

THE STROLLERS

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM, Author of "Under the Rose"

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"Strollers" exclaimed Mauville, wheeling around. "What are they called?"

"Lord, I don't know, sir. They show folks, and that's all." "Do many strolling players come this way?"

"Not for weeks and months sometimes! The old patron ordered the school to arrest them if they entered the wye."

"The Vanderdonkville in the wye?" asked the land baron quickly. "No. It was separated from the wye when Rickett Jacobus married."

"Never mind the family genealogy! Have the coach ready at 9." "Tonight?"

"This morning," replied Mauville lightly. "And meanwhile put this to bed, indicating Scroggs, who was now smiling like a bagpipe, with one arm looped round a leg of the library table."

"The caretaker hoisted the attorney on his broad shoulders, his burden still piping as they crossed the hall and mounted the stairway. Having deposited his load within the amazing depths of a Dutch feather mattress, where he lay well alighted to sleep, but not unheeding the watchman of the steyn left him to well earned slumber and descended to the kitchen."

"At the appointed hour the land baron, freshly shaven, not a faded line in his face and elastic in step, appeared on the front porch, before which his carriage was waiting."

Little Thunder was too spry to be caught by even a pursuing bullet. CHAPTER X. THE show troupe has come to town," said the tall, lank postmaster to every one who called, and the words passed from mouth to mouth, so that those who did not witness the arrival were soon aware of it.

Punchinello and his companions never attracted more attention from the old country peasants than did the chariot and its occupants as the day after their night in the woods they passed through the main thoroughfare of the village where they were soon to appear.

Dashing as in review before the rank and file of the village, the coach, with an extra flourish, rattled up to the hotel, a low but generous sized edifice, with a wide, comfortable veranda, upon the railing of which was an array of boots and behind them a number of disconsolate looking farmers.

"You want to register, do you?" said the landlord in answer to Barnes' inquiry, as the latter entered the office. "We don't keep no register, but I guess we can accommodate you, although the house is rather full with the fellows from the ark, or," he added, by way of explanation in answer to the manager's look of surprise.

"Philadelphia freight wagons, I suppose you would call them. But we speak of them as arks, because they take in all creation. Them's the occupants making a Mount Ararat of the porch. They're downhearted because they used to liquor up here and, now they can't, for the town's temperance."

"I trust, nevertheless, you are prepared for a season of legitimate drama," suggested Barnes. "The town's for lectures clear through," he answered. "They've been making a big fuss about show folks."

The manager's countenance did not fall, however, upon hearing this announcement; on the contrary, it shed forth inscrutable satisfaction. No sooner were they settled in far from commodious quarters than preparations for the future were seriously begun, and now the drama proceeded apace, with Barnes the moving spirit, despite his assertion that he was no scholar, the manager's mind was the storehouse of a hundred plays, and in that depository were many bags of gold and many bags of chaff.

From this accumulation he drew freely, frankly, in the light fingered fashion of master playwrights and lesser theatrical thimble riggers. Before the manager was a table—upon which were scattered miscellaneous articles, symbols of life and character. A stately satirical representation of the leading lady, a pepper box, the irascible father, a rotund mustered old woman, a long, slim cruet the ingenue, and a pewter spoon the lover.

commodious platform, which now served the purpose of a stage, and—note-worthy circumstance—there were gas jets for footlights, the illuminating fluid having at that early date been introduced in several of the more progressive villages. Between the acts these yellow lights were turned low, and, running with the current of popular desire, the orchestra, enlarged to four, played by special request "The Old Oaken Bucket."

The song had just sprung into popularity, and in a moment men, women and children had added their voices to the instruments. It was not the thrill of temperance fanaticism that stirred their hearts, but it was the memories of the old pioneer home in the wilderness; the rail splitting, road building days; the ancient rites of "raisings" and other neighborly ceremonies, when the farmer cut up with cradle and thrashed it out with his fall; when "butter and eggs were pin money" and wheat paid the storekeeper.

"How solemnly they take their amusements in the north, Mr. Barnes!" exclaimed a voice in one of the entrances. "What a contrast to the south—the wicked south!" The manager turned sharply. "We are mere servants of the public, Mr. Mauville."

"And the public is master, Mr. Barnes! How the dramatic muse is whipped around! In Greece she was a goddess, in Rome a hussy, in England a sprightly dame, now a straight-laced aristocrat. But you have a recruit, I see?"

"You mean Saint Prosper?" "Yes; and I can hardly blame him under the circumstances," murmured the land baron, at the same time glancing around as though seeking some one. "Circumstances! What circumstances?" demanded the manager. "Why, the pleasant company he finds himself in, of course," said the visitor easily. "Ah, I see Miss Carey. He added, his eye immediately lightening, and must congratulate her on her performance. Cursed dusty hole, isn't it?"

Brushing himself with his handkerchief as he moved away. "What business has he behind the scenes anyway?" grumbled the manager. "Dusty hole, indeed! Confound his impudence!" But his attention being drawn to the pressing exigencies of a first night, Barnes soon forgot his irritation over this unwarranted intrusion in an unlighted spot, the land baron measurable crossed to the semi-darkness at the rear of the stage behind the boxed scene, where he had observed the young girl waiting for the curtain to rise on the last act. As she approached Mauville, who stood motionless in an unlighted spot, the pale glow played upon her a moment, white on her neck, in sheen on the folds of her gown, and then she stepped into the shadow, where she was met by a tall figure, with hand eagerly outstretched.

"Mr. Mauville!" she exclaimed, drawing back at the suddenness of the encounter. His restless eyes held hers, but his greeting was conventional. "Did I not say the world was small, and that we might meet again?" "Of course, we are always meeting people and parting from them," she replied unconcernedly.

"With what delightful indifference you say that! You did not think to see me again?" "I hadn't thought about it," she answered frankly, annoyed by his persistence. "I am unfortunate," he said. "Beneath his free gaze she changed countenance, the shadow of a rose had touched her face. "You are well?" he continued. "Yes."

"I need not have asked." His expression conveyed more, so much more she bit her lip impatiently. "How do you like the new part?" "It is hard to tell yet," she answered bravely. "You would do justice to any role, but I prefer you in a historical or romantic play, with the picturesque old costumes. I fear, however, I am detaining you."

"You are piqued," he said, watching her skeptically. "Not at all," quickly, startled by his blunt accusation. "Not a little jealous?" he persisted. "Jealous?" Then, with a frown, hesitatingly: "Well, she is given prominence in the plays and—"

"You would not be subordinated if she were not in the company? Apart from this, you are fond of her?" The foot ceased its tracing and rested firmly on the floor. "I hate her!" snapped Susan, angered by this baiting. No sooner had she spoken than she regretted her outburst. "How you draw one out! I was only joking, though she does have the best parts and we take what we can get."

"But she's a lovely girl!" concluded the land baron. Susan's eyes flashed angrily. "How clever of you! You twist and turn one's words about and give them a different meaning from what was intended. If I wanted to catch you up—"

"A truce!" she exclaimed. "Let us take each other seriously hereafter. Is it agreed?" She nodded. "Well, seriously, you can help me and help yourself."

"How?" doubtfully. "Why? He allies?" "Mutual service." "Oh!" dubiously. "A woman's best?" "No," with affirmative answer in her eyes. He believed the latter. "We will seal the compact then." "And he bent over and kissed Miss Susan on the lips. She became as rosy as the flowers she carried and tossed him playfully with them. "For shame! La! What must you think of me?"

"That you are an angel." "How lovely! But I must go." "May I see you after the play?" "Yes." "Do not fall me or the soldier will transfer his affections to you!" "If he dared!" And she shook her head defiantly as she slipped away. "Little fool!" murmured Mauville, his lips curling scornfully. "The one is a pasture; the other—he paused and caught his breath—"a passion!"

But he kept his appointment with Susan, escorting her to the hotel, where he bade her good night with a lingering pressure of the hand and ordered his equipage to the door. "Hail'd you better wait until morning?" asked the surprised landlord when the young patron announced his intention of taking an immediate departure. "There are the barn burners, and traveling at night?"

"Have they turned footpads?" he was the light reply. "Can't I drive through my own lands? Let me see one of their thieving faces!" And he made a significant gesture. "Not ride at night! These Jacobins shall not prevent me." Barring the possible danger from the horseholders, who were undoubtedly ripe for any mischief, the journey did not promise such discomfort as might have been expected, the coach being especially constructed for night traveling. On such occasions there is a large cushion adapted to the purpose, which in this way converted the interior of the vehicle into a sleeping room of limited dimensions. With pillows to neutralize the jarring, the land baron stretched himself indolently upon his couch and gazed through the window at the crystalline lights of the heavens, while thoughts of leaseholders and barn burners faded into this air.

As dawn when he opened his eyes the morning star yet gleamed with a last pale luster. At the manor, which the patron shortly reached, the ever wakeful Oly-kocks was already engaged in chopping wood near the kitchen door. The growling of the hound at his feet called the caretaker's attention to the master's coming, and driving the auto-oligarch into a steering room of bickery, he donned his coat, drawing near the vehicle, where he stood in stupid wonderment as the land baron alighted.

"Any callers, Oly-kocks?" carelessly asked the master. "A committee of barn burners, my noble, to ask you not to serve any more writs." "And so give them time to fight me with the lawmakers! But, there, carry my portmanteau into the library and—as Oloff's upper lip drew back—"teach your dog to know me."

"And, unpacking the valise, Mauville took therefrom a handsome French writing case." "Thou wily limb of the law," retorted the patron, "be it known by these presents thou art summoned to appear before me! I have work for you—not to serve any one with a writ, assign, bring an action or any of your rascally, pettifogging tricks! Send me no de-murrer, but your own intemperate self."

Remain-ing in the background, the land baron watched the young girl approach the entrance to the stage. "How do you do, Mr. Mauville?" said a gay but hushed voice, interrupting his ruminations, and Susan, in a short skirt and bright stockings, greeted him. "The better for seeing you, Mistress Susan!" "Pooh!" courtesying disdainfully. "Don't believe you! You came to see some one else. Well—lightly—she is already engrossed."

"Really!" said the land baron. "Yes. You understand? He follows her with his every glance," she added roughly. Susan was never averse to straining the truth a little when it served her purpose. "I should prefer to be following her with more than his eyes," retorted the master of the manor dryly. Susan tapped the stage viciously with a little foot. "She's a lovely girl," she continued, drawing cabalistic figures with the prooking slipper.

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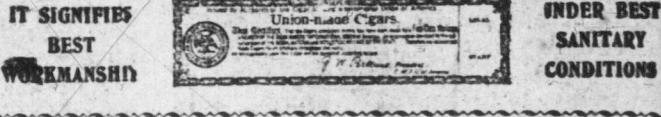
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