

A Corner in Dwarfs

by

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'I was Super-Master at the Lane Theatre when the "Stage Children's Act" was passed. I had to make it up a bit, for it was part iv me wurk t' engage the kids as well as the exthras, an' it was a rare job that year, I can tell ye. Ould Gustavus had quarrelled the year before with Madam Laffan, the dancin' misthress, iv Old Street, who used to take all the East-end childher, an' Mrs Purefoy had made her fortune and retired, so there was no one west with a stock of trained kids. The Act, you remimber, was pushed through be the faddists, an' became law before anyone could wink. Then the throuble began. The parents what usually kem beggin' an' prayin' to have their kids took on began to trate even me haughty, an' t' ask for conthtracts. They wanted double an' tribble pay. They thought they had a right to sell their childher's services, and that the new law couldn't touch them. So ould Gustavus held off in turn, when, lo and behold! you -'

'He's stealin' my words too!' murmured the Sewing Woman under her breath. She didn't dare to speak out loud for fear of offending him. Murphy was a kindly creature, and often showed her small kindnesses.

'- the beaks shut down on the whole thing, and wouldn't allow any childher at all to be engaged. We was all at our wits' end thin. We had for Pantomime that Christmas Cinderella. It was to be all done be childher, an' the scenery an' props an' costumes was all made. As time wint on I began to get anxious. Childher want a lot of tachin' an' dhrillin', and av ye have to take 'em in the raw 'tis no light job. There ginerally is a lot of such about, and in usual circumstances - unless you have lift it too late - there does be plinty of the wans that have been on before, and have only to be freshened up and taught the business iv the new play. Av coorse, every thayatre has its own lists of thim what comes to be re-engaged - I think it only just to say that I'm not the only first-class Super-Master in the business! So by-an'-by, whin the Governor asked me how many kids I had engaged, I had to say to him:

"Sorra a wan! Don't you remimber ye towld me not to engage a bally one - an' bally ind to me!" Ould Gustavus was a man what niver got angry or swore or stamped about like some; but he had the nasty tongue on him that was a dale sight worse. So, sez he:

"Oh, indade! Then, Mr Murphy, let me point out this to ye. If I've no supers an' no extras an' no childher, I don't seem to know that I have any use for a Super-Master - you undhershtand?"

"I do!" sez I, an' wint out fit to hould. Whin I was shmokin' outside the stage-door, the call-boy kem yellin' out:

"Ye're wanted be the Guvernor, Murphy, at wanst."

'Whin I kem in he says to me quite gintly - so gintly that I began to suspect he was up to some devilment:

"Be the way, Murphy, in makin' any engagements, I want ye to put in yer own name as employer. It may be a good thing, ye know, for ye personally, an' 'twill make no differ to me."

'While he was shpakin' I seen at a glance what he was up to - I think that quick. "Oh-ho!" sez I to meself, "that's the game, is it?"

'Tis to be me what employs them! An' thin, whin the polis does be comin' along undher the new Act, 'tis the employer that has to be run in!..."

"May I have some forrms, surr?" I sez.

"Certainly - as many as ye like. Take this ordher to Miles's an' get them to print ye a set." While he was shpakin', he tore out a form from th' ordher book, and handed it to me wid a conthract form which he had althered. "Tell them to print it like that - I have althered the name."

"Thin, surr," I sez, "'tis me as employs them. I suppose I can do what I like in that way?"

"Certainly, certainly," he sez. "You have a free hand in the matter. I shall make a contract with you when I want them."

"An' their pay, sir?" I sez.

"Oh, that is all right. You don't have to pay thim till work begins, ye know."

"That's thru!" sez I, an' wid that I wint out.

I got me forrms from the printer next day - hundhreds, thousands iv them - an' set to worrk. I had a game av me own on, an' I tuk not a sowl in me confidence. I knew 'twas no use gettin' childher at all, for whin the time'd come, the magistrates wouldn't let thim wurrk at all, at all. So I luk'd round an' picked out all the small young weemen I could find that was nice an' shlim.

'My! but wasn't there a lot iv them. I had no idea that London was so full iv shlim young undher-sized weemen. I suppose I used to like big girrls best, and plazed me eye whin I selected them. But there was I now engagin' the shmall wans be the score, be the hundhred, an' just whisperin' a word to aich iv thim to hould their tongues about their engagement, lest others'd crowd in an' kape thim out.

'Thin I laid out some iv me own savin's in fares to all the big cities where they had pantomimes, an' I chose in the same way hundhreds iv shlim, short girls ivrywhere.

'Thin, whin I got back to London, I engaged, in Gustavus's name this time, a lot of kids for Mистер Gustavus - rale childher

this time. I had had a "force majeure" clause put in the contract form in order to protect him.

'Ould Gustavus made his contract with me, agreeing to pay me for each of the children a shilling a week more than usual. That was more than what I had agreed with their parents for; so in case there was no objections with the police they'd be better off than usual. So that was all right.

'We began rehearsing all right. And went on at it for two weeks: when lo and behold ye -'

'My words again!' murmured the aggrieved Sewing Woman.

'- down came the police with a summons for Ould Gustavus for contravening the Act by using on the stage the labour of children under sixteen. He went off to Bow Street quite cocky, taking me with him. For defence he said, in the first place, he wasn't employing labour at all, for his theatre wasn't even open. And in the second he wasn't the employer at all. It was me. But the magistrate shut him up short. He said he'd have him know that that was a quibble, as it was within his knowledge that I was in his employment on his staff, and that as I was his agent the legal maxim *facit per alium facit per se* came in.

"He's not my agent!" he says out loud. "And look here, Murphy, I discharge you on the spot!"

"That's enough," sez the magistrate. "Your discharging the man is a proof that he was your agent up to that moment. Now the way you stand is this. As this man Murphy was your agent, the children were engaged by you; and if you allow them to appear in public you will go to prison. I accept the statement that they've not as yet been employed, as I understand that rehearsal is rather an unpaid preparation for employment than employment itself. I shall therefore discharge you to-day - or rather I shall postpone the hearing till after Christmas. And, by the way, since you discharged this man summarily, you are, I take it, liable for a week's wages. You had better pay him at once if you are wise! If not, an action will lie against you, and the proof will come from the Court!"

'When we were in the street he sez to me:

"Well?"

"It looks like the end, surr, though it's only the beginning'."

"Of course, Murphy, I'll keep you on," he sez.

"Thank ye, surr," sez I, "but I'm makin' other arrangements."

"How do ye mane?" sez he.

"I mane this, surr," sez I, "that ye've planted me for yer own purposes, an' now I intind that what grows out iv me plantin' is me own."

"I don't undhershtand," sez he, "yit!"

"Ye will by an' by," sez I. "Look here, Misther Gustavus, for yer own nefayrious purposes ye tould me t' engage a lot iv childher for the pantomime, an' ye tould me t' ingage them in me own name. That was so that whin the polis'd come at ye ye might say, as ye done just now to the beak, that it wasn't you at all, but me. Now it was ayther you or me what engaged them be conthtract. If 'twas you ye had to shtand the racket, or would have done if the sayson had begun - which it hadn't; an' ye'd have th' advantage, too. But ye said it wasn't you whin ye thought the polis had got ye, an' ye wanted to have me run in for it. So that's off. But if 'twas me what engaged them, thin 'tis me what'll git the benefit. See? Moreover, ye dischargged me in the Coort, an' the beak himself said ye'd have to pay me me salary for a week. So now I'm free av ye, wid the kay iv the shtreet in me hand. But I've got the conthtracts what I've made wid a lot iv people in all kinds iv places. These are me own prawperty, an' I'm goin' to use thim in me own way. The only conthtracts what is made in your name is wid the childher for yer own pantomime, an' thim ye has to shtand be. I might have tould his worship that they wor your conthtracts, but I thought as ye swore at the beginnin' that they worn't I'd hould them over in case ye should git obstreperous later on.

"So now ye're in the soup. Ye won't be let play the childher what ye engaged. An' I can tell ye now that ye won't be allowed any childhers at all, at all. But I've got meself in me own employment a number iv likely young weemen iv shmall patthem what'll be able to play in shpite iv all the polis in the counthry. So av ye're wishful to git what ye want, Misther Gustavus, it's me that ye'll have t'apply to. I hould the whole shtock. There is no use yer kickin'. I can prove me bona fides all along the line. 'Tis you what'll figure out as the bloated capitalist what deceived the poor honest workin' man -

that's me - what thrusted him. What made nefayrious conthtracts wid poor innocent childhers what'll have a hungry Christmas. An' what perjured hissself in a courthouse, which can be proved be the beak hissself an' some iv yer conthtracts ye made wid the childher. Not be me, av coorse, for didn't ye swear that I was not in yer sarvice. But anyhow ye have got a force majeure clause in. That'll not look well, will it? As if 'twas I what put it in, whin I haven't the same clause even for me own purtection in me own conthtracts."

"So, Misther Gustavus, ye'd better be quick in engagin' some iv me throup iv dancers. I'll only charge double for sich iv thim what is took from me by me first pathron."

'Well, th' ould man was in a clift shtick, an' knew it. So he made me come back wid him to his office, an' then an' there made an iron-clad conthtract wid me for the sarvices iv more'n a hundhred iv me dwarfs. "Mind ye," I had said to him, "ye can have as many as iver ye want at the price av ye take tham at wanst. But if ye lave it over to take more later in case ye find ye've not enough, ye'll have to come in line wid the rest av the managers. No man can come in on the ground floor a second time!"

'It all kem off well. As soon as the rehearsals began the polis woke up an' got shpry all over the counthry. The managers was all run in. Like ould Gustavus they couldn't be punished becase they hadn't done nothin' wrong, as yet. But they tuk fright, as was intended, an' gave undhertakins not to employ any childher at all while th' Act run. An' so they all had to come, in the long run, to me what had cornered all the dwarfs. Mind ye, I was careful not to use that word, for if they'd any iv them heard it, they'd have riz up an' flew away like a flock iv pigeons does, all about nothin'.

'Then the fun began. Shmall weemin is more up in themselves than big wans. So the shtage managers an' bally masters what was in the habit of drillin' childher in the pantomime sayson soon found out the differ. Some iv them thried to thrate the little weemin - "beautiful childher" is what I called them, so they thought I was a very nice man, an' we got on well with aich other, an' I had no quarrellin' wid them - as if they was kids, an' ordhered them about somethin' crool. They soon found out the mishtake. Wan iv them - Cuthbert Kinsey it was, of the Royal at Queenhythe - gave wan iv them a slap on th' ear. But she could scrap a bit, so she could; she was a sturdy, plucky little party what could whip her weight in wild cats, as the Yankees say. She just put up her dooks an' wint for him. She gave him wan on the bread-basket an' another on the boko what made him go into the claret business sthraight. So for

that sayson he kep his hooks down. My! but there was scrappin' in some theyatres, for the budlets wouldn't shtand no guff. An' whin the bally masters an' shtage managers found they was weemin an' tried to make love to them things was worse. Moreover, they tuk breaches iv promise whiniver the chap had any oof at all. I'm tellin' ye the carnage among bachelors in theyatres that year was frightful. I was a bachelor meself in thim days, so I have cause enough to know it!

'Was that when and how you met your wife, Mr Roscoe?' asked the Second Old Woman, a big-built woman with a temper of her own.

The rest of the Company smiled, for it was an open secret that Mrs Roscoe, who had once been wardrobe mistress, had been required to leave the Company on account of her success in a face-slapping episode wherein the Second Old Woman had fared badly. The Super Master, who, both as one occupying a post on the managerial staff and also as an Irishman from whom a large measure of courtesy to women was expected, kept strict guard on his temper except when quelling a riot or pleasantry amongst his own crowd, answered sweetly:

'Yes, ma'am. I am proud to say it was. I bless the day.'

'She is not here, I notice,' said the Second Old Woman, with a suavity equal to his own. 'May I ask you why that is?'

'Certainly, ma'am.' he replied heartily. 'She is away on a long tour in America with a first-class Company.'

'Oh! And she is Wardrobe - as an assistant, I suppose?'

'No, ma'am,' he replied sadly. 'I regret to say she has gone down in the world.'

'I see. A Dresser, then?'

'No, ma'am. Lower still; she is First Old Woman. But then I should say that it is a Company so good that the Old Women are played by young and pretty ones. Not by real has-beens or never-wases, as is usually the case!' The ready laugh of the younger members of the Company showed that the shot had told. The Second Old Woman's anger flamed out in her face as she said still - by a great effort - suavely:

'I hope she is now respectable?'

'Keeps, ma'am! - keeps, not "is"! She is and has always been respectable. And is always a quiet, tender-hearted woman. Except, of course, when she has to chastise insolence - as you very well know.'

The Second Old Woman contented herself by glaring, as she realised from the universal titter that the laugh was against her. The Super Master swallowed his consolation - steaming hot though it was.

The MC turned to the next on the line, The Advance Agent, an alert-looking man of middle age.

'I hope you will give us something next, Alphage. It is so seldom that we have the honour of seeing you whilst we are on the road that we should look on it as the lost opportunity of our lives if we do not hear some story or reminiscence of your own life.'

'All right, old man. I'll do what I can. You won't mind, I hope, Ladies and Gentlemen, if it is a bit dull. But the fact is that I've been so much in the habit of inventing lies about my stars that plain fact comes to be prosaic. Anyhow, it may be a change for me; I'm tired of finding out new virtues of my employers or ringing the changes on the old ones.'