THE

FOURPENCE.

ROYAL

The Curate and the Actress

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The Royal Magazine, November 1899

When I mention that Andrew Barrington was a saint, it is almost unnecessary for me to add that he had no pretentions to that emptiest of empty titles, "A Man of the World," for it is already an established and recognised fact that Sanctity is a quality not generally reckoned among the many accomplishments of such.

To thoroughly avoid evil it is necessary to be on intimate terms with it, and where a hardened sinner would have triflingly withstood its onslaught, the Reverend Andrew Barrington was conquered and laid by the heels, despite his armour of piety and virtue, on the strength of which he had reckoned over confidently.

Now, when Andrew's landlady diffidently mentioned that a young lady of the theatrical profession had taken rooms, for a month or so, in her house, a man of the world would have said to himself, "Let us have a look at her." He would have availed himself of the first opportunity to submit the lady to his critical eye, remarking perhaps, "not bad," and then his blase spirit would have been at rest, and he would have thought of her no more.

But Andrew's mode of procedure was unfortunately a less wise, and, despite his sanctity, a less exemplary one.

He grew red in the face when the news was brought to him and worried over the event for two entire days--and the better part of two nights, which resulted in a certain pallor and seedy appearance settling upon his countenance, such as slanderous tongues--if there were any in the world--might set down to dissipation.

To have a woman, and a young one to wit, sharing the same roof was evil enough; but that this woman should be an actress!--a saintly shudder ran through his slender young frame at the mere thought, and for forty-eight consecutive hours he dared not venture forth lest he should chance upon this vulgar painted female, with straw-coloured hair and pencilled lashes, of whom he had caught a glimpse through the window on the day following upon that of her arrival.

He had been glad to come to Stollbridge, for it promised him freedom to pursue his studies in peace, and away from the world; and here, upon his retreat, the fates had flung a very substantial sample of that world which he sought to be rid of for a while.

For two whole days he revolved the painful matter in his mind, with the obvious result that when he awoke upon the third morning after the lady's advent, he was firmly resolved upon setting out that day in quest of new and uncontaminated quarters for his meditations.

His manner was scarcely genial when he apprised Mrs. Jones of his determination, but there are bounds even to the endurance of a curate, and there are times when a little s warmth of expression maybe justifiable in him.

His landlady was disconsolate, and a corner of her apron was called into requisition as an illustration of her grief and an ally to her protestations, but Andrew was obdurate.

"It was unkind of you, Mrs. Jones," he said, "to have done this. Moreover, it was injudicious and unbusinesslike--for seeing that there was every possibility of my remaining with you for the next year, I think that I might have been consulted before this er--ahem--lady"--and the saint's tones grew actually sarcastic over the word--"was admitted to the same house for a single month."

"I didn't know, sir, as you'd object!" whimpered the landlady.

The silent look which the curate bestowed upon her in reply contained more eloquence than could be found in all the orations of Cicero, and the manner in which he slammed the door after his departing self told of a resolve that no living thing could alter.

He walked down to the office of the biweekly, Stollbridge Chronicle, and, having handed in an advertisement, wherein he vain-gloriously announced himself as a young gentleman of quiet and studious habits, he set off at a brisk pace towards the river.

He hired a boat and was soon speeding up-stream, propelled by long sweeping strokes that belied the apparent frailty of his slender figure.

Having sculled himself into a perspiration and into a quiet backwater, he tied the painter to the trunk of a tree, and stretching himself in the bottom of the boat, he produced a calf-bound copy of Hyland's "Advanced Psychology," and was soon lost in its metaphysical depths to the world in general and the haunting idea of the yellow-haired actress in particular.

"Excuse me, sir," said a sweet, melodious voice, breaking in upon Andrew's studies and dragging him from the dry abstract into a very interesting study of the concrete, "but could you direct me to Stollbridge?"

The young man's head went half-way round his Roman collar, and his eyes opened very wide, the better to behold the charming apparition standing on the bank close by, in a half-timid, half-respectful attitude.

So ecstatic was his admiration that he forgot to answer her question until she repeated it, whereupon he blushed like a girl and removed his hat.

"I know a short cut,"' he replied, "but if you are unacquainted with the country, I should advise you to keep to the river."

"Thank you. Is it far?"

"About four miles."

The girl gave a little frightened gasp. "Four miles," she echoed, "why it will be dusk before I get there. How annoying! This comes of exploring a country."

"Have you walked far?" he ventured timidly.

"Far! " she exclaimed, "I must have walked miles. I left Stollbridge at eleven this morning intending to visit Calvert Hall; I was told that there was a short cut across the fields which reduced the distance to two miles; I attempted to follow out the minute directions which I had received with the result that I lost myself hopelessly, and have been wandering about ever since."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Andrew, then added brilliantly, "You must be tired!"

"I should think I am," she answered; "wouldn't you be?"

Andrew confessed that such a contingency was probable, and then for a moment he pondered over something that had come into his

mind. He noted that she was young, that she was very pretty, and very ladylike, both in dress and manner and this observation troubled him not a little. Had she been elderly or unattractive, his duty would have been clear to him. As it was--

He brought his reasoning to an abrupt termination by offering timidly to take her back to Stollbridge in his boat.

She hesitated at first, looked demure, and spoke of troubling and of not knowing him, but ended by accepting his invitation.

Of course, it could not be expected that these two would travel over those four miles of tranquil river in silence. They chatted affably, and the girl even displayed a certain spirit of innocent badinage which played sad havoc with Andrew's nerves.

He noticed that her eyes were dark and large, and had a trick of opening wide at times like those of a puzzled child; that her hair was of a bright auburn; that her complexion was as delicate as that of a peach; that her mouth was small and sensitive; and that her figure, although petite, was well proportioned. By the time they had travelled a mile, it occurred to the curate that there was no reason why he should fatigue himself by over-vigorous sculling. They would reach Stollbridge quite soon enough. Of course, he told himself that it was not of the least consequence when they arrived, but down in his heart of hearts he knew that he was not telling himself exactly the truth, for--well--she was very pretty, and fresh, and innocent, and he was very young. "You are of course a visitor at Stollbridge?" he inquired presently, and he actually began to fear the conversational powers that he was displaying.

"Oh yes," she replied frankly, "I am only here for three or four weeks."

Andrew was burning to ask her how much of the three or four weeks

might still be left, but he thought the question too bold, so, with a sigh, he stifled it and grew silent.

"Do you often come on the river?" the girl inquired after a pause.

"Almost every day, when it is fine."

"And do you often pity ladies who have lost their way and take them back to Stollbridge in your boat?"

"I?" he ejaculated in accents of the profoundest horror. "I--I assure you that I do not!"

"What a pity!" she answered archly.

Andrew felt uncomfortable as the suspicion arose in his mind that, despite his cloth, she was amusing herself at his expense and he muttered something about understanding why the circumstance should be a lamentable one.

It was not until he had assisted her out of the boat at Stollbridge that she made her meaning clear to him.

"If it were a regular practice of yours," she said, and her eyes had a mischievous look in them like those of a kitten at play, "I might be tempted soon to lose myself again, for I never enjoyed the river so much as this evening. I wonder why?"

Andrew blushed up to the roots of his hair, and deemed her innocent outspokeness very embarrassing. Then, for the first time in his life, he became guilty of a gallant speech.

"No more have I," he replied in a whisper--for his sanctity was afraid that the innocent-looking boatman might have ears like other people--"and if you should contrive to lose yourself again--well--I should be

happy to find you."

He realised that he had expressed himself clumsily, and yet he felt that he ought rather to be ashamed of his boldness. But then, as I have said already, he was very young, and she was very sweet and she had very wonderful eyes. Those eyes haunted him as he walked home alone, and he told himself a dozen times that he was a churl for not having seen her to the door of her dwelling in spite of her remonstrances.

For the next four days it rained almost incessantly, which kept Andrew indoors. Moreover, he was busy packing his belongings, for he had found suitable rooms near at hand, and he was preparing to move into them; this he eventually did, on the fifth day after his adventure.

He came across the lady with the straw-coloured hair once or twice before he left his old quarters, and his eyes scarcely contained upon such occasions that sympathetic benevolence which is supposed to be characteristic of churchmen.

At last he was installed in his new rooms, unpolluted by the presence of any painted ballet girl--for thus he now defined her.

The next day was Sunday, and, as principle forbade him from boating on that day of pious indolence, he was out of humour. He was especially concerned at not seeing his fair unknown in church, and at a loss how to account for her absence. But on the Monday, the weather being fine, he went out again and sculled himself into the same shady backwater by the old mill. Only he left his psychological volume behind him this time, and spent two solid hours watching the horizon and thinking of her lovely eyes. He was just beginning to despair, when suddenly the silence was broken by a voice, which, although he had heard it but once, was deeply graven on his

memory.

"Please, sir, could you direct me to Stollbridge?"

He looked round to meet her laughing eyes, and laughing in return with pleasure and amusement, he rose as on the former occasion, to hand her into the boat.

And so it fell out that every day at about the same hour the syren's voice would come to ask the saint to show her the way to Stollbridge, until one day matters grew so bad that the Rev. Andrew Barrington actually allowed it to escape him, that he should be delighted not only to take her as far as Stollbridge but a very considerable distance further.

As a matter of fact Andrew was in love and out of his senses, as a good many more young men have been, when too constantly thrown into the company of an attractive morsel of unchaperoned femininity.

And who can blame him? He was an idealist, and here, in Miss Ellialine de Vaud--for so she had told him that she was named--he had found the incarnation of his ideal.

She was too innocent to understand the curate's gentle metaphor about a longer journey than that to Stollbridge, so she merely smiled and, taking him literally, told him that if he liked he might scull her up-stream as far as Widenham. And he had not the courage at the moment to put his metaphor into plainer language.

All this went on for the better part of a fortnight (during which the curate's studies and meditations were severely neglected) until at last the vicar, who was an intimate, although somewhat paternal friend of Andrew's, thought fit to administer a gentle remonstrance.

But Andrew flew as near a temper as his sanctity--rather rusty of late-

-would allow, and he told the vicar in plain and very much unvarnished language that he was quite old enough to choose his own companions.

"Yes, yes," replied the vicar, absorbing some of the heat which Andrew was giving out, "but it isn't that! A certain amount of example is expected from us, you know, and--well--you go out boating every day by yourself and come back accompanied, and--of course people are beginning to talk, which is very distressing!"

For a moment Andrew's sanctity deserted him wholly and the Evil One took possession of his heart, for bringing his fist down upon the table with unmistakable vehemence, he very roundly told the vicar that people might go to the devil.

The vicar's face was as interesting as a kaleidoscope at this unexpected rejoinder, and the tone in which he pointed out to Andrew that it was the earthly mission of the clergy to direct people in quite the opposite direction savoured strongly of pity.

Then he took up his hat and umbrella and with a sorrowful shake of the head, he sighingly wished Andrew good day and left him.

The saint was furious. "How dare the insidious world talk of me and my movements?" he asked himself indignantly. "And to think that even so right-minded a man as the vicar should be affected by what he heard!"

If he had been a man of the world, Andrew might have been justified in competing for a prominent place in the history of profane utterance--as it was, he could only do some remarkably strong thinking. The result was that half-an-hour later he was tearing down towards the river with a speed born of righteous indignation, and a burning desire to set matters right once and for all time.

Yes; it was the only thing to do. He was fortunately the possessor of a nice private income which would allow him to live in blissful independence, and he was determined upon asking Miss de Vaud to take him and his money to church, and marry the lot.

He found her, sitting on the grass, and looking demure in a white dress and a sailor hat--Madonna-like he thought her.

With an original comment upon the heat of the sun and the clearness of the sky, he assisted her into the boat--she accomplishing the embarkation with the orthodox display of ankle--and arranged her cushions with something more than his wonted solicitude.

Then, taking the oars again, he pulled vigorously away in the direction of Widenham. He had in his mind a certain picturesque bower formed by the overhanging boughs of a beech tree, and beneath the generous shade of this, it was his purpose to call a halt and broach the delicate subject. He could do nothing but think of what he should say--and never did a sermon give him half the trouble and anxiety--so that naturally he was strangely silent and preoccupied.

She endured this for a while; but when she had asked him for the third time whether he felt the heat, and he had answered her with a fatuous smile that he thought them very charming indeed, she deemed it time to awaken him. So giving the right rope a vicious tug, she skillfully steered him into a hawthorn bush, which, if not in bloom, was very amply in thorn--a circumstance which he appreciated, without the aid of his eyes.

As he pushed the boat back, he remarked with a sweet smile, which made his scratches bleed, that it did not signify in the least. Then a bold idea entered his mind--evoked by memories of a novel or two read in those sinful days of his boyhood--and in words which if

slightly lacking in veracity, were certainly rich in poetry and fervour, he protested that for her sake he would gladly shed every drop of blood in his veins. In fact, he almost appeared to suggest that blood had been given him for no other purpose.

She blushed in the most highly approved fashion, and applied herself to a careful study of her tan shoes. Noticing this favourable sign, and finding the ice fairly broken, Andrew left the nose of the boat in the hawthorn bush where it had caught, forgot the bower half a mile further up the river, and started forthwith upon the accelerated display of amorous rhetoric.

Pale and gasping, with thumping heart and twitching hands he told his story; now halting and stammering, now plunging headlong into a torrent of verbiage and incoherence.

And she, while contemplating the pattern of her dainty shoe, dimly realised that he was asking her to become his wife. And having guessed, her heart began to beat. Not so much out of sympathy as out of dread lest he should capsize the boat before he had finished.

At last he stopped, and signified by mopping the perspiration from his forehead and the blood from his cheeks, that he had finished.

A crafty and designing woman of the world would no doubt have commented upon the suddenness of the proposal. The simple unsophisticated child before him did otherwise. Raising for a moment her soft dark eyes, and favouring him with a glance half coy half tender--

"I am so happy, Andrew," she murmured, "so happy!"

The enraptured lover would have fallen upon his knees had he not remembered in time the disastrous results which might follow upon

so rash an act. He had to content himself with stretching across the boat and seizing the hand she half extended towards him.

"You love me? You really love me?" the poor boy whispered incredulously.

"More than I can tell you," she answered, casting down her eyes. Upon this followed many touching words, many sighs and many impassioned glances. But the sun will set, in spite of lovers, and presently with one more sigh, Andrew was obliged to release the boat from the bush and turn his way homewards.

He was more eager than ever to see her home, when they had landed at Stollbridge. But she insisted upon going alone, and despite his remonstrances and expressions of contempt for public opinion, alone she went.

Notwithstanding this, as Andrew Barrington made his way home, he felt himself indeed a happy man, and many were the thoughts of pleasant anticipation he bestowed upon the morrow. But the morrow brought him a perfumed note containing a disappointment. She had been suddenly called to town, she wrote, by a telegram which informed her that her dear Aunt was dangerously ill. Would he write? He put the note down on the table. Then snatched it up, and blushing furiously be crumpled it into his pocket as the maid-of-all-work entered with his breakfast tray.

He felt better when she had gone and began to think. He drew her note from his pocket and read it again. At the word "Aunt" he came to a full stop. It suggested a family. And with the suggestion came a sickening dread that her people--whoever they might be--should oppose their union. The anxiety was too awful to be borne. He must do something. Again his eye fell upon the note. "Will you write?" Yes, he would write at once. He got the necessary materials together,

and, sitting down, he pondered deeply for perhaps half an hour. At last with a sigh he took up the pen and began. He worked assiduously for an hour, and the contents of his waste paper basket grew steadily during that time. But in the end his critical spirit was satisfied, and he appended his signature to one of the most richly tinted flowers of rhetoric that ever bloomed between the leaves of a parson's blotting- pad. What he had written might have been summed up concisely into three sentences. "I love you. I shall never love anyone else. If your parents forbid our marriage I shall be disconsolate."

But, as everyone versed in such matters must know, these three sentences afford very considerable scope for elaboration. It need not, therefore, cause great surprise that by a zealous regard for detail, Andrew was enabled to cover eight pages of notepaper with closely- written matter. Although there may be many who could do better, still, for a saint, Andrew did very well.

The reply came promptly, and set him in a fever of delight. She had no parents, and therefore no wishes but her own to consult. Her Aunt was better, and she hoped to return to Stollbridge in a day or two. She loved him, and she trusted that he was devoting a little of his thoughts to her. Then came the signature "Ella"--a name which Andrew kept uttering aloud, until the maid-of-all-work disgusted him into silence by putting her head into the room and inquiring whether he had called her.

Ella would return in a day or two! And here again those novels read in early youth came to his aid, and he remembered what was expected of him. He had no time to lose, he must run up to town at once and buy the ring.

He put his hat on--a trifle jauntily for a saint--and went round to the vicarage to obtain his superior's sanction of the journey.

He had not seen the vicar since their somewhat unhappy parting of some three days ago, and it was not without a certain restlessness of mind that he entered the presence of that worthy man. The Reverend Mr. Ritson turned from the papers with which he had been occupied, to greet Andrew.

He was a man of medium height, with iron-grey hair and a rosy clean- shaven face. The levity suggested by a slight upward tilt of his nose was redeemed by the portly dignity of his figure.

"Ah, good morning, Andrew. Won't you sit down?"

Andrew sat down and dangled his hat between his knees in a nervous fashion. "I have come to ask you whether it would be inconvenient if I were to run up to town for a day or two."

"Certainly not," the vicar answered with a kindly smile. "Go by all means if you--"

Mr. Ritson stopped abruptly, and the smile died from his good-humoured lips. He suddenly remembered having learnt that Miss de Vaud had left Stollbridge two days ago. He was a man of some insight and some worldly experience, and the conclusion he arrived at by a simple process of deduction, was not flattering to Andrew. He turned his clear hazel eyes sternly upon the young man.

"Might I inquire, " he said coldly, "what your motives are for going to London?"

"I was about to tell you, Sir."

"Oh!" The vicar concluded from this disposition to confess, that his apprehensions were certainly unfounded and he hastened to relax the rigorous position of his facial muscles, being anxious to make up

in kindness to Andrew for the slight his imagination had for a moment cast upon the young man.

"You see, Mr. Ritson, I was twenty-four years of age I last birthday. And--and--I have been thinking about getting married." The vicar raised his eyebrows in surprise, and passing his hands under his coat tails, smiled again.

"You are thinking of marrying! Ah, well, well--a very praisewothy resolution."

Being a bachelor, the vicar was in a position to make an assertion of this character without any qualms regarding its veracity.

Andrew gathered courage from the words and explained the motive of his visit to London.

"Of course, of course," the vicar agreed, "but you haven't said anything about the lady of your choice, yet. Come, what is she like? One of my parishioners?"

Andrew remembered their last conversation, and grew distinctly nervous.

"I think you know her, sir," he answered, "I had the misfortune to disagree with you the other day, about the conversational topic I was affording Stollbridge. I have decided to set matters right by marrying Miss de Vaud, whom I very dearly--for whom I have a very deep regard."

The vicar did not say much. But what he did say was pregnant with meaning of an eminently discourteous and even sinister character.

"But--but," stammered Andrew, "I don't understand."

"Great Heavens, sir," Mr. Ritson interrupted. "Have you taken leave of your senses, or has this woman ensnared you into--"

"Sir!" cried Andrew, rising indignant, and confronting him.

The vicar looked at him for a moment, then shook his head sorrowfully.

"So? It's so bad as all that, is it?" he murmured. "Well, well, I'm sorry for you, Andrew--you are a young man of great promise. But--think it over carefully, and come to me again."

"My mind is quite made up, sir."

"Yes, but it may change. I hope it will, for although it would give me very great pain, if you persist in your mad intention of marrying an actress--"

"Marrying a WHAT?" ejaculated Andrew.

"An actress, I said."

Andrew laughed curiously. "There is some misunderstanding, I didn't mention an actress."

He uttered the word "actress," as if it were an improper expression which contaminated his saintly tongue. Mr. Ritson gazed at the young man in undisguised amazement, and began to entertain a very deep concern anent his sanity.

"Did you, or did you not say that you were going to marry Miss de Vaud; Miss Elialine de Vaud; to make myself plainer still--the Miss Ellaline de Vaud with whom you have been philandering on the river, much to every right-minded person's disgust?"

Andrew might have taken objection at another time to the impropriety of the word "philandering." But the season was inopportune for any subtle diagnosis of English vocables. He merely allowed his parched lips to murmur an assent.

"Well then--" the vicar stopped abruptly, as new light broke in upon his mind.

"Do you mean to tell me that you did not know she was an actress? That she was the very woman on whose account you changed your rooms?"

Andrew gasped beneath the load of this revelation. He glanced wildly about him, and out through the window. Someone passing at that moment riveted his attention. Springing across the room, he drew aside the curtains.

"Who's that?" he asked excitedly.

The vicar looked out and beheld a woman crossing the road. She wore a gown of prismatic hues and her hair was of a golden yellow.

"That, I believe," he answered slowly, "is Miss de Vaud's maid, or dresser, or whatever they call such creatures."

"It is the woman I fled from--I understand it all now." And dropping into a chair, Andrew mopped his face.

Mr. Ritson laid his hand kindly upon the young man's shoulder, and sought to console him.

"Fortunately there is no real harm done, Andrew," he said presently. "I suppose you have not written to her?"

"Oh, but I have," cried Andrew wringing his hands. "And such a

letter."

"Good Heavens, man! Oh, Andrew, how could you? Think--think of the disgrace to the cloth if this designing woman drags you into a breach of promise action!"

Andrew groaned, and the vicar--being unable to think of anything more appropriate--groaned to keep him company.

A week went by without any fresh developments, saving the departure of the maid, which, the vicar contended, was a sign that Miss de Vaud was not returning to Stollbridge. Andrew received two letters from her. The first was a passionate appeal to his affections and a gentle chiding for his silence. He almost wept over it--and had not the vicar intervened in time, he might have gone the length of answering it.

The second one, which came four days later, was somewhat abusive, and contained a veiled menace. Andrew wept no more--he perspired.

Then another week followed, during which the poor errant saint lived day and night in a torture of apprehension.

His health was threatening to give way when at last the gods saw fit to turn their thumbs up, and his suspense was ended.

The vicar was the first to bring him the joyful and unexpected tidings that Miss de Vaud was Miss de Vaud no longer. She was married. Yes there was no doubt about it. Andrew read the announcement himself in the Telegraph, and the brief sketch of her career which was now supposed to have terminated.

He was able to smile, and to feel very thankful at his escape. The same day a letter bearing the London post-mark and in a familiar

hand-writing was delivered to him. It ran:--

"You will no doubt have learnt before this reaches you of the marriage of that woman for whom you professed such deep and lasting affection, and whom you were horrified afterwards to learn--as I gather from your silence--was nothing more than a designing, wicked actress. I am sorry if I have wounded your vanity or your heart, but I could not withstand the temptation of testing the mettle of the young curate who fled in pious horror from under the roof which had the misfortune to shelter an actress. I hope that I have succeeded in proving to you at least that the horror you felt was only inspired by a word, and that after all an actress may still be sufficiently a woman to cause even a saint to come down from his pedestal and woo her."

She concluded by informing him that she had told her husband everything there was to tell concerning their "flirtation"--he gnashed his teeth at the word--and she enclosed the passionate letter which he had written her and for which she had no further use.

He had not the courage to read his own letter over again. But he took the immediate precaution of burning the two epistles in the same fire.

He has since become an ardent advocate of the celibacy of the clergy, and a trite aphorism which he is never tired of uttering is that appearances are extremely deceptive.