

Coggins's Property

by

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'When I was in "Her Grace the Blanchisseuse", I had just gone on the stage and played a lot of little parts of a line or two. Sometimes I was a body without a voice, and sometimes a voice without a body!'

'Vox et praeterea nihil,' murmured another Young Man, who had been to a public school.

'Amongst the voice parts was one which was supposed to come from a queen who was in bed in a room off the salon which was represented in the scene. The edge of the bed was dimly seen, and I had to put out a hand with a letter and speak two lines. My attendant took the letter, the door was shut - and that was all. Of course, I had not to dress for the part, except that I put on a little silk and lace jacket, and one sleeve as of a nightdress, so I used to come on from

the side just before my cue and slip into, or, rather, on to the bed. Then a property man came with a quilt embroidered with the Imperial Arms, which he threw over me, tucking in the edge nearest the audience. The man originally appointed to this work was Coggins, and as he had a great deal of work to do - for it was a "property" play - he only got to me in time to do his work and clear out before the door opened and my attendant came in. Coggins was an excellent fellow, grave, civil, punctual, sober, and as steady and stolid as a rock. The scene was a silent one, and what appeared to be my room was almost in the dark. The effect to the audience was to see through the lighted salon this dim sleeping chamber; to see a white hand with a letter emerge from the bed curtains, and to hear a drowsy voice as of one newly roused from sleep. There was no opportunity of speaking a word, and no need for it. Coggins knew his work thoroughly, and the stage manager and his assistants insisted on the most rigorous silence. After a few nights, when I found Coggins so attentive in his work, I said "goodnight" when I passed him at the stage-door, and gave him a shilling. He seemed somewhat surprised, but doffed his cap with the utmost respect. Henceforward we always saluted each other, each in our own way; and he had an occasional shilling, which he always received with a measure of surprise. In other portions of his nightly work and mine I often came in contact with, or rather in juxtaposition to, Coggins; but he never seemed to show the same delicate nicety which he exhibited towards me in his manipulations of my tucking-up in "Her Grace the Blanchisseuse". The piece, as you know, had a long run in London, and then the original Company went round the "Greats" for a whole season. Of course, the Manager took with him all the people who worked in London who were necessary, and amongst them came the excellent and stolid Coggins.

'After months of work done under all possible conditions, we all came to know our cues so well that we were able to cut the time pretty fine; we often turned up at our places only at the moment of our cues. My own part was essentially favourable for this, and I am afraid I began to cut it a little too fine; for I got to arriving at my place just a second or two before Coggins made his appearance with the Imperial quilt.

'At last one night, in the Grand at Leeds - you know what a huge theatre it is, and how puzzling to get on the right floor - I went just across the line of safety. I was chatting in the dressing-room with Birdie Squeers, when the call-boy came tearing along the passage shouting: "Miss Venables, Miss Venables. You're late! Hurry up, or there will be a stage wait!" I jumped for the door and tore along the passage, and got to the back of the stage just in time to meet the stolid Coggins with his stolidity for once destroyed. He

had the Imperial quilt as usual folded over one arm, but he was gesticulating wildly with the other. "Ere!" he called in a fierce whisper to a group of the other workmen. "Who the 'ell has took my Property?"

"Yer property!" said one of the others. "Garn! ye juggins. Hain't ye got it on yer arm?"

"This! This is all right," he answered. "That ain't what I mean. Wot I want is wot I covers up with this."

"Well, and ain't the bed there? You keep your hair on, and don't be makin' a hass of yerself." I heard no more, for I slipped by and got on to the bed from the back. Coggins had evidently made up his mind that his particular work should not be neglected. He was not responsible for the figure in the bed, but only for putting on the quilt; and on the quilt should go. His look of blank amazement when he found that the quilt did not lie flat as on his first effort amused me. I heard him murmur to himself:

"A trick, is it? Puttin' the Property back like that. I'll talk to them when the Act's over." Coggins was a sturdy fellow, and I had heard him spoken of as a bruiser, so I thought I would see for myself the result of his chagrin. I suppose it was a little cruel of me, but I felt a certain sort of chagrin myself. I was a newcomer to the stage, and I had hitherto felt a sort of interest in Coggins. His tender, nightly devotion to his work, of which I was at least the central figure, had to me its own romantic side. He was of the masses, and I had come of the classes, but he was a man and I a woman, and a man's devotion is always sweet - to a woman. I had often taken to heart Claude Melnotte's romantic assumption of Pauline's reply to his suit:

"That which the Queen of Navarre gave to the poor Troubadour:
"Show me the oracle that can tell nations I am beautiful."

'But it had begun to dawn upon me that my friend and humble admirer, Coggins, had no interest in me at all. My part in the play came to an end before the close of the scene, and so when the doors were closed I slipped from my place as usual; I did not, however, go to my dressing-room as was my habit, but waited to see what Coggins would do. In his usual course he came and removed his quilt; and again there was a look of annoyed amazement on his face when he found that it lay flat on the bed. Again he murmured:

"So they've took the Property away again, have they? We'll see about it presently." When he had removed the Imperial quilt two other men came, and as usual lifted away the bed, the Empress's bedroom being opened no more during the play. As there was no more to be done till the play was over, I went to the stage-door, ostensibly to ask if there were any letters for me, but in reality because the workmen usually assembled there when not wanted on the stage, and it was here that I expected the denouement. Several of the carpenters and property men were smoking outside the stage-door, and to them presently came Coggins, thoroughly militant in manner.

"Now, you chaps," he said, "there's somethin' I want to know; an' I mean to 'ave it, stryke 'ere! Which of you's 'avin' a lark with me?"

"Wot jer' mean?" said one of the others with equal truculence. He was a local man, and certainly looked like a fighter. "Wot are ye givin' us?"

'Coggins, recognising an antagonist worthy of consideration, replied as calmly as he could:

"Wot I want to know is 'oo's a plyin' tricks with my Property?"

"What property, Coggins?" asked one of his own pals.

"Yer know as well as I do; the one wot I covers up on the bed with that quilt." There was a roar of laughter from the men, and a hail of chaff began to rain on him.

"Oh! if that's your property, Coggins, I wonder what your missis will say when she hears it!"

"Why, that ain't no property; it's a gal."

"Well, boys, when the divorce is asked for we can prove that there weren't nothin' 'atween 'em. When old Jeune 'ears that he didn't know the differ between a property and a gal, he'll up and say, "Not guilty. The prisoner leaves the Court without the slightest stain on his character."

'Coggins grew very pale and perplexed-looking, and in a changed voice he asked:

"Boys, is this all a cod or what?"

"Not a bit of a cod," said one. "Do ye mean to say that you didn't know that what you tucked up every night was one of the young ladies?"

"No!" he answered hotly. "Ow could I know it? I never come on except just in time to put on the quilt and tuck it up. It was nearly dark, and it never said nothin'! An' 'ow the 'ell was I to know the bally thing was alive!" This was said with such an air of sincerity that it broke me all up, and I burst into laughter. Coggins turned angrily round, but, seeing me, took off his cap with his usual salute.

"That's yer Property, Coggins!" said one of the men; and Coggins was speechless.

'Of course, he was unmercifully chaffed, and so was I. Various members of the Company used to come up to me on all sorts of occasions, and, after gazing into my eyes and touching me, would say in a surprised way:

"Why, the bally thing's alive!"

'Coggins appeared to have a rough time of it with some of the others. For weeks he never had less than one black eye, and not only were most of our own men in a similar condition, but we left behind us wherever we went quite a crop of contusions. I knew it was no use my saying anything on my own account, for you might as well ask the wind to leave the thrashing-floor alone as for a parcel of friends to drop a good subject of chaff; but after a while I had to take pity on poor Coggins, for he sent in his resignation. I knew he had a wife and family, and that as his situation was a good one he would not leave it unless hard pressed. So I spoke to him about it. I think that his explanation had, if possible, more unconscious humour in it than his mistake. But there was pathos, too, and Coggins showed himself to be, according to his lights, a true gentleman.

"There's two things, Miss, that I can't get away from. My missis is a good ole sort, and takes care of the kids beautiful. But she believes that there ain't in the world only one Coggins - I'm him; and as I 'ave to be away so much on tour she gets to thinkin' that there's other wimmin as foolish as herself. That makes her a bit jealous; an' if she was to 'ear that I was every night a-tuckin' up a beautiful young lady - savin' your presence - in a bed, she would give me Johnny-up-the-orchard. An' besides, Miss - I hope you'll forgive me, but I want to do the right thing if I can - I've not give up carpenterin' and took to the styge without learnin' somethin' of the ways of the quality. I was in the Dook o' York's Theatre when

they had a ply what showed as how in high society if a man gets a girl into any trouble, no matter how innocent, but so as how she's chaffed by her pals, he's got to marry her to put it right. An', ye see, Miss, as how bein' married already I couldn't do the right thing ... so I've resigned, and must look for another shop."

"Ow would a dead byby suit you to hear on?' asked the Sewing Woman, with an interrogative glance round the company. 'I know of one that was simply 'arrowing.' The ensuing silence was expressive.

No one said a word; all looked at the fire meditatively. The Second Low Comedian sighed. In a half-reflective, half-apologetic way she went on, as if thinking aloud rather than speaking:

'Not that I know overmuch of bybies, anyhow, never havin' 'ad none of my own, though that's partly due that I was never married. Any'ow, I never 'ad the chances of some - married or onmarried.'

The Wardrobe Mistress, known in the Company as 'Ma,' here felt it incumbent on her, as the ostensible matron of the party, to say something on such a theme:

'Well, bybies is interesting things, alive or dead. But I don't know whether they're the cause of most noise alive or dyin' or dead. Seems to me that we've got to have it out either in screaming or sobbing or mourning, whatever you do. So, my dears, it's just as well to take things as they come, and make the best of them.'

'You may bet your immortal on that!' said the Second Low Comedian. 'Ma's head is level!' With the instinct of the profession, they all applauded the 'point,' and Ma beamed round her. Applause given to herself was a rare commodity with her.

'All right! then we'll drive on,' said the bustling MC. 'You choose your own topic, Mrs Wigglesworth - or, rather, Miss Wigglesworth, as I should say after your recent confession of spinsterhood.' The Sewing Woman coughed, cleared her throat, and made those other preparations usual to the inexperienced speaker. In the pause the Tragedian's deep voice resounded:

'Dead babies are always cheerful. I love them on the walls of the Academy. The Christy Minstrels' deepest bass as he trills his carol, "Cradle's Empty; Baby's Gone", fills me with delight. On such a night as this, surrounded as we are by the profound manifestations of Nature's feller forces, the theme is not uncongenial. Methinks

the very snow-wreaths with which the driving tempest smites the windows of our prison-house are the beatings of dead baby fingers as they clamour to lay ice-cold touches on our hearts.' The Company, especially the women, shuddered, and the comments were varied.

'Lor!!' said the Wardrobe Mistress.

'Bones!' - the slang name of the Tragedian - 'never beat that in his nach. He'll be wanting to have a play written round it,' said the Low Comedian. The Tragedian glared and breathed hard, but said nothing. He contented himself with swallowing at a gulp the remainder of his whiskey-punch.

'Refill the Death Goblet!' said the Second Low Comedian in a sepulchral voice. 'Here, Dandy' - this to the Leading Juvenile - 'pass the whiskey.'

The servile desire to please, habitual to her, animated the Sewing Woman to proceed on her task:

'Well, Mr Benville Nonplusser,' she began, 'and Lydies and Gentlemen, which I 'opes you'll not expect too much from me in the litory way. Now, if it was a-sewin' on of buttons - no matter wherever placed! An' many a queer tale I could tell you of them if I could remember 'em, and the lydies wouldn't object - though blushes is becomin' to 'em, the dears! Or if I could do summat with a needle and thread, even in a 'urry in the dark and the styge a-waitin' of -' She was interrupted by the Low Comedian, who said insinuatingly:

'Go on, my dear. This ain't the time nor place for one to object to anything. The ladies' blushes will do them good, and will make us all feel young again. Besides' - here he winked round at the Company - 'the humour, conscious or unconscious, off the various situations with which your episodal narrative must be tinged will give an added force to the gruesomeness which is attendant on the defunct homunculus.'

'You are too bad, Mr Parmentire,' whispered the Singing Chambermaid to him. 'If she makes us blush you will be responsible.'

'I accept the responsibility!' he answered gallantly to her, adding sotto voce to the Prompter: 'And I won't need any cut-throat insurance at Lloyd's to protect me against that hazard.' The Sewing Woman went on:

'Well, as to the dead byby, which it makes me cry only to think of it, and its poor young mother growin' colder and colder in spite of 'ot poultices -'

Her voice was beginning to assume that nasal tone which with a woman of her class is at once a prelude to and a cause of tears. So the Manager promptly interrupted:

'We're simply in raptures about that baby; but as an introduction to the story, couldn't you give us some personal reminiscence? The baby, you see, couldn't be your own, and therefore it can only be a matter of hearsay -'

'Lor' bless you're 'eart, sir, but I ain't 'ad anythink to reminisce.'

'Well, anything you've seen or heard in the theatre. Come now, you've been a long time in the business; did you never see anything heroic happen?'

'As 'ow, sir, 'eroes not bein' much in my way?'

'Well, for instance, have you never seen a situation saved by promptness, or resource, or daring, or by the endurance of pain -'

'Oh, yes, sir. I seen them things all in one, but it wasn't anythink to do with the dead byby.'

'Well, just tell us first how it was, and how resource and readiness and the endurance of pain saved the situation.'

As the Manager spoke he glanced around the Company with a meaning look; so she proceeded: