

# The Man and the Moment

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## CHAPTER I

MICHAEL ARRANSTOUN folded a letter which he had been reading for the seventh time, with a vicious intentness, and then jumping up from the big leather chair in which he had been buried, he said aloud, "Damn!"

When a young, rich and good-looking man says that particular word aloud with a fearful grind of the teeth, one may know that he is in the very devil of a temper!

Michael Arranstoun was!

And, to be sure, he had ample reason, as you, my friend, who may happen to have begun this tale, will presently see.

It is really most irritating to be suddenly confronted with the consequences of one's follies at any age, but at twenty-four, when otherwise the whole life is smiling for one, it seems quite too hard.

The frightful language this well-endowed young gentleman now indulged in, half aloud and half in thought, would be quite impossible to put on paper! It contained what almost amounted to curses for a certain lady whose appearance, could she have been seen at this moment, suggested that of a pious little saint.

"How the h—— can I keep from marrying her!" Mr. Arranstoun said more than aloud this time, and then kicking an innocent footstool across the room, he called his bulldog, put on his cap and stamped out on to the old stone balcony which opened from this apartment, and was soon stalking down the staircase and across the lawn to a little door in the great fortified wall, which led into the park.

He had hardly left the room when, from the wide arched doorway of his bed-chamber beyond, there entered Mr. Johnson, his superior valet, carrying some riding-boots and a silk shirt over his arm. You could see through the open door that it was a very big and comfortable bedroom, which had evidently been adapted to its present use from some much more stately beginning. A large, vaulted chamber it was, with three narrow windows looking on to the grim courtyard beneath.

Michael Arranstoun had selected this particular suite for himself when his father died ten years before, and his mother was left to spoil him, until she, too, departed from this world when he was sixteen.

What a splendid inheritance he had come into! This old border castle up in the north—and not a mortgage on the entire property! While, from his mother, a number of solid

golden sovereigns flowed into his coffers every year—obtained by trade! That was a little disgusting for the Arranstouns—but extremely useful.

It might have been from this same strain that the fortunate young man had also inherited that common sense which made him fairly level-headed, and not given as a rule to any over-mad taste.

The Arranstouns had been at Arranstoun since the time of those tiresome Picts and Scots—and for generations they had raided their neighbors' castles and lands, and carried off their cattle and wives and daughters and what not! They had seized anything they fancied, and were a strong, ruthless, brutal race, not much vitiated by civilization. These instincts of seizing what they wanted had gone on in them throughout eleven hundred years and more, and were there until this day, when Michael, the sole representative of this branch of the family, said "Damn!" and kicked a footstool across the room into the grate.

Mr. Johnson was quite aware of the peculiarity of the family. Indeed, he was not surprised when Alexander Armstrong remarked upon it presently. Alexander Armstrong was the old retainer, who now enjoyed the position of guide to the Castle upon the two days a week when tourists were allowed to walk through the state rooms, and look at the splendid carvings and armor and pictures, and the collection of plate.

Johnson had had time to glance over his master's correspondence that morning, which, with characteristic recklessness, that gentleman had left upon his bed while he went to his bath, so his servant knew the cause of his bad temper, and had been prudent and kept a good deal out of the way. But the news was so interesting, he felt Alexander Armstrong really ought to share the thrill.

"Mrs. Hatfield's husband is dying," he announced, as Armstrong, very diffidently, peeped through the window from the balcony, and then, seeing no one but his friend the valet, entered the room.

Alexander Armstrong spoke in broad Scotch, but I shall not attempt to transcribe this barbaric language; sufficient to tell you that he made the excuse for his intrusion by saying that he had wanted to get some order from the master about the tourists.

"We shan't have any tourists when she's installed here as mistress!" Mr. Johnson remarked sepulchrally.

Armstrong was heard to murmur that he did not know what Mr. Johnson meant! This was too stupid!

"Why, I told you straight off Mrs. Hatfield's husband is dying," Johnson exclaimed, contemptuously. "She wrote one of her mauve billy doos this morning, telling the master so, and suggesting they'd soon be able to be married and happy—pretty cold-blooded, I call it, considering the poor man is not yet in his grave!"

Armstrong was almost knocked over by this statement; then he laughed—and what he said meant in plain English that Mr. Johnson need not worry himself, for no Arranstoun had ever been known to be coerced into any course of conduct which he did not desire himself—not being hampered by consideration for women, or by any consideration but his own will. For the matter of that, a headstrong, ruthless race all of them and, as Mr. Johnson must be very well aware, their own particular master was a true chip of the old block.

"See his bonny blue eye—" (I think he pronounced it "ee"), "see his mouth shut like a game spring. See his strong arms and his height! See him smash the boughs off trees when they get in his way! and then tell me a woman's going to get dominion over him. Go along, Mr. Johnson!"

But Johnson remained unconvinced and troubled; he had had several unpleasant proofs of woman's infernal cunning in his own sphere of life, and Mrs. Hatfield, he knew, was as well endowed with Eve's wit as any French maid.

"We'll ha' a bet about it if you like," Armstrong remarked, as he got up to go, the clock striking three. He knew the first batch of afternoon tourists would be clamoring at the gate.

Mr. Johnson looked at the riding-boots in his hand.

"He went straight off for his ride without tasting a bite of breakfast or seeing Mr. Fordyce, and he didn't return to lunch, and just now I find every article of clothing strewn upon the floor—when he came in and took another bath—he did not even ring for me—he must have galloped all the time; his temper would frighten a fighting cock."

Meanwhile, Michael Arranstoun was tramping his park with giant strides, and suddenly came upon his friend and guest, Henry Fordyce, whose very presence in his house he had forgotten, so turbulent had his thoughts been ever since the early post came in. Henry Fordyce was a leisurely creature, and had come out for a stroll on the exquisite June day upon his own account.

They exchanged a few remarks, and gradually got back to Michael's sitting-room again, and rang for drinks.

Mr. Fordyce had, by this time, become quite aware that an active volcano was going on in his friend, but had waited for the first indication of the cause. It came in the course of a conversation, after the footman had left the room and both men were reclining in big chairs with their iced whiskey and soda.

"It is a shame to stay indoors on such a day," Henry said lazily, looking out upon the balcony and the glittering sunshine.

"I never saw anyone enjoy a holiday like you do, Henry," Michael retorted, petulantly. "I can't enjoy anything lately. 'Pon my soul, it is worth going into Parliament to get such an amount of pleasure out of a week's freedom."

But Henry did not agree that it was freedom, when even here at Arranstoun he had been pestered to patronize the local bazaar.

"The penalty of greatness! I wonder when you will be prime minister. Lord, what a grind!"

Mr. Fordyce stretched himself in his chair and lit a cigar.

"It may be a grind," he said, meditatively, "but it is for some definite idea of good—even if I am a slave; whereas you!—you are tied and bound to a woman—and such a woman! You have not been able to call your soul your own since last October as it is—and before you know where you are, you will be attending the husband's funeral and your own wedding in the same week!"

Michael bounded from his chair with an oath. "I'll be shot if I do!" he said, and sat down again. Then his voice grew a little uncertain, and he went on:

"It is worrying me awfully, though, Henry. If poor old Maurice does puff out—I suppose I ought to marry her—I——"

Mr. Fordyce stiffened, and the sleepy look in his gray eyes altered to a flash of steel.

"Let us have a little plain speaking, Michael, old boy. It is not as though I do not know the whole circumstance of your affair with Violet Hatfield. I warned you about her in the beginning, when you met her at my sister Rose's, but, as usual, you would take your own course——"

Michael began to speak, but checked himself—and Henry Fordyce went on.

"I have had a letter from Rose this morning—as you of course know, Violet is staying for this Whitsuntide with them, having dragged her wretched husband, dying of consumption as he is, to this merry party. Well—Rose says poor Maurice is in a terrible state, caught a fresh cold on Saturday—and she adds, 'So I suppose we shall soon see Violet installed at Arranstoun as mistress.'"

"I know—I heard from Violet herself this morning," and Michael put his head down dejectedly.

"Ebbsworth is only thirty-five miles from here," Mr. Fordyce announced with meaning. "Violet can pop in on you at any moment, and she'll clinch the matter and bind you with her cobwebs before you can escape."

"Oh, Lord!"

"You know you are dead sick of her, Michael—and you know that I am not the sort of man who would ever speak of a woman thus without grave reason; but she does not care for you any more than the half a dozen others who occupied your proud position before your day—it is only for money and the glory of having you tied to her apron strings. It was not any good hammering on while the passion was upon you; but I have watched you, and have seen that it is waning, so now's my time. With this danger in front of you, you have got to pull yourself together, old boy, and cut and run."

"That would be no use—" Then Michael stammered a little. "I say, Henry, I won't hear a word against her. You can thunder at me—but leave her out."

Mr. Fordyce smiled.

"Did she express deep grief at poor Maurice's condition in her letter?" he asked.

"Er—no—not exactly——"

"I thought not—she probably suggested all sorts of joys with you when she is free!"

There was an ominous silence.

Mr. Fordyce's voice now took on that crisp tone which his adversaries in the House of Commons so well knew meant that they must look to their guns.

"Delightful woman! A spider, I tell you, a roaring hypocrite, too, bamboozling poor Rose into thinking her a virtuous, persecuted little darling, with a noble passion for you, and my sister is a downright person not easily fooled. At this moment, Violet is probably shedding tears on her shoulder over poor Maurice, while she is plotting how soon she can become mistress of Arranstoun. Good God! when I think of it—I would rather get in a girl from the village and go through the ceremony with her, and make myself safe, than have the prospect of Violet Hatfield as a wife. Michael, I tell you seriously, dear boy—you won't have the ghost of a chance if you are still unmarried when poor Maurice dies!"

Michael bounded from his chair once more. He was perfectly furious—furious with the situation—furious with the woman—furious with himself.

"Confound it, Henry, I—know it—but it does not mend matters your ranting there—and I am so sorry for the poor chap—Maurice, I mean—a very decent fellow, poor Maurice! Can't you suggest any way out?"

Mr. Fordyce mused a moment, while he deliberately puffed smoke, Michael's impatience increasing so that he ran his hands through his dark, smooth hair, whose shiny, immaculate brushing was usually his pride!

"Can't you suggest a way out?" he reiterated.

Mr. Fordyce did not reply—then after a moment: "You were always too much occupied with women, Michael—from your first scrape when you left Eton; and over this affair you have been a complete fool."

Michael was heard to swear again.

"You have been inconsistent, too, because you did not even employ your usual ruthless methods of doing what you pleased with them. You have simply drifted into allowing this vile creature's cobwebs to cling on to your whole existence until you are almost paralyzed, and it seems to me that an immediate marriage with someone else is your only way of escape. Such a waste of your life! Just analyze the position. You have everything in the world, this glorious place—an old name—money—prestige—and if your inclinations do run to the material side of things instead of the intellectual, they are still successful in their demonstration. No one has a better eye for a horse, or is a finer shot. The best at driven grouse for your age, my boy, I have ever seen. You are full of force, Michael, and ought to do some decent thing—instead of which you spoil the whole outlook by fooling after this infernal woman—and you have not now the pluck to cut the Gordian knot. She will drag you to the lowest depths——"

Then he laughed. "And only think of that voice in one's ears all day long! I would rather marry old Bessie at the South Lodge. She is eighty-four, she tells me, and would soon leave you a widower."

The first ray of hope shot into Michael's bright blue eyes—and he exclaimed with a kind of joy, as he seized Binko, his bulldog, by his fat, engaging throat:

"Bessie! Old Bessie—By Jove, what an idea!—the very thing. She'd do it for me like a shot, dear old body!"

Binko gurgled and slobbered in sympathy.

"She would be kind to you, too, Binko. She would not say she found your hairs on every chair, and that you dribbled on her dress! She would not tell your master that he left his cigarette-ash about, and she hated the smell of smoke! She would not want this room for her boudoir, she——"

Then he stopped his flow of words, suddenly catching sight of the whimsical, sardonic smile upon his friend's face.

"Oh, Lord!" he mumbled, contritely. "I had forgotten you were here, Henry. I am so jolly upset."

"This heartlessness about poor Maurice has finished you, eh?" Mr. Fordyce suggested. He felt he might be gaining his end.

Michael covered his face with his hands.

"It seems so ghastly to think of marriage with the poor chap not yet dead—I am fairly knocked over—it really is the last straw—but she will cry and make a scene—and she has certainly arguments—and it will make one feel such a cad to leave her."

"She wrote that—did she?—wrote of marriage and her husband's last attack of hemorrhage in the same paragraph, I suppose. Michael, it is revolting! My dear boy, you must break away from her—and then do try to occupy yourself with more important things than women. Believe me, they are all very well in their way and in their proper place—to be treated with the greatest courtesy and respect as wives and mothers—even loved, if you will, for a recreation—but as vital factors in a man's real life! My dear fellow, the idea is ridiculous—that life should be for his country and the development of his own soul——"

Michael Arranstoun laughed.

"Jolly old Mohammedan! You think women have none, I suppose!"

Henry Fordyce frowned, because it was rather true—but he denied the charge.

"Nothing of the sort. Merely, I see things at their proper balance and you cannot."

Michael leaned back in his chair; he was quieter for a moment.

"I only see what I want to see, Henry—and I am a savage—I cannot help it—we have always been so. When I fancy a woman, I must obtain her—when I want a horse, I must have it. It is always *must*—and we have not done so badly. We still possess our shoulders and chins and strength after eleven hundred years of it!" and he stretched out a splendid arm, with a force which could have felled an ox.

An undoubtedly fine specimen of British manhood he looked, sitting there in the June sunlight, which came in a shaft from the south mullioned window in the corner beyond the great fireplace, the space between occupied by a large picture of uncertain date, depicting the landing of Mary, Queen of Scots, in her northern kingdom.

His eyes roamed to this.

"One of my ancestors was among that party," he said, pointing to a figure. "He had just killed a Moreton and stolen his wife, that is why he looks so perky—the fellow in the blue doublet."

Mr. Fordyce rose from his chair and fired his last shot.

"And now a female spider is going to paralyze the last Arranstoun, and rule him for the rest of his days, sapping his vitality."

But Michael protested.

"By heaven, no!"

"Well, I'll leave you to think about it. I am going for another stroll on this lovely day." He had got to the window by this time, which looked into the courtyard on the opposite side to the balcony. "Goodness! what a party of tourists! It is a bore for you to have them all over the place like this! To own a castle with state rooms to be shown to the public has its disadvantages."

Michael looked at them, too, a large party of Americans, mostly of that class which compose the tourists of all countries, and which no nation feels proud to own. He had seen hundreds of such, and turned away indifferently.

"They only come here twice a week, and it has been allowed for such ages—they are generally quiet, and fortunately their perambulations close at the end of the gallery. They don't intrude upon my own suite. They get to the chapel by the outside door."

Henry crossed the room and went on to the balcony.

"Mrs. Hatfield will alter all that," he laughed, as he disappeared from view.

Michael flashed a rageful glance at his back, and then flung himself into his great armchair again, and pulled the wrinkled mass, which called itself a prize bulldog, on to his lap.

"I believe he's right and we are caught, Binko. If we fled to the Rocky Mountains, she would track us. If we stay and face it, she'll make an almighty scandal and force us to marry her. What in the devil's name are we to do——!"

Binko licked his master's hands, and made noises, so full of gurgling, slobbering sympathy, no heart could have remained uncomforted. Who knows! His canine common sense may have telepathically transmitted a thought, for Michael suddenly plopped him on the floor, and stalked toward the fireplace to ring the bell, while he exclaimed, as though answering a suggestion. "Yes, we'll send for old Bessie—that's the only way."

But before he could reach his goal, the picture of Mary, Queen of Scots, landing fell forward with a crash, and through the aperture of a secret door which it concealed, there tumbled a very young and pretty girl right into the room.

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