

ON THE TRAPEZE.

We have been partners, Jim and I, for just upon ten years in the flying trapeze line of business. We were called the Brothers Darcalls, and without boasting ("grazing" is all it in the profession) we deserved the name, for there was no feat, however difficult or risky, but what we would undertake, and excel in.

We were devoted to our work and to each other. Jim was twenty-seven and I was twenty-nine; we had started before either of us was twenty. We were both single, and had nothing to worry about, so were as happy as it is possible for two young fellows to be.

To all appearance she was a veritable Arcadian, so guileless did she seem. She was sweetly pretty, had a charming little figure, and a sweet voice; but was as delicate as a feather. I fell a victim to her wiles first, and if ever a man was an abject slave to a woman, I was. I had never with my pen, perhaps I might express myself more poetically, but in plain prose I was "fool all too!"

I've heard of serpents fascinating their victims with a glance. I never saw a human serpent, that reptile was Flora Denbigh. It ever there was a poor creature absolutely enchanted, that victim claims to be the writer of this narrative. I had never been in love before, so was as clay in the hands of the potter. It came about in this way:

One evening, after the performance, a telegram was handed to Jim—I noticed he looked agitated, and asked the reason. "My mother!" he faltered. "She is dangerously ill, Jack—she is asking for me—I must go to her."

"Why of course you must," said I. "But how about the engagement? Old Morrizz won't let us break it without paying forfeit, and that'll be hard on you, Jack."

"Not so hard as you being prevented from seeing your mother," I rejoined. "It won't run us, Jim; besides, perhaps he'll let me do a single turn till you get back."

"No, no, Jack," he exclaimed, "you've not been used to it of late; you've got too heavy for leaps—why, you've only been bearer the last two years, and I'm sure no man on earth would have resisted the temptation, and Jim didn't. He carried her again. I could stand it no more, and rushed frantically away, reaching the circus in a state of agitation that was noticed by everyone."

"For 'cavin' saks, Jack, what's the matter?" asked old Morrizz. "Ave you bin a-drinkin'?"

"No," I almost shouted. "I'm as sober as a judge. Leave me alone."

He shrunk away with a positive look of fear on his greasy, Jewish features. Having dressed myself, I saw to the fixing of our apparatus, taking more than usual care in good order; way, I knew not, but I shall be thankful for that extra bit of precaution to my dying day. At the very last moment Jim arrived, and had just time to get his war-paint on—that is, his theatrical face—when the bell rang for our appearance. As we prepared to go on he looked at me earnestly and whispered, "What's wrong, Jack?"

"I know all," I hissed. "Let us get through this night's business, and then part before worse comes of it."

He flushed crimson through his "make up," but said nothing, and we went on together as usual, meeting with a splendid reception. That evening Jim fairly surpassed himself in skill, grace, and daring; I could perceive among the sea of faces below that of Flora Denbigh, with her eyes fixed admiringly upon him. I don't know, I felt sick and giddy, half mad with jealousy, and a desire for revenge.

We had now reached one of our final acts. I was hanging from the bar by my feet, Jim was at the other trapeze preparing for a living leap to my somersaults into the net beneath us. He gave the signal, and the next instant was shooting towards me like an arrow. We gripped, and took the usual swing to and fro; as I prepared to let go I felt his grasp on my wrist tight spasmodically.

I knew something was wrong. I looked down: his eyes met mine without a sign of intelligence; they were rolling horribly, and bloodshot—his features were purple, and looked swollen, while his form was stiffened like that of a corpse. Then the awful truth came to me with a shock; he was in a fit of some kind. It was so startling that I nearly let go my hold; he started to and from more slowly, and stopped dead; the perspiration rolled like rain from my own to his upturned face: the tension on my muscles was becoming unbearable. I tried to call for help, but no sound escaped my parched throat. I looked at the onlookers, professionals and all, thought we were about to perform some new and startling feat.

If I was mad before with jealousy, I was crazy now with horror. What could I do? If I dropped him he would fall an inert mass into the net, and either break his neck or burst through it, and bleed; if not killed outright, at least crippled for life. His head now fell back and his hold relaxed. What could I do? To support him much longer was impossible. At that supreme moment there came to me a temptation so revolting that I shudder now to think of it.

His rival was in my power; all I had to do was let him fall, and all would be over. No one could blame me, and no person but Flora could possibly suspect anything. I instinctively looked at her; it was evident that she could see we were in a trouble; her eyes were full of a horror too terrible for me to attempt to describe. The temptation grew stronger. Some demon seemed to whisper: "Let go, fool. Now is your chance. Let go. You can soon get another partner."

That word restored all my manhood like an electric shock; the reaction was almost unbearable, but I withstood it. With a silent prayer I braced myself up for the last effort to save or die with him. It was now that the result of having recently worked the aerial act singly came to my aid. It had me as supple and strong as a tiger.

Exerting all my powers in a final act

"Others," I interposed. "Oh, yes, I know you have dozens of admirers as well as me, and one of the principal of them is—"

"Jim?" she suggested, promptly. "You may as well say it as think it. Of course, he likes me, and I like him. But," she added coaxingly, "I like you, too, Jack. Still you must wait—"

"And suppose you had never seen Jim?" I suggested.

"Oh, goodness knows!" she tittered. "Perhaps I should have accepted you by this time. But there goes eight o'clock; you'll be late for your turn as you call it, if you don't hurry."

I turned and walked slowly away, having plenty of time before me, and no inclination for work. The way to the circus, which was a canvas one, in an open space on the outskirts of the town, was through a shady lane. As I rambled moodily along I noticed, as I neared a bend, a man who drew behind a clump of bushes as Jim!

One glance was sufficient to tell me that he was there in a flash. Restraining my passion with grim determination, I passed on, then crept through a gap in the hedge, stealthily returned to the spot to listen, like the coward I was, to the forthcoming interview. In a few minutes she came, and in her arms while she showered kisses upon her upturned face. The sight maddened me, and only by tremendous efforts did I restrain myself from rushing upon them. At last she said, as she released herself:—

"Then, that'll do, Jim. I want to tell you something." Then, in her pretty, artless fashion, she related our last conversation. Jim listened patiently to the end, and then said, very gravely:—

"Poor old Jack; I'm truly sorry to hear this. I wish I'd known it before."

"That wouldn't have prevented you falling in love with me, though, Jim, she reasoned.

"No," he retorted, still more gravely. "Perhaps not, but it would have prevented you confessing it. Good heavens! what will Jack think of the friend and partner who steals his sweetheart from him?"

"Don't be a gaby," she cried; "You haven't stolen his sweetheart. I never was his sweetheart. I like old Jack very much, no one could help doing that, but I don't love him, Jim, like I do—well, someone who is not a hundred miles away."

It was dusk, and I could well imagine how she looked at me as she said this. I'm sure no man on earth would have resisted the temptation, and Jim didn't. He carried her again. I could stand it no more, and rushed frantically away, reaching the circus in a state of agitation that was noticed by everyone."

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human effort, I drew Jim up until I clasped him round the waist, and my left arm, then raised myself to the bar, and grasped it with my disengaged hand, got astride, and dragged Jim up beside me. When it is borne in mind that I had been all this time suspended by my feet, the extraordinary exertion required to perform this act may be imagined. It is certain some but a trained athlete could have done it. And exactly how I did it myself I never could tell, but by Heaven's help I did do it, and we were comparatively safe.

By this time the audience had become dangerous and were awe-struck, and a stupendous silence reigned in the vast tent. After a brief rest I regained my power of speech, and called out, hoarsely: "The rope! The rope!" This aroused the professionals from their stupor, and the climbing rope by which we ascended and descended to and fro from the razzie was brought within my clutch. More dead than alive, I slid down with Jim still in my arm.

I was told afterwards that I cried like a child when I recovered from the swoon into which I had fallen, and learned that my partner had, by the aid of a doctor who happened to be present, also regained his senses. I put my feet on the ground, and my acknowledgments to the deafening applause with which I was greeted.

It was a terrible experience, and I have never been on a trapeze since—neither has Jim. We set up in business, and doing fairly well, and in a few months had a number of well-to-do and rich friends than ever.

What became of Flora Denbigh? Oh, she flitted up both and married a rich, retired, old tradesman. She buried him recently, and is quite ready to lead another victim to the altar—but it won't be me or Jim.

CECCA'S CHOICE.

"Si, Signore, she's a handsome woman, and she doesn't forget me, though I'm only a waiter. Ever since you and Morrizz left London, which you told me in a smile as you say, like spring, she was always fresh and beautiful."

Think you see her in London? Si, si, so you would. She lives in England. She's a very great lady, and she's painted her face so often, they say, in all sorts of characters. Very distinguished, very rich, in the best society—Princes and Marquises, they tell me—so no doubt the signore will have met her in some palazzo."

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any English gentleman who drops in for a sorbetta or a limonata; but up there in San Procolo we thought him at least the Prince Inheritor of England. The girls were mostly shy, but Cecca—she was always a woman of the world in the grain. So, when the rest held back, she went boldly forward and asked the gentleman if he wanted anything.

Well, the Englishman, of course, had very little Italian. In those days we thought it odd, and smiled at his broken words, never having met any one who could not speak Tuscan. But, to our surprise, Cecca seemed to understand either that he was a great Prince or that he was unable to express himself in Tuscan better, and erred through inadvertence, to perform a brief rest I regained my power of speech, and called out, hoarsely: "The rope! The rope!" This aroused the professionals from their stupor, and the climbing rope by which we ascended and descended to and fro from the razzie was brought within my clutch. More dead than alive, I slid down with Jim still in my arm.

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