

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

Mrs. BUSBY GLAISHER'S

DEFEAT

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MRS. BUSBY GLAISHER was large and square and red, with the joy of a misanthrope. She always thought of herself as of a misanthrope. She was womanly; it was terrible. She was not only large corporeally but was a woman of large generous ideas on the subject of the infidelity of Mrs. Busby-Glaisher.

She was never troubled by a doubt of the righteousness of any of her feelings, and in her eyes any desire she cherished was sacred. Anybody who ran counter to them was an infamous person, outside the human pale. The crushing of such a person was apt to become a fixed idea with her; she would stick at nothing to compass it, and the weapons she used against the transgressor were the most potent continuous slanders that any misanthrope could use.

She had the habit of domination, and ruled both Pringle Hill and Pringle Hill, the suburb she resided in with her father. Her wealth, inherited from a father, a gentleman who had made a large fortune out of wholesale and retail, tailoring, and she had a complete grip of the chief sweating factory of Pringle Hill, gave her great social prestige among her less wealthy neighbors; her tenacity, her misanthropy, and her authority over the town.

Pringle Hill, who did not like Mrs. Busby-Glaisher, and who lived at Pringle Hill, would sometimes raise the standard of revolt. They always resented it, but they were wise to do so, for she had a large number of followers, and she crushed them. Carriers, organizers, and private persons who would not give her her own sweet way, had in the end to leave Pringle Hill, for the most part with badly damaged characters.

She was above all distinguished by an inveterate inability to young married women, especially if they claimed to be pretty and attractive. It was almost impossible for them to avoid quarreling with her, for she forced quarrels on them; and it was seldom that she failed to cause them a good deal of unhappiness.

This ill-naturedness caused her to fall foul of the Scarlets. This young couple established itself at Pringle Hill in a small house, a fact which in itself caused Mrs. and Mrs. Scarlet to little consideration. But since they showed an agreeable disposition to make the best of suburban life, they presently were admitted to Pringle Hill society, to the Tennis Club, the dances, the lectures, and other social advantages which Pringle Hill enjoys. Mr. Antony Scarlet, a young man of twenty-five, presented to the world an excellent, a vigorous man, an open mouth, and a lip. People who chanced to see him with that eyesome air of his own, a young man with very keen, intelligent eyes and closest, resolute lips. Also he had his hair with his eyes, but that was an appearance he kept for the privacy of his home and the society of his intimate friends. The shrewd world of Pringle Hill saw only a patient idiot.

He was believed to be "something" in the city, though no one knew what, since the Scarlets showed a quite uncommon reverence about themselves; and the maid they had brought with them maintained an equal reverence about the Scarlets. Their cook, recently engaged, knew nothing about them. This reverence, so lacking to legitimate curiosity, was bad enough, but Mrs. Scarlet's prettiness and charm were even more annoying to the elderly ladies of Pringle Hill, even though as they often said, they could see nothing in her.

Mrs. Busby-Glaisher found them indeed detestable. She even began to fear that by that mere charm Mrs. Scarlet would presently be a rival power in Pringle Hill. Nothing was further from Mrs. Scarlet's desires or thoughts; but to Mrs. Busby-Glaisher her domination of Pringle Hill was the central fact of the universe; she was ready to suspect anyone of striving to displace it with her; and she set to work to crush Mrs. Scarlet with her usual weapons. Mrs. Scarlet was not long observing a change in people's manner toward her, a disposition to look askance at her, to avoid her, and an uneasiness in her society. She set about inquiring into the matter, and learned from Mrs. Crowe, another young married woman, that Mrs. Busby-Glaisher had been saying horrid things about her; that she dyed her hair, painted her face, carried on with married men in a very brazen way, and was altogether a most undesirable person, quite unfit to associate with the select social circle which adorned Pringle Hill.

Mrs. Scarlet came to Mr. Scarlet in a very pretty fury, told him what she had learned, and begged him to deal with Mrs. Busby-Glaisher. Antony shed his eyes and listened to her with the keenest interest. He did not express any anger when she had finished, but he looked unconsciously dangerous as he said: "I'll deal with the old beast—fairly. But there is only one way, and that will make things a good deal more unpleasant for you in Pringle Hill before they are all right."

"I don't mind that at all as long as you punish that horrid old woman," cried Mrs. Scarlet.

"Very good," said Antony; and then he added with some hesitancy: "I have had an odd feeling all the time that Pringle Hill was really a gold mine, if one could only hit on the reef." With that he took his hat and came and caught a train to town.

The next morning Mrs. Busby-Glaisher was beyond measure charmed to receive a handwritten letter, signed only "A. W. W. W. W." and unaccompanied by that well-known address, which informed her that

Mr. and Mrs. Scarlet had neglected to go through the formality of getting married. At once she summoned the more suitable ladies of Pringle Hill and the rector; and without mentioning that the information came from an anonymous letter, told them that she had learned that Mr. and Mrs. Scarlet were not married. When they had exhausted their expressions of horror at Mrs. Scarlet's brazen effrontery in thrusting herself into their circle, on Mrs. Busby-Glaisher's suggestion they called on the rector to expedite this abomination from their midst.

The rector, a very womanly man of bad family and large private means, who loved a bit of scandal every while as much as the worst of them, expressed the deep sympathy he really felt with them, and proposed his earnest resolve to purge Pringle Hill of pollution. He was always a warm supporter of Mrs. Busby-Glaisher, whom he respected for her wealth and firmness of character, and of whom he cherished a very honest dread.

Having obtained this assurance from him, the more unpleasant of the ladies, headed by Mrs. Busby-Glaisher, went forth to demonstrate their propriety and enjoy themselves by "outing" Mrs. Scarlet on her wedding's morning in Pringle Hill. She came when the rector came early in the afternoon. Antony Scarlet received him with his most open-mouthed, nervous air. The rector, who was used to him and to his in and out of the pulpit, rose to the great occasion of his life and expressed his heartfelt indignation at the enormity of the conduct of his hearer and his reputed wife with a thoroughness as agreeable as it was surprising to himself.

Antony Scarlet was greatly flustered, and lamely asked whether the outraged ladies were likely to have suffered much harm from having been brought into contact with Mrs. Scarlet. The indignant rector did not spare him; he told him almost word for word what Mrs. Busby-Glaisher had said, what other ladies had said, what he himself had said about the scandalous Mrs. Scarlet. Then he told Mr. Scarlet with amazing eloquence his opinion of him.

Antony the rector took his hat, without saying a word more than was sufficient to excite him to his fullest expression of the sentiments of his outraged Pringle Hill. But as he left he said, with his foolish lip: "Haven't you large private means, Mr. Gudger?"

"Yes, sir, I have, thank goodness. And it enables me to say what I think without fear or favor," said the rector; and he walked with pleasure at his happy way of putting it.

"To Mr. Gudger, Mr. Gudger," said Antony Scarlet, with an ill-disguised sneer. "The rector did not long leave when a young Mrs. Crowe came round in great distress. Antony saw her, since Mrs. Scarlet was lying down with her headache, and she told him that Mrs. Busby-Glaisher had called on her with two other ladies whom she described with some bitterness as old cats, and told her that he and his wife were not married, and assured her that if she continued to associate with Mrs. Scarlet no one would associate with her. Antony showed a good deal of interest about their exact words; but, since he did not deny the charge, she came away believing it to be true, and as much distressed as when she came.

For a few days the affair developed slowly. Ladies of more uncompromising propriety were bled of their fervent desire to out Mrs. Scarlet since she did not appear in the streets of Pringle Hill. They probed about for hours in the evening, the green, a confirmed and public-spirited Plymouth Brother, refused to supply the Scarlets with groceries; and the other tradesmen sent in their bills and demanded instant payment in an obscure but fervent conviction that by this drastic action they were vindicating outraged propriety. Antony Scarlet paid the bills in person and in cash; the sight of gold, or perhaps his child, invariably forced the tradesmen's tongues, and he learned that Mrs. Busby-Glaisher, or the rector, or both, had inspired the sending of each bill.

Then Mrs. Busby-Glaisher took another step. She sent a note to the Scarlets' servants asking them to come to see her. Their master bade them go by all means. When they were shown into Mrs. Busby-Glaisher's drawing-room they found the rector with her; and she at once asked them seriously if they were bent on spending their chances of getting other places by remaining in a house where the master and mistress were not married. The parlor maid at once very respectfully and with considerable heat, said

to her of little importance. She was used to infamy. But it was a serious matter indeed if she had offended a member of the class she had so long regarded from afar with impressed esteem, and in which she had always felt that she was born to shine, could she but obtain an entrance into it. What if she had missed such an entrance?

However, she assured the girl, with diplomatic firmness, that she believed her to be a shameless liar in league with her shameless master, and bade her go. The girl went, saying that she would have the law on her.

Mrs. Busby-Glaisher turned to the rector and said: "Can we have made a mistake?" "It will be a hum—hum—very awkward if we have," said the rector.

"I hope we have," said Mrs. Busby-Glaisher. "To think of having a baronet's niece at Pringle Hill!"

But the rector was uncomfortable; and he pressed Mrs. Busby-Glaisher for the sources of her information. She showed him the anonymous letter. The simple cleric read it and said that it was a very proper letter, and, of course, her correspondent could do no less than write it, if she had reasons for her belief. Then he added, suddenly: "Of course it relieves us from any legal responsibility for the action we have taken. But I shall have no time in going to see Mr. Scarlet, and have him—putting to him the immorality of letting us labor under this misapprehension."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," cried Mrs. Busby-Glaisher, sharply. "Leave it all to me. Why, I may be months getting on proper terms with her after this uncomfortable affair! I cannot risk any maddening."

"Very well—hum—your well-known fact," said the rector, and he took his leave. But after while he grew uncomfortable. The thought that there might be a legal side to the matter troubled him; the thought also that he might incur some odium for acting as firmly as he had on insufficient grounds, worried him. Moreover, he began to resent Antony's having let him in a false position, when a simple denial would have cleared the matter up. He made up his mind that by far the best course would be to go and at once take a high hand with the young idiot.

Accordingly, after his high tea he went to the Scarlets' house. The maid told him her master was at dinner, showed him into the drawing-room, and brought back word that Mr. Scarlet would see him when he had finished dinner. She left him to look his heels for nearly an hour in that drawing-room. He was not long feeling that he was not being treated with a proper regard to his social importance, and the feeling grew in depth and intensity till, when the door did open, he was ready to treat the matter with a very high hand indeed.

Antony Scarlet came in, wearing a dinner jacket and an object in itself hardly an assurance of genuine respectability. He looked at the standard of Pringle Hill, smoking a large cigar, and without one word of apology, without removing his hands from his pockets, said cheerfully: "Well, Mr. Gudger, how are you?"

The rector rose, drew himself to his full height, and said, with admirable dignity: "I have come to ask, Mr. Scarlet, for an explanation of your extraordinary conduct in allowing Mrs. Busby-Glaisher and myself to labor under a mistake, as to your marriage with Mrs. Scarlet. A word from you would have set the matter right at once. But you chose to let me go on in a false position, and I must demand an explanation."

"And why shouldn't you, Mr. Gudger? Why shouldn't you?" said Antony, heartily, with a beaming smile.

Flustered by his engaging manner, the rector said sternly: "And what is your explanation of this—hum—hum—levity?"

"Oh, when you came to me with the blackguardly Mrs. Busby-Glaisher, I was content about my wife, it did not occur to me to say anything until I could say it in the proper way through her solicitor. I thought he had served the writ on you by now," said Antony cheerfully.

"Blackguardly! He's Solicitor! What do you mean?" asked the rector.

"Yes, about a woman's affairs, he is generally considered blackguardly; and my wife's solicitor has instructions to communicate no news, for slander against you and Mrs. Busby-Glaisher," said Antony, with a cheerful smile.

Suddenly the rector realized that this Antony Scarlet was a very different young man from the vacuous young man he had known, that for all his easy and pleasant cheerfulness his eyes were dangerous, and he stuttered.

"But you never dreamed it! A word from you would have stopped the matter at once! You had only to speak, to show me your marriage certificate! It's entirely your own fault."



EDGAR JEPSON

that Mrs. Busby-Glaisher was a scandal-mongering old woman, that she had been with Miss Dorothy since she was a little girl, and had been present at her marriage with her master, who, if he was not well off, was well known to be a very honorable young gentleman. She ended by expressing her wonder at what Miss Dorothy's uncle, the baronet, would say if he heard that these lying stories were going about.

Mrs. Busby-Glaisher was much taken aback. That she had been spreading slander on grounds supplied her by a kind but anonymous correspondent, seemed



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to her of little importance. She was used to infamy. But it was a serious matter indeed if she had offended a member of the class she had so long regarded from afar with impressed esteem, and in which she had always felt that she was born to shine, could she but obtain an entrance into it. What if she had missed such an entrance?

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"I shouldn't dream of taking the trouble to contradict a miserable lie of that kind; and much less should I dream of showing my marriage certificate to any fool-minded meddler who chooses to ask for it."

"Do you allude to me as a fool-minded meddler, sir?" roared the rector.

"Certainly, my dear rector, certainly," said Antony. And he added, with a genial laugh: "I think that the jury will take an even stronger view of the matter."

The rector's mouth was dry and his face was pale as he said: "Do I understand that you propose to wash your dirty linen in public—in a court of law?"

"Your dirty linen, rector; yours and Mrs. Busby-Glaisher's," said Antony, cheerfully.

"It's entirely your own fault, sir! Entirely! The

sight of your marriage certificate would have stopped it at once! Any jury will see it!"

"You spread the lie before you made any attempt to ascertain the truth. But there, we'll leave it to the jury. And now I won't keep you. Don't please think me impatient; but Mrs. Scarlet will want the room fumigated after you have been in it, before she can use it again. Good evening."

"Fumigated? I was never so insulted in my life!" roared the rector, as he went out, a limp and broken man. He had no heart for a noisy talk with Mrs. Busby-Glaisher after the quietude of Mr. Antony Scarlet. That good lady therefore spent an impatient evening, decaying by her eagerness to be consoled sympathetically with the niece of a baronet. Next morning she could have dealt with the slowness with which the hours were passing in really unalike language. At eleven o'clock a gentleman called to see her who proved to be a lawyer's clerk. With a brisk heartiness he presented her with a legal document which he explained was the writ in an action for slander brought against her by Mrs. Scarlet, and that the amount of damage claimed was £5,000.

Mrs. Busby-Glaisher was at first exceedingly annoyed, since she was doubtful whether it was quite good form to call on a lady who was bringing an action for slander against her. But presently it occurred to her that she might very well make the best of an excuse for calling earlier than the usual hour, to talk such a serious matter over at once, amicably, and she grew cheerful again. Then in came the limp and broken rector, bearing in his hand a similar writ which the brisk and hearty lawyer's clerk had just served on him.

Mrs. Busby-Glaisher treated the matter of the writs with a light, contemptuous cheerfulness. She assured him that they were merely the form of a legal action; the matter, that people of position like the Scarlets, did not air their grievances in the law courts. She ended by saying: "It's just a matter for a little friendly chat. I shall call on Mrs. Scarlet this afternoon and settle it. We shall be all the better friends for this little tiff; you'll see."

The rector went away striving to share her confidence; but Mr. Antony Scarlet's eyes, quiet and dangerous, kept rising before his mind. He felt that he needed comfort—comfort from his lawyer—went to town.

When, outlining the rainbow in her magnificent apparel, Mrs. Busby-Glaisher knocked at the Scarlets' door, it was opened by the maid with whom she had been so diplomatically firm the night before.

The maid said: "My mistress said that if you had the brazen impudence to call, I wasn't to let you into the house. And the master has come to town to see his lawyer about my bringing an action against you for calling me a shameless liar."

"I don't want any impudence from you, you impudent slave! Show me into the drawing-room at once, and tell your mistress I insist on seeing her!" roared Mrs. Busby-Glaisher.

The maid shut the door in her face, and left her planted on the steps. With her splendid firmness and in the very nick of time, Mrs. Busby-Glaisher curled a bit of apoplexy and went home. She drank a strong brandy and soda, and sat down to consider other means of getting in touch with Mrs. Scarlet and becoming reconciled with her. Suddenly it flashed upon her that Mrs. Scarlet might be serious in her action for slander. She took the writ and the anonymous letter and went to town to her husband's solicitor.

Mr. Horsham, an old friend of her husband's, received her with the air of a ghastly disaster she wrongly believed husband to him. But as she told her story and answered his searching questions, he gradually grew cheerful; and at the end he said: "A disgusting business; a very disgusting business indeed. I suppose you want me to try to get this lady to take less than £5,000. She will be a fool if she does; and Bickerseth & Crumpton are not the fools to let her!"

"What? My pay £5,000?" cried Mrs. Busby-Glaisher.

"Certainly, you'll pay," said Mr. Horsham, almost, with gloom. "There isn't a chance of your doing any thing else."

"Never! I'll fight the case through every court in England!"

"Then it will cost you ten thousand," said Mr. Horsham, scarcely able to restrain his joy at the devoted lady's predicament.

"Nonsense! I don't believe it! Engage the best legal talent in England! At once!" cried his client.

"Garden me. This is not the kind of business my firm would dream of touching. It would utterly destroy our standing in the profession," said Mr. Horsham.

He was firm in this refusal; and the face of the Mrs. Busby-Glaisher who left the office, screaming vituperation, was a rich purple. She came home, raging, to find a large gathering of the ladies of Pringle Hill in her drawing-room, and in the middle of them the pale and perspiring rector. The lawyer's clerk had been improving the shilling hours by visiting them, frightening them, and bullying evidence out of them with his brisk heartiness. The rector had come in to tell her that his lawyer, too, had bidden him settle the case, and refused to defend it. The ladies, terrified by the thought that they had been misled into insulting an innocent lady, and the niece of a baronet at that, had been mercilessly berating him for a disgraceful scandal-monger. The raging Mrs. Busby-Glaisher turned the excited drawing-room into the scene of a battle royal; and when, after a series of recriminations, she roared her reviling subjects out of the house, she sat down on the sofa to realize that her domination of Pringle Hill was shattered for years, maybe beyond recovery.

A fortnight later, as Mr. Antony Scarlet took up the two checks for £5,000 which his wife had just received, he said: "I'm going to pay them into my account, Dolly. Your uncle said that if ever I could show him £10,000 of my own he'd raise your allowance from £500 to £1,500. Since, with the interest from this, we shall have a couple of thousand a year, we will leave these pleasant Pringle shades and take a flat in Mount Street among the people we know."

"Oh, how nice!" cried Mrs. Scarlet. Then she added, thoughtfully: "But I've been wondering who sent that horrid anonymous letter which enabled us to punish these detestable people."

"Ah, I wonder," said Mr. Scarlet; and he smiled a queer smile.