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REPENTANCE.

He kissed me, and I know 'twas wrong,
For he was neither kith nor kin;
Need one do penance very long
For such a tiny little sin?

He pressed my hand; that wasn't right;
Why will men have such wicked ways?
It wasn't for a minute—quite—
But in it there were days and days.

There's mischief in the moon, I know;
I'm positive I saw her wink
When I requested him to go;
I meant it, too—I almost think.

But after all, I'm not to blame;
He took the kiss, I do think men
Are quite without a sense of shame.
I wonder when he'll come again!

DESMORO; OR, THE RED HAND.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "TWENTY STRAWS," "VOICES FROM THE LUMBER-ROOM," "THE HUMMING-BIRD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XI.

The playbills on the walls of Braymount announced that Manager Jellico had engaged the celebrated tragedian, Mr. Mackmillerman, who would appear at the Theatre Royal, Braymount, in the course of the ensuing week.

This piece of important intelligence put all the playgoers of the town in a state of great excitement, and people were rushing to secure places and tickets for those evenings when the great "star" was to shine forth and quench every other light with its splendid and dazzling rays.

The first night's performance was to be *Hamlet*, which tragedy was already in rehearsal. Mrs. Polderbrant was to enact the Queen, Desmoro Laertes, and Shavings, at the particular request of the manager himself, had undertaken the part of *Osric*.

Every member of the company was nervous and unhappy, dreading the coming of the eminent actor, who was one who regarded all his professional brothers and sisters—no matter how talented such might chance to be—as mere puppets, which were to move and to talk only according to his expressed directions.

Mr. Mackmillerman was a selfish, tyrannical man, who was heartily detested by almost every actor and actress that came in contact with him. Mrs. Polderbrant knew him of old, and entertained for him a most bitter and implacable hatred—a hatred which she took no pains to conceal, whenever business brought her near him.

This feeling on her part was fully reciprocated by the gentleman himself, who would fume and growl exceedingly at the bare mention of her name.

Mr. Mackmillerman, who with his valet and his baggage had just arrived at Braymount in his own private carriage, was lodged at the Bell Hotel, in an apartment of which he was now sitting with Manager Jellico.

The pair were examining a damp playbill just issued from the printing office of the town.

Mr. Mackmillerman was reading over the cast of the various characters.

Suddenly there was a loud growl from the eminent tragedian, who had flung his head back and plunged his fingers distractedly into his hair.

"Zounds! she here!" he exclaimed, "I was in hopes that she had been consigned to the tomb of the Capulets long ago."

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked Jellico.

"Of Mrs. Polderbrant, of that firebrand in petticoats" returned the tragedian vehemently.

Jellico's face dropped for an instant.

"She is a very clever woman in her own particular line," he observed.

"And what may that line be, Mr. Jellico," drily asked the other.

"She is our heavy lady, you know, Mr. Mackmillerman."

"She's a cat, sir—a cat, and nothing else," was the ireful reply.

The manager shrugged his shoulders, not presuming to differ from the opinion expressed by the great theatrical star.

"Had I known that that woman occupied a prominent position in your theatre, that I should be compelled to touch her hand, I tell you plainly, Mr. Jellico, I should not have condescended to perform in the Theatre Royal, Braymount."

"I am very sorry, really," was the regretful answer.

"Mrs. Polderbrant is a somewhat eccentric woman, I will allow; but notwithstanding that fact, she has, as I said, before, considerable talent."

"Talent! In what, I should like to be informed?"

"I am exceedingly distressed that the lady is obnoxious to you, Mr. Mackmillerman."



"Obnoxious!" echoed the star. "My dear sir, she is a dose of ipecacuanha to me."

"I wish I could alter matters for your convenience and pleasure," was the other's rejoinder.

At rehearsal on the following day, on the evening of which the tragedian was to appear, that startling luminary sent his valet (who was a black man) to rehearse the part of *Hamlet* in his stead.

At the appearance of Mr. Mackmillerman's sable retainer, the whole company refused to proceed with the business of rehearsal. They would none of them have anything to do with the negro, whom Mr. Mackmillerman had lately brought over with him from America.

The man was more than commonly intelligent, else he would never have been able to acquire the words of Shakspeare's characters, and learn to understand the stage business belonging to the different parts.

Of course Jellico felt the affront that had been put upon the members of his company, but interest compelled him to make the best of the matter.

Mrs. Polderbrant, who was perfectly furious, inwardly determined to avenge this insult.

"Wait until to-night!" said she, in significant tones; "I'll warrant that I'll make him remember his engagement at Braymount! I've owed him some grudges for a long while, and now I'll repay him in full!"

Saying which, the "heavy lady" stalked off the stage, the whole of the other actors and actresses following her example, and was no more seen there until night.

Mr. Mackmillerman was highly indignant when his servant repeated to him the manner in which he had been treated by Mrs. Polderbrant and others.

"The idiots!" stormed the tragedian. "But I'll make them suffer for it, never fear!"

Alas! the gentleman little dreamed of what was in store for his own magnificent self.

At length the eventful evening arrived. Mrs. Polderbrant looked majestic, and malicious as well, as if some mighty wickedness was brooding in her breast.

The house was crowded to overflowing.

The overture, as performed by the violin, trumpet, and drum, had been played; the curtain was up; and the tragedy begun.

Scene the second now introduces the *King*, and *Queen*, and *Hamlet*.

The entrance of the latter was the signal for a perfect burst of enthusiastic applause, in acknowledgment of which the star, touching his heart, bowed profoundly.

Mrs. Polderbrant's eyes seemed to dart sparks of living fire.

She was thinking of the black man with whom she had been required to rehearse the grand words of William Shakspeare.

This scene finished, the heavy lady darted into the flies, exactly over the stage, and over the heads of the performers, where the sky borders, and the roller-scenes are worked.

Here, taking a certain position, she waited for some length of time. She had evidently some task in hand, a task widely different from her usual employment.

She looked down on the heads of those below, and listened to the following dialogue—

Hamlet. It waxes me still.

Go on. I follow thee.

Marcellus. You shall not go, my lord.

Hamlet. Hold off your hands.

(Mrs. Polderbrant, above, was mysteriously busy at this moment.)

Horatio. Be ruled, you shall not go.

Hamlet. My fate cries out,
And makes each petty artery in this body
As hard as the Nemean lion's nerve.

Still I am called; unhand me, gentlemen:
(*Ghost beckons him.*)
By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!

I say away—Go on, I'll follow thee!

Just as the tragedian had uttered these words, a large dead cat, white as the Ghost himself, attached to a string, descended from the flies, and hung before him.

Amazed and horrified, the actor started back, unable to credit his eyes, while the audience first tittered, then laughed, and screamed, and the whole theatre was in a state of absolute confusion and uproar.

For a few moments the great star stood transfixed with amazement, the body of the white cat dangling before him, the shrieks of laughter in his ears.

The actors and the audience were all convulsed, while Mr. Mackmillerman, who was absolutely furious, recovering himself a little, rushed off the stage, crying out, "Drop the curtain, instantly! Drop the curtain! I will not act another scene to-night! Drop the curtain! Mr. Jellico," he continued, rushing to the manager, who was standing at the wing, looking like one quite thunderstruck.

"Mr. Jellico, what is the meaning of this unparalleled insult? what is the meaning of your dead cat? and who am I to thank for its appearance there?"

"Heaven only knows, Mr. Mackmillerman," returned the manager, doing his best to restrain his own laughter, which was struggling to burst forth at the sight of the defunct animal swinging to and fro at the end of a piece of string.

"You do not know, eh? Very well, Mr. Jellico! You'll drop the curtain, if you please!"

"Drop the curtain, Mr. Mackmillerman! It will be the ruin of us to do so."

"I am, attend me to my dressing-room," spoke the tragedian, disregarding the other's words, and addressing his valet, who was standing close at hand.

"But, Mr. Mackmillerman—" added the distressed manager.

"I'll hear no more!" returned he, stalking off in the direction of his dressing-room, Jellico following him.

"I'll give twenty pounds to any one who will discover the perpetrator of this vile and dastardly trick!" said the star, suddenly turning round to the manager, and foaming at the mouth with rage.

"Nay, I will give fifty! Where is that witch, Mrs. Polderbrant," he abruptly continued, "I'll warrant that she is at the bottom of all this! Bring her before me!"

"Mrs. Polderbrant?" repeated the astonished and now doubly bewildered manager.

"Really, Mr. Mackmillerman, I could not so insult the lady. Continue the performance, I entreat, sir, and in the meantime, I will endeavour to investigate the affair, and do my utmost to find out the offender."

"Whom you will discharge on the spot?" interrupted the star.

"I'll warrant that you will discharge her instantaneously."

"She! We are not certain of the sex of the transgressor."

"I am."

"Well, Mr. Mackmillerman, will you resume your part, and suffer the play to proceed?"

The tragedian fumed, stamped his feet, and then commenced striding up and down from wing to wing, his fingers thrust into his hair, his eyes rolling terrifically.

By-and-by he paused.

"Let the play go on," he commanded.

At this Jellico rushed away, and quiet being once more restored both before and behind the curtain, the play was resumed at that part of it where it had lately been so strangely interrupted.

The whole company knew who the delinquent was; but, notwithstanding Mr. Mackmillerman's proffered reward, not a person belonging to that company would betray her.

As for Jellico himself, he had not the remotest suspicion of the offender, and he did not take much trouble to find her out. Mr. Mackmillerman had offered a gross insult to the actors and actresses in Jellico's establishment, and those actors and actresses had fully avenged themselves on him.

During the remainder of the evening Mrs. Polderbrant conducted herself in her old manner; and although the star every now and then fixed his eyes upon her in withering glances, he failed to cause her the slightest concern in any way. She was just as self-collected and dignified as ever—nay, perhaps a little more.

Now Shavings was far from feeling perfect in his part, and fearfully nervous into the bargain, wishing with all his heart that he could run away from the task, and bury himself for a few hours.

He was dreading the moment when he should have to stand before the tragic hero; and his knees were knocking against each other, his bosom was loudly palpitating, his throat and mouth parched and hot, and his wits all astray. He was enduring stage-fright and all its host of terrors.

Ready dressed for his part, he was sitting behind the scenes, by the side of Comfort, who had been hearing him rehearse the words of his part for the seventh or eighth time.

The poor little man looked shriveled up, and wholly unlike his wonted, humorous self—and his teeth were actually chattering together from excess of agitation.

"It's truly awful, Comfort! I wish I could overcome it," said Shavings, alluding to his present state of alarm.

"I'm bothered with the g's and the h's, you see, until I can think of nothing else but them and Mr. Mackmillerman! Oh, that there had never been a Shakspeare or a Mr. Mackmillerman! I desay I'm wicked in uttering such a wish, but I can't help it, my dear—I really can't."

"The young girl wound her arm about the speaker's neck, and laid her smooth cheek against his."

"If I'd a thousand pounds, Comfort, I'd give every penny of it to escape standing before that man! I am ill, my child, feeling sick as death at the bare thought of him!"

Comfort felt him tremble all over as he spoke.

"What could she do in order to spare her father from the ordeal he was so dreading?"

"I wish you had not undertaken the part, dear dad," she said.

"So also wish I, my dear; but Jellico was distressed for people, and I was willing to oblige him."

And as he spoke the clown's head drooped on his breast.

"Dad," said Comfort, rousing him, "you'll never get through your part if you thus give way."

"Never mind—never mind, my dear, twelve o'clock must come, you know—that's one of my favourite mottoes, you remember; yes, twelve o'clock must come to all of us!"

And with these words, Shavings literally swooned away in his daughter's arms.

At this instant the act drop fell, and the fiddle, the trumpet and drum, all three burst out as loudly and as musically as they could.

The young girl, who did not want to expose the weak terrors of her beloved father, sat perfectly still and quiet, holding him clasped to her breast, which was throbbing fast and painfully, not knowing what to do.

Presently, Desmoro issued from a doorway close at hand, and spoke to Comfort.

"What are you sitting in that dark corner for?" he asked, as he drew near her. "Is not your father well?" he added, perceiving the clown's drooping form.

"Hush, Desmoro!" returned she, in a low voice. "Is any one in your room?" she inquired eagerly.

"No!" replied he, amazed at her strange question. "What's the matter?"

"He has fainted, I think! Take him in your arms, and carry him in there at once! Do, do, Desmoro, I implore!"

Without uttering another syllable, Desmoro stooped, lifted up the insensible figure, and bore it into his own apartment, whither Comfort followed.

No one had witnessed this little scene, which occurred behind the shade of several flats and wings, and Comfort felt secure.

"They'd all laugh at and ridicule him so," she observed, clasping her father's hands. "He who has been on the stage all these many years, to be in this state of affliction!"

"He's as cold as stone, Comfort!" said Desmoro, quakingly. "Shall we tell Mr. Jellico of this, and send for a doctor?"

"No, no!" was the quick reply.

"What shall we do then, Comfort? Who's to play his part, supposing he should not be able to?"

"Who's to play his part, Desmoro? Why, I will!"

"You, Comfort!" he repeated, in amazement.

"I!" she answered, courageously.

"Nonsense—nonsense, Comfort!"

"I know every syllable of the part, and I know also how it should be acted."

"Still it is sheer nonsense for you to think of attempting the part; Mr. Jellico would not suffer you to do so!"

"Mr. Jellico shall know nothing at all about the matter until it is too late to alter it! Sprinkle his face with a little water, and loosen his shirt collar," she continued, assisting Desmoro in endeavouring to recall the clown's fainted senses.

"Is there another suit of clothes in the wardrobe like unto these my father is wearing?" she inquired in quick and resolute accents.

"Comfort, you mustn't think of doing such a thing! Let me dissuade you from this idea."

"No, no; it will be for my poor dad that I shall do it, Desmoro, remember that! What would you not do for a parent, had you one to serve—one like mine, so kind and loving? Don't fear my ability to get through the performance of my self-allotted task; you'll see I shall quite astonish you!"

Desmoro looked at the young girl in perfect wonder, and she went on.

"We shall have to deceive him in some way," said she, fanning Shavings' face. "See, he is recovering! Leave everything to my management," she added, in a lower voice.

"Are you better, dad?" asked she, as the clown opened wide his eyes, and wildly stared about.

No answer.

"Give him a glass of water, Desmoro; then get him to lie down for a while."

The young man did her bidding, and there lay poor Shavings more dead than alive, with his eyes closed, not heeding the presence of any one, but muttering to himself all the while.

Comfort now became alarmed at her father's state, and she was beginning to fear that a doctor would really be required.

Without a word, she dashed out of the room, and sought the worthy manager, to whom she at once communicated the fact of her parent's sudden illness and her own willingness to undertake the character he was to have sustained.

"I have all the words, sir," she pursued, in courageous accents, "and I am taller than dad."

"But Mr. Mackmillerman will be furious at having a female *Osric*," objected the perplexed manager. "Matters have already gone cross enough with him to-night; this fresh trouble will be a terrible annoyance to him. I'm afraid that he will throw up his engagement, and should he do so he will leave me in a painful position with the Braymount people, with whom he is a vast favourite. I really know not what to do! I wish from my heart's depths there had never been a Mr. Mackmillerman or a William Shakspeare. Go and get on the clothes, and let us make the best we can of the affair."

The young girl did not await a second bidding, she was gone to attire herself in male habiliments as one of the Court of Denmark, while Jellico repaired to Desmoro's room to inquire after the poor clown's condition.

Osric, although a character of no particular importance, is not one fit for a female to re-