

A Deputy Waiter

by

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'When I began my career, I was ambitious to shine upon the lyric stage - no, sir! not in Shaftesbury Avenue.' The interpolation was in answer to the Tragedian's again removing his pipe from his lips, preparatory to some effort of biting sarcasm. I intended Grand Opera, the whole big thing. I didn't take much stock of Comedy in those days. Indeed, I thought Comedy was vulgar!' Here there was an approving grunt from the Tragedian. Without turning to him she went on:

'As vulgar as tragedy was ridiculous! You needn't laugh, boys and girls - that was when I was young - very young; I know better about both things now.

'Well, they said at the Conservatoire in Paris that I might succeed if a something-or-other happened to my throat, and that in such case

I would be a star, for my voice would be abnormally high. However, the something-or-other didn't come off, and I had to look for success in a different way. I didn't know at that time that I had latent those gifts of Comedy and humour which have since then lifted me to my present height in my career. This is all nothing, however; it is only to explain how I came to be an intimate friend of the great cantatrice, Helda, who was a class-fellow of my own. She went up like a rocket, if you like; and the stick never fell till it fell into her grave! In all her success she never forgot me, and whenever she knew I was in the same town, or near it, she always had me to come and stay with her. It was sometimes a nice change for me, too, for things were up-and-down with me. She was a good creature, and was able to take, in a lordly sort of way, all the honours that were showered upon her. But they must have oppressed her now and again; for when I would come to her she would love to pretend that I was the great star, and would make me sit opposite her at dinner, or at supper after the play, when we were alone, all hung over with the magnificent jewels that Kings and Queens had given her. I liked it all at first, but after a few years, when the hollowness of the world had been burned into me, I began to feel it in my inmost heart as a bitter sort of mockery. Of course, I wouldn't have let her know my feeling for the world, for it would have cut her to the quick; so there was never any change, and the old girlish game went on to the end.

'It was when I was with her in Chicago that I had an adventure of an odd kind. Some of you may have heard of it?'

She looked round interrogatively; the silence was broken by the voice of the Tragedian:

'They've forgotten it, my dear, those who haven't become dodderly since then!'

'Bones, when you counter, even a woman, you shouldn't hit below the belt!' said one of the young men, who had been at Oxford. The Tragedian glared at him, the appalling impudence of the youngster, who looked angry, and seemed to mean what he said, being unprecedented. A Young Man to put a Tragedian to rights! Of all the -! He felt, however, that he was in the wrong, and remained silent, waiting. The Singing Chambermaid looked saucily round her; but there was a tremble in the curl of her lips, and a furtive dimness as of unshed tears in her eyes. The blow had told. She went on:

It is long ago; there is no denying that! But it seems to me all as clear as if it were yesterday! There was I, all alone, in Helda's flat. It was in the Annexe, where there are suites of rooms with an outer door on the corridor with a regular latch-key. Helda was singing in Fidelio, and her maids were with her. I had stayed at home, because I was "under the weather," to use an Americanism, and I wasn't in The Fatal Legacy, which our company was giving that night at McVicker's. I was lying back in a comfortable chair, half dozing, when I heard the door open with a latch-key. I didn't turn round, for there was a special waiter who attended each suite, and I thought he had come to ask if I wished for coffee, as he usually did about that time when we were at home. It seemed as if at the same time the housemaid had gone in to make up the bedrooms. He did not speak to me as usual, so I said sleepily:

"Fritz." There was no answer.

"I think, Fritz," I said, "I would like a cup of tea to-night, instead of coffee." He still said nothing, so I looked round, and saw that it was a strange waiter. "Oh," I said, "I thought it was Fritz. Where is he?" The man answered me with perfect politeness:

"He has gone out, madam! This is his night off, but I am to take his place."

"Then," I said, "will you kindly bring my tea as soon as you can. I have a headache, and it may do it good." I sank back in my chair again. I did not hear him go out, so I looked round and said: "Do pray make haste," for his waiting irritated me. He had not stirred, but stood there looking at me fixedly. I began to feel a bit frightened, for there was, I thought, a wild look in his eyes as of a man hunted or desperate. In Helda's room I heard the rustle of the chambermaids at their work. I rose quickly and went towards the door, intending to join them and then get somebody else sent up instead of the new waiter, who was, I had by this time settled in my mind, mad. Just, however, as my hand was on the door-knob, a voice behind me, thin and keen, said in a fierce whisper:

"Stop!" I turned round and looked straight into the muzzle of a revolver pointed at my head. For an instant I was too paralysed to scream out, and then I felt that the only way to deal with a madman was to be calm and cool. Let me tell you, however, that being calm and cool under certain conditions is no easy task. I would just then have given my year's salary to have been able to have appeared hot and flustered. The voice came again:

"Sit there! His hand pointed to the piano stool. I sat down. Again came the voice:

"I know you; you are a Singing Chambermaid! Sing!"

In the midst of all my trouble it was some comfort to find my professional abilities recognised, even by a lunatic. When I looked at him to ask what I should sing, I saw his eyes roll horribly. I thought it better not to ask questions, so I started at once my great song, "George's Kiss is not like Daddy's," which I had rendered famous in the Farce-Comedy, From the West. At first he did not seem to like it. Some of you may have heard it - of course, in your extreme youth' - this with a reproachful look at the Tragedian. 'It begins wonderingly, and then works up and up with each verse. It is a song that has to be acted, and in those days I used to finish the refrain with a high note, a sort of suggestion of sudden surprise as one gives at an unexpected pinch. The "Inter-ocean" called it "Miss Pescod's yelp." The boys in the gallery used to take it up, and the latter verses were always chorused by the audience.

My lunatic friend had evidently not heard the song, though I had been singing it three times a week in Chicago for a whole month, so I guessed that, as he knew me as an actress, he must have seen me in some other town. He entered into the spirit of the thing, however, and when he heard the end of the first verse his face relaxed, and he cried, "Hear! Hear!" Thenceforward he made me sing the refrain of every verse over several times, and joined in the chorus himself. He seemed to be satisfied with my complaisance, for though he held the revolver in his hand, he did not keep it pointed at me.

In the middle of one of the verses the door from the bedroom opened very slightly and so softly that, had I not seen it, I should not have known; the maids were evidently listening. This was my chance; I called out imperatively and sharply:

"Come in!"

The door was instantly shut - so quickly that this time it sounded loudly; at the same instant the muzzle of the revolver rose and covered me.

"Silence!" came the fierce whisper. "This treat is for me alone! It is deah to someone if it be shared!" I tried to go on singing, but the sudden terror was too much for me. I put my hands to my forehead to steady myself. At that instant I heard the lintel of the outer door click; the maids had evidently gone.

I looked up at the waiter. He was grinning with a savage delight; and as I was now quite powerless, I sank to the floor. He said, with his eyes rolling:

"Mine alone! All for me now! All the entrancing delight of music from a Master voice! Then he pointed the revolver at me, saying:

"Get up, Singing Chambermaid! Sing! Sing to me! Sing for your life!"

'It is astonishing what a restorative a revolver, properly used, can be. I don't know but that when I have a theatre of my own I won't present one to my Stage Manager. It would be a prompt and admirable help!'

'Hear! Hear!' said the Stage Manager enthusiastically. She resumed:

'Well, I got up quickly and went on with the song just where I had left off. It didn't do to have any fooling around under the circumstances. I sang for all I was worth, and the lunatic joined in the chorus with a gleeful zest which was bewildering. I would like to have scratched him!

'When he had encored the whole song twice, I began to get tired. It was no joke to me; and if it hadn't seemed really a matter of life and death, I couldn't have gone on. When I made a protest, he scowled at me, and his hand rose with the revolver. After a moment's thought he said:

"You can have five minutes' rest from singing, but you must go on playing."

I began to play. I thought some merry tune might soothe him, and I started into a Scotch reel. The effect was so far good that he began to snap his fingers and to keep time with his feet. All the time my brain was working, and it flashed across me that if I could move him thus to my will with music, I might be able to devise some means to rid myself of him. There was so much of hope in the thought that it almost overcame me, and I began to laugh. The instant my hands stopped, his moved, and the revolver rose again.

"Play up, or you're lost!" came the peremptory whisper.

'Nature is nature, and necessity is necessity, and I suppose that hysterics is the result of the struggle between them. Anyhow, I kept playing away at the reel, and all the time rolling on the piano stool with laughing. Presently I was recalled by a peremptory word:

"Time!" I looked round; the revolver still covered me. He went on:

"The five minutes is up! Singing Chambermaid, do your work! Follow your vocation! Exercise your calling! Practise your art! Sing!"

"What shall I sing?" I asked in desperation. His face wore a sardonic smile as he replied:

"Sing the same song again. You will have time to think of something else whilst you are singing it!"

I began the song again. I used to think it very funny, and full of a sort of quaint plaintiveness, but now it seemed only a mass of distressing rubbish - false sentiment, indelicate, inane. From that hour I could never sing it without a nauseating sense of humiliation.'

'Hear! Hear!' said the Tragedian, but drew back under the fierce 'Hsh' of the Company. The Singing Chambermaid looked at him reproachfully, and went on:

'Presently my lunatic waiter drew close to me, and whispered:

"Don't stop! If you pause a moment you are a dead woman. Here is Fritz; I hear his footsteps." He must have had wonderful ears, I thought; but that is the way of madness. "When he opens the door, tell him that you are practising some songs, and don't want to be disturbed. Remember, I am watching you! If you even falter, your life and his are forfeit! I am desperate! The music is mine alone, and alone I will have it!" He withdrew to the bedroom, leaving the door slightly open. He could not be seen from the outer door, but he could see me. And I could see him, with his revolver pointed at my head, and a set, vindictive, threatening scowl upon his evil face. I knew that he would kill me if I did not do as he wished, so when Fritz opened the door, I called to him as complacently as I could -

there is some use in stage training:

'I am practising, Fritz, and do not wish to be disturbed. I shall want nothing till Madame comes in.'

"Goot!" said the pleasant Fritz, and he at once withdrew.

'Then my mad friend came out from the room, and said, showing his teeth with a grim smile:

"You showed your nerve and your wisdom, Singing Chambermaid; now sing!"

'Well, I sang, and sang, and sang all the songs I could think of, till I grew so weary that I could hardly sit erect; and my brain began to reel. The maniac then began to grow more desperate. As I grew fainter he levelled his pistol at me and forced me to go on from very fear of death. His face began to twitch, his eyes to roll horribly, and his mouth to work convulsively as he called, in a fierce whisper:

"Go on. Sing! Sing! Faster! Faster! Faster!"

'He made me go faster and faster still, beating time with the revolver, till my breath began to go. I held on in mortal fear till even sheer terror could no longer uphold me. The last thing I saw as I fell senseless from the stool was his scowling face and the bobbing muzzle of the revolver as he called, "Faster! Faster!"

'The next thing I remember is hearing Helda's voice, seemingly coming from a great distance. I recognised the tone before I heard the words, but things grew clearer and clearer, and at last I knew that it was her hands which held my head up. Then I heard distinctly the words she said:

"Oh, don't bother! What does it matter? I would rather see her her dear self than all the jewels in Christendom!" Then came a gruff, strong voice:

"But, look here, ma'am. Time is everything now! We can't begin till we get some kind of clue. Do you just tell us what you know; we'll do the rest.' She answered impatiently:

"I really know nothing, except what I've told you already. I came in after the Opera, and found her here in a dead faint. Perhaps, when she regains her consciousness, she will be able to tell us something."

Then came the strong voice again:

"And you, Fritz Darmstetter, have you no more to say than this: 'I came several times during the evening, and heard her singing, generally the same song over and over again. Something about George and Daddy. When, at last, I opened the door, she told me to go away, as she was practising, and did not want to be disturbed. She would not want anything till Madame came'?"

"Dat is so!" Here I seemed to become awake. I opened my eyes, and when I saw my dear Helda close to me, I clung to her and implored her to protect me. She promised me that she would. Then, somewhat reassured, I looked round and saw myself surrounded with a crowd. At one side was a row of gigantic policemen, with a still more gigantic inspector standing in front of them; on the other side were a lot of the hotel servants, male and female, and Helda's maids, who were wringing their hands. One of the policemen carried Helda's Russia-leather jewel-case with the lid wrenched off. When the Inspector saw my eyes open he stooped and, with a sweep of his arm, lifted me to my feet.

"Now," he said in a commanding voice, "now, young lady, tell me what you know!"

'I suppose we women know a man's voice when we hear it, and we, or our mothers before us, have learned to obey, so I spoke out instinctively:

"The lunatic came in and pointed a revolver at me, and made me sing all the evening till I fell down with fatigue!"

"What was he like, miss?" asked the giant Inspector in an imperative voice.

"He was thin," I answered. "He had dark whiskers and a shaven upper lip, and his eyes rolled!" Then I proceeded to tell him all I knew of the lunatic's strange proceedings.

'As I spoke, there came a queer sort of grin on the faces of the policemen; the Inspector seemed to voice their sentiments as he said:

"Well, ma'am, this case is pretty clever. Guess its Dimeshow Pete this time. The old man has fooled us all. He seems to have been tarnation clever over it! That was a cute scheme of his to make the young woman sing over and over again the same song with the high

note, like as she was practising, whilst his confederates got off with the swag. Guess they're off on the Lake Shore special hours ago, and he's gone on the Flyer, and has jumped at Lake. Pete's a peach! He's been too many for us this time, but I reckon we'll chalk it up to him agin the time comes!"

For some little time the eyes of the Company had been gradually focussing the Tragedian, who was next in order. He had himself shown to experienced eyes a certain uneasiness, though he tried with all the wile of his craft to disguise it in a mantle of degage self-possession.

When the last speaker had completely finished - this, his auditory being actors, being when the applause had entirely ceased and the opportunity for encore or recall had come and gone - the MC spoke:

'Now, Mr Dovercourt, we hope for the honour of hearing from you!' There was an immediate chorus from all the Company, the Manager being bland - not exactly patronising, but striking an exact mean between condescension and respect - whilst the rest all down the line with an ever-growing serious attention which began with the Low Comedian's companionable deference and ended with the Sewing Woman's self-abasement.

The latter, who through effluxion of time which had put her own literary effort in historical perspective, and influxion of the cup that cheers, felt herself in a halo of imaginative glory, added her tearful request:

'And if I might make so hold, Mr Wragge, seein' as 'ow I may now claim to be myself a sister hartis, though in a numble wy, I would wenture to arsk if you could tell us out of tragic lore some instance of anythink which isn't about a dead byby, which the same belongs to my spear, an" - this said with an air of vicious determination - 'I means to 'old to my rights, though I be a numble woman what knows her plyce for all the -'

Her eloquence was cut short by the MC, who said, with a stern determination which reached her intelligence through her somewhat clouded faculties:

'That will do, Mrs Wrigglesworth! When your turn comes again we'll call on you, never fear. In the meantime, you must not interrupt anyone else; more especially one whom we all respect and admire so much as we do our Tragedian, the glory of our Company, the pride

of our calling, the perfected excellence of our Art. Mr Dovercourt, here is your very good health! Ladies and gentlemen all! in the good old fashion: Hip, Hip, Hurrah!

The toast was drunk standing, and with a manifest respect on the part of all, which was a really effective tribute to his branch of his Art. Growl as they may, the companions of the Tragedian have always a secret respect, if not for the Man, at least for the Artist.

The Tragedian began: