THE INDEPENDENT FARMER

[illegible]

## A MIDNIGHT DRAMA.

What a clock was that? not noisy, but quiet and full of tone of an old gentleman, rich, prosperity, Bob Withers, the young man in his shirt sleeves, felt the silver, had [illegible] with the heat of conviction from his head the fine chestnut wig which covered the shaved scalp in imitation of the natural covering. The grief is there [illegible] had an element of panic in it, for midnight with this night, rich more lively minutely, after having wooed and won Angie McLane in his wig, he has been scowling up his courage to the point of saying to her that it is a wig, as he felt in honour he ought to do. He had put it off and put it off, never finding just the right opportunity for the confession until now the wedding is but a month off, and the task seems hard, more impossible than ever. He is at present spending a couple of days at the house of the McLanes in the country, with a view of getting acquainted with the family. For the sake of enjoying unalloyed the pleasure of Angie's society for this short time, he was compromised with his conscience by [illegible] at once and [illegible] to her and to the [illegible] and [illegible] presents.

[illegible]

At [illegible] the prospect of getting a point [illegible] family. Bob not [illegible] Bob as a [illegible] point of [illegible] and [illegible]. Disappointment to the [illegible]. Nothing but Angie's [illegible] which their [illegible] at Bob, [illegible] Angie [illegible] and George. Mr. [illegible] the family [illegible] and also [illegible] point of [illegible] opposition. Mr. McLane [illegible] Bob [illegible] Angie receiving an [illegible] which [illegible] all [illegible] Bob had [illegible] and [illegible] his gift [illegible] and [illegible] dining [illegible] the [illegible] the [illegible] guilty of [illegible] his wig [illegible] John's [illegible] with the quiet figure, he well knew, he [illegible] some.

Mr. [illegible] Bob lay awake a couple of hours thinking over these embarrassing circumstances, and the kind of [illegible] Angie's face, to which they were [illegible]. In the course of his [illegible] he came to the conclusion that his [illegible] were not on his fingers, and not only [illegible] that, after subject to [illegible] in a parlor game that [illegible] he had forgotten to replace it. A portion of his careless [illegible] instantly made him wide awake. He sprang out of bed on the library table. Had the hideous act where, and, if there, of such a nature to be picked by a servant on the morning. Associations made it unavoidable, and he found himself so uneasy about its safety that he could not sleep. Perhaps the best thing he could do was to quietly step down stairs in his stockings without disturbing anybody, and make sure about it. He knew that he could, even in the dark, steer his way straight to the library. In the sleepless, excited state of his mind the slight tinge of adventure in his plan had an attraction.

Jumping out of bed he put on a pair of his clothes and softly opening the door of the room, went across the hall and down the stairs to the ground floor. It was quite dark, but he found his way easily, having a good topographic method. From the lower hall he entered the dining room, and from that the library. The embers on the grate were still dicker ing brightly, illuminating the sumptuously furnished room with a faint, soft glow of peculiarly rich effect.

There, on the table his ring glittered in the dull firelight, and, as he slipped it on his finger, he felicitated himself on his successful enterprise. The room was so charmingly cosy that he felt it would be a sin not to linger awhile. So, throwing himself on a sofa before the grate, he fell into a delightful reverie.

[illegible] there, in that chair, Angie had sat during the evening, and there he pictured her again, mentally going and leaning over it in a caressing attitude. Fondly cheating himself. Over there had sat Mrs. McLane, and the chair back at once transformed him with two critical eyes, till he was fain to look away. The brothers were there, and there.

Bob chuckled with a cosy sense of surreptitiousness as he thought how they would stare could they see him now. The subtle pleasure of clandestine things is doubtless partly the exaggeration of the personality which takes place as the pressure of other minds is withdrawn. To persons of Bob's sensitive mental atmosphere that pressure is painful when such minds are hostile, and often irksome even when they are friendly, if not in perfect accord. So that now is was with a positively voluptuous sensation that his personality expanded till it filled and felt the whole room.

The fire burned, and busily flew the shuttles of his fancy, weaving once again the often-varied patterns of the future. Those shuttles had little leisure nowadays, for all the web must be unravelled and rewoven, that through it all might run the golden thread of Angie's love. How rarely did it light up the fabric, before so dull and dark!

The bronze mantle clock sounded with a silvery tinkle the hour of two, but the sound fell apparently unheeded on the ear of the dreamer. It was a full minute before the impression reached his mind. There are times when the thoughts throng so that each new sensation has to take its place in the rear and wait its turn to get attention. Then he stirred and roused himself, emerging reluctantly from the warm, voluptuous atmosphere of imagination, as one leaves an invigorating bath. He had been lying thus a full hour, and it was high time to return to bed. He left the library and started across the dining room with a hasty step.

Perhaps long gazing at the fire had dazzled his eyes, or perhaps his haste, together with an undue confidence in his skill in navigation by dead reckoning, rendering him less careful than when he had come down. However that may be, a light stand which he had easily avoided then, he now blundered fully upon.

Everybody knows that when one stubs the toe in the dark, instead of delivering the blow when the foot is moving slowest, at the beginning or the end of the step, it always happens so that the toe strikes with the maximum momentum. So it was this time. If Bob had been kicking football he could not have made a nicer calculation of force, and the shock sent the stand completely over.

It would have made noise enough anyhow, but it must happen that on this stand the family silver was laid out for breakfast, and the clanger was similar to that of Apollo's silver bow, when time to let fly at the Grecian host before Troy.

Bob stood paralyzed with horror. Even the anguish of a terribly stubbed toe was forgotten in an overpowering sense of the awful mess he had made, and the unimaginable consequences that would ensue. As the hideous clanger and clatter rang through the house, shattering its sacred silence, he shrank together and made himself small, as if he could impart a sympathetic shrinkage to the noise. The rackets to his own ears were splitting enough, but he felt, in addition, as if he heard it with the ears of all the family, and he willed before the conception of the feelings that were at that moment starting up in their minds toward the unknown cause of it.

His first rational idea was, to bolt for his room, and gain it before any one was fairly roused. But the shock had so scattered his wits that he could not at once recollect his bearings, and he relied with indescribable sensations that he was lost. He consumed [illegible] moments bumping himself all about the room before he found the right door.

As he reached the foot of the stairs voices were audible above, and lights were gleaming down. His retreat was cut off, he could not get back to his room without being discovered. He now distinguished the voice of Mrs. McLane in an agitated tone entreating somebody to be careful and not to get shot, the gruff voices of the brothers responding, and then their steps rapidly descending the stairs. Should he go up and take the risk of a volley while announcing himself? It would make a pretty ribbon. Presenting himself in such a guise and under such circumstances, what sort of a reception could he expect from John, who treated him with undisguised contempt in the drawing room, and whose study it was to place him at a disadvantage? He might have hesitated longer, but at this moment the voice of Angie, coming down to her brothers to be careful, decided him. He could not face her under such terribly false circumstances, and without his wig.

All this took place far quicker than I can write it. The glimmer of the descending lamp already shone dimly in the hall, and Bob frantically looked about him for a hiding-place. But all the furniture stood up too high from the floor, and the corners were disgustingly bare. He sprang into the dining room, but in the dark he could not see how the land lay, and hurried on into the library.

The dying fire still shed a dim light around, and he eagerly canvassed the various possibilities of concealment which the room offered. Youthful experiences in the game of hide and seek now stood him in good stead, and showed him at a glance the inutility as refuges of half a dozen places that would have deluded one less practiced by the specious but too partially guessed shelter they afforded.

Vainly seeking a safe refuge, he ran round the apartment like a rat in a trap. He already heard the brothers in the dining-room picking up the silver and wondering to find it all there, when, obeying a sudden inspiration, he clambered upon a lofty bookcase that ran across one end of the room, sliding above the dining-room door, and reaching within a few feet of the ceiling. In cold blood he never could have scaled it. Lying at full length upon the top of the bookcase with his back to the wall, the bulge of him was still visible from the further part of the room, in case it should occur to his pursuers to look so high.

The latter now entered the library, and, peering over the edge of the bookcase, Bob recognized with singular amazement the two gentlemen with whom he had been quietly conversing a little earlier in the evening. They were arrayed in faultless evening dress, and their manner, although unpolitely enough, was calm and polished. Now he saw them half dressed, with dishevelled hair, John carrying a student's lamp in his left hand, and in his right an ugly looking cane sword with a blade painfully naked, while George held a revolver at full cock.

Talking in a low tone, as they called one another's attention to various spots where possibly the burglar might be concealed, they went slowly from corner to corner, probing every recess with the sword, and in an attitude of strained attention to every sound. Their faces, particularly lit by the mingled fire and lamp light, showed a fierce gamer's look that made Bob fairly sick.

He did not dare to look at them long lest the magnetism of his gaze should attract their inveterate attention. Nay, by even such a trifle the effort not to think of them, from the fear that some physical contact might have the same effect—for he believed strongly, though vaguely, in the mysteries of animal magnetism—and had a notion that a powerful effort to such influence might direct the presence of his visitor by the very terror the latter had of him.

He could scarcely believe his fortune, when, a moment later, the two brothers passed again beneath him back into the dining-room.

From there they went on through the rooms beyond, and the sound of their footsteps died away entirely.

Perhaps five minutes after, they returned—that is, so far as the dining-room and Bob gathered from their conversation that they had found one of the fastenings in the basement in a condition indicating that the burglar might have escaped there.

Mrs. McLane and Angie, having satisfied themselves that the coast was clear, descended to the dining-room, and a lively discussion of all aspects of the problem ensued, which was highly edifying to Bob.

Then the conversation became still more interesting, as it turned on himself. He heard Mrs. McLane saying:

'He must be a hard sleeper, for I knocked several times on his door.'

Then one of the brothers grunted something contemptuously, and he heard Angie's voice excusing him on the ground that he must be tired after his long journey.

'Are you sure you looked everywhere in the library?' was Mrs. McLane's next question, at which a cold sweat broke out on Bob's face. He had just begun to feel quite comfortable.

John and George, however, declared that they had looked everywhere.

'Did you look under the sofa?'

'Behind the window curtains?'

'In that dark corner by the bookcase?' asked the ladies in succession.

Ingenious cruelty of late! Even Angie was racking her brain to guess his hiding place. What if it should be she who hit upon it!

Bob drew a breath of relief as John replied, with some asperity, to all these questions, that he had told them once that they looked everywhere.

This silenced them, but Angie said, a moment after:

'Just let me ask one more question. Did you look on top of the bookcase?'

It seemed to Bob that he died then, and came to life again to hear John reply, contemptuously:

'Over the bookcase? There's no room there; and, if there were, nobody but a monkey could get up.'

'There's room enough,' persisted Angie, 'and I have often noticed, when sitting in the library, what a nice hiding place it would be. What if he should be up there now, and hear what I'm saying!' she added in an agitated whisper.

'Nonsense!' said John.

'Well, there is no harm in looking, anyway,' said Mrs. McLane.

'Come along, then,' grumbled John. 'You shall see for yourselves.'

At this Bob shut his eyes, and turned his face to the wall. The ostrich instinct is the human instinct of despair. He tried to fly away from himself, and leave his body there like a derelict. The effort was desperate, and seemed almost successful. But he could not quite sever the connection, though his soul appeared to be hovering over his body, only attached by a single thread but a thread which, alas! would not break.

A moment after they all passed through the door directly beneath him, and, going clear to the other end of the library, stood on tiptoe, and peered at his hiding place. There seemed to be eyes in his back, which felt their scrutiny. But the lamp they carried did not suffice to bring out his figure clearly.

'I'm sure I see something,' said Angie, getting up on a chair.

'It's only the shadow of the firelight,' replied John.

'Light the gas and let us make sure,' said Mrs. McLane.

George stood upon a chair under the chandelier, and lighted one of the burners.

An inarticulate ejaculation fell from every mouth. A human figure was distinctly visible, reclining along the top of the bookcase, with his face toward the wall. The ladies would been forthwith run away but for the fact that one door of the room was directly beneath the bookcase, and the other close to it. Upon Bob's paralyzed senses fell the sharp words of John:

'We've got you. Get down!'

He did not move, but at the summons his soul, with inexpressible reluctance and disgust, began to return from the end of its floating thread, and reinhabit the quarters for which it could not quite shake off responsibility.

'Get up, or I'll shoot!' said George.

'Oh, don't shoot him,' cried Mrs. McLane, while Bob, still motionless, dimly hoped he would.

'Get up!' reiterated John; and he did get up. His own will was inactive, and John's was the force that moved his muscles. He turned around and sat up, his legs dangling over the edge of the bookcase, and his wet, white, wretched face, blankly directed toward the group, a most pitiable figure.

'Jump down,' said John; 'and, if you try to escape, you will get shot.'

Bob let himself drop without regard to how he was to alight, and in consequence was severely bruised against a chair and the edges of the bookcase.

He stood facing the group. His eyes mechanically sought Angie's. What was his surprise not to perceive in her expression of mingled curiosity and fright the slightest sign of recognition! A glance showed him that it was the same with the others. John and George evidently supposed they were dealing with an ordinary burglar, and the others were apparently quite as devoid of suspicion as to his identity. His wig! He had forgotten all about it. That explained their singular demeanor.

The bald man in stockings, trousers and shirt, caught hiding in the library after an attempt on the silver, quite naturally failed to recall to their minds the youth of rather foppish attire and luxuriant locks who had made them good night a few hours previous. As this fact and its explanation broke upon Bob's mind he felt an immense sense of relief, instantly followed by a more poignant perception of the inexplicable falsity and comic absurdity of his position. He had little time to think it over and determine his best course.

John stepped forward, and, with the point of his cane sword motioned him into a corner, thus leaving the way clear to the ladies, who at once hurried into the dining-room, throwing a glance of fear and revulsion upon Bob as they passed. Angie paused at the door only and asked:

'What are you going to do with the scoundrel, dear?'

Bob even then was able to notice that he had never seen her so variously beautiful as now, with her pale face and lustrous eyes, with the light falling over her charming shoulders, while her eyes scintillated with excitement. She would have blushed to have been seen by him in such an undress before, but, with an odd feeling of being double, he perceived that she now regarded him as she would have an animal.

'George and I will attend to him. You had better go to bed,' replied John to her question; and then he sent George after some cord, meanwhile standing in front of Bob with cocked revolver. Had he scanned his prisoner closely, he might have detected something familiar in his lineaments, but in careless contempt he took him in with a sweeping glance as an average burglar, whose identity was a question for the police.

Bob had not uttered a word. In the complex falsity of his position he could not indeed master presence of mind to resolve on any course, but regarded with a kind of fatality the extraordinary direction events were taking. But when George returned with the rope, and ordered him to put his hands behind him, he said, in a tone so quiet that it surprised himself:

'Hold on, Mr. McLane; this joke has gone far enough. I am Robert Withers, at your service, and respectfully decline to be considered in the light of a burglar any further.'

George's jaw dropped with astonishment, and John was scarcely less taken aback.

'D—d if he isn't!' ejaculated the former, after a moment, in a tone of incredulous conviction, as he recognized at once the voice and now the features of Bob; 'but where's your hair?'

Bob blushed painfully.

'I wear a wig,' he replied, 'and tonight, coming down stairs after you were all abed to get my ring which I had left on the table here, I did not fully dress. (Going back it was my luck to stumble over that cursed stand in the other room!)'

'But what did you hide for?' asked John, sharply.

Bob just touched his bald head and replied:

'I heard the ladies up.'

John pitched the revolver on the sofa and stood pensive. Finally he said, with a sardonic smile:

'Mr. Withers, how do you propose to get out of this? Shall I call in the ladies and let you explain? They will presently be wanting to know what we have done with the burglar.'

Bob made no reply. Already bitterly humiliated, he saw no way of avoiding indefinite and yet bitterer humiliations.

John thought a few minutes longer and then he said:

'Take a seat, Mr. Withers; I have a proposition to make.'

They sat down.

'You are aware,' continued John, in the calmest, most imperturbable tone, 'that I don't like your match with my sister, and have done my best to break it off. But she is an obstinate girl, and I had pretty much given up hope. These peculiar circumstances have most unexpectedly put you in my power, and I propose to make the most of my advantage. If I were to call in Angie now and introduce you, I feel tolerably well assured that it would be the end of your matrimonial expectations in that quarter. Still, you shall have a chance for your life. I will call her if you say so!' And John rose.

'For Go's sake don't let her come in here!' groaned Bob in abject panic.

John grinned, stepped toward the door, and then turned back irresolutely, muttering:

'Wonder if it wouldn't be the shortest way out of it to call her down? Then, with a saving reflection upon the uncertainty of a woman's course under any given set of circumstances, he came back, and resuming himself opposite Bob, said, with a sardonic smile: 'So you don't like my little suggestion of giving you one more chance with Angie? On the whole, I think you are wise. The other alternative is to leave the house at once, relinquish your engagement, and never see her again. Make your choice, and as quickly as convenient, for I'm getting sleepy,' and he yawned lazily.

Bob sat in an attitude of utter dejection, staring at the ashes of the fire, which an hour ago had blazed as brightly as his own love-lit fancies. He was completely demoralized and almost incapable of thought or resolution. There was something so odd-looking, dismantled figure, half dressed, with that queer, white, bulbous head, dimmed black eyes, and expression of crushing shame and defeat that it would have moved almost any one to compassion. It did stir compunctions in George, but there was no mercy in John's still blue eyes. Two or three minutes passed in a silence so complete that even the almost noiseless movement of the French clock on the mantel was directly audible.

'You are taking altogether too long to make up your mind, Mr. Withers. It will make shorter work to call Angie,' finally said John, sharply, his patience quite at an end. He rose and stepped to the door as he spoke.

'It won't be necessary, John—here I am!' said a clear voice, with a sharp ring in it that the family had learned to know meant decisive work, and Angie stepped into the room, her blue eyes flashing with indignation and her lips trembling with scorn, beautiful as a goddess.

Bob started up from his abject attitude and stood facing her with the look of a man waiting his doom from the firing-squad. As he stood there, drawn up to his full height, with just a touch of appeal softening the defiance of his expression, it was a manly face and figure in spite of all. But her brothers received Angie's first attention.

'You mean, cowardly fellows!' she said, in tones of concentrated contempt. 'I would not have believed that men were so mean! And I am almost as much ashamed of you, Mr. Withers,' she added, turning to Bob, with a softer but angry voice. 'Did you think, sir, that I took you for your beauty? I don't care if you wear forty wigs, or none. You are absolutely rare, sir.' She was smiling now. 'You should know that when a woman loves a man it is of grace and not of works. Anyhow, John,' she added, turning to him, as if constituting his slight figure with Bob's fine proportions, 'Mr. Withers doesn't wear another wig. Withers, please stand over this way. Come into the drawing room, I'm sure your good manners will excuse us. I'm sorry we must trouble you to go out by the window, but you must go out that way, for I'm afraid we shall be busy for some time to come. I'm so sorry, John, that you will have to be up so early in the morning to open the door for Mr. Withers. I'm afraid you will be very sleepy, but it will be such a good thing for you to have done a good deed early in the morning. Good-morning, Mr. Withers. Mind the step. Good-morning.'

Bob was in the garden. The door had closed on the last of the group, and the last glimpse he had caught was of Angie's face, with the light falling over her charming shoulders, while her eyes scintillated with excitement. She would have blushed to have been seen by him in such an undress before, but, with an odd feeling of being double, he perceived that she now regarded him as she would have an animal.

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