering acutely. I wrenched my hand out of his, grasped the arm supporting me, and, pushing myself free, fell plump into the sand and sat helpless. My hat had fallen off in the struggle, and my hair tumbled about my face and shoulders in the most mortifying way.

"Go away from me," I cried, half choking. "Oh, PLEASE go away, you—you Thug! How dare you think THAT when my leg is asleep?"

I actually said those identical words! And then I broke down and sobbed. Irene, I BLUBBERED!

His manner altered in an instant—I could see that much through my fingers and hair. He dropped on one knee beside me, parted the tangle of hair, and said, in the tenderest way: "My poor girl, God knows I have not intended to pain you. How should I?—I who love you—I who have loved you for—for years and years!"

He had pulled my wet hands away from my face and was covering them with kisses. My cheeks were like two coals, my whole face was flaming and, I think, steaming. What could I do? I hid it on his shoulder—there was no other place. And, oh, my dear friend, how my leg tingled and thrilled, and how I wanted to kick!

We sat so for a long time. He had released one of my hands to pass his arm about me again, and I possessed myself of my handkerchief and was drying my eyes and my nose. I would not look up until that was done; he tried in vain to push me a little away and gaze into my eyes. Presently, when it was all right, and it had grown a bit dark, I lifted my head, looked him straight in the eyes, and smiled my best—my level best, dear.

"What do you mean," I said, "by 'years and years'?"

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"Dearest," he replied, very gravely, very earnestly, "in the absence of the sunken cheeks, the hollow eyes, the lank hair, the slouching gait, the rags, dirt, and youth, can you not—will you not understand? Gunny, I'm Dumps!"

In a moment I was upon my feet and he upon his. I seized him by the lapels of his coat and peered into his handsome face in the deepening darkness. I was breathless with excitement.

"And you are not dead?" I asked, hardly knowing what I said.

"Only dead in love, dear. I recovered from the road agent's bullet, but this, I fear, is fatal."

"But about Jack—Mr. Raynor? Don't you know—"

"I am ashamed to say, darling, that it was through that unworthy person's invitation that I came here from Vienna."

Irene, they have played it upon your affectionate friend,

MARY JANE DEMENT.

P.S.—The worst of it is that there is no mystery. That was an invention of Jack to arouse my curiosity and interest. James is not a Thug. He solemnly assures me that in all his wanderings he has never set foot in Sepoy.