

# **A Criminal Star**

by

**Bram Stoker**

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'Of course, you all remember Wolseley Gartside -'

'Rather!' This was from the Tragedian. 'I remember when he took that name. Indeed, I was not pleased with him about it; it clashed with the name I had taken myself - or, rather - ahem! - which my sponsors took for me at my christening. I consoled myself with the reflection that Wolseley was a later name historically than Wellesley.' The Advance Agent went on:

'Gartside, like many others who have risen from the ranks - the ranks of his profession - was, well, a wee, tiny bit over-sensitive in matters of public esteem. In fact, he did not like to be neglected -'

Here the Second Heavies interrupted with a rapidity and acerbity which left an impression that indignation was founded on aggrievement:

"Over-sensitive in matters of public esteem!" I like that. He had got the swelled head bad, if that be what you mean. He wanted the earth, he did! The way he hustled other people off the posters was indecent! And the size of type he clamoured for was an inducement to blindness and an affront to the common sense of an educated community.' The Advance Agent went on calmly:

'- did not like to be neglected. This was all bad enough when he was engaged by someone else; but when he was out on his own with nothing to check him except the reports of his treasurer, he became a holy terror. There wasn't any crowding of names off the bill then; there were simply no names at all. Names of other people, I mean; his name was all right so long as the paper was up to the biggest stands, and the types were the largest to be had in the town. Later on he went even further and had all his printing done in London or New York from types cut special.' The Second Heavies cut in again:

'No! Mr Wolseley Gartside didn't mean to get neglected so long as there was a public Press to be influenced or a hoarding to be covered.'

'Exactly!' said the Advance Agent drily. He was beginning to fear that his pitch would be queered by the outpouring of the grievances of the Second Heavies. The professional instinct of the audience made for peace. They were all trained to listen. Mr Alphage seized the opportunity, and went on:

'When he was arranging his first American tour he wanted to get someone who, as a persona grata, could command the Press; who understood human nature to the core; who had the instinct of a diplomatist, the experience of a field-marshal, the tact of an Attorney-General; the -'

'All right, old man. We know you took him in tow.'

'Thank you, Bones! I understand. Gartside was a tragedian, too, and of course wanted the whole stage. They're all the same.'

'Well, of all the -' began Dovercourt; but there he stopped. There was a readiness of repartee about the Advance Agent that disturbed his self-serenity.

'So I took him in tow, as Bones calls it. I thought my work was piloting. But Bones knows; he, too, belongs to the hungry, egotist lot who have to be dragged into publicity - like Wolseley Gartside!

'Well, before I started out, which he insisted should be a full week ahead of him, he began to teach me my business. At first I pointed out to him that the whole mechanism of advance publicity wasn't wrong because he hadn't done it. But he took me up short, and expressed his opinions pretty freely, I admit. He gave me quite a dissertation on publicity, telling me that to hit the public you must tell them plenty. They wanted to know all about a man; they didn't care much whether it was good or bad; but on the whole they preferred bad. Then he went on to give me what he called my instructions. That I was to have paragraphs about him every day. "Make me out," he said, "a sort of Don Juan, with a fierce, revengeful nature. A man from whose hate no man is safe; no woman from his love. Never mind moral character. The public don't want it - nor no more do I. Say whatever you please about me so long as you make people talk. Now I don't want argument with you. Do you just carry out my instructions, and all will be well. But if you don't, you'll get the order of the chuck." I didn't want to argue with him. To begin with, a man like that isn't worth argument - especially about instructions. Instructions! Just fancy an Advance Agent who knows his business being instructed by a Star that he has got to boom, and to whose vanity - no, sensitiveness - he has to minister. Why, compared with even a duffer at my work the biggest and brightest star in the theatrical firmament don't know enough to come in out of the rain! I was very angry with him, I admit; but in a flash there came to me out of his own very instructions an idea which put anger out of my mind. The top dog isn't angry - though he may bite! "Very well, Mr Wolseley Gartside," said I to myself, said I, "I'll carry out your instructions with exactness. They're yours, not mine; so if anything comes out wrong you are the responsible party." Before I went to bed I wrote out a mem of my "instructions."

"The public want to know everything about a man. Tell them plenty - all they want. They don't care whether it's good or bad. On the whole, they prefer bad. Give them paragraphs every day. Make me a Don Juan, fierce, revengeful, passionate. No man safe from

my hate; no woman from my love. Don't aim at moral character; the public don't want it; no more do I. Say whatever you please about me so long as you make people talk. Make things lively before I come!"

I headed this "Instructions to Montague Phase Alphage, Advance Agent to Wolseley Gartside, Esquire." In the morning I brought it to him and asked him to sign and date it, as I wished to carry out his instructions to the full, and to take for myself advantage of his wisdom and his splendid initiative power. He signed it, looking very pleased. The sort of smirk that tragedians use when they're feeling good.

The next day I started out on my travels. The tour was to begin with a week of one-night stands. Wolseley Gartside had insisted on making out the tour himself, and, of course, he knew better than anybody - everybody else. You know what that means, Wragge. I certainly covered the ground for him that week. I simply lived in trains, and I wore out the stairs of all the offices of what they called newspapers. Do you know, I think there must be a special angelic squad told off to look after advance agents. And if there is, my chap must have had what they call a hellova time. It's a direct mercy that I didn't develop acute DT in letting the penny-a-liners of that group of one-horse towns have the time of their lives. They tumbled to it quick that they would not have to write any themselves, for, of course, I did all that myself. It was best that way, anyhow, for not one of them could have written a decent par to save his soul.

I filled them all up with Wolseley Gartside; and they filled up as much space as the editorial staff could spare from ads. Generally I paid for the printing, too - though who benefited by it I don't know. I thought Gartside would darken the air when he got my bill; but I did him well - in quantity, at all events. But the quality was good, too; just what the old man liked. I not only painted him as a man of transcendent genius and as an artist that had no peer in past or present, but gave him such a character as a libertine that the local Don Juans began over their drink to talk of reviving lynching, and the womenkind exhausted the dry goods stores for new frocks and fal-lals of all kinds. Why, they tell me that the demand for toupees and false fronts and extensions was such that the New York wholesale hair houses sent down a whole flock of drummers. The back-numbers were going to have a turn at him as well as the girls and the frisky matrons! I gave him out as having the courage of a lion and the heart of a fiend; the skill at cards of a prestidigitateur; the style and daring in the hunt of Buffalo Bill; the learning of an Erasmus; the voice of a De Reske; the strength of Milo - it was

before Sandow's time. I finished it all off with a hypnotic gift which was unique; which from the stage could rule audiences, and in the smoking-room or the boudoir could make man or woman his obedient slave. I got most of the newspapers to take up hypnotism as a theme of controversy, and wrote lots of letters on the subject, under various names, which opened people's eyes as to the power of that mysterious craft - or quality, whichever it is - and the consequent danger attendant on their daily lives. I suppose I needn't say that the whole controversy everywhere circled round Gartside and his wonderful powers. I tell you that by the Sunday afternoon when my Star came along with his crowd in his special, with his private car at the tail of it, and him on the rear platform, the women of Patricia City, where he opened, were in a flutter. They didn't know whether it was hope or fear. Knowing the sex as I do, I am inclined to think it was hope. To tame and subdue a dragon of voluptuous impurity is the dearest wish of a good woman's heart!

'Oh, really, Mr Phase Alphage ...' said the First Old Woman, raising an index finger of remonstrance.

'True, dear lady, true. It is trite as a record, as well as solemn as a truth.'

'Aye, it is truth, indeed. Sad truth!' murmured the Tragedian, in a thunderous bass. 'The experiences of my own hot youth have proven it to the full. 'Twas not gifts of mind or body, all-compelling though these be, nor the fascinations of our glamorous calling. Rather would I call it the maelstrom of passion which the Apple of Eden begot in the breast of woman.'

'Rather a mixed metaphor that!' said the young man from Oxford, who seemed to have taken on himself the task of keeping the Tragedian to order. 'But we understand what you mean. Drive on, Alphage.'

'I was fifty miles on my road when the day of opening came; but I ran back - that came out of my own pocket, too! - to see Gartside and hear what he thought of the way I had exploited him. I boarded his train down the line, and came on with him. He was both jubilant and effusive, and said my work in advance was the best he had ever had. "Go on, my boy, go on, and follow it up. You are on the right tack!" were the last words he said to me. I dropped off at the depot, and got on the outward train, for I didn't want to

get pitched into by him when he should find the excitement was less than he expected. I do believe he thought there would be in waiting a murderous crowd, with a rope, intent on a neck-tie party, with a few regiments of State troops to counteract them.

'When I got into the next town the Press was full of what had been said at Patricia City, and wanted me to go at least one better, or they couldn't use my stuff at all. That would be checkmate to me as Advance Agent, so I was in a real difficulty. I couldn't increase the praise of my Star, so the only thing was to go down. I made up my mind to go deeper and deeper into crime. There was no help for it. I knew well that each other town in that group would want its own increase of pressure, and so arranged my plans in the back of my head. I should have to distribute the steps of the downward grade amongst five different towns; so I laid out my work and began to get my copy ready. I never went to bed at all that night, but spent it writing advance matter in shorthand. In the morning I got a smart typewriter and dictated to her from my stenographic script. I sent off that for Tuesday by mail, and got the rest ready to post when the hour should arrive. I had to be careful not to send matter long enough in advance for the comparison of towns, or of different papers in the same town.

'Early on Tuesday morning I got to Hustleville - that was the second town of the tour - and from that moment matters began to hum. All the papers were full, not only of my own matter, but of comments on it. In addition, nearly every one had a leader in which they cut the Tragedian to pieces. The Banner of Freedom wanted to make out his coming to be nothing short of an international outrage.

"It makes little," it said, "for the comity of nations that an ostensibly friendly country like England should be allowed to dump down on our shores a cargo of criminal decadents like the man Wolseley Gartside and his crowd of hooligans. His being left at large so long as seems to have been the case says little for either the morals or the sanity of the people who have permitted his existence. He is a smirch on the fair face of cosmic law, a living germ of intellectual disease, a cancerous growth even in the parasitic calling which he follows; an outrage to man and morals, to fair living, to development of God's creatures - nay, even to God Himself! The people of this State have not in the past lacked courage or energy to terminate swiftly, by the exercise of rough justice in the open courts of natural law, the opportunities of offenders against public good. We have heard of a human pendulum swinging on a giant bough of one of our noble forest trees; there are recollections in the minds of

those of our pioneers who happily survive of worthless miscreants riding on rails clad in unpretentious costumes of feathers and tar. It is up to the heroic souls who founded Hustleville to break the long silence of their well-won repose, and, for protection of the city they have won from forest depths, and for the defence of their kin, to raise voice and hand for woman's honour and man's unshrinking nobility! A hint on such a subject should be sufficient. Verbum sapientice sufficit. We have done."

"This reached Gartside after breakfast, and he at once wired me:

"Go on; it is well. Banner has struck right note. Shall be ere long living heart of international cyclone!"

"I went on the same afternoon to Comstock, which was next on our route. I had, of course, sent on plenty of advance matter, and the editors had written me gratefully about it. But when I called at the Whoop - which was, I understood, the popular paper - I was received in a manner which was decidedly chilly. I am not, as a rule, lacking in diffidence ..."

"Distinctly an understatement, my dear sir," said the Tragedian, with challenge to battle in his eye. "You really wrong yourself by putting it in that negative way!" He glared in return, but went on, calmly:

"... but I admit I was a little nonplussed - no pun intended, Governor" - this to the Manager. "So I asked the editor if I had hurt or affronted him in any way to cause his greeting to be so different from his written words. He hum'd and haw'd, and finally admitted that he was chagrined that the Comstock Whoop had not been treated as well as the Hustleville Banner of Freedom.

"How?" I asked. "I sent you twenty per cent more advance copy."

"Aye. The quantity was all right; but there were none of the spicy details which worked up the dormant conscience of even a one-horse town like Hustleville. Now, I suppose you know that we young towns can't live on the past. Has-been isn't a good diet for growing youth. Moreover, we're all living on one another's backs, with the nails dug in. What we want in the Whoop is anti-soothing syrup; and nothing else is any use to us. So get a move on you and let us have it. We want stronger meat than Hustleville."

"But there's nothing stronger. To say more wouldn't be true."

The editor seemed as if struck blind. He raised his hands as if expostulating with the powers of the air, as he said:

"True! Do I live to hear the Advance Agent of a Troupe speak of truth ... Now, look here, Mister. It's no use talking ethics with you. For either I'm drunk - which would be early in the day for me - or else you've got some sort of freshness on you that I don't understand. And I may tell you for your edification that we don't much care for freshness here. Comstock is a town where we perspire quick; and there's plenty of space in the forest for developing our cem-e-tary. When I got your first letter I told my boys to hold back because this was your funeral, and ye was up in the etiquette. But the boys wasn't altogether pleased. They are good boys, and could knock sparks out of Ananias in making a story. See! So you'd better get to work. You know your man and they don't; so your story is apt to seem more lifelike. I'll want the copy here by seven. Then, the quicker ye quit the better."

There was nothing for it but to carry out Wolseley Gartside's instructions. It was wife-beating this time that swelled his reputation. I didn't mean to be knocked out by the boys of the Whoop, nor to afford an opportunity for exemplifying the sudorific rapidity of Comstock - no, nor to take a part in de-veloping the cem-e-tary either; so the story of WG's experiences as a defendant in the police-court of Abingchester, in the Peak of Derbyshire - that was well out of the way of public prints - was given in full detail, together with a description of the Lord Chancellor who condemned him, and an exciting account of his escape, riddled with bullets, from the county gaol. The editor read it with a beaming face, and said when he had done:

"That's the biggest scoop we ever had. Here, I'll give you a straight tip which will put money in your pocket if you get out your copy right smart. There is every indication that when the play is over to-morrow night there will be an adjournment of citizens to the forest, and that one of the oaks will bear a new sort of acorn. One with a bloated body; but a rotten heart. See?"

I did see; and I sent an urgent letter to WG by the driver of the mail train, telling him frankly where his instructions were likely to lead him.

He was wise for once, and altered his route. This wasn't a case for vanity, but for skin. So there wasn't any new kind of acorn



found on the forest round Comstock, though the search party was all ready.

'Now, Mr Hempitch,' said the MC, 'you're next.' So he began at once.

'All right, sir. Mr Alphage's story of a Star reminds me of a Star of another kind which is more in my line of business.