

W. M. Thackeray (1811-63)

4 *Damages, Two Hundred Pounds*

Special Jurymen of England! who admire your country's laws,
And proclaim a British Jury worthy of the realm's applause;
Gaily compliment each other at the issue of a cause
Which was tried at Guildford 'sized this day week as ever was.

Unto that august tribunal comes a gentleman in grief 5
(Special was the British Jury, and the Judge, the Baron Chief),
Comes a British man and husband — asking of the law relief,
For his wife was stolen from him — he'd have vengeance on the thief.

Yes, his wife, the blessed treasure with the which his life was crowned,
Wickedly was ravished from him by a hypocrite profound. 10
And he comes before twelve Britons, men for sense and truth renowned,
To award him for his damage twenty hundred sterling pound.

He by counsel and attorney there at Guildford does appear,
Asking damage of the villain who seduced his lady dear:
But I can't help asking, though the lady's guilt was all too clear, 15
And though guilty the defendant, wasn't the plaintiff rather queer?

First the lady's mother spoke, and said she'd seen her daughter cry
But a fortnight after marriage: early times for piping eye.
Six months after, things were worse, and the piping eye was black,
And this gallant British husband caned his wife upon the back. 20

Three months after they were married, husband pushed her to the door,
Told her to be off and leave him, for he wanted her no more.
As she would not go, why *he* went: thrice he left his lady dear;
Left her, too, without a penny, for more than a quarter of a year.

Mrs. Frances Duncan knew the parties very well indeed, 25
She had seen him pull his lady's nose and make her lip to bleed;
If he chanced to sit at home not a single word he said:
Once she saw him throw the cover of a dish at his lady's head.

Sarah Green, another witness, clear did to the jury note 30
How she saw this honest fellow seize his lady by the throat,

How he cursed her and abused her, beating her into a fit,
Till the pitying next-door neighbours crossed the wall and witnessed it.

Next door to this injured Briton Mr. Owers a butcher dwelt;
Mrs. Owers's foolish heart towards this erring dame did melt
(Not that she had erred as yet, crime was not developed in her); 35
But being left without a penny, Mrs. Owers supplied her dinner —
God be merciful to Mrs. Owers, who was merciful to this sinner!

Caroline Naylor was their servant, said they led a wretched life,
Saw this most distinguished Briton fling a teacup at his wife;
He went out to balls and pleasures, and never once, in ten months' space, 40
Sat with his wife or spoke her kindly. This was the defendant's case.

Pollock, C.B., charged the Jury; said the woman's guilt was clear:
That was not the point, however, which the Jury came to hear;
But the damage to determine which, as it should true appear,
This most tender-hearted husband, who so used his lady dear — 45

Beat her, kicked her, caned her, cursed her, left her starving, year by year,
Flung her from him, parted from her, wrung her neck, and boxed her ear —
What the reasonable damage this afflicted man could claim
By the loss of the affections of this guilty graceless dame?

Then the honest British Twelve, to each other turning round, 50
Laid their clever heads together with a wisdom most profound:
And towards his Lordship looking, spoke the foreman wise and sound; —
"My Lord, we find for this here plaintiff, damages two hundred pound."

So, God bless the Special Jury! pride and joy of English ground,
And the happy land of England, where true justice does abound! 55
British jurymen and husbands, let us hail this verdict proper:
If a British wife offends you, Britons, you've a right to whop her.

Though you promised to protect her, though you promised to defend her,
You are welcome to neglect her: to the devil you may send her:
You may strike her, curse, abuse her; so declares our law renowned; 60
And if after this you lose her, — why, you're paid two hundred pound.

1850

(From *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*. Vol. 13.
London: Smith, Elder, & C., 1899)