

The Contested Marriage

The Experiences of a Barrister, #3

by Samuel Warren, 1807-1877

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I had just escaped to my chambers one winter afternoon from a heavy trial "at bar" in the King's Bench, Westminster, and was poring over a case upon which an "opinion" was urgently solicited, when my clerk entered with a letter which he had been requested to deliver by a lady, who had called twice before during the day for the purpose of seeing me. Vexed at the interruption, I almost snatched the letter from the man's hand, hastily broke the seal, and to my great surprise found it was from my excellent old friend Sir Jasper Thornely of Thornely Hall, Lancashire. It ran as follows:

"My Dear ___, The bearer of this note is a lady whom I am desirous of serving to the utmost extent of my ability. That she is really the widow she represents herself to be, and her son consequently heir to the magnificent estates now in possession of the Emsdales—you remember how they tripped up my heels at the last election for the borough of ___ I have no moral doubt whatever; but whether her claim can be legally established is another affair. She will tell you the story herself. It was a heartless business; but Sir Harry, who, you have no doubt heard, broke his neck in a steeple-chase about ten months ago, was a sad wild dog. My advice is, to look out for a sharp, clever, persevering attorney, and set him upon a hunt for evidence. If he succeed, I undertake to pay him a thousand pounds over and above his legal costs. He'll nose it out for that, I should think!—Yours, truly,
"Jasper Thornely.

"P.S.—Emsdale's son, I have just heard—confound their impudence!—intends, upon the strength of this accession of property, to stand for the county against my old friend ___, at the dissolution, which cannot now be far off. If you don't think one thousand pounds enough, I'll double it. A cruelly, ill-used lady! and as to her son, he's the very image of the late Sir Harry Compton. In haste—J.T. I re-open the letter to enclose a cheque for a hundred pounds, which you will pay the attorney on account. They'll die hard, you may be sure. If it could come off next assizes, we should spoil them for the county—J.T."

"Assizes"—"county"—"Sir Harry Compton," I involuntarily murmured, as I finished the perusal of my old friend's incoherent epistle. "What on earth can the eccentric old fox-hunter mean?" "Show the lady in," I added in a louder tone to the clerk. She presently appeared, accompanied by a remarkably handsome boy about six years of age, both attired in deep mourning. The lady approached with a timid, furtive step and glance, as if she were entering the den of some grim ogre, rather than the quiet study of a civilized lawyer of mature age. I was at once struck by her singular and touching loveliness. I have never seen a woman that so completely realized the highest Madonna type of youthful, matronly beauty—its starlight radiance and mild serenity of sorrow. Her voice, too, gentle and low, had a tone of patient sadness in it strangely affecting. She was evidently a person, if not of high birth, of refined manners and cultivated mind; and I soon ceased to wonder at warm-hearted old Sir Jasper's enthusiasm in her cause. Habitually, however, on my guard against first impressions, I courteously, but coldly, invited her first to a seat, and next to a more intelligible relation of her business with me than could be gathered from the letter of which she was the bearer. She complied, and I was soon in possession of the following facts and fancies:

Violet Dalston and her sister Emily had lived for several years in close and somewhat straitened retirement with their father, Captain Dalston, at Rock Cottage, on the outskirts of a village about six miles distant from Leeds, when Captain Dalston, who was an enthusiastic angler, introduced to his home a gentleman about twenty-five years of age, of handsome exterior and gentlemanly manners, with whom congeniality of tastes and pursuits had made him

acquainted. This stranger was introduced to Violet (my interesting client) and her sister, as a Mr. Henry Grainger, the son of a London merchant. The object of his wanderings through the English counties was, he said, to recruit his health, which had become affected by too close application to business, and to gratify his taste for angling, sketching, and so on. He became a frequent visitor; and the result, after the lapse of about three months, was a proposal for the hand of Violet. His father allowed him, he stated, five hundred pounds per annum; but in order not to mortally offend the old gentleman, who was determined, if his son married at all, it should be either to rank or riches, it would be necessary to conceal the marriage till after his death. This commonplace story had been, it appeared, implicitly credited by Captain Dalston; and Violet Dalston and Henry Grainger were united in holy wedlock—not at the village church near where Captain Dalston resided, but in one of the Leeds churches. The witnesses were the bride's father and sister, and a Mr. Bilston, a neighbor. This marriage had taken place rather more than seven years since, and its sole fruit was the fine-looking boy who accompanied his mother to my office. Mr. Grainger, soon after the marriage, persuaded the Dalstons to leave Rock Cottage, and take up their abode in a picturesque village in Cumberland, where he had purchased a small house, with some garden and ornamental grounds attached.

Five years rolled away—not, as I could discern, *too* happily when the very frequent absences of Violet's husband in London, as he alleged (all her letters to him were directed to the post-office, St. Martin's le Grand—till called for), were suddenly greatly prolonged; and on his return home, after an absence of more than three months, he abruptly informed the family that the affairs of his father, who was dying, had been found to be greatly embarrassed, and that nothing was left for him and them but emigration to America, with such means as might be saved from the wreck of the elder Grainger's property. After much lamentation and opposition on the part of Emily Dalston and her father, it was finally conceded as Violet's husband wished; and the emigration was to have taken place in the following spring, Henry Grainger to follow them the instant he could wind up his father's affairs. About three months before their intended departure—this very time twelvemonth, as nearly as may be—Captain Dalston was suddenly called to London, to close the eyes of an only sister. This sad duty fulfilled, he was about to return, when, passing towards dusk down St. James Street, he saw Henry Grainger, habited in a remarkable sporting-dress, standing with several other gentlemen at the door of one of the club-houses. Hastening across the street to accost him, he was arrested for a minute or so by a line of carriages which turned sharply out of Piccadilly; and when he did reach the other side, young Mr. Grainger and his companions had vanished. He inquired of the porter, and was assured that no Mr. Grainger, senior or junior, was known there. Persisting that he had seen him standing within the doorway, and describing his dress, the man with an insolent laugh exclaimed that the gentleman who wore that dress was the famous sporting baronet, Sir Harry Compton!

Bewildered, and suspecting he hardly knew what, Captain Dalston, in defiance of young Grainger's oft-iterated injunctions, determined to call at his father's residence, which he had always understood to be in Leadenhall Street. No such name was, however, known there; and an examination, to which he was advised,

of the "Commercial Directory" failed to discover the whereabouts of the pretended London merchant. Heart-sick and spirit-wearied, Captain Dalston returned home only to die. A violent cold, caught by imprudently riding in such bitter weather as it then was, on the outside of the coach, aggravated by distress of mind, brought his already enfeebled frame to the grave in less than two months after his arrival in Cumberland. He left his daughters utterly unprovided for, except by the legal claim which the eldest possessed on a man who, he feared, would turn out to be a worthless impostor. The penalty he paid for consenting to so imprudent a marriage was indeed a heavy and bitter one. Months passed away, and still no tidings of Violet's husband reached the sisters' sad and solitary home. At length, stimulated by apprehensions of approaching destitution—whose foot was already on the threshold—and desirous of gratifying a whim of Emily's, Violet consented to visit the neighborhood of Compton Castle (the seat, her sister had ascertained, of the "celebrated sporting baronet," as the porter called him) on their way to London, where they had relatives who, though not rich, might possibly be able to assist them in obtaining some decent means of maintenance. They alighted at the "Compton Arms," and the first object which met the astonished gaze of the sisters as they entered the principal sitting-room of the inn, was a full-length portrait of Violet's husband, in the exact sporting-dress described to them by their father. An ivory tablet attached to the lower part of the frame informed the gazer that the picture was a copy, by permission, of the celebrated portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence, of Sir Harry Compton, Baronet. They were confounded, overwhelmed, bewildered. Sir Harry, they found, had been killed about eight months previously in a steeple-chase; and the castle and estates had passed, in default of direct issue, to a distant relative, Lord Emsdale. Their story was soon bruited about; and, in the opinion of many persons, was confirmed beyond reasonable question by the extraordinary likeness they saw or fancied between Violet's son and the deceased baronet. Amongst others, Sir Jasper Thornely was a firm believer in the identity of Henry Grainger and Sir Harry Compton; but unfortunately, beyond the assertion of the sisters that the portrait of Sir Harry was young Grainger's portrait, the real or imaginary likeness of the child to his reputed father, and some score of letters addressed to Violet by her husband, which Sir Jasper persisted were in Sir Harry's handwriting, though few others did (the hand, I saw at a glance, was a disguised one), not one tittle of evidence had he been able to procure for love or money. As a last resource, he had consigned the case to me, and the vulpine sagacity of a London attorney.

I suppose my countenance must be what is called a "speaking" one, for I had made no reply in words to this statement of a case upon which I and a "London attorney" were to ground measures for wresting a magnificent estate from the clutch of a powerful nobleman, and by "next assizes" too—when the lady's beautiful eyes filled with tears, and turning to her child, she murmured in that gentle, agitating voice of hers, "My poor boy." The words I was about to utter died on my tongue, and I remained silent for several minutes. After all, thought I, this lady is evidently sincere in her expressed conviction that Sir Harry Compton was her husband. If her surmise be correct, evidence of the truth may perhaps be obtained by a keen search for it; and since Sir Jasper guarantees the expenses—I rang the bell. "Step over to Cursitor Street," said I to the clerk as soon as he

entered; "and if Mr. Ferret is within, ask him to step over immediately." Ferret was just the man for such a commission. Indefatigable, resolute, sharp-witted, and of a ceaseless, remorseless activity, a secret or a fact had need be very profoundly hidden for him not to reach and fish it up. I have heard solemn doubts expressed by attorneys opposed to him as to whether he ever really and truly slept at all—that is, a genuine Christian sleep, as distinguished from a merely canine one, with one eye always half open. Mr. Ferret had been for many years Mr. Simpkins' managing clerk; but ambition, and the increasing requirements of a considerable number of young Ferrets, determined him on commencing business on his own account; and about six months previous to the period of which I am now writing, a brass door-plate in Cursitor Street, Chancery Lane, informed the public that Samuel Ferret, Esq., Attorney-at-Law, might be consulted within.

