

**THE AMERICAN
BARON: A NOVEL**

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The American Baron: A Novel by James De Mille

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BARON: A NOVEL**



“AND AS THEY STOOD THE CLERGYMEN SLOWLY CAME OUT OF THE HOUSE.”—[SEE PAGE 132.]

THE
AMERICAN BARON.

A Novel.

By JAMES DE MILLE,

AUTHOR OF

"THE DODGE CLUB," "THE CRYPTOGRAM," "CORD AND CREESE," &c.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.



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THE AMERICAN BARON.



"PARDON, MESS."

CHAPTER I.

THE AVALANCHE.

SOMEWHAT less than a hundred years ago a party of travelers might have been seen crossing over the Simplon Road, *en route* for Italy. They had been detained at Brieg by reports that the road was impassable; and, as it was the month of March, the prospect of snow and storms and avalanches was sufficient to make them hesitate. At length the road had been reopened, and they were informed that the journey might be made on sleds.

Unwilling to wait at Brieg, and equally unwilling to make a detour so as to take the railroad, the party decided to go on. They were informed that they could go on wheels as far as the line of snow, but that afterward their accommodations would not be so comfortable as they might desire. The road had been cleared for only a few feet; the snow was deep; the sleds were rade; and progress would be slow.

These statements, however, did not shake the resolution of the party; and the end of it was that they determined to go on, and cross the mountain if it were possible.

On leaving Brieg the road began to ascend with a very slight incline, winding around in an intricate sort of way, sometimes crossing deep gullies, at other times piercing the hillside in long dark tunnels; but amidst all these windings ever ascending, so that every step took them higher and higher above the little valley where Brieg lay. The party saw also that every step brought them steadily nearer to the line of snow; and at length they found the road covered with a thin white layer. Over this they rolled, and though the snow became deeper with every furlong of their progress, yet they encountered but little actual difficulty until they approached the first station where the horses were to be changed. Here they came to a deep drift. Through this a pathway had been cleared, so that there was no difficulty about going through; but the sight of this served to show them what might be expected further on, and to fill them all with grave doubts as to the practicability of a journey which was thus interrupted so early.

On reaching the station these doubts were confirmed. They were informed that the road had been cleared for sleds on the preceding day, but that on the previous night fresh snow had fallen, and in such quantities that the road would have to be cleared afresh. The worst of it was that there was every probability of new snow-storms, which would cover the road still deeper, and once more obliterate the track. This led to a fresh debate about the journey; but they were all unwilling to turn back. Only a few miles separated them from Domo d'Ossola, and they were assured that, if no fresh snow should fall, they would be able to start on the following morning. This last assurance once more confirmed their wavering resolution, and they concluded to wait at the station.

For the remainder of that day they waited at the little way-side inn, amusing themselves with looking out upon their surroundings. They were environed by a scene of universal white. Above them towered vast Alpine summits, where the wild wind blew, sweeping the snow-wreaths into the air. In front was a deep ra-

vine, at the bottom of which there ran a torrent that foamed and tossed over rocks and boulders. It was not possible to take a walk to any distance. Their boots were made for lighter purposes than plunging through snow-drifts; and so they were forced to remain indoors, and pass the time as best they could.

On the following morning they found every thing in readiness for a start. In front of the inn they saw five sleds of that kind which is universally used in the northern part of America. Each sled was of the rudest possible construction, and was drawn by one horse; straw was spread over the sled, upon which fur robes and blankets were flung. The party was distributed among these sleds, so that each one should have as light a load as possible, while one of the rude vehicles carried the luggage.

Thus arranged, they all started off. And now, since they are all fairly under way, I propose to introduce them, individually and collectively, to my very good friend the reader.

First of all I must mention the fact that the party consisted chiefly of ladies and their attendants.

Of these the most prominent was a slim, tall, elderly lady, with large, dark, soft eyes, that spoke of a vanished youth and beauty from her heavily wrinkled face. She was the Dowager Lady Dalrymple, and acted toward the rest of the party in the multifarious capacity of chaperon, general, courier, guide, philosopher, friend, and Mentor.

Next came Mrs. Willoughby, a widow of great beauty and fascination, a brunette, good-natured, clever, and shrewd. I might here pause, and go into no end of raptures on the various qualities of this lady's character; but, on the whole, I think I'd better not, as they will be sufficiently apparent before the end of this story is reached.

Then there was Miss Minnie Fay, sister to Mrs. Willoughby, and utterly unlike her in every respect. Minnie was a blonde, with blue eyes, golden hair cut short and clustering about her little head, little bit of a mouth, with very red, plump lips, and very white teeth. Minnie was very small, and very elegant in shape, in gesture, in dress, in every attitude and every movement. The most striking thing about her, however, was the expression of her eyes and her face. There was about her brow the glory of perfect innocence. Her eyes had a glance of unfathomable melancholy, mingled with childlike trust in the particular person upon whom her gaze was fastened. Minnie was considered by all her friends as a child—was treated as a child—humored, petted, coaxed, indulged, and talked to as a child. Minnie, on her part, thought, spoke, lived, moved, and acted as a child. She fretted, she teased, she pouted, she cried, she did every thing as a child does; and thus carried up to the age of eighteen the bloom and charm of eight.

The two sisters were nieces of the Dowager

Lady Dalrymple. Another niece also accompanied them, who was a cousin of the two sisters. This was Miss Ethel Orne, a young lady who had flourished through a London season, and had refused any number of brilliant offers. She was a brunette, with most wonderful dark eyes, figure of perfect grace, and an expression of grave self-poise that awed the butterflies of fashion, but offered an irresistible attraction to people of sense, intellect, intelligence, esprit, and all that sort of thing—like you and me, my boy.

I am taking up too much time and anticipating somewhat, I fear, by these descriptions; so let us drop Miss Ethel.

These ladies being thus all related formed a family party, and had made the journey thus far on the best of terms, without any other escort than that which was afforded by their chaperon, general, courier, guide, philosopher, friend, and Mentor—the Dowager Lady Dalrymple.

The party was enlarged by the presence of four maids and a foreign gentleman. This last-mentioned personage was small in stature, with a very handsome face and very brilliant eyes. His frame, though slight, was sinewy and well knit, and he looked like an Italian. He had come on alone, and had passed the night at the station-house.

A track about six feet wide had been cut out through the snow, and over this they passed. The snow was soft, and the horses sank deep, so that progress was slow. Nor was the journey without the excitement of apparent danger. At times before them and behind them there would come a low, rambling sound, and they would see a mass of snow and ice rushing down some neighboring slope. Some of these fell on the road, and more than once they had to quit their sleds and wait for the drivers to get them over the heaps that had been formed across their path. Fortunately, however, none of these came near them; and Minnie Fay, who at first had screamed at intervals of about five minutes, gradually gained confidence, and at length changed her mood so completely that she laughed and clapped her little hands whenever she saw the rush of snow and ice. Thus slowly, yet in safety, they pushed onward, and at length reached the little village of Simpton. Here they waited an hour to warm themselves, lunch, and change horses. At the end of that time they set out afresh, and once more they were on their winding way.

They had now the gratification of finding that they were descending the slope, and of knowing that this descent took them every minute further from the regions of snow, and nearer to the sunny plains of Italy. Minnie in particular gave utterance to her delight; and now, having lost every particle of fear, she begged to be allowed to drive in the foremost sled. Ethel had been in it thus far, but she willingly changed places with Minnie, and thus the descent was made.

The sleds and their occupants were now arranged in the following order:

First, Minnie Fay alone with the driver.

Second, Mrs. Willoughby and Ethel.

Third, the Dowager and her maid.

Fourth, the three other maids.

Fifth, the luggage.

After these five sleds, containing our party, came another with the foreign gentleman.

Each of these sleds had a driver to itself.

In this order the party went, until at length they came to the Gorge of Gondo. This is a narrow valley, the sides of which rise up very abruptly, and in some places precipitously, to a great height. At the bottom flows a furious torrent, which boils and foams and roars as it forces its impetuous way onward over fallen masses of rock and trees and boulders, at one time gathering into still pools, at other times roaring into estaracts. Their road had been cut out on the side of the mountain, and the path had been cleared away here many feet above the buried road; and as they wound along the slope they could look up at the stupendous heights above them, and down at the abyss beneath them, whose white snow-covering was marked at the bottom by the black line of the roaring torrent. The smooth slope of snow ran down as far as the eye could reach at a steep angle, filling up all crevices, with here and there a projecting rock or a dark clump of trees to break its surface.

The road was far beneath them. The drivers had informed them that it was forty feet deep at the top of the pass, and that its depth here was over thirty. Long poles which were inserted in the snow projected above its surface, and served to mark where the road ran.

Here, then, they drove along, feeling wearied with the length of the way, impatient at the slowness of their progress, and eager to reach their journey's end. But little was said. All had talked till all were tired out. Even Minnie Fay, who at first had evinced great enthusiasm on finding herself leading the way, and had kept turning back constantly to address remarks to her friends, had at length subsided, and had rolled herself up more closely in her furs, and heaped the straw higher about her little feet.

Suddenly, before them, and above them, and behind them, and all around them, there arose a deep, low, dull, rushing sound, which seemed as if all the snow on the slope was moving. Their ears had by this time become sufficiently well acquainted with the peculiar sound of the rushing snow-masses to know that this was the noise that heralded their progress, and to feel sure that this was an avalanche of no common size. Yes, this was an avalanche, and every one heard it; but no one could tell where it was moving, or whether it was near or far, or whether it was before or behind. They only knew that it was somewhere along the slope which they were traversing.

A warning cry came from the foremost driver.

He looked back, and his face was as pale as death. He waved his hands above him, and then shouting for the others to follow, he whipped up his horse furiously. The animal plunged into the snow, and tossed and floundered and made a rush onward.

But the other drivers held back, and, instead of following, shouted to the first driver to stop, and cried to the passengers to hold on. Not a cry of fear escaped from any one of the ladies. All did as they were directed, and grasped the stakes of their sleds, looking up at the slope with white lips, and expectation of horror in their eyes, watching for the avalanche.

And down it came, a vast mass of snow and ice—down it came, irresistibly, tremendously, with a force that nothing could withstand. All eyes watched its progress in the silence of utter and helpless terror. It came. It struck. All the sleds in the rear escaped, but Minnie's sled lay in the course of the falling mass. The driver had madly rushed into the very midst of the danger which he sought to avoid. A scream from Minnie and a cry of despair from the driver burst upon the ears of the horrified listeners, and the sled that bore them, buried in the snow, went over the edge of the slope, and downward to the abyss.

CHAPTER II.

THE PERILOUS DESCENT.

THE shriek of Minnie and the driver's cry of despair were both stopped abruptly by the rush of snow, and were smothered in the heap under which they were buried. The whole party stood paralyzed, gazing stupidly downward where the avalanche was hurrying on to the abyss, bearing with it the ill-fated Minnie. The descent was a slope of smooth snow, which went down at an angle of forty-five degrees for at least a thousand feet. At that point there seemed to be a precipice. As their aching eyes watched the falling mass they saw it approach this place, and then as it came near the whole avalanche seemed to divide as though it had been severed by some projecting rock. It divided thus, and went to ruin; while in the midst of the ruin they saw the sled, looking like a helpless boat in the midst of foaming breakers. So, like such a helpless boat, it was dashed forward, and shot out of sight over the precipice.

Whither had it gone? Into what abyss had it fallen? What lay beneath that point over which it had been thrown? Was it the fierce torrent that rolled there, or were there black rocks and sharp crags lying at the foot of the awful precipice? Such were the questions which flashed through every mind, and deepened the universal horror into universal despair.

In the midst of this general dismay Ethel was the first to speak and to act. She started

to her feet, and looking back, called in a loud voice:

"Go down after her! A thousand pounds to the man who saves her! Quick!"

At this the drivers came forward. None of them could understand English, and so had not comprehended her offer; but they saw by her gestures what she wanted. They, however, did not seem inclined to act. They pointed down, and pointed up, and shook their heads, and jabbered some strange, unintelligible patois.

"Cowards!" cried Ethel, "to leave a young girl to die. I will go down myself."

And then, just as she was, she stepped from the sled, and paused for a moment, looking down the slope as though selecting a place. Lady Dalrymple and Mrs. Willoughby screamed to her to come back, and the drivers surrounded her with wild gesticulations. To all this she paid no attention whatever, and would certainly have gone down in another moment had not a hand been laid on her arm, and a voice close by her said, with a strong foreign accent,

"Mees!"

She turned at once.

It was the foreign gentleman who had been driving behind the party. He had come up and had just reached the place. He now stood before her with his hat in one hand and the other hand on his heart.

"Pardon, mees," he said, with a bow. "Eet is too perillous. I sall go down eef you 'low me to mak ze attempt."

"Oh, monsieur," cried Ethel, "save her if you can!"

"Do not fear. Be calm. I sall go down. Nevare mine."

The stranger now turned to the drivers, and spoke to them in their own language. They all obeyed at once. He was giving them explicit directions in a way that showed a perfect command of the situation. It now appeared that each sled had a coil of rope, which was evidently supplied from an apprehension of some such accident as this. Hastily yet dextrously the foreign gentleman took one of these coils, and then binding a blanket around his waist, he passed the rope around this, so that it would press against the blanket without cutting him. Having secured this tightly, he gave some further directions to the drivers, and then prepared to go down.

Hitherto the drivers had acted in sullen submission rather than with ready acquiescence. They were evidently afraid of another avalanche; and the frequent glances which they threw at the slope above them plainly showed that they expected this snow to follow the example of the other. In spite of themselves an expression of this fear escaped them, and came to the ears of the foreign gentleman. He turned at once on the brink of the descent, and burst into a torrent of invective against them. The ladies could not understand him, but they could perceive that he was uttering threats,

and that the men quailed before him. He did not waste any time, however. After reducing the men to a state of sully submission, he turned once more and began the descent.

As he went down the rope was held by the men, who allowed it to pass through their hands so as to steady his descent. The task before the adventurer was one of no common difficulty. The snow was soft, and at every step he sank in at least to his knees. Frequently he came to treacherous places, where he sank down above his waist, and was only able to scramble out with difficulty. But the rope sustained him; and as his progress was downward, he succeeded in moving with some rapidity toward his destination. The ladies on the height above sat in perfect silence, watching the progress of the man who was thus descending with his life in his hand to seek and to save their lost companion, and in the intensity of their anxiety forgot utterly about any danger to themselves, though from time to time there arose the well-known sound of sliding masses, not so far away but that under other circumstances of less anxiety it might have filled them with alarm. But now there was no alarm for themselves.

And now the stranger was far down, and the coil of rope was well-nigh exhausted. But this had been prepared for, and the drivers fastened this rope to another coil, and after a time began to let out that one also.

Farther and farther down the descent went on. They saw the stranger pursuing his way still with unflinching resolution; and they sent after him all their hearts and all their prayers. At last he plunged down almost out of sight, but the next moment he emerged, and then, after a few leaps, they saw that he had gained the place where lay the ruins of the shattered avalanche. Over this he walked, sometimes sinking, at other times running and leaping, until at length he came to the precipice over which the sled had been flung.

And now the suspense of the ladies became terrible. This was the critical moment. Al-ready his eyes could look down upon the mystery that lay beneath that precipice. And what lay revealed there? Did his eyes encounter a spectacle of horror? Did they gaze down into the inaccessible depths of some hideous abyss? Did they see those jagged rocks, those sharp crags, those giant boulders, those roaring billows, which, in their imaginations, had drawn down their lost companion to destruction? Such conjectures were too terrible. Their breath failed them, and their hearts for a time almost ceased to beat as they sat there, overcome by such dread thoughts as these.

Suddenly a cry of delight escaped Ethel. She was kneeling down beside Lady Dalrymple and Mrs. Willoughby, with her eyes staring from her pallid face, when she saw the stranger turn and look up. He took off his hat, and waved it two or three times. Then he beckoned to the drivers. Then he sat down