

# **Mick the Devil**

by

**Bram Stoker**

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'It was when I was with the Windsor Theatre Company in America in the 'eighties. I was then Second Lead. Things change, alas! Well, we had been North and East and West, and were entering on the last quarter of an eight months' tour when we got to New Orleans. There had been an unusually dry fall, and the rivers were down to the lowest known for years. The earth was all baked and cracked; the trees were burned up with drought, and the grass and undergrowth were as brown as December bracken. The Mississippi was so low that the levees were visible down below the piles, and the water that went swirling by looked as thick as pea-soup. We were playing a three weeks' engagement, before, during, and after Mardi Gras; and as we had been doing two months of one-night stands, we were all glad to have the spell of rest in one place. No one can imagine, till they try it, what a wearisome business it is changing camps every day or every few days. Sometimes you get so dazed with it all that when

you wake up in the morning you can't remember where you are - even though you had not been up with the boys the night before.

'Just before Mardi Gras the weather changed. There came for two days a close, damp heat, which was the most terrible thing I ever experienced. It was impossible to keep dry, and I was in nightly fear that the whole paint would wash away from everyone. It was just a miracle how moustaches stuck on; and as for the flush of youth and beauty on the girls' cheeks! - well, "there is a Providence that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will." Then the rain came down. Great Scott! what rain, both as regards quality and quantity! It seemed as if the sky was full of angels emptying buckets. The ground was so hard that at first the rain didn't sink into it, but ran off into the streams and the river. You know what a place New Orleans is! It has its head just above water, when the level is low; but when the Mississippi rises, the levees fill up and the river rushes on high over the city level. We didn't mind the rain, though it spoiled the show in the streets, for it cooled the air, and that was much.

I certainly never saw anything uglier than the streets of New Orleans. Theoretically, the place is delightful, and if I were only to give you bare facts I should mislead you altogether. What would you think, for instance, of streets by each side of which run streams of water whose gurgling is always in your ears as you walk? Sounds nice, don't it? But then the whole place is clay, and the water is muddy with it; the streams in the streets are full of dirty water, with refuse of all kinds tumbling lazily along. If you dig a foot deep in any street you find water; that is why the gas-pipes are in the air, and why the dead are buried above ground in stucco-covered vaults like bakers' ovens. Well, the rain kept on, and the Mississippi rose till it was up to the top of the levees, and we in New Orleans began to wonder when the city would be flooded out. One day, when I saw the base of the banks beginning to cave in, I felt glad that we were leaving the neighbourhood that night. We were bound for Memphis, and our train was scheduled to leave at one o'clock in the morning. Before turning in, I met the Sectional Engineer tramping up and down and chewing the end of his cigar in a frightful fashion, and we got into conversation. I saw he was anxious, and asked him the cause. He told me in confidence - "in my clothes," he called it - that there had been a "wash-out" in the Valley section of the line, on which it had been arranged that we should travel; and so we would have to go round another way. As I was going on the journey, I was naturally anxious, too, and began to pump him, pretending that I was not at all afraid. He tumbled to it, and explained the trouble to me:

"You see, I am afraid of Bayou Pierre. There's a spongy gap a couple of miles wide, with a trestle bridge across it over which you have to pass. At the best of times I am anxious about that trestle, for the ground is so bad that anything might happen at any time. But now, with a fortnight's rain and the Mississippi up the levees and the bottoms flooded all over the country, that blessed place will be like an estuary of the sea. The bridge isn't built for weather like this, and the flood is sure to be well over it. A train running on it will have to take chance whether it is there at all; and if any of it is gone - swept away or caved in - well, God help the train! That's all I can say, for everyone in it will die like a rat in a trap!"

'This was distinctly comforting to one of the travellers! I did not know exactly what to do or say, so I just managed to gasp out a question without giving myself away:

"How long will it take us to get to Bayou Pierre?"

"Well, say that you start about three o'clock, you will be there about noon or a little before it!" I said good-night and went into the train, determined to wake up pretty early and be ready to have some business in some local town about ten.

I didn't sleep very well, and the grey dawn was edging its way under the dark blind of my sleeping berth when I dropped off. I had plenty of disturbing dreams. The last I remember was that a great crocodile came out of a raging flood, snapped me up in its mouth, and began whirling me along at an inconceivably rapid rate. For a while I tried to make up my mind what I would do. There was no denying the pace at which we were going; I could distinctly hear the whirring of the wheels.

'Then, with a gasp, I remembered that crocodiles don't use wheels, and I jumped out of my berth faster even than I usually did when the nigger porter put his black hand over my face or pulled my toes. We seemed to be going at a terrific pace. The carriage rocked to and fro, and I had to hold on, or I should have been thrown about as in a cabin at sea in a storm. I looked out of the window and saw palm and cypress and great swathes of hanging Florida moss on the live-oaks as we whirled by. It was evident we were not going to stop soon. I looked at my watch; it was close to eleven o'clock. I ran back and hammered at the door of the drawing-room of the car where our manager made himself comfortable. He called out "Come in"; I evidently astonished him when I burst in in my pyjamas and a violent state of excitement.

"Well, Mr Gallimant, what is it?" he asked shortly, as he stood up. "Do you know," I said, "that we are going to cross a flooded creek on a trestle bridge under water, and that it may be washed away?"

"No," he said, quite coolly, "I don't! Who has been filling you up with fool-talk?"

"The engineer of the line told me last night," I answered, unthinkingly.

"Told you last night!" he said sarcastically. "Then why did you not let me know before? Oh, I see; you wanted to get off in time yourself and let the rest of us meet the danger. You needn't deny it; I see it in your face. Then let me tell you that if you had got off and stayed behind, you'd have found your berth full when you caught us up. See?" I saw pretty well that there was no sympathy to be had from him, so I ran through the train looking for the conductor, whom I found in the observation-room on the last car. Several of the Company, seeing my excitement, took it for granted that something was wrong, and followed me. When we burst in on the conductor, who was making an entry in his book, he looked up and said:

"Well, what's wrong with you all?"

"Here, you, stop the train!" I cried. "We want to get out before we're drowned!"

"Oh, indeed!" he said coolly. "And how do you know you're going to be drowned?"

"Because," I said, in a heat, "we are going to run over Bayou Pierre on the trestle bridge, and it's under water. Who knows that part of it mayn't be washed away or have collapsed?" He actually smiled at me.

"Now, do you know," he said, "that shows great knowledge, both topographical and problematical, on your part! And so you want to get out? Well, you can't. Tell you why? Mick Devlin was put on to drive this train because he's the daringest driver on the whole fit-out. 'Mick the Devil' they call him. And Mick is letting her go now for all she is worth. Listen to that; she's going seventy, clean. Mick knows his part of the job, and I guess you've all got to keep your hair on and sit tight while Mick has his hand on the throttle."

'Here's luck to Mick!' said the driver of the engine, in a hearty voice.

'Hush, h-s-s-h!' said the rest, for they were getting interested in the story. The Prompter went on:

"Why does he want to go so fast?" I said.

"Now you're beginning to talk!" he answered; "and as you know so much, I'll tell you more. Mick knows what he's about; what he doesn't know about engines and bridges and floods isn't much worth knowin'. See? We've got to go across Bayou Pierre to-day; and belike we'll be the last to cross it before the floods go down. You know some of the dangers, but you don't know as much as Mick. Someone has been fillin' you up with bogey talk, and you've taken it not only for Gospel, but for all the Gospel there is. The Sectional Engineer is a permanent-way man, and he looks on his work from the standpoint of statical force. But, you see, Mick's special province is dynamics. He knows all the dangers that there Engineer ladled into you; and he takes his chances on them blindfold, for he can do nothing. If there is a wash-out or a collapse anywhere, it's kingdom-come for us all, anyhow. But then there's other dangers that Mick knows, and I know; mayhap the Sectional Engineer knows them, too, though he didn't talk of them, for they don't belong to his trade."

"What are the other dangers?" I gasped out with what appearance of nonchalance I could muster, for the doorway was crowded with a lot of deadly-white faces. The conductor actually smiled as he replied:

"I guess I'd better explain" - here he actually laughed - "though I daresay some of ye think it's pretty tiresome listening to a dissertation on coming dangers whilst a mad Irishman is whirling you all to perdition. Well, be it so! Your own boss made a contract. The railway company agreed to it; and Mick and me undertook to carry it out. Our Yard-Master said we was to put you down in Nashville, flood or no flood; and so we shall, the will of God alone objectin'. An' what the will of God is we'll try to find out for sure. You see, this flood has been out nigh on a week. Floods in a big place like Bayou Pierre don't, as a rule, run strong enough to wash clean away like a sea or a big river does. But it can weaken. It eddies everlastingly round the bases of piles, and it softens the mortar between the bricks of the piers. There's a lot of them in this bridge we're coming to, for though you'll hardly believe it when you see it, it's only a flat

valley, except in floods, with streams running through it here and there. When pierwork or brickwork is demoralised and weakened that way, though it will stand all right till it gets a shock, it will suddenly go all to bits if it gets jarred. You know what that means. Each pier holds a piece of a bridge; and if it goes, down goes the whole thing. Now, have any of you ever thought of the weight, the deadweight, of a train? Such a one as ours will weigh, engine and tender and brake and goods and passengers and all, more than half a million pounds. Put that suddenly on the top of one of these tottering piles or weakened piers, and what'll happen? Why, the darned thing will slide, or warp, or twist, or crumble away, or grind together; and this, mind you, without a steady force of water to wash away every fragment of mortar as it is disturbed. So as we travel over them we're helping to make the wash-outs and collapses that the Sectional Engineer fears."

He paused, and through the beating of my own heart and the throbbing of the pulses in my own head I could hear a sort of sobbing groan from the womenkind - they were far too frightened to scream. Without was the whirring rush of the wheels and the panting of the engine taxed to its utmost with our terrific speed. The Conductor looked keenly into the faces of all before he went on:

"Now, Mick knows all about this, and he also knows the way to minimise the risk. Why, he's doin' it now; that is why he's goin' at our present pace! Mick's workin' this job bald-headed!"

"Why?" The question was gasped out by one of the ladies, her eyes as round as a bird's with fright. The Conductor nodded approval.

"Now, that's good! I like to see people that's reasonable and don't quite let their fears master them. Well, ma'am, I'll tell you why. A pier can't fall all in a second; it takes time to break up anything that it has taken time to put together, even if it has to be hoisted with dynamite. Now, our pressure is great, but it doesn't last long. The quicker we go, the shorter it lasts; so that when things are real bad - so near a collapse that it only wants a finishing touch - we can be up and over before the crash comes. I've seen Mick take a train through three feet of water in a flood on one of the Pan Handle branches, and felt the last car pull up the slope of the girders of a bridge as the pier collapsed behind us. Don't you be skeered, any of you! Mick's the right man in the right place; an' if you're goin' to get through to-day he's the man to take you. If not, we're well out of it compared with

him! Drownin' is an easy death, they say; but if the engine goes down head first, as she will if there be aught wrong, there's steam enough in the boilers and heat enough to cook him and his mate while they're drownin'!

"Well, s'long! I'm goin' up to the baggage-car in front to be near Mick. We've worked together too long to be parted at the last, if it should come. There she goes! we're into Bayou Pierre now, and so long as we're on the trestle, all any of you can do is to say your prayers and confess your sins. After that - well, I don't think I'd worry much about it as yet!"

He passed on his way, leaving behind him a sense of gallant manhood that made me ashamed of being afraid.

The speed had manifestly diminished, although we still went at a considerable rate; there was a queer sound, a sort of hissing scream as the water was churned by our rushing wheels.

I stepped out on the rear platform and looked around. In front of me, as I stood, the shore we had left receded farther and farther at every instant. The dwarf palms became a stunted mass, and the clumps of cypress and live-oak seemed to dwindle away into shrubs. Around us was a waste of water flowing swiftly under our feet; a great frothy yellow tide, with here and there floating masses of debris - logs, hay, dead cattle, and drift of every imaginable kind. On either side it was the same. Leaning out over the rail I could just see the far shore, a dim line on the horizon. We were driving through the flood at a great pace and our engine sent before us, as does the prow of a steamer, a wave whose flanks fell ever back on us as we swept along. Now and again we could feel a sort of shiver or a sudden shock, as though something had loosened or given way under us. But somehow we ran along all right; and as the shore we had passed grew dimmer, and as the far shore grew closer, our spirits rose and the fear fell away from us.

It was with glad hearts that we felt the solid ground under us and heard the old roar of the wheels again. The squealing of the brakes was like music as we drew up on the track a little later on.

The engine seemed to pant like an animal which has gone through hard stress; and her master, Mick the Devil, looking gay and easy and debonnair, raised his cap in answering salute as we all tumbled out and raised three cheers for him in true Anglo-Saxon fashion.'

'Now, Mr Hupple,' said the MC, 'as we learned from Gallimant that you were on the train crossing Bayou Pierre, and that you heard the confessions, perhaps you will tell us something of what happened?' There came a chorus of entreaty from all, amongst which the voices of the ladies were the most eager. Confessions - of other people - are always interesting. The Second Low Comedian had a hint of the duty before him, and seemed quite prepared. He began at once: