

A Moon-Light Effect

by

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'I'm afraid I cannot give any narrative of a humorous or touching nature. My life has been, as is necessary for the art I follow, an unexciting one. Perhaps it has been just as well; for art requires a measure of calmness if not of isolation for its higher manifestations. Perfection was never achieved amid the silent tumult of conflicting thoughts.'

'Pip-pip' came again from the young man from Oxford. The Tragedian started to his feet - in his momentary passion he forgot to be slow.

'I protest against this unseemly interruption. This intrusion into the privacy of our artistic life of hooligans without soul: this importation

to the inner heart of refinement, of the coarser vulgarisms of the world of decadent ineptitude. And when, in addition, the perpetrators of this ignoble infamy seem to be ignorant of the very elemental basis of the respect due to recognised personal supremacy in a glorious art and an honoured calling. Bah! Never mind, Turner Smith. I suppose all the fine arts are to be assailed in turns. Your time will come, however. You can, later, turn this painful episode to professional advantage. I understand that you are doing the scenery of the panto at Poole; why not take for the subject of your opening scene, the gloomy one, The Home of the Hooligan. The audience will show at once their detestation of that offensive class. Doubtless the Costumier will rise to the occasion, and show a peculiarly offensive fiend with a marvel of ill manners. The Musical Conductor, too, can enhance the satirical effect by introducing into his score as a motif the Pip-pip whereby the Hooligan proclaims himself.' Then the Tragedian retired into himself with a victorious air. In the constrained silence that followed the Wardrobe Mistress was heard to whisper to the Sewing Woman:

'Mister Wellesley Dovercourt giv it him in the neck that time. It'll be a lesson to Cattle what he won't forget.' Cattle was the nickname of the young man from Oxford, given to him soon after his joining the company. The occasion had been his writing his name in a landlady's 'book' and putting after it, Oxon. This was looked on by his comrades not as cheek but as bad spelling. The Scene Painter saw his chance to continue, and so resumed his narrative:

'I was Scenic Artist at one time to old Schoolbred, the impresario. It was a special engagement, and just suited me, for at that time I had undertaken a lot of work of various kinds, and was looking about for a painting room. Schoolbred had then a long lease of the Queen's Opera House, which had, as some of you may remember, a magnificent atelier. Old Schoolbred paid me a good salary - that is, he promised it, for he never paid any one if he could help it. I daresay he suspected that I mistrusted him, for he also put it in the agreement that I was to have full use of the painting-room for my own purposes from the time of my signing until I should start at his work. It was then that my solicitor did a wise thing. He, too, knew from old experience that there was sure to be some trouble with Schoolbred, and insisted that I should have a lease of the painting rooms. "Otherwise," he said, "your own property is not safe. If he goes bankrupt the creditors will seize all of yours that is on the premises." When I objected he said:

"Surely it is all the same to you. You will give him each week a

quittance for salary, and he will give you one for rent. It is as broad as it is long; and you wouldn't touch money anyhow." As he found all materials and paid wages I was on velvet, for I should have no expenses. All I risked was my time; and against that I had the use of the finest frames in London. Schoolbred's work was only touching up the old scenes belonging to the Opera House and painting the new opera by Magnoli, Il Campador. My assistant, whom he paid, could do most of the re-painting, and as I knew that his work did not come on till September I had nearly six months rent free, and my time my own.

'When I had moved in my traps I got to work at once. It took me half a day going over the scenery book with Grimshaw, who was then the Stage Carpenter, and off and on a couple of days more examining the scenes before we could get to work. The scenery was old-fashioned - nearly all flats; hardly a cloth, let alone a cut-cloth, in the lot. Heavy old framed stuff that wouldn't fold; and as much messy old timber about it as would furnish a ship-yard. Old Schoolbred had ordered the scenes to be made workable, so that when the time should come of bringing the operas on the road they should be all ready. There would, I saw, be a fine old job for Grimshaw to cut and hinge that mass of scenes so that they would double up for transport. However, Grimshaw was a good man, and work was no terror to him. He got his coat off, and once he was started with his own men I couldn't overtake him. Schoolbred was in a hurry to have the work done - in such a hurry that he didn't even grumble when I had to get a second assistant and two more labourers. Mind you, that meant a lot to him, for weekly wages means ready money; and out-of-pocket expenses have to be paid every Saturday. There were seventeen operas, so that it was no slouch of a job to get them all into moving trim. But there is, I must say, this about a carpenter's job that when the "production" is simplified it means saving labour afterwards. But the more scenes there are - not built scenes, but flats and cloths, wings and borders - to keep in order for nightly use and travel, and the taking to and from the storage, the more the poor scenic artist gets it in the neck.

'However, when we had once got started and I had explained to my assistants what I wanted and roughed out sketches to guide them I was able to get a bit of my own work in hand. I had a whole batch of such at the time. As you know, it was just when I was starting on my own, and every scene that was done was just so much in my pocket. I tell you I worked hard to get a bit ahead and give myself room, so that I wouldn't have to be always pulling the devil by the tail. We all worked day and night; as old Schoolbred didn't grumble at overtime the men were content to do twenty-four hours

in the day. Our work has long waits; and as the labourers have to be on hand whenever they are wanted they did themselves well in the way of sleep. At first they had old sacks and such like to lie on; but presently they got luxurious, and nothing would do them but ticking and fresh hay and army blankets to cover them. I didn't mind. Indeed, I never even let on that I noticed.

After all, the men had to rest some time, and when they slept in the theatre it saved them their lodging. As you know, we scenic artists sometimes have our food cooked for us in the paint room in busy times, so that these men lived pretty well free. Naturally, I charged all expenses, as old Schoolbred was in such a hurry that ordinary rules didn't count. He was glad to get the work done so quickly at any cost.

I had on the frames then a set of scenes for Manfred, which Wilbur Winston had commissioned. I had knocked off the other work quickly in order to be free for this. For this was a production that would make me. The scene of the Thunderstorm in the Alps would put me at the very top. That I held back, for I was anxious to make a great thing of it. It was my first job for Winston, and I wanted him to be pleased. Moreover, he had a great following, and a fine scene at the British was talked about everywhere. There was a lot of built stuff in it and paperwork, so that by the time it was done it bulked up pretty big. It was still in hand when the opera season began. Winston wasn't ready for it, so he asked me to keep it till he should rehearse. Of course, I had to meet his wishes, but happily there was loads of room at the Queen's, even after we had arranged the operas separately so that we could deal with them as they came along. So there wasn't any trouble about that.

'At first the season seemed to promise well enough; but after a night or two business fell off, and Schoolbred was at his wits' end. He was already over head and ears in debt, and this time he was only given credit in the hope that those he owed to would get a bit back. They certainly treated him very well, I will say that. They gave him every possible chance; but when the creditors saw that so far from things getting better they were going from bad to worse, a meeting was held.

'At the meeting steps were taken, and very soon after Schoolbred was in process of being made a bankrupt. A Receiver was appointed by the Court, and took formal possession. Everyone in the theatre was upset about it - except me. I had my lease, and felt like a cock on his own dunghill.

I found out, however, after a bit that it wasn't all sunshine even with a lease. As an employe I could get salary, if there was any to get; but the liquidator cut down expenses, and, along with the rest, I was discharged. But as a lessor I was held to my lease and had to pay my rent. Long before this, as I said, old Schoolbred's work was finished, and I was working at my own contracts. I could not grumble much as my rent was small, and though I had had practically no salary in the past I had had the use of the atelier. So I paid up regularly, and was glad to be able to work. There was a little nuisance in one way; as the whole Opera house was in charge of the Receiver, and as my lease was only of a little bit of it I had to get a special permit to take out any of my scenes as they were done. I didn't want to make unnecessary trouble for myself, so I never made a bother, but asked formally whenever I wanted a permit. The Receiver was a good enough fellow, and was very civil to me. We became quite friends. Schoolbred kept on working the show with the sanction of the liquidator. He had good assets, remember, and his engagements of star singers were fine.

'One day I came across him in a violent rage. When I asked him what had upset him he could hardly speak at first. At last when he got calmer he said:

"It's enough to drive a man mad. Here I've been spending money like water to increase the taste for opera; and now, when I've a company that's simply gorgeous and things ought to hum along this Royal death happens and knocks me right out. And the worst of it is it is all old debts except the landlord, and he's the worst of the bunch. Here have I been and restored this old rat's nest of his that had been so long empty that there's not a foot of timber in it that hasn't got the dry-rot. And now he goes and helps to make me a bankrupt - just as if that'll do him any good!"

"But," I said, "surely that hasn't made you so violently angry this morning?"

"Indirectly it has!"

"How is that?" I asked.

'I have just got an offer from America - a magnificent offer - one that would make any manager get up and dance for joy. A fortune, sir, a fortune - a gigantic fortune. Every big town in the United States and Canada and Mexico and South America, where they're all crazy for opera, to follow."

"But surely," I said, "that is a thing to be glad about, not angry. Why on earth should you stamp about with rage just because unexpectedly fortune has been put within your grasp?"

"That is just the flaming aggravation of it all."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said.

"Oh, you don't understand, don't you?" he said, with a bitterness of sarcasm in his tones which showed that the wildness of his rage had passed. "Then I had better explain to you. What is the use of putting fortune in my grasp - and then not letting me grasp it?"

"It may be very silly of me, Mr Schoolbred," I said, "but still I don't understand."

"How can I take the golden opportunity when I can't get away from here? Haven't we got bailiffs in the place! Isn't there an Official Receiver! How am I to get to America when these won't let a thing leave the Opera House? You can't play Grand Opera without scenery and properties and costumes, stupid! Here we are with sixteen operas - the best and most popular of them, all ready for the road - and yet we can't get even started. They are all rehearsed and perfect in every detail. I have every one of the artists on two years' engagements at English salary, but to play where and when I please. If I could get to America any time within the next two months there is nothing that could stand between me and success. There's no opposition whatever, and they couldn't get up one in the time. Moreover, I have all the popular artists - every one of them. Aye, and they would have to help me for a month at the beginning on half salaries or no salaries at all, and pay their own personals in addition. For they're in a cleft stick. They are engaged to me, so they can't play with anyone else; and if I don't play them they can't play at all. And yet here I am - here are we all - hung up for want of the sticks and rags. It's cruel! It's wicked! It's vile! If I could only get away out of this."

'Whilst he was talking a thought had come to me that made me very uneasy. How would all this affect me? Since I had been allowed to take out some of my own work that was urgent, things had got worse. Then disaster had been only threatening; now it had come. How would it be if they were to seize my things as well as old Schoolbred's! Then it flashed across me how wise had been the provision of the lease, for now they couldn't take my goods. Old Schoolbred had been watching my face narrowly; now he said, suddenly:

"But I can't get away. None of us can get away. They have formal possession of everything in the house - and they'll bally well take care to hold very tight so that they can seize everything when the time comes."

"They can't seize my things!" I said. He rubbed his hands in delight.

"That is so; you have a lease. I am glad of that." He thought awhile, and his face fell. For a moment there was a gleam, but it faded as quickly as it had come, and there was on him a look of hopeless sadness. It was in his voice, too, when he spoke next:

"That Receiver is a leery fellow - a sly, cold-blooded, heartless villain! There won't be much consideration for either you or me in the long run. I say, Turner Smith, a word of caution in your ear: Don't you trust him, and if you can help it don't ask any favours from him. Later on it may be all right; but at present he has to think of himself."

"How do you mean?" said I.

"He has to hold down his own job. He may be willing enough to help you; but his first duty is to the Court that employs him."

Two or three days afterwards he came up to my room and said he had a commission to give me, and explained that he was going to make a new departure in opera.

I am going to show them a realistic up-to-date opera; in fact, an old-fashioned Adelphi drama - except that it will be all sung. It is to be called *For the Love of an Actress*. The scenes will be all theatre interiors except the third act, which is to be the wicked Billionaire's palace in Park Lane. The Soprano is, of course, the heroine, and is the daughter of the Scenic Artist. She loves with mutual affection the Tenor, who is the unacknowledged son of the Billionaire by a secret marriage. The Billionaire (Bass, of course), who is a widower, wants to marry her, but she refuses. Then he gets mad and carries her off. The Tenor breaks into the Park Lane palace, and there is a great trio, which is ended by the King and all his nobles, who are coming to dine, arriving unexpectedly early. Of course, they are all in their robes as they are dining with a Billionaire. The King happens to have in his pocket the marriage certificate of the Billionaire's first wife, and also of the birth of her son. So then and there he holds a meeting of the House of Lords, and they find the

Billionaire guilty. The Headsman is called in, and he is going to be executed when the Soprano in a passionate prayer appeals to the King to save him. 'Spare, oh spare, Most Gracious Ruler, the grandsire of my unborn child!' So the Billionaire makes over his money to his son, whom the King creates a Duke, and all ends happily. How does that strike you, my boy? Eh?"

"Well, as you ask me," I said, "I think it the balliest rot I ever heard in my life!" He slapped me on the shoulder with quite a merry air, as he explained:

"Right, my boy, right as rain. Rot is no name for it! That's why I'm so hopeful about it. We'll play it with grim seriousness, and there won't be a scene that isn't prickly with the most outrageous breaches of convenance. All London will rush to see it and laugh their very souls out. The music is fine, full of melody - just the thing for empty-headed smart society that wants to be amused. We're going to be on the pig's back, I can tell you, my boy." He then proceeded to make me a very handsome offer for painting the scenes. He said he had worked it out on a generous basis, because he wouldn't be able to pay me till the opera was out. That was reasonable enough, so I agreed. Then he told me that for the first act we couldn't do better than reproduce the painting room exactly as it stood. "It looks business, you know. All the appliances for scene painting ready with the painter at work - a fine bit of realism. That will fetch the public in itself. The Tenor will make up like you - Willie Larkom will arrange all that. And as it will be good to show the public what an expensive thing an opera is, you, or rather he, will have twelve assistants who will all be made up like the best known members of the Royal Academy. Of course, they are chorus, and will sing a song with a queer catch in the refrain - a discord like the creaking of a windlass." At the door he turned and said:

"By the way - two things: not a word of this to a soul. The surprise will be half the battle, and I want to get it out quick, so you must get the first act done as soon as ever you can. As this is to be a reproduction of your own atelier, and the painting is in your own hands, there is no need for a model. You can start at once. In order to save time, I have had the flats primed and ready - full stage, my boy, and new canvas framed in folding panels for travelling - and not a wrinkle in the lot. And please note, I want that scene - it is where the lovers meet - to be brilliant moonlight. You must have a practical moon - a big one - shining in through the glass roof. I want to show a new moonlight effect."

I slipped into my work, and three days afterwards I was almost ready. I kept my doors locked, and not a soul was in the secret except old Schoolbred and myself, and, of course, my own people; but I could trust them.

It was too bad that I had a delay; but I suppose it could not be helped. It turned out that Wilbur Winston had fixed the date for Manfred, and wanted to get in the Thunderstorm Scene at once, so that he could start the lighting rehearsals. He had decided four days before, but had not announced it, except to a few friends, till he was ready to take rehearsals in hand. I arranged with him that the stuff should be brought into the British on the following Saturday night after the play was over. I got the police permit, which was necessary, for there was a devil of a lot of stuff and huge stuff too. Some of the built pieces were over forty feet long. There was one panorama cloth, which was to go round nearly the whole of the three sides of the stage. This would have to travel on two timber carts roped together head and tail. I was to come early on Sunday and see to its being put together on the British stage, and Winston would begin the lighting with a full staff that night. Rehearsals were to follow from Monday.

Old Schoolbred was most helpful in arranging things. He certainly could hustle when he put his back into it! He undertook to arrange and look after the carting. I told him how many carts I should require, and the kind. He had a carting contract with the London Haulage Company based on men and horses and hours, so I knew he couldn't best me about the price. It was necessary to keep an eye on the old man, for he was the shiftiest old rascal I ever came across. I told my assistant to look after him, and he undertook to see the stuff safely out. I had, of course, arranged with the Receiver that the scenery should be allowed to come out. He was very nice about it, and I had his written permit in due form. He had not been a bit like what old Schoolbred said of him. I know now even better how false the old trickster was.

Schoolbred had asked me to set the new scene on the stage - well up, so that it should not be in the way of rehearsals on Saturday after the day-men had gone home. We did not play on that night, so it was easy to arrange. I got my own men and a few that the Governor sent in; the regular day-men of the Opera House were away for the afternoon. The Governor had fixed the day for the "outing" of the theatre staff and employees, and they were having a big dinner up in Islington. The old man provided dinner for them "very handsomely," as they said. It was conventional lighting - plain gas, and all overhead, just as we used in the painting room. Old Schoolbred came and saw

it set himself. We didn't want any fuss, so there was no one there except those actually at work. He was very complimentary about my work. He said he couldn't have believed that anyone could have made the dull old painting room so luxurious. "If I had thought you could have done that with it I'm blessed if I would have rented it to you at the money!" he said, in a burst of candour unusual to him.

"But you asked me to specially," I answered. "Don't you remember you said that you wanted it to look like a miracle of artistic luxury. I took some pains, I can tell you, to paint in all that fine old furniture. Dagmar let me take some drawings in his place; he said he'd be blessed if he'd let his things come here -"

"Oh, I ain't complaining," he answered. "In fact, I intended to furnish the place up a bit myself, so as I thought I would have some practical safes and things I went to his place and got them - paid him for them too; he wouldn't let them come without. When he told me in confidence which pieces you had taken as models, I purchased them. They are in my own room at the present moment. I'll send them down here to-morrow, so as to be ready for rehearsals."

'There was only one disagreeable incident that day, and strangely enough it came from an unexpected quarter. The men in possession got shirty because they had not been asked to the beano. It was an outrageous position for them to take, when their only duty was to be on and not off the premises. But men in their position can give a lot of trouble by simply doing nothing; and everyone who has had the misfortune of having them in the house knows that it is well to keep them in good humour. I was a bit anxious myself, for, after all, they were the servants of the Court, and they might ruin me by wilfully making some mistake about my permit, and I couldn't get it put right till Monday. If Winston didn't get his Thunderstorm Scene on the Saturday night he might get shirty in his turn and repudiate the whole transaction - then where should I be?'

'In the soup, my boy; in the soup!' said the Low Comedian.

'H-s-s-h!' said the Company in chorus; they wanted to hear what happened.

'However, Schoolbred soothed them with the promise of a dinner for themselves. On the Saturday night I saw the men in possession just sitting down to dinner. The old man had certainly done them

well. He had a dinner sent in for them from the Old Red Post Restaurant - soup and fish, and an entree, and joints and sweets and savoury and cheese and dessert and coffee. Moreover, there was champagne up to the masthead, and liqueurs, and brandy and whisky and cigars after. It was all laid out at once, and they looked as if they were enjoying the very sight. Said I to myself: "There won't be any trouble with these fellows about my permit. This banquet of Heliogabalus will make them blind. Moreover, they will be blind in another form before very long. It'll take them till to-morrow afternoon to sleep this off!"

'My assistant, Rooke, was there to see our work off, so I went home to have a good sleep. I knew there would be no time for sleep or rest when Winston began to rehearse his great scene.

'On Sunday, just as I had got my scene set up in the British ready for Winston to see it Rooke came in looking very excited, and took me on one side:

"'Oh, that infernal scoundrel!" he began. He was so excited that I found it difficult to get him to begin. However, he started at last:

"'That old scoundrel Schoolbred! What do you think that he did! It turns out that he made a contract for America - the one he told you was offered him - undertaking to stage sixteen full operas. He had them all ready, as you know; but his trouble was to get them off, for they were in the hands of the Court, with men in possession to watch them. Well, he evidently fixed last night to get off. He had a big Atlantic steamer, the Rockefeller, ready in the docks, and put the whole company, staff and chorus and all, aboard last evening. Then at midnight he had a train of carts ready - there must have been a hundred of them - and on the head of getting out our one scene he carted off the whole lot out of the Opera House. They didn't begin that work, of course, till after our job, for I was there and might have been dangerous. Of course, I left when our own stuff went. In fact, I came on the last cart, and saw it all brought into the British. That yarn about the new opera was all bunkum. The new scene, too, was only a blind to keep our lot quiet and disarm suspicion. The moon was his joke. He had the sofas put in as he said he would, and had the bailiffs carried in and laid on them. They may be there yet for all I know. It would take a whole day to make them conscious. But the job seemed to the police and others continuous - they had the order of the Receiver and the police permit, and there was nothing seemingly out of order. When once the carts got off it was no one's business to enquire where they were going to. So that is how the old rascal shot the moon. He

is off on blue water by this time with his whole outfit, and will come back with a fortune. The landlord won't grumble, because Schoolbred must pay his rent, or else they will attach him for stealing their scenery. Nor will the Receiver either, for he is in for a fat job for at least a year to come, nothing to do, and sure of being paid. Even the men in possession whom he diddled will have to be kept here, and they will have an easy time. I daresay they will expect to have every day a blow-out such as they had last night. But they won't get it. They don't know Schoolbred. He is all very generous when he wants anything, but he don't give something for nothing."

'But he did - for once. Before he came back from America he sent me the receipt from the Receiver of my rent for the whole time. He had paid it himself.'

Just then there was a distant noise which came drifting down on the wind. All started to their feet. There was the shrill sound of a whistle. Presently there was a loud knock at the side door of the saloon, and the door was dragged open, to the accompaniment of drifting snow and piercingly cold wind. Two railway men came in, shutting with difficulty the door behind them. One of them shouted out:

'It's a' richt! A snow-ploo wi' twa engines has been sent on frae Dundee. A rotary that has bored a road through the drifts. We're firin' up fast, and ye'll a' sleep in yer beds the nicht - somewhere. An' A'm thinkin' we could dae wi' some o' yer Johnny Walker - hot.'