

In Fear of Death

by

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'Our little lot comprised the major part of the Company. None of them had talked to the Sectional Engineer, and so were not prepared to save their own skins by bolting without ever giving a hint to their pals. I never knew the full measure of our friend's bravery before!'

'Time!' said the MC, warningly. He nodded cheerfully and went on:

'It was only when we were actually in the water that any of them began to concern themselves. Indeed, at first no one seemed to mind, for we had often before made a dash over a flooded stream. But when the speed slackened and the rush of the wheels in the water made a new sort of sound, they all ran to the windows and

looked out. Some of the festive spirits thought it a good opportunity to frighten the girls, and put up a joke on the more timid of the men. It didn't seem a difficult job so far as some of them were concerned, for the surprise was rapidly becoming terror. Everything seemed to lend itself to the presiding influence; the yellow water seeming to go two ways at once as it flowed past us and as we crossed its course; the horrible churning of our wheels which seemed to come up from under us through the now opened windows; the snorting and panting of the engine; the looks of fear and horror growing on the blanching faces around; all seemed to culminate towards hysteria. The most larky of the men was young Gatacre, who was understudy for Huntley Vavasseur, then our Leading Juvenile. He pretended to be terribly afraid, and cowered down and hid his face and groaned, all the time winking at some of us. But presently, as the waste of water grew wider and wider, his glances out of the window became more anxious, and I could see his lips grow white. All at once he became ghastly pale, and, throwing up his hands, broke out into a positive wail of terror, and began to pray in a most grovelling manner - there is no other way to describe it. To some of us it was revolting, and we should have liked to kick him; but its effect on the girls was dreadful. All the hysteria of panic which had been coming on broke out at once, and within half a minute the place was like the Stool-of-Repentance corner at a Revival Meeting.

I am glad to say that, with these exceptions, they were in the main brave and sensible people, who kept their own heads and tried to make, for very shame's sake, their friends keep theirs. It seems to me that really good women are never finer than when they are helping a weak sister. I mean really helping when it isn't altogether pleasant work. I don't count it help to a woman, lashing out wastefully with other people's Eau de Cologne, and ostentatiously loosening her stays, and then turning to the menkind who are looking on helplessly, with a "phew!" as if they knew what was wrong with her all the time. We all know how our women help each other, for we are all comrades, and the girls are the best of us. But on this occasion the womenkind were a bit panicky, and even those who kept their heads and tried to shield the others from the effects of their hysterical abandon, were pale and rocky themselves, and kept one eye on the yellow flood running away under us.

I certainly never did hear such a giving away as in the confessions of some of them, and I tell you that it wasn't pleasant to listen to. It made some of us men angry and humiliated to think that we could be so helpless. We took some of the girls and tried to actually shake

them back into reason, but, Lord bless you! it wasn't the least use. The more we shook them, the more we shook out of them things which were better left unsaid. It almost seemed as if confession was a pebbly sort of thing that could be jerked out of one, like corn out of a nose-bag. The whole thing was so infernally sudden that one had no time to think. One moment we were all composed and jolly, and the next there were these poor women babbling out the most distressing and heartrending things, and we quite unable to stop them. The funny thing, as it seemed to me now, was that it never occurred to any of us to shove off and leave them alone! Anyhow, we didn't go, at all events till the fat was in the fire. Fortunately, the poor girls didn't have much to confess that seemed very wrong to most of us. There were one or two nasty and painful things, of course, but we all shut our memories, and from that day to this it never made any difference in any way that I could ever see - except in one case, where a wife told an old story to her husband. I can see the scene now. The terror in her grey eyes, the frown in his pale face, all the whiter by contrast with his hair. "Sun and Shade," we used to call them.'

He broke off suddenly, paused a moment, and then resumed:

'But that was their own business, and though it never seemed to come right, none of us ever said a word about it.'

'Did none of the men confess anything?' asked the Singing Chambermaid. There was in the tone of her voice that underlying note of militant defiance which is always evident when the subject of woman in the abstract is mentioned in mixed company. The Second Low Comedian smiled as he replied:

'Certainly, my dear! I thought you understood that I was speaking of the young ladies of both sexes. You remember that the first, in fact the one to set them off, was an alleged Man.'

'Well, these things, you see, made the painful side of the incident, for it is not pleasant to hear people say things which you know they will grieve for bitterly afterwards. But there was another side, which was both interesting and amusing: the way in which the varieties of character came out in the confessions, and the manner of their coming. If we hadn't known already - I speak for myself - we should have been able to differentiate the weaknesses of the various parties, and to have got a knowledge of the class of things which they fondly hoped they had kept hidden. I suppose it is such times that reveal us to ourselves,

or would do so if we had grace to avail ourselves of our opportunities. Anyhow, the dominant note of each personality was struck in so marked a way that the scene became a sort of character-garden with living flowers!

When the applause which followed his poetic 'tag' had ceased, there was a chorus of indignant disappointment:

'Is that all?'

'Why stop just as it was getting interesting?'

'Just fancy, with material like that, to fade out in vague generalities!'

'Can't you tell us some more of the things they said?'

'What's the use of telling us of confessions when you keep it dark what they were.'

'Was there anything so very compromising, to you or to anybody else, that you should hesitate?'

'That's just it,' said the Second Low Comedian with a grin. 'If there was anything compromising, I would tell it with pleasure, especially, I need not say, if it concerned myself. But of all the confessions that were ever written or spoken, I suppose there never were any as little compromising as on this occasion. With the one exception that I have spoken of, and on which all our lips are sealed, there was nothing which would injure the character of a sergeant in the Archangelic police force. Of course, I except the young man who began the racket. There was not one of those who "confessed" who did not compromise himself or herself. But the subjects were so odd! I didn't know there were so many sinless wickednesses in the whole range of evil!'

'What on earth do you mean?' said the Leading Lady with the wide open eyes of stage amazement. 'Do give us some examples, so that we may be able to follow you.'

'Ah! I thought that was what you wanted!' he answered with a wink. 'You would like to hear the confessions, good or bad, or, rather, bad or worse, and judge for yourself as to their barometric wickedness. All right! I will tell you all I remember.'

'There was our Leading Lady, I mention no names, who had been on the stage, to my own knowledge, twenty-eight years, and she was in the Second Lead when I met her first at Halifax in Wibster's Folly, which was a popular stock piece on the Yorkshire Circuit. She confessed to having deceived, not only the public, but her friends, even her dear friends of the Company, and would like to put herself right with them all and have their forgiveness ere she died. Her sin was one of vanity, for she had deceived them as to her age. She had acknowledged to twenty-nine; but now in her last hour, with the death drops on her brow, and the chill of the raging flood already striking into her very soul, she would confess. They knew how hard it was for a woman to be true when dealing with her age; women at least would understand her; she would confess that she was really thirty-three. Then she sank down on her knees, in a picturesque position, which she had often told her friends she made famous in East Lynne, and held up her hands and implored their forgiveness. Do you know that nearly all those present were so touched by her extraordinary self-sacrifice in that trying moment, that they turned away and hid their faces in their hands. I could myself see the shoulders of some of them shake with emotion.

'Well, her example was infectious; she was hardly on her knees when our Juvenile Lead took up the running. With a heart-breaking bitter sob, such as adorned his performance in Azrael the Prodigal, he held his hands aloft with the fingers interlaced, and, looking up to the gallery - I mean the roof, or the sky, or whatever he saw above him with either his outer or his inner eye - he mourned his malingering in the way of pride. He had been filled with ungodly pride, when during his very first engagement, having been promoted through sheer merit - having swept, if he might say so, upward like a rocket through the minor ranks of the profession, he had emerged in sober splendour amongst the loftier altitudes. Oh, even that fact had not bounded his excesses of pride. That evil quality, which, like jealousy, "mocks the meat it feeds on," had grown with the enlarging successes which seemed to whirl upon him like giant snowflakes from the Emyrean. When the Mid-Mudland Anti-Baptist Scrutiniser had spoken of him as "the rising histrionic genius who was destined to lift from the shrouded face of Melpomene the seemingly ineradicable shadow which the artistic incompetence of a re-puritanised age had thrown upon it," he had felt elated with the thought that on his shoulder rested the weight of the banner of art, which it would be his duty, as well as his pride, to carry amongst the Nations, and unfurl even before the eyes of their Kings. Ah! but that was not his worst sin, for with the years that had carried the greatness of his stormy youth into the splendour of his prime young manhood, had grown an ever-increasing pride in what he knew from the adoring looks of women and their

passionate expressions of endearment - both written and verbal - was the divine gift of physical beauty in perfection. In which gift was included the voice at once sweet and powerful which evoked that enthusiastic tribute from the Bootle Local Government Questioner, wherein occurred the remarkable passage: "It is rare, if not unique, to find in the tones of a human voice, centred in no matter how perfect a physical entourage, at once the subtlety of the lyre, the great epigrammatic precision of the ophicleide, and the resonant doom-sounding thunder of the clarion and the bassoon." So, too, was included a bearing of grace and nobility which "recalled" as the Midland humoristic organ, The Pushful Joe, remarked, "the worth of the youthful emperor Gluteus Maximus." Oh! these things were indeed sources of a pride, which was at best a weakness of poor humanity. Still, it should be held in check, and this in proportion to its natural strength. "Mea culpa! Mea culpa!" he said in the tones with which he used to thrill the house in Don Alzavar the Penitent, or the Monk of Madrid. He went on further, for pride seemed to have no limit, but essayed, when fixed in daring and lofty natures, to scale the very bastions of Olympus. He was proud - oh, so proud that in this dread moment, when he stood hand-in-hand with his fellow-brother, Death, he could see its earthly littleness. It was when depicting the roles in which he had won his greatest fame, he had, with the best and purest intention, he assured us, dared the blue ribbon of histrionic achievement in essaying the part of Hamlet in the Ladbroke Hall. He had found his justification of Metropolitan endeavour in the striking words of the Westbourne Grove and Neighbouring Parishes' Chronicle of Striking Events: "The triumph of our youngest 'Hamlet' is as marked as his many successes in less ambitious walks of histrionic renown!"

He was interrupted by our First Low Comedy Merchant, who said:

'Time! old man. There are others who want a chance of public confession whilst Death still stares us in the face.' He was followed by our Heavy Man, who added:

'It's a good idea, as well as a new one, to confess your Notices. Anyhow, it makes a variety from having to pretend to read them every time you strike a man for a drink.' The Leading Juvenile glared at his interrupters, in the manner which he was used to assume as Geoffrey Plantagenet in The Baffled Usurper. He was about to loose the vials of his wrath upon them when our First Singing Chambermaid, who had been furtively preparing for her effort by letting down her back hair, flung herself upon her knees

with a piercing shriek, and, holding up her hands invocatively after the manner of The Maiden's Prayer, cried out, interrupting herself all the while with muttered sobs of choking anguish:

"Oh, ye Powers, to whom is given the priceless guardianship of Maiden life, look down in forgiving pity upon the delinquencies of one who, though without evil purpose, but in the guilelessness of her innocent youth, and with the surpassing cruelty of the young and thoughtless, hath borne hard upon the passionate but honourable love of Dukes and Marquises! Peccavi! Peccavi!! Peccavi!!!" with which final utterance she fell fainting upon her face, and struggled convulsively, till, seeing that no one flew to her assistance, she lay still a moment, and then ignominiously rose to her feet and retired, outwardly sobbing and inwardly scowling, to her section.

'Hardly, however, had she spoken her tag when two aspirants for confessional honours sought to "catch the speaker's eye." One of them was the Understudy of the last confessor, the other the First Old Woman. They were something of an age and appearance, each being on the shady side of something, and stout in proportion. They both had deep voices, and as neither would at first give way, their confessions were decidedly clamorous and tangled, but full of divine possibilities of remorse. They both had flung themselves on their knees, right and left, like the kneeling figures beside an Elizabethan tomb. We all stood by, with admiring sympathy manifested in our choking inspirations and on our broadening smiles. It was a pretty fair struggle. The First Old Woman was fighting for her position, and that is a strong stimulus to effort; the other was endeavouring to win a new height in her Olympian ambition, and that is also a strong aid to endeavour. They both talked so loud and so fast that none of us could follow a word that either of them said. But neither would give way, till our Tragedian, beginning to despair of an opening for his confession, drew a deep breath and let us have it after the manner of his celebrated impersonation of the title-role of Manfred in the Alpine storm, in which you will remember that he has to speak against the thunder, the bassoon, the wind, and the rain - not to mention the avalanches, though he generally makes a break for them to pass. The women held out as long as they could, and finally, feeling worsted by the Tragedian's thunder, they joined against the common enemy, and shrieked hysterically in unison as long as their breath held out. Our Tragedian's confession was immense. I wish I could remember it word for word as he gave it, with long dwelling on his pet words, and crashing out his own particular consonants. We were all silent, for we wanted to remember, for after use, what he said. Being a Tragedian, he began, of course, with Jove:

"Thou Mighty One who sittest on the cloud-capped heights of Olympus, and regardest the spectral figure of the mighty Hyster seated in his shadowy cart, deign to hear the murmurings of a heart whose mightiest utterances have embodied the noblest language of the chiefest bards. Listen, O son of Saturn! O husband of Juno! O father of Thalia and Melpomene! O brother of Neptune and Pluto! O lover of Leda and Semele and Danae and of all the galaxy of celestial beauties who crowned with love the many-sided proclivities of Thou, most multitudinous-hearted God! Hear the sad wail of one who has devoted himself to the Art of Roscius! Listen to the voice that has been wont to speak in thundrous tones to the ears of a wondering world, now stilled to the plaintive utterance of deepening regret. Hear me mourn the lost opportunities of a not-unsuccessful life! When I think that I have had at my foot the ball of success, and in my sublime indifference spurned it from me as a thing of little worth, well knowing that in all the years genius such as mine must ever command the plaudits of an enraptured world, what can I say or how announce the magnitude, or even the name, of my sin? Hear me then, O mighty Jove ..."

'Just then the dull threshing and swishing of the submerged wheels changed to the normal roar and resonance, as we left the trestle bridge and swept into the cutting beyond. The first one to speak was the Prompter, who said:

"Your attack was a little slow, Mr Montessor. It's a bit hard that the curtain has to drop before the invocation is properly begun!"

There was a pause, chiefly utilised for the consumption of heeltaps and the replenishment of drinking vessels. It was broken by the voice of one of the Young Men who sat at some distance from the fire and quite away from the Prompter - a Young Man who wore his hair long and had literary ambitions. He spoke of himself sometimes as 'a Man of Letters as well as a Player.'

'How small the world is! Do you know that out of that very episode that Mr Hupple has just spoken of came a strange circumstance? If I were next on the list I could give it as a fitting corollary.'

'Corolly or no corolly,' the Sewing Woman was heard to murmur, the punch having had some effect in creating a certain drowsiness which fell on her like a robe. 'Corolly or no corolly,

it ain't in it with the Dead Byby I was a-tellin' ye of.'

The MC stopped the threatened reminiscence by shaking her by the shoulder. 'Wake up, dear lady,' he said, 'and learn of the smallness of the world. I think we may take it,' he added, looking round, 'that in such an exceptional case we may break the rule and ask Bloze to go on next.' 'Bloze' was the nickname of Mr Horatio Sparbrook (stage name) given to him for an attempt he had once made to introduce realism into the part of Gaspard in *The Lady of Lyons* in replying to Claude's entreaty to pardon the blows which he had received in his service: 'Bloze! Melnotte, Bloze! Bloze!' instead of the traditional 'Balows! Melnotte, Balows! Balows!' Without further preface Mr Sparbrook began:

'Mr Hupple mentioned that in that memorable journey across the flooded Bayou Pierre a certain confession was made. May I ask if that was done in your hearing?' Considerable curiosity was manifested, and the faces of all were turned towards the Second Low Comedian, awaiting his reply. After a pause it came with a certain reluctance:

'Yes, more than one of us did hear the confession. No one seemed to mind it at the time; but there was a painful result. There were few words, but they meant much. We didn't ever see them speaking to each other after that, but when that tour ended they both resigned, and I never saw either of them again. Someone told me that they had both given up the stage! I'd like to know how you came to know of it. There was a sort of understanding amongst those of us who saw the scene and heard what was said that we wouldn't ever speak of it. I've never done so from that time to this.'

'Was he a tall, well-featured man, with clustering grey hair?'

'It was black then; as black as Bones's! I beg your pardon, old man' - this to the Tragedian. The Young Man continued:

'And was she handsome and somewhat aquiline? A fine woman with a presence, and thick white hair, and grey eyes like stars?'

'She had beautiful grey eyes as big and bright as lamps, but her hair was golden. They were the handsomest young couple I think I ever saw; and up to that time I believe they simply doted on each other. I tell you it was a grief to us all what happened that journey.' The Young Man said very gravely:

'If we knew everything, as the Almighty knows it, perhaps we should regret some things more than we do, and others less. I only

guessed that Bayou Pierre was the scene of that confession; the other end of the story comes from across the world.' There was a shiver of expectation from all. Here was a good story that seemed to have a living interest. A stillness, as marked as that of the falling snow without, reigned in the car.