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THE MAN ON THE BOX

"You sent for me, Miss?"—his hat in his hand, his attitude deferential and attentive.

She was engaged upon some fancy work, the name of which no man knows, and if he were told, could not possibly remember for longer than ten minutes. She laid this on the reading-table, stood up and brushed the threads from her little two-by-four cambric apron.

"James, on Monday night I dropped a rose on the lawn. (Finds thread on her sleeve.) In the morning when I looked for it (brushes the apron again), it was gone. Did you find it?" She made a little ball of the straggling threads and dropped it into the waste-basket. A woman who has the support of beauty can always force a man to lower his gaze. James looked at his boots. His heart gave one great bound toward his throat, then sank what seemed to be fathoms deep in his breast. This was a thunderbolt out of heaven itself. Had she seen him, then? For a space he was tempted to utter a falsehood; but there was that in her eyes which warned him of the uselessness of such an expedient. Yet, to give up that rose would be like giving up some part of his being. She repeated the question: "I ask you if you found it?"

"Yes, Miss Annesley."

"Do you still possess it?"

"Yes, Miss."

"And why did you pick it up?"

"It was fresh and beautiful; and I believed that some lady at the dinner had worn it."

"And so you picked it up? Where did you find it?"

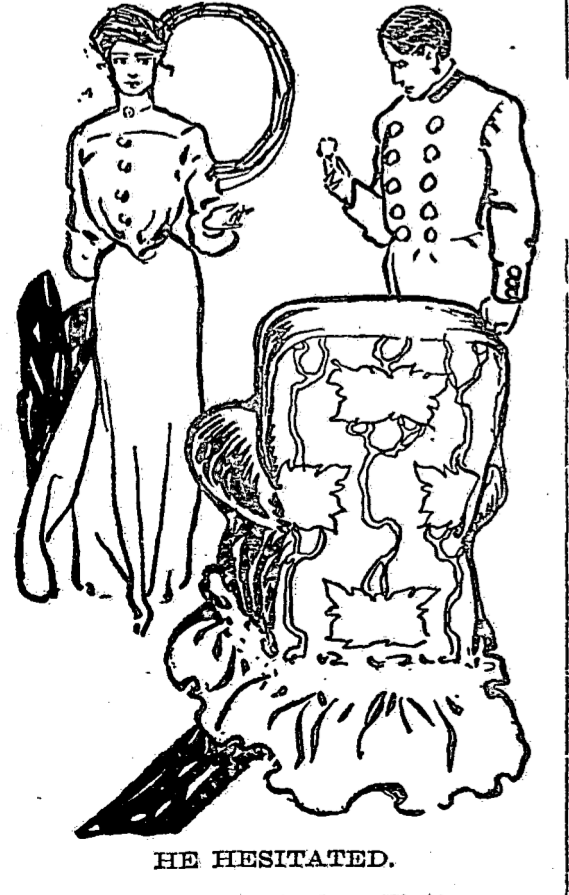
"Outside the bow-window, Miss."

"When?"

He thought for a moment. "In the morning, Miss."

"Take care, James; it was not yet 11 o'clock at night."

"I admit what I said was not true, Miss. As you say, it was not yet 11." James was pale. So she had thrown it away, confident that this moment



would arrive. This humiliation was premeditated. Patience, he said, inwardly; this would be the last opportunity she would have to humiliate him.

"Have you the flower on your person?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Did you know that it was mine?"—mercilessly.

"Yes; but I believed that you had deliberately thrown it away. I saw no harm in taking it."

"But there was harm."

"I bow to your superior judgment, Miss."—ironically.

She deemed it wisest to pass over this experimental irony. "Give the flower back to me. It is not proper that a servant should have in his keeping a rose which was once mine, even if I had thrown it away or discarded it."

Carefully he drew forth the crumpled flower. He looked at her, then at the rose, hoping against hope that she might relent. He hesitated till he saw an impatient movement of the extended hand. He surrendered.

"Thank you. That is all. You may go." She tossed the withered flower into the wastebasket.

"Pardon me, but before I go I have to announce that I shall resign my position next Monday. The money which has been advanced to me, deducting that which is due me, together with the amount of my fine at the police-court, I shall be pleased to return to you on the morning of my departure."

Miss Annesley's lips fell apart, and her brows arched. She was very much surprised.

"You wish to leave my service?"—as if it were quite impossible that such a thing should occur.

"Yes, Miss."

"You are dissatisfied with your position?"—idly.

"It is not that, Miss. As a groom I am perfectly satisfied. The trouble lies in the fact that I have too many other things to do. It is very distasteful for me to act in the capacity of butler. My temper is not equable enough for that position." He bowed.

"Very well. I trust that you will not regret your decision." She sat down and coolly resumed her work.

"It is not possible that I shall regret it."

"You may go."

He bowed again, one corner of his mouth twisted. Then he took himself off to the stables. He was certainly in what they call a towering rage.

If I were not a seer of the first degree, a narrator of the penetrative order, I should be vastly puzzled over this singular action on her part.

CHAPTER XXII.
THE DRAMA UNROLLS.

It is half after eight; the curtain rises; the music of a violin is heard coming from the music-room: Col. Annesley is discovered sitting in front of the wood fire, his chin sunk on his breast, his hands hanging listlessly on each side of the chair, his face deeply lined. From time to time he looks at the clock. I can imagine no sorer picture than that of this loving, tender-hearted, wretched old man as he sits there, waiting for Karloff and the ignominious end. Fortune gone with the winds, poverty leering into his face, shame drawing her red fingers across his brow, honor in sackcloth and ashes!

And but two short years ago there had not been in all the wide land a more contented man than himself, a man with a conscience freer. God! Even yet he could hear the rolling, whirring ivory ball as it spun the cir-

cle of that fatal night at Monte Carlo. Man does not recall the intermediate steps of his fall, only the first step and the last. In his waking hours the colonel always heard the sound of it, and it rattled through his troubled dreams. He could not understand how everything had gone as it had. It seemed impossible that in two years he had dissipated a fortune, sullied his honor, beggared his child. It was all so like a horrible dream. If only he might wake; if only God would be so merciful as to permit him to wake! He hid his face. There is no hell save conscience makes it.

The music laughed and sighed and laughed. It was the music of love and youth; joyous, rollicking, pulsing music.

The colonel sprang to his feet suddenly, his hands at his throat. He was suffocating. The veins gnarled on his neck and brow. There was in his heart a pain as of many knives. His arms fell: of what use was it to struggle? He was caught, trapped in a net of his own contriving.

Softly he crossed the room and stood by the portiere beyond which was the music-room. She was happy, happy in her youth and ignorance! she could play all those sprightly measures, her spirit as light and conscience-free; she could sing, she could laugh, she could dance. And all the while his heart was breaking, breaking!

"How shall I face her mother?" he groaned.

The longing which always seizes the guilty to confess and relieve the mind came over him. If only he dared rush in there, throw himself at her feet, and stammer forth his wretched tale! She was of his flesh, of his blood; when she knew she would not wholly condemn him. . . . No, no! He could not. She honored and trusted him now; she had placed him on so high a pedestal that it was utterly impossible for him to disillusion her young mind, to see for ever and ever the mute reproach in her honest eyes, to feel that though his arm encircled her she was beyond his reach.

God knew that he could not tell this child of the black gulf he had dug for himself and her.

The bell sang its buzzing note; there was the sound of crunching wheels on the driveway; the music ceased abruptly. Silence. A door opened and closed. A moment or so later Karloff, preceded by the girl, came into the study. She was grave because she remembered Mrs. Chadwick. He was grave also; he had various reasons for being so.

"Father, the count tells me that he has an engagement with you," she said. She wondered if this appointment in any way concerned her.

"It is true, my child. Leave us and give orders that we are not to be disturbed."

She scrutinized him sharply. How strangely hollow his voice sounded! Was he ill?

"Father, you are not well. Count, you must promise me not to keep him long, however important this interview may be. He is ill and needs rest,"—and her loving eyes caressed each line of care in her parent's furrowed cheeks.

Annesley smiled reassuringly. It took all the strength of his will, all that remained of a high order of courage, to create this smile. He wanted to cry out to her that it was a lie, a mockery. Behind that smile his teeth grated.

"I shall not keep him long, Mademoiselle," said the count. He spoke gently, but he studiously avoided her eyes.

She hesitated for a moment on the threshold; she knew not why. Her lips even formed words, but she did not speak. "What was it? Something oppressed her. Her gaze wandered indecisively from her father to the count, from the count to her father.

"When you are through," she finally said, "bring your cigars into the music-room."

"With the greatest pleasure, Mademoiselle," replied the count. "And play, if you so desire; our business is such that your music will be as a pleasure added."

Her father nodded; but he could not force another smile to his lips. The brass rings of the portiere rattled, and she was gone. But she left behind a peculiar tableau, a tableau such as is formed by those who stand upon ice which is about to sink and engulf them.

The two men stood perfectly still. I doubt not that each experienced the same sensation, that the same thought occurred to each mind, though it came from different avenues: love and shame. The heart of the little clock on the mantel beat tick-tock, tick-tock; a log crackled and fell between the irons sending up a shower of evanescent sparks; one of the long windows giving out upon the veranda creaked mysteriously.

Karloff was first to break the spell. He made a gesture which was eloquent of his distaste of the situation.

"Let us terminate this as quickly as possible," he said.

"Yes, let us have done with it before I lose my courage," replied the colonel, his voice thin and quivering. He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. His hand shone white and his nails darkly blue.

The count stepped over to the table, reached into the inner pocket of his coat, and extracted a packet. In this packet was the enormous sum of \$180,000 in notes of \$1,000 denomination: that is to say, 180 slips of paper redeemable in gold by the government which had issued them. On top of this packet lay the colonel's note for \$20,000.

(It is true that Karloff never accepted money from his government in payment for his services; but it is equally true that for every penny he

laid out he was reimbursed by Russia.) Karloff placed the packet on the table, first taking off the note, which he carelessly tossed beside the bank-notes.

"You will observe that I have not bothered with having your note discounted. I have fulfilled my part of the bargain; fulfill yours." The count thrust his trembling hands into his trousers pockets. He desired to hide this embarrassing sign from his accomplice. Annesley went to a small safe which stood at the left of the fireplace and returned with a packet somewhat bulkier than the count's. He dropped it beside the money, shudderingly, as though he had touched a poisonous viper.

"My honor," he said simply. "I had never expected to sell it so cheap."

There was a pause, during which neither man's gaze swerved from the other's. There was not the slightest, not even the remotest, fear of treachery; each man knew with whom he was dealing; yet there they stood, as if fascinated. One would have thought that the colonel would have counted his money, or Karloff his plans; they did neither. Perhaps the colonel wanted Karloff to touch the plans first, before he touched the money; perhaps Karloff had the same desire, only the other way around.

The colonel spoke.

"I believe that is all," he said quietly. The knowledge that the deed was done and that there was no retreat gave back to him a particle of his former coolness and strength of mind. It had been the thought of committing the crime that had unnerved him. Now that his bridges were burned, a strange, unnatural calm settled over him.

The count evidently was not done. He moistened his lips. There was a dryness in his throat.

"It is not too late," he said; "I have not yet touched them."

"We shall not indulge in moralizing, if you please," interrupted the colonel, with savage irony. "The moment for that has gone by."

"Very well." Karloff's shoulders settled; his jaws became aggressively angular; some spirit of his predatory forbears touched his face here and there, hardening it. "I wish to speak in regard to your daughter."

"Enough! Take my honor and be gone!" The colonel's voice was loud and rasping.

Karloff rested his hands on the table and inclined his body toward the colonel.

"Listen to me," he began. "There is in every man the making and the capacity of a great rascal. Time and opportunity alone are needed—and a motive. The other night I told you that I could not give up your daughter. Well, I have not given her up. She must be my wife."

"Must?" The colonel clenched his hands.

(To be continued)

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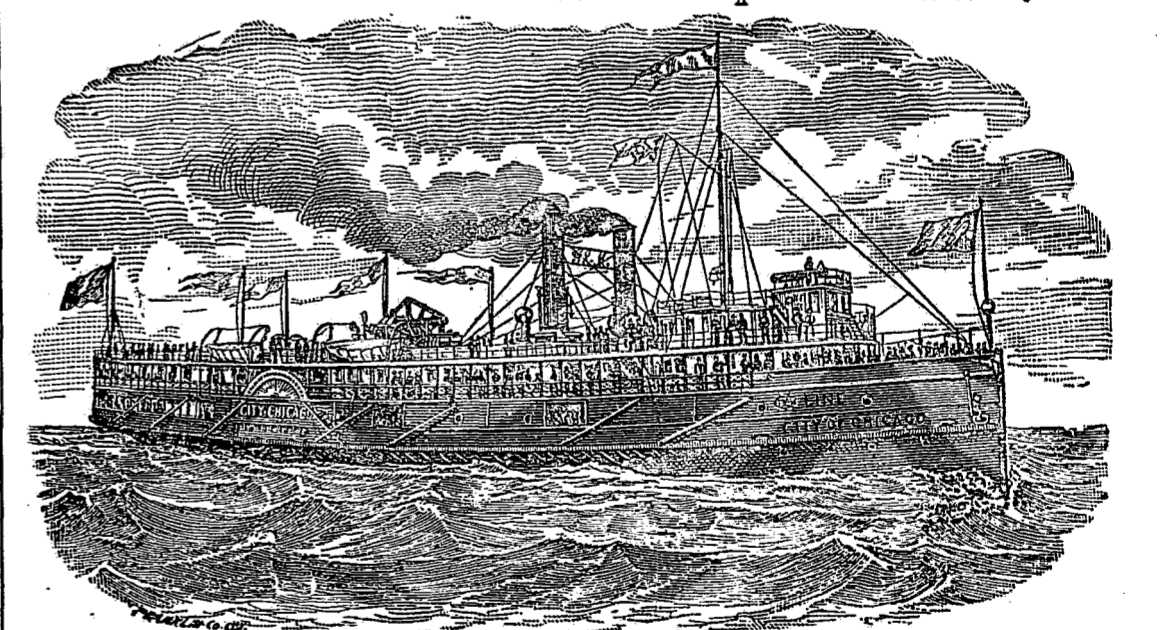
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