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THE MASTER OF MAN :-: By Sir Hall Caine

An Outspoken and Moving Study of a Deep Sex Problem by the Noted Author of "The Manxman," "The Deemster," "The Eternal City," "The Woman Thou Gavest Me," Etc.

WITHIN half an hour Alick was on the road. He had no doubt of overtaking Bessie—she was only half an hour gone. But which way should she go? It was easier to say which way she would not go. She would not go to the north of the island, where she would be known to everybody. Above all, she would not go home—the home of Dan Baldromma.



It was Bessie before the High Bailiff

All that day he wandered through Castletown—every street and alley. At nightfall he was back at Derby Haven. Had Bessie returned? No! Had anything been heard of her? Nothing!

Next day he set out on a wider journey—all the towns and villages of the south. Port St. Mary, Port Erin, Flewick, Ballanilla, Colby, Ballabeg and Cregneash. He walked from daylight to dark, and asked no questions, but at every open door he paused and listened. When he saw a farm house that stood back from the high road he made excuse to go up to it—a drink of milk or water.

Day followed day without result. His heart was sinking. More than once he met somebody whom he knew and had to make excuse for his rambling. Wonderful what a walking tour did to blow the cobwebs from a fellow's mind after he had been shut up too long in an office! His friends looked after him with a strange expression. He had been something of a dandy, but his hair was uncombed and his linen was becoming soiled and even dirty.

At length he became a prey to illusions. He always slept in the last house he came to, and one night, in a fisherman's cottage near Flewick, he was awakened by the wind blowing over the thatch. He thought it sounded like the voice of Bessie, and that she was wandering over the highway in the darkness, alone and destitute.

Next day he began to inquire if anything had been seen of such a person. He was told of a young woman who found walking barefoot on the lonely road to Drenning, had been taken to the asylum, and he hurried there to inquire. No, it was not Bessie. Some poor wifely, only six months married and beginning to be happy in the prospect of a child, had lost her husband in an accident at the mines at Fockdale.

The dread of suicide took hold of him. One day a fish cadger on the road told him that a young woman's body had been washed ashore at Peel. Again it was nothing—nothing to him. The wife of the captain of a Norwegian schooner which had been wrecked off Contrary—with her eyes open and her baby locked in her rigid arms.

Alick's heart was falling him. Do what he would to keep down the evil thoughts they were getting the better of him. Sometimes he rested on the seat that usually stands outside the whitewashed porch of a Manx cottage, and although he thought he could do little he found that the women, especially such of them as were mothers of grown-up girls, seemed to divine the object of his journey.

"Aw, yes, that's the way with them, the boys, especially when there's a man bothering them. Was there any man, now?"

But Alick was up and gone before they could finish their question.

Thus ten days passed. Absorbed in his search, perplexed and tortured, he had seen no newspaper and heard nothing of what was happening in the island. Suddenly it occurred to him that Bessie could not have left him so long without news of her. She could not be so cruel; she must have written, and her letter must be lying at his office.

People who knew him, and saw him return to Douglas, could scarcely recognize him in the pale, unwashed, unshaven man who climbed the steps from the station, looking like a drunkard who had been sleeping out in the fields.

His chambers, when he turned the key (he had no clerk now), were stuffy and cheerless. The ashes of his last fire were on the hearth, and his desk was covered with dust. Behind the door (he had no letter box) a number of circulars and bills lay on the ground, but, running his trembling fingers through them, he found no letter from Bessie.

There was a large and bulky envelope, with the seal of government. Hours and minutes he looked at it, and what could it be? On the top of a thick body of folio paper he found a letter. It was from Fenella Stanley.

"Dear Mr. Gell—At the suggestion of Mr. Stowell, who is still in London, I am writing on behalf of the Women's Protection League, to ask you if you can undertake the defense of the young woman in the north of the island who is to be charged with the murder of her new-born child."

Alick paused a moment to draw breath.

As you will see by the report of the high bailiff's inquiry and the copy of the depositions which I inclose that the girl denies everything, and that her mother supports her, but the evidence is only too sadly against her—particularly that of the doctors and of two neighbors who live higher up the glen."

Alick felt his heart stop and his whole body grow cold.

"Her stepfather has not been asked by the prosecution to depose, and it is doubtful if the defense ought to call him."

"Innocent or guilty, the girl has suffered terribly. She has been several days in hospital at Ramsey, but she was to be removed to Castle Rushen this morning. Her case is to come on next week at the Court of General Gaol Delivery, so perhaps you will send me a telegram immediately saying if you can take up the defense."

"As you see the poor creature is herself an illegitimate child—the name by which she is commonly known being Bessie Colister."

Alick shrieked. He had seen the blow coming, but when it came it fell on him like a thunderbolt.

It was all a lie—a damned lie! Nobody would make him believe it. Bessie arrested for the murder of her child! She had never had a child.

He leaped to his feet and tramped the room on stiffened limbs and with a heart throbbing with anger. Then, half afraid, but doing his best to compose himself, he took the report and the depositions out of the big envelope, and, sitting before the dead hearth with his shaking feet on the fender, and holding the folio pages in his dead-cold hands, he read the evidence.

As he did so he shrieked again, but this time with laughter. What a tissue of manifest lies! The Skillicomnes and their quarrel with Dan Baldromma and what a malicious conspiracy! Lord, what blind fools the police could be! And the attorney, had he come to his second childhood?

Again and again Alick thumped the desk with his fist and filled the air of the room with the dust that rose in the sunshine which was now pouring through the windows.

could not shut out everything. Over the rumble of the wheels, when the train started again, she heard shrieks of laughter from the compartment in front. The elderly men were jesting in their free way with the girls, and the girls, nothing loath, were answering them back.

At the junction of St. John's, the train had to stop for carriages from Peel to be linked on to it, and while the coupling was going on one of the passengers strolled along the platform. It was Willie Teare, who had wanted to marry Bessie, and he saw her behind the constables. At the next moment a throng of girls gathered outside her window, but the constables pulled down the blinds.

"Take your seats! Take your seats!"

The train went on. There was no more laughter from the passengers in the compartment in front. Bessie understood—they were whispering about her.

Her heart was becoming hard. Sitting in the darkened carriage, with spears of sunlight flashing from the flapping blinds, she heard the constables talking about Mr. Stowell. It was reported that he had been made Deemster. He would make a good Deemster, too.

"A taste young, maybe, but clever—clever uncommon."

On reaching Douglas, where they had to change into the train for Castletown, Bessie was being hustled across the platform, between the constables, when she became aware of a crowd of women and girls who were crushing up to stare at her. There was a whispering and muttering: "Serve her right, there she is!" "Serve her right, I say!"

Brief as the message was, the clerk at the counter could hardly decipher the agitated handwriting.

A few minutes later he was at the police office, asking the Chief Constable for an order to allow him, as Bessie's advocate, to see her alone in her cell.

At 2 o'clock he was back at the railway station, taking the train for Castletown. As he stepped into his carriage the newboys were calling the contents of the evening paper: "Victor Stowell appointed Deemster. Glorious! Bessie would have a human being on the bench. Thank God for that anyway!"

"I don't know what you are talking about—I really don't. You make me lousy and his eyes were a look of tears," the defendant is suffering from the temporary mania which is not unusual in such cases. I suggest that she should be sent to the hospital."

Bessie fainted. The next thing she knew was that she was in bed in a hospital ward, and that another doctor (a younger man with thin hair and a large pug-nose) was leaning over her, and laying his hand on her breast. She pushed it off, and then he said, in an authoritative tone:

"My good woman, if you are innocent, as you say, the best proof you can give is that of a medical examination."

At this Bessie broke into fierce wrath.

"If you touch me again," she cried, "I'll tear your eyes out!"

Then she fainted once more, and for two days lay in a strong delirium. When she came to herself she was with a kind face by her side, saying "Hush!" and doing something at her breast with a glass instrument.

She knew she had been delirious (having a vague memory of crying "Alick! Alick!" as she returned to consciousness) and was in fear of what she might have said.

"In it morning?" she asked.

"Yes, dear."

"Then it's the next day?"

"The next but one."

"Have I been wandering?"

"A little."

"Did I call for anybody?"

"Yes."

She dare not ask whom, but lay wondering if Alick knew where she was and what had happened to her. After a while she said:

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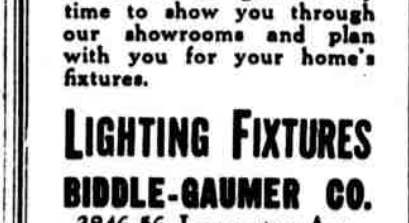
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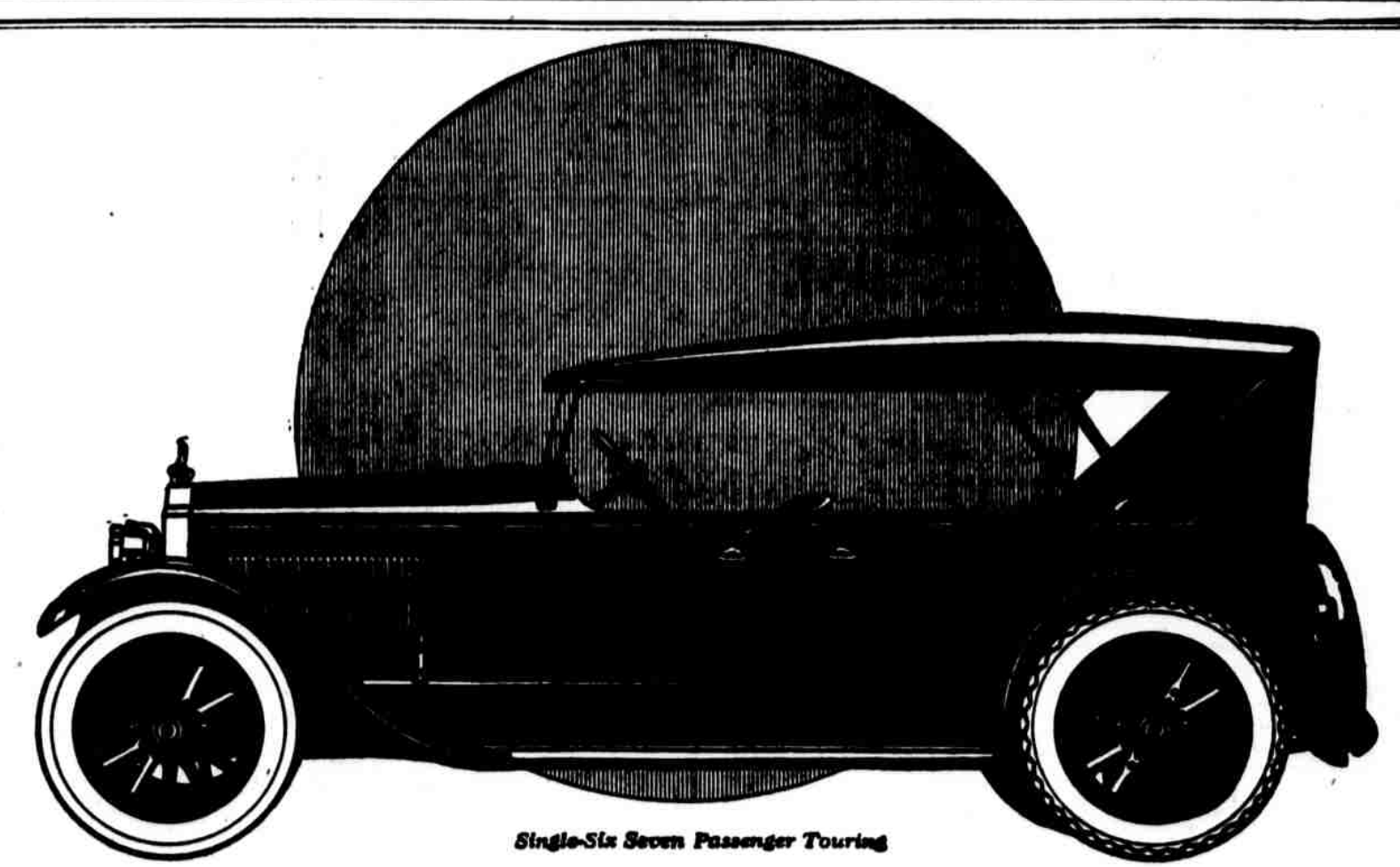
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