

The God in the Car

Young Lord Stranleigh in Masquerade

By ROBERT BARR

Illustrations by T. VICTOR HALL



YOUNG LORD STRANLEIGH always proved a disappointment to a thorough-going Radical, for he differed much from the conventional ideas of what a heredity-proud peer should be. He was not overbearing on the one hand, nor condescending on the other, being essentially a shy, unassuming person, easily silenced by any controversialist who uttered statements of sufficient emphasis. He never seemed to be very sure about anything, although undoubtedly he was a judge of well-fitting clothes, and the tailoring of even the remotest parts of America rather pleased him.

One thing that met his somewhat mild disapproval was undue publicity. He shrank from general notice, and tried to efface himself when reporters got on his track. In order, then, to live the quiet and simple life, his lordship modified a stratagem he had used on a previous occasion with complete success. He arranged that the obedient but unwilling Ponderby should act the country-gentleman of England, bent on enlarging his mind by residence in the United States. Lord Stranleigh himself decided to masquerade as Ponderby's chauffeur, a role for which he was well-fitted, because of his love for motoring, and expertness in the art. He dressed the character to perfection, being always particular in the matter of clothes, and was quite admirable in raising his forefinger deferentially to the edge of his cap, a salute which oddly affected Ponderby.

Ponderby had been born a servant and brought up a servant, with the result that posing as a gentleman was little to his taste. He would do anything Lord Stranleigh commanded, and that without consciously showing disapproval, but the Earl shrank from giving a command, as much as he would have disliked receiving one. He was suave enough with people in general, but just a little more suave in dealing with those dependent on him.

"PONDERBY," said the Earl in broaching the matter, "I've been thinking that we both need a change."

"Yes, my lord?"

"Ponderby," pleaded Stranleigh, "please oblige me by omitting the appellation."

"A change, sir?"

"Ah, that's better; but omit the 'sir' in future, also. Incidentally, Ponderby, I have placed in the bank of Altonville fifteen thousand dollars to your credit. You cannot return to old England just yet, but you may enjoy New England. I have taken a furnished house for you; all I ask in return is that I may officiate as your chauffeur."

And so it was arranged. Lord Stranleigh at the wheel saw much of a charming country, sometimes with Ponderby in the back seat, but more often without him, for the inestimable servant was quite evidently ill at ease in his new role.

One balmy day during the exceptionally beautiful summer of that year, Stranleigh left Altonville in his motor, alone, and turned into a road that led ultimately to the Adirondack mountains, seen dimly in the haze, far to the north. It was his favorite drive. The road led along the uplands, and gave a fine view of a group of crystal lakes, with well-wooded banks on the opposite shore. The district was practically untouched by commerce, save that here and there, in the valley, stood substantial mills, built to take advantage of water power from

the brawling river connecting the lakes. Some of these factories had been abandoned, and were slowly becoming picturesque as an old European castle; others were still in going order. The valley had once been prosperous, but in an age of tremendous progress had lost step, as it were, with the procession. Lack of adequate railway connection with the outside world was the alleged cause, but the conservatism of the mill-owners, who, in an age of combination, had struggled individually to uphold the gospel of letting well alone, had resulted in their being left alone. Some of the mills had been purchased by the Trusts, and closed up. One or two still struggled on, battling for individualism and independence, everyone but themselves recognizing the result was a foregone conclusion.

Yet, for a man who wished to rest, and desired, like the old-fashioned millers, to be left alone, this countryside was indeed charming. Stranleigh had the roads to himself, and without any thought of his disconsolate valet moping in an unnecessarily large and well-furnished house, the selfish young man breathed the exhilarating air, and reveled in his freedom.

HE passed a young couple, evidently lovers, standing on a grassy knoll, and gazing across a blue lake at the wooded banks of the other side, seemingly at a fine old Colonial mansion which stood in a clearing of the timber, with well-kept grounds sloping gently down to the water.

A man driving a motor has little opportunity for admiring scenery, but Stranleigh caught a fleeting glimpse of a girl, in whose expression there was a tinge of sadness which enhanced her loveliness; then he was past, with the empty road before him. He fell into a reverie, a most dangerous state of mind for a chauffeur, but it was interrupted by a shout, quickly followed by another. He looked back over his shoulder, and saw the young man running towards him. Stranleigh applied his brakes and came to a standstill. The young man, approaching, said breathlessly:

"You are the chauffeur of the Englishman in Altonville, aren't you?"

"I am."

"Are you going to meet him?"

"No; I am out for my own pleasure."

"I'll give you a dollar if you will take my wife and me back to Altonville."

Stranleigh smiled.

"My wife has sprained her ankle, and cannot walk," urged the young man.

"I am sorry to hear that," replied Lord Stranleigh. "Step in. We will go back to her."

The young man sprang into the car, which the amateur chauffeur turned very deftly, and in a few moments they were at the grassy bank where the girl was sitting. Her husband lifted her to the back seat, and the polite chauffeur, again expressing regret at the accident, drove the car swiftly back to Altonville, stopping at the office of the only doctor.

The young man rang the bell, but before the door was opened, he had carried the girl up the steps. Presently he returned, and found Stranleigh still sitting in the chauffeur's seat. He thrust hand in



Her husband lifted her to the back seat, and the polite chauffeur drove the car swiftly back to Altonville.

pocket, and drew forth a silver dollar.

"I am ever so much obliged," he said, "and am sorry to have kept you so long."

"That's of no moment at all," returned Stranleigh. "To be of assistance, however slight, is a pleasure. I hope to hear that the lady's injury is not serious, and then I shall be well paid." He ignored the hand that proffered the dollar.

"You will not be paid," returned the young man, with a frown, "until you have taken this dollar."

Stranleigh laughed gently.

"I told you," he said, "that I was not working for coin."

The young man came closer to the automobile. "To tell the truth," he said, earnestly, "now we are in Altonville I fear that pompous gentleman, your boss, may come along, and you will get into trouble. Masters don't like their men to use their motors for other people's convenience."

"DON'T you worry about Mr. Ponderby," said Stranleigh, reassuringly. "He's very good-hearted, and his pomposity is merely a mannerism. I'm waiting here to take Madame and yourself to your residence."

"It is n't much of a residence," the other said ruefully. "Only a couple of rooms and a small kitchen; it's less than a hundred yards from here."

"I'll wait, and take you that hundred yards." "I work in Fulmer's flour mill," explained the husband. "We are not very busy, so I had the day off. The big mills in the east, and further west, do practically all the grinding nowadays."

The doctor's door opened, and the physician appeared.

"It's all right, Mr. Challis," he said, cheerfully. "Your wife must stop indoors a few days, and rest her foot. The cure may be tedious, but not painful, thanks to prompt treatment."