

His True Title

Mrs. Agatha Wilson was a widow yet in her prime, the mistress of a handsome fortune, and “guardian of the person and estate,” in legal parlance, of her niece, Blanche Willoughby, the only child of a deceased sister.

Blanche’s grandfather had taken offence at the marriage of Blanche’s mother, whom he cut off in his will, dividing his ample fortune between his daughter, Mrs. Wilson, and his granddaughter, Blanche Willoughby, coupling the bequest to the latter with the condition that if she married at any time before thirty, without her aunt’s approval, her portion should be forfeited to the latter.

And the old gentleman, having thus settled things to his mind, and provided, as far as practicable, against the recurrence of improvident marriages in the family, died in peace, and Blanche’s mother followed not long after.

Blanche found a kind home in her aunt’s house; and the years passed happily till it became a question of accepting a lover of her own choice, or one of her aunt’s. Blanche’s choice was Charles Wharton; her aunt’s wasn’t; and on this point the difference was irreconcilable.

Mrs. Wilson’s opposition was strengthened by the friendly advice of Monsieur Le Baron L’Escroe, a French nobleman, it was said, whom political reasons had driven into exile, and who, of late, had been sojourning in the quiet country town where Mrs. Wilson had her residence.

The baron was a man of military port. Indeed, those who pretended to know—and there *are* such everywhere—asserted that his valor had been displayed on many fields, and that the glove, which constantly covered his right hand, was worn to conceal the disfigurement of an ugly wound received in his country’s service. The baron himself never introduced these subjects; still, he would converse upon them, if others drew him out.

For one of his rank, he was quite affable. Soon he was the lion of the town; and when it got to be noised about that he was “paying attentions” to the rich and blooming widow, more than half-a-score of appreciative hearts burned with envy.

“*Bong zhoor*, madame,” he would say, on dropping in for a cozy chat with the widow.

“*Bong zhoor*, *Moshoo*,” the widow would simper back.

Then would invariably come up the subject of Charles Wharton, who had gone to practice law in the city, whither the baron went on an occasional flying visit.

“Ah! madame,” the baron would sigh, “’tees veray—veray *mallyroo*—vat you call sad!”

“More bad reports about Charles Wharton, I dare say,” the widow would reply.

“Oh! madame, I fear zat Moshoo Vhartong ees vun *tray movay soozhay*—vun veray hard case!”

“I’ll never consent to his marrying my niece!” the widow would exclaim. “Her fortune shall never come into his hands—or *hers* either, if she throws herself away on him!”

“Eet would be vun *pesh*—vat you call sin,” the baron would say solemnly.

One day, at the end of the usual rehearsal, the baron was suddenly struck with a weakness in one knee, on which he dropped gracefully, clasped the widow’s hand, and broke out into a torrent of amatory broken English to which it would be impossible to do justice by any known arts of orthography. He threw himself, his title, and honors in a lump at her feet, and implored her to be his, and his only, forever!

The widow’s fancy, in its wildest fights, had never soared to such a height as this. She felt flattered at the baron’s polite condescension, had even come to look upon him as something like a friend; but to have a title placed within her grasp—to have it in her power, at a word, to be transformed from plain Mrs. Agatha Wilson into Madame L’Escroe, it fairly made her head whirl and her heart leap to her mouth.

“*Vooly voo* be mine?” beseechingly whined the baron.

“*Wee, Moshoo,*” softly sighed the widow, in her best Parisian.

“Only let me catch that low plebeian, Charles Wharton, dangling after Blanche *now*,” thought the widow to herself, as the baron, after kissing her hand, gracefully rose and dusted the lately obeisant knee. “If she takes up with anything less than a prince or a duke, she shall never finger a penny of her grandfather’s money!”

“Is Miss Blanche at home?” inquired a tall, handsome young gentleman of a servant who answered the door-bell.

“Walk into the library, sir, and I’ll go and see.”

Now, it was in the library, all unknown to the servant, that the scene was enacting which we have just described, and Charles Wharton’s entrance a few moments sooner would have made him a witness of its climax.

As it was, all three started. The widow darted an angry glance at the intruder; and Wharton turned an astonished look upon the baron, while the latter seemed inclined to shrink into the back-ground.

“May I inquire, madam,” said Charles, turning to Mrs. Wilson, and speaking in a tone of cold

politeness, “how that man comes to be here?”

“It is an impertinent question, sir,” the widow answered haughtily—“doubly so when the gentleman’s rank and character are taken into account!”

“His rank and character!”

“Surely a distinguished French nobleman, in the presence of a lady whose house he honors with visits, is entitled to be spared the rudeness of impertinent intruders!” flashed out the widow, in a full blaze of temper.

“Let me *show* you his title of nobility!” exclaimed Charles—“I *thought* there was some mistake.”

Advancing, he grasped the quailing baron by the arm, tore off the concealing glove, forced open the clenched hand, and exposed the palm on which was deeply branded the letter T.

“There it is!” cried Charles—“the blazon of a *thief*, HIS TRUE TITLE, won by *merit* years ago! He is neither a Frenchman nor a noble, but the notorious Dick Stalker. I have seen him in the prisoner’s dock many times, and his portrait is now in the rogues’ gallery.”

The gallant baron didn’t stay to call his accuser to account, but incontinently fled, leaving the widow to thank Charles Wharton in her heart for an escape, the story of which she prudently kept to herself. She made him amends, however, in a way which gave satisfaction all round—especially to Blanche and Charles.

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