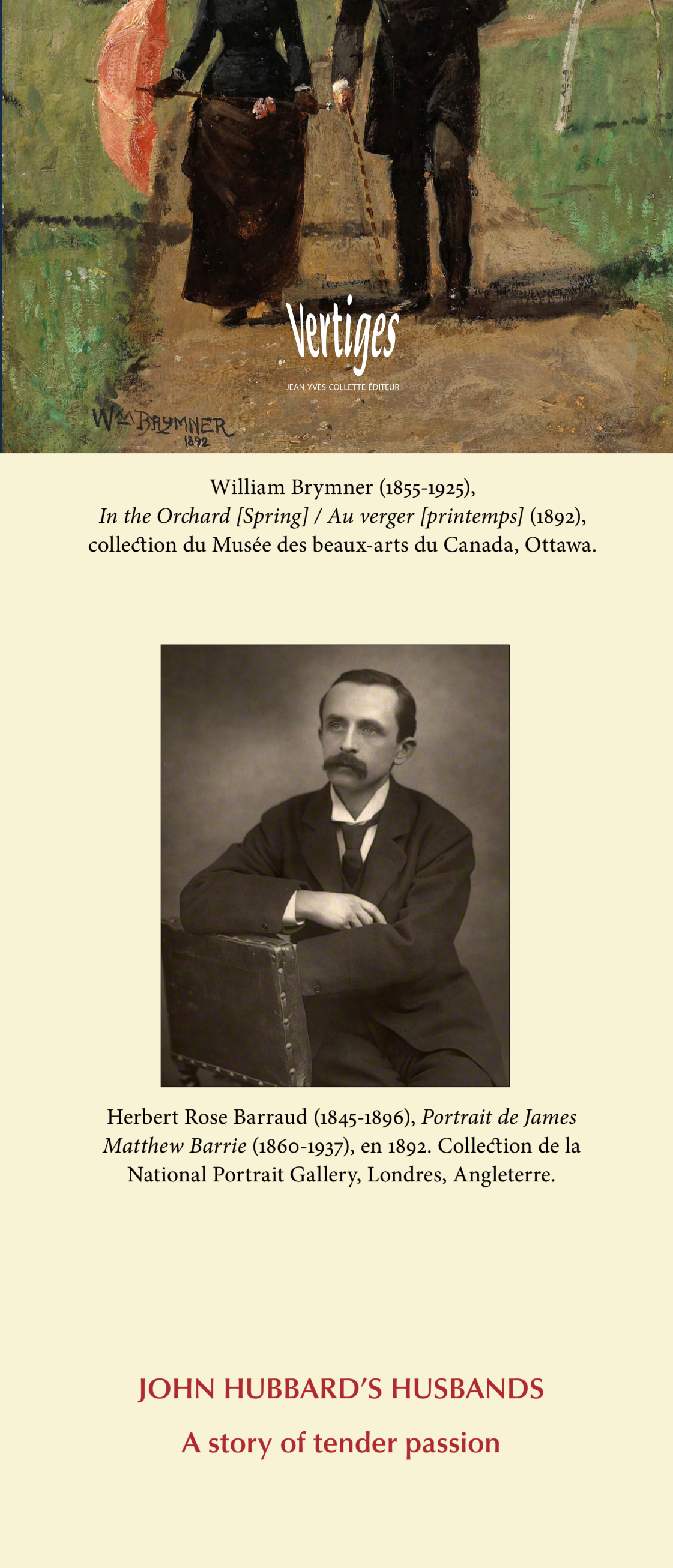


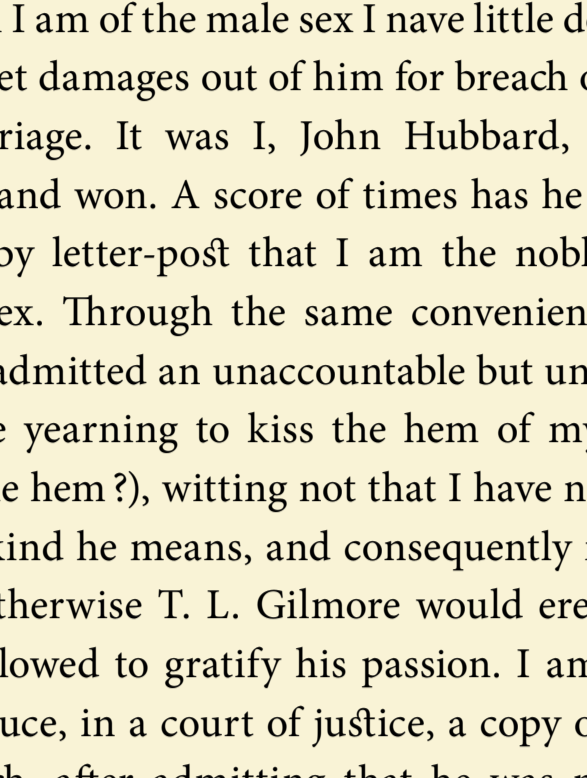
James Matthew Barrie

# John Hubbard's Husbands



William Brymner (1855-1925).

*In the Orchard [Spring] / Au verger [printemps]* (1892).  
collection du Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, Ottawa.



Herbert Rose Barraud (1845-1896), *Portrait de James Matthew Barrie* (1860-1937), en 1892. Collection de la National Portrait Gallery, Londres, Angleterre.

## JOHN HUBBARD'S HUSBANDS

A story of tender passion

**NOT FIVE MINUTES** ago a pair of horses with their ears in white clattered away from our door and round the corner. The last glimpse I had of Thomas L. Gilmore, my husband of an hour, he was assisting a blushing young lady who calls me brother into the wedding coach. The circumstances were peculiar and not without their element of pathos. Legally Jenny is his wife, but morally he was pledged to me. Though I am of the male sex I have little doubt that I could get damages out of him for breach of promise of marriage. It was I, John Hubbard, whom he wooed and won. A score of times has he intimated to me by letter-post that I am the noblest of the other sex. Through the same convenient medium he has admitted an unaccountable but undoubtedly genuine yearning to kiss the hem of my garment (why the hem?), witting not that I have no garment of the kind he means, and consequently no hem to kiss. Otherwise T. L. Gilmore would ere this have been allowed to gratify his passion. I am still able to produce, in a court of justice, a copy of the note in which, after admitting that he was not wholly indifferent to me, I referred him to my mother. But of course I have no intention of making things unpleasant for him. He has taken Jenny with him believing her to be another, so no blame can attach to him. There is no probability of his ever discovering the mistake, unless I give him a hint, and I have already surrendered all claims to him. Yet a rush of thoughts, too turbulent for utterance, well up to my mouth as I take my last look of a husband who must never know me. He is my third. The pathetic and the practical are strangely blended in this life of ours. Gulping my emotions, I take a steady aim with a high-heeled slipper and stove in Thomas L. Gilmore's hat. It is curious that I should find a relief in this. Yet I would that we had parted otherwise than thus.

When the rumble of the wheels died away, I did not return to the wedding breakfast. There was something distasteful about it to me now, and I felt that the congratulatory toasts would fall fulsome on my ear. The company, of course, laboured under the same misapprehension as the bridegroom. Slipping past the hum of speech-making, I escaped upstairs, and found myself in the room where we had first met. Why my feet should have carried me there I have not the most remote conception, unless it was because the house is of limited dimensions. It would be absurd to say that sentiment had anything to do with it. I may as well say at once that I never cared the smallest of silver coins for Thomas L. Gilmore. Good honest fellow, how well I remember that day, and what an ass I thought him! He sat in the armchair by the window on the antimacassar that my dear mother spreads so carefully over it to hide the rent in the velvet, and gaped at Jenny. I always wondered what men saw in Jenny, though she undoubtedly could pin herself artfully together. They should have seen her ten minutes after they left the house, for in the privacy of the domestic circle Jenny liked her ease, and began to take out the pins the moment the front door closed. At this time Thomas L. Gilmore wore sensible kid gloves, a great improvement on the things he afterwards carried about with him. They, however, were a gift from Jenny, who sent them to him with a note saying that «every stitch in them was worked with her love.» It was my other sister, Susy, who sewed them. In our family, you see, we play into each other's hands, and Susy does the sewing. She is the kind of girl that fellows think would make a fine wife for other fellows.

Jenny was at the piano floundering through a march in something, and foolish Thomas L. Gilmore clutched his hands in a nervous ecstacy. It was a daring thing in Jenny to do to try him with music the very first time he had been in the house, for her playing is perhaps the worst thing she does. On the other hand, she has a neat little back, which goes off in shakes and trembles at the slightest provocation, and it shows well on a piano-stool. When T. L. Gilmore ventured a small joke, for making which I had myself been taken to task by Jenny earlier in the day, that innocent little back went into convulsions. This daring experiment of Jenny's was warranted by results. He was a «gentleman farmer», and had come to us with an introduction, two things that perhaps justified my little sister—I am told that Thomas L. Gilmore calls her «Baby»—in putting him to the test at once. Though I am only in my twentieth year, the other two husbands whom I have morally married have, of course, made a cynic of me, and I already took a far greater interest in Thomas—as he used to sign himself—than he, at this early stage in our acquaintance, took in me. I had been invited upstairs with an eye to business—and Jenny had bid him for a little while to herself—after I took in the situation at a glance. My cue at such a time is to say certain pre-arranged sarcastic things to Jenny, so that she may wither me up with pre-arranged smart replies. This is found useful where the victim has, or is supposed to have, a sense of humour. An occasional quarrel excepted, Jenny and I are really the best of friends, and always ready to give each other a lift. It is an understood thing in our family that none of the girls can get married without my assistance. I had already a splendid reputation to look back upon—even though we had missed fire once or twice—and Jenny's time had now evidently come. In our family the girls are the anglers, as it were, but I carry the gaff.

Well, that was our first meeting, and I give it this space because though there was nothing very remarkable about it, so much came of it. It is natural that one should dwell fondly on his first meeting with his third husband. I still feel Thomas L. Gilmore taking my hand in his, and holding it a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. When I heard him clanging the garden gate, I made a bolt for the pantry, just in time to catch Jenny—who is a die-away young thing in company—making off with the cold roast beef.

So far, it must be admitted, Jenny had done the running for herself, and I would be romancing did I pretend that Thomas L. Gilmore was already enamoured of her brother. It was not until he left our pleasant little country town, and returned to the farm, which another man managed, for him, that his feelings underwent a change. In other words, for this is what it amounts to, I did not step into the arena until the time for the letter-writing came. Letter-writing is my strong point, and none of our girls happens to be good at it. You may, of course, say that Jenny should not have been writing to a man to whom she was not yet by any means «engaged.» I have neither time nor inclination to argue that point. What I wish to emphasize is that when the man to whom I now bear such a curious relation left us, he had been «struck» by Jenny, but no more. Her letters to him completed the business, and as I wrote them while she only copied them, it is plain that though this mixes things a little up, it was John Hubbard to whom he ultimately made an offer of the hand which Jenny Hubbard accepted. This will become more and more obvious as you read on.

Considered strictly from the artistic point of view, I am less proud of Thomas L. Gilmore than of some of my earlier conquests. I had brought at least one of them to my feet without even seeing him at all, while I had considerable opportunity of experimenting upon Gilmore before we took to corresponding. When Jenny, for instance, was to take him out for a walk, she would come to me beforehand, and I would put her up to a good thing. The time being autumn, and Thomas evidently a man of sentiment, I sent them strolling in a wood, where they would be compelled to wade through beds of rustling leaves. Jenny had then directions to look around her sadly, and murmur as if to herself, but still just loud enough for him to hear, something about—

*Autumn laying here and there  
A fiery finger on the leaves.*

As she had no memory, I found it unadvisable to give her more than one of those at a time, in case she should stick in the middle of them, or fire them off prematurely in order to relieve her mind; but it is wonderful how far a couplet a day will go, and Gilmore never knew that the reason why Jenny was so comparatively silent during these walks was because she was saying her quotation over and over to herself. He conveyed the notion that she was steeped in poetry just like himself, and that the beauty of Nature made her sad. Milly's husband has the same idea of Milly, and Nell's of Nell. If the three couples should ever happen to go for a walk in a wood late in the year, I have no doubt that force of habit would make the three dear little women all murmur at the same time—

*Autumn laying here and there  
A fiery finger on the leaves.*

In all kinds of letter-writing I am equally at home. Where it is convenient, I prefer before beginning, it is true, to know something of my correspondent, even though it be nothing more than his views on the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, or the way he divides his hair. But if such information is not forthcoming, I generally know my man after his first letter has been handed over to me. I classify my husbands—her possibilities, Jenny called them—into the Humorous, the Domesticated, and the Sentimental; and I find that so far all the gentlemen with whom I have corresponded with a view to matrimony have fallen under one or other of these heads. Thus the gentleman who, knowing no better, calls Milly his wife, affords us an interesting instance of the Humorous. My most jocular letters to him were masterpieces in their way, and did their work in a very short time. In his answers, which were also full of merry conceits, he used to say that Milly was the cleverest and wittiest girl he had ever met, and that he had taken the liberty of showing her last note to a friend, who had nearly gone into hysterics over it. Milly's reply to his entreaty that she (meaning me) would be his was read aloud to the family before she copied it out for transmission, and was generally looked upon as worthy of the occasion. I was glad to see Milly married and fairly off my hands, however, for she has no sense of humour, and was the cause of constant anxiety to me lest she should miss out the joke now and then, and so perhaps spoil everything at the eleventh hour. I always looked over her copy carefully before it was sent off, and sometimes insisted on her rewriting it. This I found was the only way of ensuring accuracy.

With Mr. Philip Tomlinson, again, who thinks Nell is his wife, I had to pursue other tactics. He was never long in your company without telling you bluntly, whatever your sex, that he was a practical man, who, if he married at all, would choose a wife who would make him a comfortable home. A pretty face he scorned, but he admired a girl who could make dumplings and enjoyed working a sewing-machine. Nell is not just the young person I would have selected myself if I had only been on the look-out for a housekeeper; yet Nell is Mrs. Tomlinson now. This is how we managed Philip. First of all, Nell created a good impression by rushing to the garden when it was announced that Philip's rotund figure could be seen approaching, and being there discovered pulling up weeds. Not knowing certain flowers from weeds, Nell made a terrible mess of the garden, but we felt that, as this was her chance, considerable allowances should be made. The relief in the house, however, was general when Nelly gave up the garden and took Philip indoors. It was now her part to rush off from the drawing-room every little while to see that the scones were not burning, or to talk with the butcher's boy about the leg of mutton he had brought by mistake the day before yesterday. Nell even wanted to make a cake and give Philip some of it with his tea, but the others of us thought that this would be risking too much; so she had to content herself with talking about the cake and answering the door when Philip called, with her sleeves rolled up above her elbows. She had dimpled arms, Nell, and they looked well and business-like covered with flour. When she found, to her consternation, that the caller was Philip, she had of course to blush and explain that she was making a cake. The worst thing about Nell was that she ventured too much, and occasionally startled Philip into looking for his hat by some such injudicious remark as that if she had a horse she would feed him on oats, as they were so much cheaper than corn. However, the letter-writing allayed all his fears, and Philip is one of us now.

The agricultural columns in the newspapers were a great assistance to me in my correspondence with Philip. If it happened to be raining when I wrote to him in the furtherance of Nell's interests, I expressed a fear that the potato crop would suffer. In the same circumstances, when I was courting Milly's husband, I would have remarked that really it was time for a special commission to be appointed to inquire into the state of the weather. My versatility is indeed surprising. In the Philip period I posed as an authority on soup-kitchens, furniture polish, cooking, the trimming of hats, tract distributing, the making of preserves, &c. I never began a letter without having to admit that I had spent the morning in dusting the back parlour or making a pie, and I had always to break off suddenly in case the pancakes were burning. No wonder that Philip was unable to stand it long, and was always writing to me (nominally to Nell) to hasten the happy day. The whole affair was an artistic triumph, mainly owing to Nelly's good sense in putting herself entirely into my hands. Even the quantity of kisses sent was strictly in accordance with my directions.

As I was always a little inclined to the sentimental, less credit is perhaps due to me for my manipulation of Thomas L. Gilmore. Thomas is sentimental even to morbidity, and used to be so carried away by the beauty of my figures of speech that he answered me in verse. These effusions were addressed to Jenny, but of course that was because the author knew no better. In my answers I always told him which lines I liked best, and hoped he would not be angry though I tried to set them to music. He said that he would not be angry. Many a pretty thing have I said to T. L. Gilmore about the brevity of life, and the silent tomb, and hearts that beat as one. He has to this day documentary evidence that his «Reflections on the Dying Year» (privately printed) affected me to tears, and that I loved him from the first moment I saw him. I have hinted to him that if he was untrue to me it would break the heart I long ago entrusted to his keeping, and he knows that the rest of the world is nothing to me so long as he is by my side. He has gratified me more than he can think by saying that though his mother was at first adverse to the match, my beautiful letter in which I beseeched her for a little, a very little of her love, for her noble son's sake, has completely brought her round. Jenny had fifty wedding gifts, and thanked every donor in a suitable manner to my dictation. To the young ladies I was artlessly gushing, to the young gentlemen maddeningly formal; the old ladies I almost made to cry by my beautiful references to the days when they too were young, and with the bald-headed men I fear I flirted. As I sit here in the room where I have so frequently wooed and won, within sound of the merry-making downstairs, and sadly light my pipe with Thomas's «Elegy written on a Rotten Tree-trunk», a soft melancholy steals over me and I lean my head upon my hands.

At long intervals I pay a brief visit to my husbands, with feelings that can be more easily imagined than expressed. At such times it is all I can do to keep from bursting into a passion of tears. If they only knew! It affords me food for reflection to note that Philip thinks he has got the most domesticated of wives, and that Milly keeps her reputation as a humorist. But it is when their dear little children crawl up my legs and amuse themselves tearing the buttons off my coat that I feel my position most keenly. What is my relation to these little babbling creatures? They call me uncle, but I am no ordinary uncle to them. Crushing my handkerchief into my eyes to conceal my emotion I lay them in a heap on the floor, and seizing my hat wander off in the direction of my solitary chambers.

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