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IN AN EVIL MOMENT.

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CHAPTER X.—(CONTINUED.)

"What's the matter?" Walter demanded. "I didn't think the place was as rough as it is," Tom explained, "and I was saying we had better get out of it. The noise and bustle affects you, does it not?"

Like many other nervous people, Walter Barr picked up wonderfully in a crowd. He was at his worst in his own quiet home.

"On the contrary," he replied briskly, "I like it very much. All this activity cheers me up. A man couldn't very well be startled in such a noise as this," he added, with a smile.

Tom slightly elevated his eyebrows to express to Lily his surprise at the improvement in her father. Perhaps the young surgeon did not understand his patient quite as well as he imagined.

"I suppose its scarcely the thing to be seen amongst this motley gang!"

They had left their conveyance at the hotel, and as Tom spoke they were standing on the bridge that crossed the river, looking at the compact collection of caravans and stalls which were arranged, circle within circle, on a piece of ground, called by such of the inhabitants that possessed an exuberant imagination—"the Green."

A lofty clock tower—erected to the memory of the late Prince Consort—crowned with gilt and an opulence of decoration, stood at one end of this grassless enclosure. The river and promenade confined the space on another side, and picturesque old-fashioned houses completed its boundaries. Far away were purple-tipped hills; close at hand the running stream danced and sparkled. It was a charming spot, and the yelling, unclean crowd seemed sadly out of place in it. "I don't care who sees me," said Walter, a little defiantly, in response to Tom's remark.

"I'm sure," said Lily, with a laugh in her eyes, "Tom need not dread meeting any of his patients."

"We'll walk through the Fair at any rate," Tom declared, leading them across the road into the surging crowd.

They had scarcely passed through the outer fringe of pleasure-seekers when Walter Barr, with a little cry, stopped short, and stood as one suddenly deprived of power and speech.

They were standing before a small show, rubbed grandiloquently, and in mammoth letters:

THE WORLD'S MUSEUM OF LIVING CURIOSITIES!

There was a grotesqueness about the entire erection that had at once appealed to Lily's strong sense of humor. It was so clumsily put together; so very small; and the letters that described it were so absurdly big! The man too who stood on the rickety platform outside had such funny red spiky hair; such a quaint face—such gaunt, knotty hands!

As she watched this man, and listened to him, Lily could not restrain her laughter. She did not notice the ashy pallor that had overspread her father's face.

"This 'ere," yelled the man with the red, spiky hair, and the queer hands, beating a deafening gong after every second word, "is the World's Museum of Living Curiosities,"—here he pointed to the flaming letters—"and the best show in the fair, bar none. We have inside, ladies and gentlemen, the giant rat from India; the raging jackal from the trackless wilds of Abyssinia; the learnedest pony in the world from the stables of the greatest monarch on earth; the Boss of all the Chinias; the intelligent cobra that can drink rum like a Christian, and says his prayers regular every night. Then there's the greatest wonder of the universe, the Zulu maiden and the African chief, brought over in their war paint—all alive, bear in mind, ladies and gentlemen, all alive, alive, alive! This, ladies and gentlemen," Mr. Blend continued in a semi-confidential tone, "is what I call my double event—the instruction and elevation of the armless hilarity of the circus; and all for one penny, ladies and gentlemen, all for one—Well, I'm d—"

Mr. Blend stopped suddenly and fell back as though he had been shot. The energy with which he uttered the oath brought a roar from the gaping bumpkins.

Mr. Blend's agitation is easily explained. His eye had caught Walter Barr's white and panic-stricken face.

"Quick, quick," Walter gasped, almost throwing himself upon Tom for protection. "Take me away. Quick, quick; do not waste an instant."

Lily turned round, and saw for the first time the agitation of her father. They both hurried him from the spot as rapidly as possible.

Before Mr. Blend recovered himself they had disappeared in the crowd. He called lustily after them, but at this moment the shows on each side of him commenced to sound their gongs and drums, and he could not hear his own voice.

"Tom," said Mr. Barr, as they helped him into his conveyance—his agitation had made him very feeble—"you said that I wanted change—complete change?"

"Yes," Tom allowed a little dubiously, wondering what was coming next.

"I will have change—complete change. Is it possible to catch the last London train to-night?"

"It is possible," Tom began slowly, (Lily, much alarmed, was watching her father earnestly), "but—"

"If it's possible we can do it," Walter declared with a decision scarcely to be expected in his present state, "We will go to London to-night."

"My dear fellow," Tom protested, "I cannot leave you—"

"You must get Doctor Jones to look after your patients until you can find a substitute," Mr. Barr laid his hand on Tom's arm. "Tom," he said gently, "I feel that the crisis of my life is at hand. do not desert me: I cannot do without you now. You must come."

Lily pleaded with her eyes, and Tom forgot all the difficulties in the way, and made up his mind to accompany them, wondering whether this last freak of Mr. Barr's was due to incipient insanity, or had its foundation in an attempt to elude tangible danger.

CHAPTER XI.

RETIRING FROM BUSINESS.

A few mornings after the interview (faithfully chronicled in the ninth chapter of this veracious record) between Mr. Gregory Axon and Stivey Blend had occurred, the first-named gentleman sat in his dusty office, bearing every outward trace of anxiety and agitation.

Before him were some open letters. He had thrown himself back in his chair; his hat was so far from his forehead, that it threatened each moment to fall upon the dirty floor. His hands were plunged deeply into his pockets, as though he were determined to fill the said pockets with something; and his great red face had a sullen, helpless expression not easily described.

"Well," he muttered to himself, "the whole three of them"—he nodded at the open letters—"should have remitted to-day, and not one has sent."

He rose from his stool, pressed his hat savagely on his head, and walked up and down his office—it took him exactly six steps to accomplish the last feat.

"I made sure that one of them would have sent," he continued disconsolately. Then shrugging his shoulders, he added:

"But it's no use bothering. I'm in a mess, and there's an end of it."

He opened the drawer wherein, on the last occasion on which we saw him, he had concealed his money, and drew from it a small spirit-flask. The flask contained brandy—perhaps half a tumblerful; this he swallowed neat, and, replacing the bottle, he resumed his stool by the table.

"There's nothing to be done," he soliloquized, placing his hat upon his desk, and running his fingers through his hair, "nothing. Matters must take their course."

Then his eyes fell upon a letter that still lay unopened upon the table.

"From Stivey Blend," he said indifferently, as he examined the superscription and the post-mark. "I wonder how the deuce he managed to get into Devonshire. I'm getting rather tired of that fellow," he went on with a half yawn. "I'll get rid of him."

He played with the letter for a few minutes, dwelling the while on his own difficulties; then he lazily opened it.

At first it seemed almost too much trouble to read the ugly scrawl; but suddenly Mr. Axon's features assumed an expression of the keenest interest. He eagerly bent over the letter, and his hands shook as he perused it. It was impossible to make out every word of the missive, for it was written on several small pieces of dirty tattered paper. In some parts these were so greasy as to make the lines quite illegible. Mr. Axon's eyes had caught sight of one name, and that name made his faculties so amazingly sharp that in a few seconds he had gathered the gist of the slovenly, puzzling epistle.

The few lines heading the first scrap of paper were tolerably distinct. They were composed of large, straggling, irregular characters, formed by the knotty hand of Mr. Blend himself, and were to this effect:

"Dear Boss,

"The following 'as been popped down in between whiles by the Zulu maiden. Pardon her spelling, Boss; edekashun wasn't thought much of in the part of London she come from. More when we meet.

"Your ever faithful friend,

"Prince of Showmen,

"STIVEY BLEND."

It had apparently not occurred to Mr. Blend that while he was penning the above unimportant lines he might himself have written the startling news he had to impart. Perhaps the showman was rather proud of having an amanuensis; it was quiet easy to detect that though the calligraphy might be that of the "Zulu maiden" the language was his own.

We need not reproduce the precious document here.

In a peculiarly diffuse and ornate style (Mr. Blend had more than once been heard to declare that he had a taste for literature) it described the unexpected discovery of Walter Barr at the Fair, and how, when Stivey Blend called after him, that gentleman had vanished in the crowd. It concluded by begging Mr. Axon to immediately take the train for Barnsbarn and make an effort to discover Walter Barr's home. Stivey would do this himself, but it was impossible for him to leave the show either day or night.

Of late years, Gregory Axon had grown very excitable, and very slight occurrences were wont to occasion him considerable agitation. It was curious to watch his unnatural calmness after he had read the letter. For fully ten minutes he remained motionless in his chair, gazing vacantly at the disfigured wall before him. Presently he murmured:

"At last! at last!" Then he again became silent and thoughtful.

"If I play the game well," he soliloquized, "I am a made man, and the past poverty will be at an end. I will play well," he went on, an evil expression creeping over his face, "and I will win."

He buttoned his frayed frock coat across his chest and drew himself up proudly. "Unless," he added after a moment, the perspiration oozing from his forehead, and his face growing pale, "unless Stivey Blend speaks to him before I arrive. But no, no, it isn't likely—it isn't likely;" and the old cruel triumphant expression returned.

Some of the lower drawers of the office table were open, and Mr. Axon, in his excessive complacency, closed them with a rough kick. They were of the slightest description, and as he struck them with his boot they cracked or broke inwards. He smiled grimly at the damage, and cried:

"I shan't want you any more. I retire from business to-day, and drop the auctioneer and become the gentleman." Then he locked the place up, and proceeded to the dingy public house at the corner of the street, where he ordered more brandy, and begged the loan of a London and South-Western Time Table.

"There's a mid day train," he said, running his finger down the narrow column. "I'll catch it."

He suddenly remembered that he had no money. It chanced that to-day his watch

and chain were in his own possession—a not very usual occurrence in those days, and he lost no time in "creating a mortgage," as he facetiously termed it, upon them.

"I'll get plenty of money when I'm down there," he reflected. "If the worst happens, there's Stivey."

Poor Stivey! So long as you have a few pounds and can be of any use, Mr. Gregory Axon will not be far from you!

Like that evening, when the people were leaving the fair ground at Barnsbarn, and Mr. Blend was making the wildest efforts to coax another "house" into his show, a broad-shouldered, sullen man entered the crazy erection, and, with an oath, saluted the proprietor.

"Hullo, Boss!" Stivey cried, with considerable animation; "I thought you'd come. Get inside for a moment. Alive, bear in mind, ladies and gentlemen, alive. The last time to-night, and ALIVE!"

"Shut up that row," Gregory growled; "I want to speak to you."

"Whatever's the matter?" Stivey asked, in amazement, following Gregory submissively behind the piece of canvas that screened the living curiosities from the public gaze until the time for the performance came round, and leaving the doorman to continue the harangue.

"Quite enough's the matter;" was the ungracious response. "I was as enough to pay attention to your confounded letter, and I've come all these miles on a fool's errand; I had to pawn my watch to pay my fare."

Mr. Blend's face expressed the most lively concern.

"It can't be a fool's errand, Gregory," he ventured; "Mr. Barr must be in the neighborhood."

"This neighborhood is just where he is not. He is in London—the very place I have come from!"

"Impossible!" Mr. Blend declared. "Why it's only yesterday that I saw him here with my own eyes."

Gregory gave a short, contemptuous laugh.

"What was to prevent him taking the night train, as it turns out he did? Pooh! he might be in France by this time."

"I don't matter," Blend declared cheerfully. "I was asking a chap last night if he knew Mr. Barr, and he told me that he had a large house somewhere down Sawton way. They'll tell you where he's gone to."

"That's where you're wrong again," Gregory replied, with a sneer. "He left hurriedly, and has not given a soul his address. All letters for him are to be sent to his lawyer's—"

"Then write to him," the showman broke in with the triumphant air of a man making a brilliant suggestion. "He'll make a point of seeing you at once."

"Blend, you're a fool," Axon exclaimed.

"No," he went on, half to himself, "we're done. He's escaped me again; and, as for finding him in London—bah!" and he laughed a hard, bitter, angry laugh.

Seeing the dangerous humour his friend was in, it occurred to Mr. Blend that it would be wise to attend to business, and postpone all further converse until the show was cleared for the night.

When he rejoined Axon that gentleman said to him decisively:

"Blend, I must return to London by the first train, and you must find me money."

The showman looked dubious.

"You must have plenty," Gregory declared.

"As for money," Stivey allowed, slowly; "of course I've got a tidy bit in hand, but it isn't exactly mine you see until I've cleared off the mortgage on the institution—"

"Hang the mortgage!" Axon cried savagely, and, as had happened numberless times before, Mr. Blend's engagements were thrust aside and the needs of Gregory Axon administered to.

On the second morning following this interview, Gregory Axon again sat in his shabby office, ruefully contemplating the broken drawers and inwardly cursing the perverseness of his fate.

Suddenly the door opened and a young man entered.

"Do you happen to have a house on your books about—?" he commenced. He did not get any farther. An older gentleman, on whose arm was a bright-eyed, golden-haired girl, followed him into the office. The moment Gregory caught sight of the second gentleman's face, he started from his stool and sprang towards him.

"Walter Barr!" he cried; "thank God for this!"

And he seized Mr. Barr's hand.