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Lady Baltimore

by Owen Wister

July, 1998 [Etext #1386] [Date last updated: 17th October, 2002]

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LADY BALTIMORE

BY OWEN WISTER

To S. Weir Mitchell With the Affection and Memories of All My Life

To the Reader

You know the great text in Burns, I am sure, where he wishes he could see himself as others see him. Well, here lies the hitch in many a work of art: if its maker--poet, painter, or novelist--could but have become its audience too, for a single day, before he launched it irrevocably upon the uncertain ocean of publicity, how much better his boat would often sail! How many little touches to the rigging he would give, how many little drops of oil to the engines here and there, the need of which he had never suspected, but for that trial trip! That's where the ship-builders and dramatists have the advantage over us others: they can dock their productions and tinker at them. Even to the musician comes this useful chance, and Schumann can reform the proclamation which opens his B-flat Symphony.

Still, to publish a story in weekly numbers previously to its appearance as a book does sometimes give to the watchful author an opportunity to learn, before it is too late, where he has failed in clearness; and it brings him also, through the mails, some few questions that are pleasant and proper to answer when his story sets forth united upon its journey of adventure among gentle readers.

How came my hero by his name?

If you will open a book more valuable than any I dare hope to write, and more entertaining too, *The Life of Paul Jones*, by Mr. Buell, you will find the real ancestor of this imaginary boy, and fall in love with John Mayrant the First, as did his immortal captain of the Bon Homme Richard. He came from South Carolina; and believing his seed and name were perished there to-day, I gave him a descendant. I have learned that the name, until recently, was in existence; I trust it will not seem taken in vain in these pages.

Whence came such a person as Augustus?

Our happier cities produce many Augustuses, and may they long continue to do so! If Augustus displeases any one, so much the worse for that one, not for Augustus. To be sure, he doesn't admire over heartily the parvenus of steel or oil, whose too sudden money takes them to the divorce court; he calls them the 'yellow rich'; do you object to that? Nor does he think that those Americans who prefer their pockets to their patriotism, are good citizens. He says of such people that 'eternal vigilance cannot watch liberty and the ticker at the same time.' Do you object to that? Why, the young man would be perfect, did he but attend his primaries and vote more regularly,--and who wants a perfect young man?

What would John Mayrant have done if Hortense had not challenged him as she did?

I have never known, and I fear we might have had a tragedy.

Would the old ladies really have spoken to Augustus about the love difficulties of John Mayrant?

I must plead guilty. The old ladies of Kings Port, like American gentlefolk everywhere, keep family matters sacredly inside the family circle. But you see, had they not told Augustus, how in the world could I have told--however, I plead guilty.

Certain passages have been interpreted most surprisingly to signify a feeling against the colored race, that is by no means mine. My only wish regarding these people, to whom we owe an immeasurable responsibility, is to see the best that is in them prevail. Discord over this seems on the wane, and sane views gaining. The issue sits on all our shoulders, but local variations call for a sliding scale of policy. So admirably dispassionate a novel as *The Elder Brother*, by Mr. Jervey, forwards the understanding of Northerners unfamiliar with the South, and also that friendliness between the two places, which is retarded chiefly by tactless newspapers.

Ah, tact should have been one of the cardinal virtues; and if I didn't possess a spicce of it myself, I should here thank by name certain two members of the St. Michael family of Kings Port for their patience with this comedy, before ever it saw the light. Tact bids us away from many pleasures; but it can never efface the memory of kindness.

LADY BALTIMORE

I: A Word about My Aunt

Like Adam, our first conspicuous ancestor, I must begin, and lay the blame upon a woman; I am glad to recognize that I differ from the father of my sex in no important particular, being as manlike as most of his sons. Therefore it is the woman, my Aunt Carola, who must bear the whole reproach of the folly which I shall forthwith confess to you, since she it was who put it into my head; and, as it was only to make Eve happy that her husband ever consented to eat the disastrous apple, so I, save to please my relative, had never aspired to become a Selected Salic Scion. I rejoice now that I did so, that I yielded to her temptation. Ours is a wide country, and most of us know but our own corner of it, while, thanks to my Aunt, I have been able to add another corner. This, among many other enlightenments of navel and education, do I owe her; she stands on the threshold of all that is to come; therefore I were lacking in deference did I pass her and her Scions by without due mention,--employing no English but such as fits a theme so stately. Although she never left the threshold, nor went to Kings Port with me, nor saw the boy, or the girl, or any part of what befell them, she knew quite well who the boy was. When I wrote her about him, she remembered one of his grandmothers whom she had visited during her own girlhood, long before the war, both in Kings Port and at the family plantation; and this old memory led her to express a kindly interest in him. How odd and far away that interest seems, now that it has been turned to cold displeasure!

Some other day, perhaps, I may try to tell you much more than I can tell you here about Aunt Carola and her Colonial Society--that apple which Eve, in the form of my Aunt, held out to me. Never had I expected to feel rise in me the appetite for this particular fruit, though I had known such hunger to exist in some of my neighbors. Once a worthy dame of my town, at whose dinner-table young men and maidens of fashion sit constantly, asked me with much sentiment if I was aware that she was descended from Boadicea. Why had she never (I asked her) revealed this to me before? And upon her informing me that she had learned it only that very day, I exclaimed that it was a great distance to have descended so suddenly. To this, after a look at me, she assented, adding that she had the good news from the office of *The American Almanach de Gotha*, Union Square, New York; and she recommended that publication to me. There was but a slight fee to pay, a matter of fifty dollars or upwards, and for this trifling sum you were furnished with your rightful coat-of-arms and with papers clearly tracing your family to the Druids, the Vestal Vir-gins, and all the best people in the world. Therefore I felicitated the Boadicean lady upon the illustrious progenitrix with whom the *Almanach de Gotha* had provided her for so small a consideration, and observed that for myself I supposed I should continue to rest content with the thought that in our enlightened Republic every American was himself a

sovereign. But that, said the lady, after giving me another look, is so different from Boadicea! And to this I perfectly agreed. Later I had the pleasure to hear in a roundabout way that she had pronounced me one of the most agreeable young men in society, though sophisticated. I have not cherished this against her; my gift of humor puzzles many who can see only my refinement and my scrupulous attention to dress.

Yes, indeed, I counted myself proof against all Boadiceas. But you have noticed--have you not?--how, whenever a few people gather together and style themselves something, and choose a president, and eight or nine vice-presidents, and a secretary and a treasurer, and a committee on elections, and then let it be known that almost nobody else is qualified to belong to it, that there springs up immediately in hundreds and thousands of breasts a fiery craving to get into that body? You may try this experiment in science, law, medicine, art, letters, society, farming, I care not what, but you will set the same craving afire in doctors, academicians, and dog breeders all over the earth. Thus, when my Aunt--the president, herself, mind you!--said to me one day that she thought, if I proved my qualifications, my name might be favorably considered by the Selected Salic Scions--I say no more; I blush, though you cannot see me; when I am tempted, I seem to be human, after all.

At first, to be sure, I met Aunt Carola's suggestion in the way that I am too ready to meet many of her remarks; for you must know she once, with sincere simplicity and good-will, told my Uncle Andrew (her husband; she is only my Aunt by marriage) that she had married beneath her; and she seemed unprepared for his reception of this candid statement: Uncle Andrew was unaffectedly merry over it. Ever since then all of us wait hopefully every day for what she may do or say next.

She is from old New York, oldest New York; the family manor is still habitable, near Cold Spring; she was, in her youth, handsome, I am assured by those whose word I have always trusted; her appearance even to-day causes people to turn and look; she is not tall in feet and inches--I have to stoop considerably when she commands from me the familiarity of a kiss; but in the quality which we call force, in moral stature, she must be full eight feet high. When rebuking me, she can pronounce a single word, my name, "Augustus!" in a tone that renders further remark needless; and you should see her eye when she says of certain newcomers in our society, "I don't know them." She can make her curtsy as appalling as a natural law; she knows also how to "take umbrage," which is something that I never knew any one else to take outside of a book; she is a highly pronounced Christian, holding all Unitarians wicked and all Methodists vulgar; and once, when she was talking (as she does frequently) about King James and the English religion and the English Bible, and I reminded her that the Jews wrote it, she said with displeasure that she made no doubt King James had-- "well, seen to it that all foreign matter was expunged"--I give you her own words. Unless you have moved in our best American society (and by this I do not at all mean the lower classes with dollars and no grandfathers, who live in palaces at Newport, and look forward to every- thing and back to nothing, but those Americans with grandfathers and no dollars, who live in boarding-houses, and look forward to nothing and back to everything)--unless you have known this haughty and improving milieu, you have never seen anything like my Aunt Carola. Of course, with Uncle Andrew's money, she does not live in a boarding-house; and I shall finish this brief attempt to place her before you by adding that she can be very kind, very loyal, very public-spirited, and that I am truly attached to her.

"Upon your mother's side of the family," she said, "of course."

"Me!" I did not have to feign amazement.

My Aunt was silent. "Me descended from a king?"

My Aunt nodded with an indulgent stateliness. "There seems to be the possibility of it."

"Royal blood in my veins, Aunt?"

"I have said so, Augustus. Why make me repeat it?"

It was now, I fear, that I met Aunt Carola in that unfitting spirit, that volatile mood, which, as I have said already, her remarks often rouse in me.

"And from what sovereign may I hope that I--?"

"If you will consult a recent admirable compilation, entitled The American Almanach de Gotha, you will find that Henry the Seventh--"

"Aunt, I am so much relieved! For I think that I might have hesitated to trace it back had you said--well--Charles the Second, for example, or Elizabeth."

At this point I should have been wise to notice my Aunt's eye; but I did not, and I continued imprudently:--

"Though why hesitate? I have never heard that there was anybody present to marry Adam and Eve, and so why should we all make such a to-do about--"

"Augustus!"

She uttered my name in that quiet but prodigious tone to which I have alluded above.

It was I who was now silent.

"Augustus, if you purpose trifling, you may leave the room."

"Oh, Aunt, I beg your pardon. I never meant--"

"I cannot understand what impels you to adopt such a manner to me, when I am trying to do something for you."

I hastened to strengthen my apologies with a manner becoming the possible descendant of a king toward a lady of distinction, and my Aunt was pleased to pass over my recent lapse from respect. She now broached her favorite topic, which I need scarcely tell you is genealogy, beginning with her own.

"If your title to royal blood," she said, "were as plain as mine (through Admiral Bombo, you know), you would not need any careful research."

She told me a great deal of genealogy, which I spare you; it was not one family tree, it was a forest of them. It gradually appeared that a grandmother of my mother's grandfather had been a Fanning, and there were sundry kinds of Fannings, right ones and wrong ones; the point for me was, what kind had mine been? No family record showed this. If it was Fanning of the Bon Homme Richard variety, or Fanning of the Alamance, then I was no king's descendant.

"Worthy New England people, I understand," said my Aunt with her nod of indulgent stateliness, referring to the Bon Homme Richard species, "but of entirely bourgeois extraction--Paul Jones himself, you know, was a mere gardener's son--while the Alamance Fanning was one of those infamous regulators who opposed Governor Tryon. Not through any such cattle could you be one of us," said my Aunt.

But a dim, distant, hitherto uncharted Henry Tudor Fanning had fought in some of the early Indian wars, and the last of his known blood was reported to have fallen while fighting bravely at the battle of Cowpens. In him my hope lay. Records of Tarleton, records of Marion's men, these were what I must search, and for these I had

best go to Kings Port. If I returned with Kinship proven, then I might be a Selected Salic Scion, a chosen vessel, a royal seed, one in the most exalted circle of men and women upon our coasts. The other qualifications were already mine: ancestors colonial and bellicose upon land and sea--

"--besides having acquired," my Aunt was so good as to say, "sufficient personal presentability since your life in Paris, of which I had rather not know too much, Augustus. It is a pity," she repeated, "that you will have so much research. With my family it was all so satisfactorily clear through Kill-devil Bombo--Admiral Bombo's spirited, reckless son."

You will readily conceive that I did not venture to betray my ignorance of these Bombos; I worked my eyebrows to express a silent and timeworn familiarity.

"Go to Kings Port. You need a holiday, at any rate. And I," my Aunt handsomely finished, "will make the journey a present to you."

This generosity made me at once, and sincerely, repentant for my flippancy concerning Charles the Second and Elizabeth. And so, partly from being tempted by this apple of Eve, and partly because recent overwork had tired me, but chiefly for her sake, and not to thwart at the outset her kindly-meant ambitions for me, I kissed the hand of my Aunt Carola and set forth to Kings Port.

"Come back one of us," was her parting benediction.

II: I Vary My Lunch

Thus it was that I came to sojourn in the most appealing, the most lovely, the most wistful town in America; whose visible sadness and distinction seem also to speak audibly, speak in the sound of the quiet waves that ripple round her Southern front, speak in the church-bells on Sunday morning, and breathe not only in the soft salt air, but in the perfume of every gentle, old-fashioned rose that blooms behind the high garden walls of falling mellow-tinted plaster: Kings Port the retrospective, Kings Port the belated, who from her pensive porticoes looks over her two rivers to the marshes and the trees beyond, the live-oaks, veiled in gray moss, brooding with memories! Were she my city, how I should love her!

But though my city she cannot be, the enchanting image of her is mine to keep, to carry with me wheresoever I may go; for who, having seen her, could forget her? Therefore I thank Aunt Carola for this gift, and for what must always go with it in my mind, the quiet and strange romance which I saw happen, and came finally to share in. Why it is that my Aunt no longer wishes to know either the boy or the girl, or even to hear their names mentioned, you shall learn at the end, when I have finished with the wedding; for this happy story of love ends with a wedding, and begins in the Woman's Exchange, which the ladies of Kings Port have established, and (I trust) lucratively conduct, in Royal Street.

Royal Street! There's a relevance in this name, a fitness to my errand; but that is pure accident.

The Woman's Exchange happened to be there, a decorous resort for those who became hungry, as I did, at the hour of noon each day. In my very pleasant boarding-house, where, to be sure, there was one dreadful boarder, a tall lady, whom I soon secretly called Juno--but let unpleasant things wait--in the very pleasant house where I boarded (I had left my hotel after one night) our breakfast was at eight, and our dinner not until three: sacred meal hours in Kings Port, as inviolable, I fancy, as the Declaration of Independence, but a gap quite beyond the stretch of my Northern vitals. Therefore, at twelve, it was my habit to leave my Fanning researches for a while, and lunch at the Exchange upon chocolate and sandwiches most delicate in savor. As, one day, I was luxuriously biting one of these, I heard his voice and what he was saying. Both the voice and the interesting order he was giving caused me, at my small table, in the dim back of the room, to stop and watch him where he stood in the light at the counter to the right of the entrance door. Young he was, very

young, twenty-two or three at the most, and as he stood, with hat in hand, speaking to the pretty girl behind the counter, his head and side-face were of a romantic and high-strung look. It was a cake that he desired made, a cake for a wedding; and I directly found myself curious to know whose wedding. Even a dull wedding interests me more than other dull events, because it can arouse so much surmise and so much prophecy; but in this wedding I instantly, because of his strange and winning embarrassment, became quite absorbed. How came it he was ordering the cake for it? Blushing like the boy that he was entirely, he spoke in a most engaging voice: "No, not charged; and as you don't know me, I had better pay for it now."

Self-possession in his speech he almost had; but the blood in his cheeks and forehead was beyond his control.

A reply came from behind the counter: "We don't expect payment until delivery."

"But--a--but on that morning I shall be rather particularly engaged." His tones sank almost away on these words.

"We should prefer to wait, then. You will leave your address. In half-pound boxes, I suppose?"

"Boxes? Oh, yes--I hadn't thought--no--just a big, round one. Like this, you know!" His arms embraced a circular space of air. "With plenty of icing."

I do not think that there was any smile on the other side of the counter; there was, at any rate, no hint of one in the voice. "And how many pounds?"

He was again staggered. "Why--a--I never ordered one before. I want plenty--and the very best, the very best. Each person would eat a pound, wouldn't they? Or would two be nearer? I think I had better leave it all to you. About like this, you know." Once more his arms embraced a circular space of air.

Before this I had never heard the young lady behind the counter enter into any conversation with a customer. She would talk at length about all sorts of Kings Port affairs with the older ladies connected with the Exchange, who were frequently to be found there; but with a customer, never. She always took my orders, and my money, and served me, with a silence and a propriety that have become, with ordinary shopkeepers, a lost art. They talk to one indeed! But this slim girl was a lady, and consequently did the right thing, marking and keeping a distance between herself and the public. To-day, however, she evidently felt it her official duty to guide the hapless young, man amid his errors. He now appeared to be committing a grave one.

"Are you quite sure you want that?" the girl was asking.

"Lady Baltimore? Yes, that is what I want."

"Because," she began to explain, then hesitated, and looked at him. Perhaps it was in his face; perhaps it was that she remembered at this point the serious difference between the price of Lady Baltimore (by my small bill-of-fare I was now made acquainted with its price) and the cost of that rich article which convention has prescribed as the cake for weddings; at any rate, swift, sudden delicacy of feeling prevented her explaining any more to him, for she saw how it was: his means were too humble for the approved kind of wedding cake! She was too young, too unskilled yet in the world's ways, to rise above her embarrassment; and so she stood blushing at him behind the counter, while he stood blushing at her in front of it.

At length he succeeded in speaking. "That's all, I believe. Good-morning."

At his hastily departing back she, too, murmured: "Good-morning."

Before I knew it I had screamed out loudly from my table: "But he hasn't told you the day he wants it for!"

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