

ROMANCE AND MR. HORNIMAN

The Beginning and Ending of a Weedy Little Draper's Chivalry

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THE sun beat down from the hard summer sky upon the Spanish town which lay huddled between the river and the hill. Spire and pinnacle shone white as alabaster in the clear fierce air. Except for a red-sailed large creeping up against the sluggish stream, there was no sign of human action; the distant tinkle of a bell as one of the herd moved uneasily on the slopes alone awoke the mid-day silence. And little James Horniman, seated on a convenient heap of stones near the crest of the ridge, stared so fiercely from under his big hat at the ancient roofs and lazy river, and away to the northward where the great hills rose in a band of shimmering purple, that his eyes might reasonably have been expected to make actuality of a catchword and drop out of his head.

From the artistic standpoint, Horniman was essentially disappointing. That weedy little figure in its knickerbocker suit, crowned by a broad-brimmed pith helmet suggested cheap trippers, Cooks tours, red-bound guide-books and a total lack of sympathy in the romantic.

Yet though Horniman was the manager of the West Kensington branch of a large firm

of London drapers, and moreover in possession of considerable business ability, though he was upon a cheap tour, though a guide-book blushed unseen in his left-hand coat pocket, he was even then peering the old town with Castilian knights and lace-veiled beauties peeping from behind their fans, just as if Don Quixote had never pranced into the lists to laugh the make-believe out of Spanish chivalry. For eleven months in the year Horniman conducted himself with a decorum that gave perfect satisfaction to his directors; in the twelfth, which was his holiday, he dreamed dreams.

And up the road, though Horniman never suspected it, not even when he saw him, Romance came walking.

The track from the town was steep, and he watched the stranger toiling toward him with the absorption in another's discomfort inseparable from the contented spirit. He was a big, stout man, and he stopped now and again to wipe his forehead with a large red handkerchief. When at last he reached the summit, he waited panting while he regarded Horniman seated on the stones by the roadside.

"A warm day," suggested Horniman. Whether the stranger understood him or not, he felt he must do the polite thing.

"An Englishman, as I live!" exclaimed the stout man, staring at Horniman as if he was some rare and curious creature. "And where may you have sprung from?"

Horniman, warmed by the sound of his own language, made haste to explain his position as a tourist who had strayed from the customary track of his kind. The stout man listened attentively, nodding his head from time to time. When the narrative was concluded, the stranger, to Horniman's great surprise, sat down suddenly upon the bank and dropped his face into his hands. His attitude might have served as a model for obese despair.

"My dear sir," said Horniman, jumping to his feet, "my dear sir, what on earth is the matter?"

"Nothing that you can cure!" the stout man growled. "Just let me alone, can't you?"

"But perhaps I might be of some help," urged Horniman. "Two Englishmen thrown together in a foreign country must stand shoulder to shoulder."

The other looked up, his cheeks scarlet with emotion. "They've got me beat, curse 'em!" he spluttered. "Poor girl, poor little kid!"

All the romance in Horniman's thirty inches of chest throbbled at the words. "Please tell me the story," he said, not without dignity. "If a lady has been wronged, you can count upon my assistance."

"I've no right to pull you into my troubles," answered the stout man. "It's kind of you and I don't deny it's a temptation, considering the cir-



Little Mr. Horniman Stared Fiercely From Under His Big Hat

stances; but it wouldn't be fair."

"Of that I am the best judge."

The stranger got to his feet, and grasping Horniman's hand shook it with a sudden resolution. "You're a white man, by thunder!" he said. "Sit down and hear all about it."

"A mining engineer, that's what I am," he began, "and Rutherford is my name, William Horatio Rutherford. I've been up and down this blasted country for twelve years and more, making fortunes for other people in London to spend. That's enough about me, anyway."

"Do you see that tall chimney beyond the town, to your right at the foot of the ridge? Well, that's the Madrono mine—a first-class investment six years ago, and a warm one still. There's not a bit of the plant above or below ground that I didn't see fixed."

"While I was setting up the machinery and knocking 'to-morrow' out of the vocabulary of a couple of hundred idle greasers, I took a

lodging in the town. On the floor above me was a brandy-soaked old scamp, a Major he had been in the Carlist wars, who lived with his niece, a little kid of ten. The old man used to keep her hard at work all day while he lounged around the cafes and played the gentleman. Hardly a night but I heard him stumbling and cursing on the stairs. I used to get pretty mad, thinking of the poor kid who was waiting up for him. Once or twice I spoke to her; but though she knew I meant it kindly she was too proud or too shy to let me help her.

"One summer evening the Major came reeling home earlier than usual, about eight o'clock it was, and presently I heard the girl sing out from the floor above. As I stood hesitating what to do, there was a pattering of feet on the stairs and in ran the kid, white and trembling. The old man came clattering at her heels. He had a stick in his hand, and his ferret eyes were red with passion and the drink that was on him.

"I apologize for this intrusion, señor," says he, propping himself against the door-post; "but this scoundrel of a child is my excuse." He spoke in Spanish; but I had the lingo pretty well by this time.

"Go back to your bed," said I. "Go back, and think shame on your gray hairs!"

"He got hold of himself at that, and stood blinking and staring as if my meaning was beyond him.

"Is it your purpose to insult me, señor?" said he.

"It's as you please," I told him.

"You will fight?" he asked, fierce and sudden.

"The little kid cried out at his words and came running in between us. But the old brute let out with his cane, catching her on the side of the head and bowling her over like a shot rabbit. I jumped for him, grabbed the stick and cracked it across my knee.

"You had better go," I said, "or I shall be doing you mischief."

"There was murder in

his face, and his hands were working to be at my throat. But whatever he had in his mind, he wasn't fool enough to try it.

"So my Isabel has a new guardian," he said. Polite he was now, but with his lips twitching. "A new guardian—indeed the idea is not displeasing to me. I present her to you, señor, with my most profound compliments. May the saints bless you! I wish you good-evening."

"He gave a great laugh, snapped his fingers in my face and stumped out into the passage. I heard him go up to his room; but a few minutes later he came stumbling down the stairs and passed out into the street. From my window I could see him strutting along with a bag in his hand. As he turned the corner, under the oil lamp, I caught the sound of a desolate little sob at my elbow.

"Cheer up, Isabel," said I. "He'll come back to-morrow, and if he doesn't, why—"

"She stood watching me as I hesitated over the idea. 'What then, señor?'

"You must leave that to me, my dear," I said."

Rutherford paused, mopping his face with his handkerchief in great agitation. Presently he pulled a leather case from his pocket, extracted a photograph and passed it over to Horniman.

"That's her," he said.

It was the portrait of a girl, in age some seventeen years. Large melancholy eyes looked out from a face of gentle beauty. She might have sat to Velasquez, a worthy Madonna.

"And when was this taken?" asked Horniman. "Eight months ago."

The stout man waited; but as Horniman was plainly embarrassed he proceeded with his tale.

"The old landlady took charge of her that night; and next morning I woke with a compassion for the poor little kid all about my heart. Precious fond of children I always was, and what with my loneliness and what with the pretty ways she had, she couldn't have seemed dearer if she'd been my very own. As for the old Major, I swore he wouldn't take her, not if he came back with all the police in the town behind him. But in that matter I'd no cause for trouble. I never set eyes on him again.

"So things went on. She lived with the landlady and had the run of my room. She was the good fairy of the nursery books to me. A few flowers, a washed curtain, dusted shelves and my clothes all patched and mended—not much, you say, but to me it changed the old place like the tap of a wand. I never came back from the mine without something for the kid, and to see her standing there shy, with big round eyes, while I pulled out a bit of ribbon or a handkerchief or some tomfoolery—Lord, I can't bear to talk about it!

"It was the landlady that did it. A mighty strict place is Spain, and I believe the old woman, to give her proper credit, was anxious for the kid's future. Anyhow, she found out that Bella had an aunt in Madrid, and wrote off, telling her the facts. So one morning there came a notary with a sheaf of instructions and a bagful of compliments to the kind Englishman; but I knew at once that the game was played. One thing I had to be thankful for. When they placed her at a convent in the town they gave me permission to see her once a fortnight.

"Well, the years went by—faster than what I'm tell-



"That's Her"