

***AMBROSE
PRATT***

***HER ASSIGNED
HUSBAND***

Ambrose Pratt

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Author of 'The Remittance Man,' 'Three Years with Thunderbolt,' 'The Outlaws of Weddin Range,' 'Mysterious Investment.'

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Chapter I.—A Family Conclave.

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AMELIA BLESSINGTON Shrugged her shoulders, tilted her dark brows, and allowed the edges of her thin, straight mouth to droop. She desired to signify to her son that she was piously resigned to the inevitable. Her eyes, however, did not betoken resignation. They sparkled with a fine, malicious fire which seemed to take color from the burning logs at which she gazed. Sir Harry Blessington regarded her with a cold appraising stare. His eyes were cynical and deeply discontented. "It was on your advice I left England," he observed.

"Was it on my advice you absented yourself for nearly five months, never writing to Elizabeth, and not even condescending to inform your mother of your whereabouts?"

The young man's face flushed. "Deuce take it," he muttered. "I acted for the best. My silence merely bettered your instructions. Absence and fond hearts, you know. I thought myself uncommonly considerate and clever—in the circumstances—to disappear for a time. I had her promise, and, hang it all—you vowed that she should never break her word."

"You behaved like a fool—an imbecile. I blame you for everything," said his mother quietly.

Sir Harry bit his lip. "And I deserve to be blamed," he admitted. "I reposed too great a confidence in you. I fancied you more than capable of managing the baggage, idiot that I was."

Mrs. Blessington permitted her son a glimpse of the red light in her eyes. With a voice of exceeding sweetness she asked: "Do you think it would pay either of us to quarrel just now? I suppose you are as hard up as usual. I, for my part, am dreadfully in debt, and my creditors daily grow more insolent."

"But you are still the trustee of Elizabeth's estate?" he demanded anxiously.

"I am not."

"What!" he cried. "Already?"

"My guardianship was terminated by the marriage. Her rascally husband cut short the honeymoon in order to get her to take over control of her affairs."

Sir Harry showed his teeth in a snarl of rage, and his black brows drew together in an ugly frown. He looked for the moment like a dangerous wild animal. "How much did the fellow make away with before the debacle?" he demanded.

"He! Oh, nothing. A thousand or two, perhaps. Why?"

Sir Harry looked tremendously relieved. "I thought from your tone that he had ruined her. Pish! You frightened me." He flung out his hands. "Come, come, mater. Things are not so black after all. The money's safe. It's only a question of laying our hands on it. Somehow or another we'll contrive that."

"How?"

The acrid monosyllable and the glance that accompanied it served to put Sir Harry on his mettle. "How?" he repeated; then in a voice of concentrated resolution: "I'll find a way, by heavens! And there'll be no mistake made this time. But

first I must know just where we stand. Let me remind you that as yet I am only acquainted with the barest facts. One, Bessie is married. Two, her husband has been transported to Botany Bay for fourteen years. Three, she has sacked you and assumed control of her property. Why, strap me if you've even told me her husband's name."

Mrs. Blessington once more shrugged her shoulders. "His name is Sherwin, Luke Sherwin."

"Sherwin. Humph! Commence from the beginning, please."

"It commenced at Bath; you know when you left us that we proposed to winter at Bath."

"And I begged you not. But never mind, go on!"

"We met him at the rooms. Lord Strathnaver introduced him as a friend——"

"That young wastrel!" cut in Sir Harry. "Surely such a presentation should have put you on your guard at once. A friend of Strathnaver——"

Mrs. Blessington stopped her son with a single burning look. "I required no warning, sir, Mr. Sherwin never deceived me." She spoke in a tone the softness of which uncannily contrasted with the passion in her eyes. "I read him for a villainous adventurer while he was preparing to make his smirking bow to us. But Elizabeth——" She spread out her hands.

"Well, well," impatiently. "Elizabeth?"

"She fell in love with the blackguard at first sight. She danced every dance with him."

"You should have quitted Bath next morning."

"I desired to, but Elizabeth defied me, and refused to go."

"You should have coerced her, dragged her away!"

"She anticipated that by poisoning my coffee. Such, at least, is my opinion. At any rate, I was taken dangerously ill very suddenly, and for nearly a fortnight I was confined to bed."

"And Elizabeth?"

"Was always with Mr. Sherwin, I subsequently discovered from the servants. As soon as I became strong enough to raise my head I intervened, of course, but the mischief was done."

"What do you mean?"

"They had procured a parson to marry them on the fifth day of their acquaintance."

"But no contract could be legal without your consent. Her father's will expressly stipulated——"

"Elizabeth had foreseen even that detail. She is a creature of resource. While I lay ill and fearing myself about to die, she persuaded me with many tears and kisses to sign a document which I understood was a message to you—bidding you attend my bed of death. It was in reality a formal consent to her marriage with Luke Sherwin."

"The little devil!" hissed Sir Harry. "But still, fraud, fraud. No court would uphold a consent so wickedly obtained."

Mrs. Blessington smiled grimly. "So I told Mr. Sherwin."

"Ah! And he?"

"Mr. Sherwin proved himself an adroit man of business. He pointed out that since the mischief actually was done, it might be more advantageous to me to compromise than to fight a protracted lawsuit. He had previously taken pains to ascertain my true financial status."

"Ah! So you compromised. And the terms?"

"He agreed to push no inquiries into my stewardship of his wife's estate, and he gave me a bond for £20,000. In return, I signed a valid consent to the marriage."

Sir Harry gave a low whistle. "And nevertheless you are in debt," he cried.

"When the bond came due for payment, Mr. Sherwin lay a prisoner in irons at the Old Bailey. He is now on his way to New South Wales."

"But Elizabeth will honor it. She must."

"She may. She is under no legal responsibility, my lawyers tell me, but I continue to hope that she may prove so far tractable!"

"Is she aware your husband gave you the bond?"

"She was present when he signed it."

"Why do you doubt her, then?"

"She has greatly changed. Wait until you see her and you will understand."

Sir Harry shifted to a more comfortable position. He had obviously been under a prolonged muscular strain. "Is she still infatuated?" he inquired.

"It is impossible to say. She will not talk about her husband at all. For a week after he was sentenced she kept her room and refused to see a soul. She reappeared a woman of the world, ten years older, and infected with a craze for keeping her own counsel. Since then she has plunged into every sort and form of gaiety. She seems intent on making the world believe that she is heart-whole."

Sir Harry smiled, and stroked his black moustache. "So she is keeping a stiff upper lip. Well, well—we'll see."

"She is prouder than Lucifer," said Mrs. Blessington. "I believe she would murder anyone who offered to sympathise with her."

Sir Harry nodded. "Thanks for the hint. By the way, who was her husband?"

"At Bath," sneered Mrs. Blessington, "he was the eldest son of a wealthy Irish gentleman. At his trial he was shown to be the youngest son of an impoverished Cornish schoolmaster."

"A personable creature, I daresay? Tall and dark, with a military figure, an ingratiating smile, a melancholy air, and the manners of a French dancing master?"

Mrs. Blessington frowned and shook her head.

"On the contrary, he is fair, not very tall, but immensely big and imposing. He reminded me of a prize-fighter, but I am obliged to confess that his features, though heavy, are not coarse."

"What do you count the secret of his fascination? He did fascinate the girl, I suppose."

"He has a remarkable gift of brightness. He turns everything to laughter, and he can be incredibly impertinent without causing offence."

"A marvel!" exclaimed Sir Harry. "He will be a rare acquisition to the convict settlement. By the way, for what was he transported? Something romantic, one may be permitted to hope?"

Mrs. Blessington's thin lips curled. "Before marrying Elizabeth he was a common pickpocket," she replied. "But no—I do him an injustice—an uncommon pickpocket, I

should say. No man ever possessed a more limitless effrontery. Witness the circumstances of his arrest."

"Ah!"

"He took Elizabeth that evening to the Spanish Ambassador's ball."

"Well?"

"Only a few weeks earlier he had stolen a watch and purse from his Excellency's pocket at a London theatre and had been detected in the act. He only got clear by striking his victim senseless and forcing a way through the crowd. He must be a Hercules."

"The ambassador recognised him, I presume."

"At once, and charged him with the crime in the middle of the ball-room—Elizabeth hanging on the rascal's arm."

Sir Harry laughed gently and rubbed his hands together as though well pleased. "Elizabeth would not have relished that," he murmured. "A jilted lover may find compensation in the thought."

Mrs. Blessington pursed up her lips.

"I told her he was an adventurer from the start," he said.

"And doubtless at the finish, too," sneered Sir Harry. "But tell me, how did the fellow, Sherwin, behave?"

"He laughed to scorn his Excellency's accusation and challenged him to fight a duel. Pretended to be grossly insulted, and so on."

"You were present, mother?"

"Aye." Mrs. Blessington smiled as at some precious memory.

"What else?"

"There was a violent scene, and many people took sides with the adventurer. But his Excellency pressed the charge, and Mr. Sherwin was arrested, here in this house, later the same evening, by the Bow Street runners. Elizabeth was like one demented——"

"Spare me her insanities. I can imagine them. What was Sherwin's defence?"

"He endeavored to set up a case of mistaken identity and prove an alibi."

"He failed, of course?"

"Absolutely."

"There was no error made. He is not by any chance an injured innocent?"

"His whole life was traced. It made a spicy record. Moreover, several brother pickpockets and many respectable citizens identified him past questioning. He had been in gaol before."

"And so he was transported for fourteen years."

"Yes."

Sir Harry thrust out his boots to the fire. "There should be no trouble in breaking Elizabeth's marriage," he observed. "Does she still call herself Mrs. Sherwin?"

"Yes."

"And the world titters, of course."

Mrs. Blessington raised her eyebrows. "She is an object of combined curiosity, pity, and contempt. She is attempting the impossible—to live as though nothing had happened and her position were not desperately equivocal. She could not maintain the farce for a day were it not for her

enormous fortune. But already she is finding out how bitter is her need of a protector. The young bloods, you know."

"Ah, yes. I know the young bloods well. Hum, hum! I begin to see my way. I must teach her to lean on me. What? Can you better that for a suggestion?"

"You will need to be extremely careful not to let her discern your purpose. She is uncommonly intelligent, and her mind has been sharpened with suspicion."

"Trust me, mother. I'll commence by being her indulgent elder brother. I'll escort her everywhere, and yet efface myself in company and incite the world to enjoy all the opportunities it craves to fret her spirit. Damme! but the role appeals to me. With my left hand I'll fan the flames, with my right I'll pluck her from them just as they begin to sear her flesh. Mark me well. In a month I'll be her only comforter, her only consolation."

"Would you wed her, Harry?"

Sir Harry tugged thoughtfully at his moustache. "There are eighty thousand reasons why I should," he said at last. "But I confess I'd prefer to get my fist into her treasury some other way. There's no disguising the fact she is a soiled dove. She's the wife of a pickpocket, you say, but for aught we know he may have half a dozen other wives. However, we'll talk again on this. There's no hurry to decide." He got to his feet. "Meanwhile, I'll have a furbish up, if you'll excuse me. My old room, I suppose?"

"I'll go with you, Harry. Pray lend me your arm."

Some two or three moments after Mrs. Blessington and her son had departed from the library, a section of one of the heavy bookcases, flanking the ingle opened outwards on

a shrieking hinge, and from the cavity behind it a young woman of medium height and slender build stepped into the apartment. She was attired as though for a garden party at Ranelagh—richly, according to the accepted fashion of the period. Her first act was to close the bookcase. She then removed the hat which had obscured her countenance, and revealed a shapely head covered with a wonderfully plaited mass of gleaming copper hair. It was not a gentle or a genial face the fire-light played upon. The young woman's features were regular enough and her complexion was clear and faultless, but her expression was not alluring. It would have set a man on his defence; a child it would have terrified. For several minutes she stood motionless, gazing, as Mrs. Blessington had done, into the heart of the burning logs; one hand holding the strings of her discarded hat, the other pressed tightly to her side. But her mobile face was never for an instant still. A thousand shades and shadows crossed it, and each muscular distortion gave a fleeting portraiture of stormy passions, superbly held within subjection by a strength of will enormously beyond the commonplace of female resolution. No physiognomist but would have been enchanted by the spectacle. No dreamer but would have trespassed on the utmost prerogatives of inspiration to divine a future fit for such a subject of distracting speculation. Many a time the young woman seemed to be on the very edge of a tumultuous verbal outburst, but always her pre-determination to be silent triumphed. At the outset of these little crises she looked a girl of twenty-three; as often as she mastered them she aged a dozen years.

At length her reverie was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps in the corridor. Immediately she heard them the young woman's attitude relaxed. She did not alter her pose, but she began to swing her hat gently to and fro, and when, a few seconds later, Mrs. Blessington re-entered the room, the young woman showed her a visage that reflected nothing of the owner's soul, except, perhaps, her pride.

"So you have returned, my dear," said Mrs. Blessington, pausing, somewhat startled, near the door. "I did not expect you for another hour at least. No unpleasant contretemps recalled you, I sincerely hope?"

"Nothing unusual, aunt, save that I was unusually bored. Has Sir Harry arrived?"

"Only a little while ago. He is now repairing the exactions of his journey."

"How much does he know?"

"Everything, Elizabeth. I was only required to supply a few details. You have nothing, my dear, to apprehend from his reproaches—nor need you fear his sympathy. He assured me he regards you as a sister, and he quite approves the courageous attitude you have taken up. I am confident you will find him an agreeable companion, and I trust you will not scruple to employ his services. You are far too young to go about unattended, and, if you'll suffer me to pay you an earnest compliment, you are far too beautiful, my dear."

Mrs. Sherwin dropped her aunt a smiling little curtesy. "You are too indulgent to your emancipated ward," she said, then added quickly: "I think you have always been a little too indulgent to me, aunt, and I a little too ungrateful."

"Oh, my dear," cried Mrs. Blessington, "you are growing human. I must kiss you for that most delightful little speech."

Mrs. Sherwin seemed nothing loth. She held out her arms, indeed, for the embrace, and the two women caressed each other cordially.

"Between ourselves," whispered Mrs. Blessington, "Harry is as much your slave as ever."

Mrs. Sherwin blushed very charmingly. "Between ourselves," she whispered in return, "I am very glad to hear it. I am not unmindful that I treated him abominably."

Mrs. Blessington was bewitched by this unexpected confession into a display of magnanimity that flouted practice and disowned all precedent. "He deserved it," she exclaimed. "But for his outrageous folly in deserting us——"

But the younger woman put a loving finger on her aunt's lips. "No, no," she said. "Harry is not responsible, and I will not have you blame him."

Positively, there were tears in Mrs. Blessington's eyes when her niece ran away to dress for dinner.

Chapter II.—Some Pages from a Young Woman's Diary.

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October 17.—It is well, Indeed, that I contrived to overhear their first unguarded colloquy. Mrs. Blessington is a Sphinx, and my cousin has the wisdom of a fallen angel. Oh, heavens, to know that his unfailing kindness, his exquisite consideration, his chivalrous solicitude, and his unflagging readiness to sacrifice his predilections to my whims are so many sweet, smiling masks assumed to trap my confidence and undermine my independence. Is there any meanness, any baseness, from which a gentleman will shrink in his pursuit of fortune? With pickpockets and snatch-purses, such practices may be accounted natural, but I do now begin to realise that the hearts of all men are infamous and black with guile. Yet there is one shall pay me to the full; aye, and more than one, perhaps. Why not acquit Sir Harry in his own coin—with the other? Might I not constrain him to attend me to the Antipodes—there to be an instrument of my revenge? How could he resist the pressure I may put upon him? He is fathoms deep in debt, and I have learned the trick of stirring up his passions. Shall I teach him that his "soiled dove" is a spider—spinning out the lesson over many thousand leagues of ocean and across the verges of an undeveloped continent? The plan has pleasing features, and a man is always useful to a woman who can manage him and keep him loyal with a dangled purse. Do you not hear the knelling of your doom, accursed sneak who call yourself Sir Harry Blessington?