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THE STROLLERS

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM,

Author of "Under the Rose"

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"Hello!" he said. "Avast, my dear!" he called out.

Echoing in that still place, his harsh tones produced a startling effect, and the figure before him moved faster and faster, casting a glance behind her at the man from the river, who, with snatches of song, started in uncertain but determined pursuit. As the heavy footsteps sounded nearer she increased her pace, with eyes bent upon the distant gate. Darker seemed to grow the way. More menacing the shadows outstretched across the path. Louder crunched the boots on the shell walk. More audible became the words of the song that flowed from his lips, when the sound of a sudden and violent altercation replaced the hoarse toned cadence, an altercation that was of brief duration, characterized by long-shoreman oaths and followed by silence. And then a figure, not that of the tuneful waterman, sprang to the side of the startled girl.

"Miss Carew!" exclaimed a well remembered voice.

Bewildered, breathing quickly, she gazed from Edward Mauville, who thus unexpectedly accosted her, to the prostrate form lying motionless on the road. The rude awakening from her day dream in the hush of that peaceful place and the surprising sequence had dazed her senses, and for the moment it seemed something tragic must have happened.

"Is he dead?" she asked quickly, unable to withdraw her glance from the immovable figure stretched out in the dim light on the path.

"No fear," said Mauville quietly, almost thoughtfully, although his eyes were yet bright from the encounter. "You can't kill his kind," he added contemptuously. "Brutes from coal barges or raftsmen from the head waters! He struck against a stone when he fell, and what with that and the liquor in him will rest there awhile. He'll come to without remembering what has happened."

Turning moodily, the land baron walked slowly down the road away from the gate. She thought he was about to leave her, when he paused as though looking for something, stooped to the ground and returned, holding out a garment.

"You dropped your wrap, Miss Carew," he said awkwardly. "The night is cold, and you will need it." She offered no resistance when he placed it over her shoulders, indeed seemed unconscious of the attention.

"Don't you think we had better go?" he went on. "It won't hurt him," indicating the motionless body, "to stay here, the brute!"

Her answering look was so gentle, so sad, an unwonted feeling of compunction seized him. He repented of his harshness and added less brusquely:

"Why did you remain so late?"

"I did not realize how late it had become."

"Your thoughts must have been very absorbing," he exclaimed quickly, his brow once more overcast.

Not difficult was it for him to surmise upon whom her mind had been bent, and involuntarily his jaw set disagreeably, while he looked at her resentfully. In that light he could but dimly discern her face. Her bonnet had fallen from her head, her eyes were bent before her as though striving to penetrate the gathering darkness. With his sudden spell of jealousy came the temptation to clasp her in his arms in that silent, isolated place, but the figure of the sailor came between him and the desire, while pride, the heritage of the gentleman, fought down the longing. This self conquest was not accomplished, however, without a sacrifice of temper, for after a pause he observed:

"There is no accounting for a woman's taste."

She did not controvert this statement, but the start she gave told him the shaft had sped home.

"An outlaw! An outcast!" exclaimed the patroon, stung beyond endurance by his thoughts.

Still no reply; only more hurried footsteps. Around them sounded a gentle rustling. A lizard scrambled out of their path through the crackling leaves. A bat or some other winged creature suddenly whirred before them and vanished. They had now approached the gate, through which they passed

"Is he dead?"

and found themselves on the road leading directly to the city, whose lights had already begun to twinkle in the dusk.

The cheering rumble of a carriage and the aspect of the not far distant town quickened her spirits and imparted elasticity to her footsteps. Upon the land baron they produced an opposite effect, for he was obviously reluctant to abandon the interview, however unsatisfactory it might be. There was nothing to say, and yet he was loath to leave her. There was nothing to accomplish, and yet he wished to remain with her. For this reason as they drew near the city his mood became darker, like the night around them. Instinctively she felt the turbulent passions stirring in his bosom. His sudden silence, his dogged footsteps, reawakened her misgivings. Furtively she regarded him, but his eyes were fixed straight before him on the soft luster above the city, the reflection of the lights, and she knew and mistrusted his thoughts. Although she found his silence more menacing than his words, she could think of nothing to say to break the spell, and so they continued to walk mutely side by side. An observer seeing them beneath the cypress, a lovers' promenade, with its soft, enfolding shadows, would have taken them for a well matched couple who had no need for language.

But when they had emerged from that romantic lane and entered the city the land baron breathed more freely. She was now surrounded by movement and din; the seclusion of the country gave way to the stir of the city; she was no longer dependent on his good offices; his role of protector had ended when they left the cypress walk behind them.

His brow cleared; he glanced at her with ill concealed admiration; he noticed with secret pride the attention she attracted from passersby, the sidelong looks of approval that followed her through the busy streets. The land baron expanded into his old self; he strode at her side, gratified by the scrutiny she invited; assurance radiated from his eyes like some magnetic heat; he played at possession willfully, perversely. "Why not?" whispered Hope. "A woman's mind is shifting ever. Her fancy—a breath! The other is gone. Why"—

"It was not accident my being in the cemetery, Miss Carew," said Mauville, suddenly covering her with his glance. Meeting her look of surprise unflinchingly, he continued: "I followed you there; through the streets, into the country! My seeing you first was chance, my presence in the burial ground the result of that chance. The inevitable result!" he repeated softly. "As inevitable as life! Life; what is it? Influences which control us; forces which bind us! It is you, or all; you or nothing!"

She did not reply. His voice, vibrating with feeling, touched no answering chord. Nevertheless, a new, inexplicable wave of sorrow moved her. It might be he had cared for her as sincerely as it was possible for his wayward heart to care for any one. Perhaps time would yet soften his faults and temper his rashness. With that shade of sorrow for him there came compassion as well; compassion that overlooked the past and dwelt on the future.

She raised her steady eyes. "Why should it be 'I or nothing,' as you put it?" she finally answered slowly. "Influences may control us in a measure, but we may also strive for something. We can always strive."

"For what? For what we don't want? That's the philosophy of stoics, moralists, Miss Carew," he exclaimed. "That's your modern ethics of duty. Playing tricks with happiness! The game isn't worth the candle. Or, if you believe in striving," he added, half resentfully, half imploringly, "strive to care for me but a little. But a little!" he said again. "I, who once wanted all and would have nothing but all, am content to ask, to plead, for but a little."

"I see no reason," she replied wearily, yet not unkindly, "why we should not be friends."

"Friends!" he answered bitterly. "I do not beg for a loaf, but a crumb, yet you refuse me that! I will wait. Only a word of encouragement. Will you not give it?"

She turned and looked into his eyes, and before she spoke he knew what her answer would be.

"How can I?" she said simply. "Why should I promise something I can never fulfill?"

He held her glance as though loath to have it leave him.

"May I see you again?" he asked abruptly.

She shook her head. His gaze fell, seeing no softening in her clear look.

"You are well named," he repeated, more to himself than to her. "Constance! You are constant in your dislikes as well as your likes."

"I have no dislike for you," she replied. "It seems to have been left behind me somewhere."

"Only indifference, then," he said dully.

"No; not indifference!"

"You do care what—may become of me?"

"You should do so much—be so much in the world," she answered thoughtfully.

"Sans peur et sans reproche!" he cried, half amused, half cheerlessly. "What a pity I met you! Too late!"

They were now at the broad entrance of the brilliantly lighted hotel. Several loungers, smoking their after dinner cigars, gazed at the couple curiously.

"Mauville's a lucky dog," said one.

"Yes; he was born with a silver spoon," replied the person addressed.

As he passed through the envious throng the land baron had regained his self command, although his face was marked with an unusual pallor. In his mind one thought was paramount—that the walk begun at the burial ground was drawing to an end, their last walk, the finale of all between them. Yet he could call to mind nothing further to say. His story had been told, the conclusion reached. She, too, had spoken, and he knew she would never speak differently. Bewildered and unable to adjust his new and strange feelings, it dawned upon him he had never understood himself and her, that he had never really known what love was, and he stood abashed, confronted by his own ignorance. Passion, caprice, fancy—he had seen depth in their shallows, but now looked down and discerned the pebbly bottom. All this and much more surged through his brain as he made his way through the crowd and, entering the corridor of the hotel, took formal leave of the young girl at the stairway.

"Good night, Miss Carew," he said gravely.

"Good night," she replied. And then on the steps she turned and looked down at him, extending her hand. "Thank you!"

That half timid, low "thank you!" he knew was all he would ever receive from her. He hardly felt the hand clasp. He was hardly conscious when she turned away.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"IN the will of the Marquis de Ligne, probated yesterday, all of the property, real and personal, is left to his daughter, Constance," wrote Straws in his paper shortly after the passing of the French nobleman. "The document states this disposition of property is made as 'an act of atonement and justice to my daughter, whose mother I deserted, taking advantage of the French law to annul my marriage in England.' The legitimacy of the birth of this, his only child, is thereupon fully acknowledged by the marquis after a lapse of many years and long after the heretofore unrecognized wife had died deserted and forgotten. Thrown on her own resources, the young child, with no other friend than Manager Barnes, battled with the world, now playing in taverns or barns, like the players of interludes, the strollers of old; or 'vagabonds,' as the great and mighty Junius from his lofty plane termed them. The story of that period of 'vagrant' life adds one more chapter to the annals of strolling players which already include such names as Kemble, Siddons and Kean.

"From the Junius category to a public favorite of New Orleans has been no slight transition, and now to appear in the role of daughter of a marquis and heiress to a considerable estate—truly man, and woman, play many parts in this brief span called life. But in making her sole heir the marquis specifies a condition which will bring regrets to many of the admirers of the actress. He robs her of her birthright from her mother. The will stipulates that the recipient give up her profession, not because it is other than a noble one, but 'that she may the better devote herself to the duties of her new position and by her beneficence and charity remove the stain left upon an honored name by my second wife, the Duchess d'Argens.'"

On the same day this public exposition appeared Barnes and the young actress were seated in the law office of Marks & Culver, a room overlooking a courtyard brightened by statues and urns of flowers. While the manager and Constance waited for the attorney to appear they were discussing, not for the first time, the proviso of the will to which Straws had regretfully alluded.

"Yes," said Barnes, folding the newspaper which contained Straws' article and placing it in his pocket, "you should certainly give up the stage. We must think of the disappointments, the possible failure, the slender reward. There was your mother—such an actress! Yet toward the last the people flocked to a younger rival. I have often thought anxiously of your future, for I am old—yes, there is no denying it—and any day I may leave you, dependent solely upon yourself."

"Do not speak like that," she answered tenderly. "We shall be together many, many years."

"Always if I had my way," he returned heartily. "But with this legacy you are superior to the fickle public. In fact, you are now a part of the capricious public, my dear," he added in a jocular tone, "and may applaud the 'heavy father,' myself, or prattle about prevailing styles while the buskined tragedian is strutting below your box. Why turn to a blind bargain? Fame is a jade, only caught after our illusions are gone, and she seems not half so sweet as when pursuing her in our dreams."

Now, reading the anxiety in his face as he watched her, she smiled reassuringly, her glance, full of love, meeting his.

"Everything shall be as you wish," she said softly. "You know what is best!"

The manager's face lighted perceptibly, but before he could answer the door opened and Culver, the attorney, entered. With ruddy countenance and youthful bearing, in antithesis to the hair silvered with white, he was one of those southern gentlemen who grow old gracefully. The law was his taskmaster; he practiced from a sense of duty, but ever held that those who rushed to court were likely to repeat the experience of Voltaire, who had twice been ruined—once when he lost a lawsuit, the second time when he won one! Nevertheless, people persisted in coming to Culver wantonly welcoming unknown ills.

"Well, Miss Carew," he now exclaimed, after warmly greeting his visitors, "have you disburdened yourself of prejudice against this estate? Wealth may be a little hardship at first, but soon you won't mind it."

"Not a bit!" spoke up Barnes. "It's as easy to get used to as—poverty, and we've had plenty of that!"

"You know the other condition?" she said, half defiantly, half sadly. "You are to be with me always."

"How can you teach an old dog new tricks?" protested Barnes. "How can you make a fine man about town out of a 'heavy father?'"

"The 'heavy father' is my father. I never knew any other. I am glad I never did."

"Hoity toity!" he exclaimed scoffingly, but pleased nevertheless.

"You can't put me off that way," she said decisively, with a sudden flash in her eyes he knew too well to cross. "Either you leave the stage, too, or"—

"Of course, my dear, of course"—

"Then it's all settled you will accept the incumbrance to which you have fallen heir," resumed Culver. "Even if there had been no will in your favor, the state of Louisiana follows the French law, and the testator can under no circumstances alienate more than half his property if he leave issue or descendants. Had the old will remained, its provisions could not have been legally carried out."

"The old will!" said Barnes. "Then there was another will?"

"One made before he was aware of your existence, Miss Carew, in favor of his ward, Ernest Saint-Prosper."

"Ernest Saint-Prosper!"

Constance's cheeks flamed crimson, and her quick start of surprise did not escape the observant lawyer. Barnes, too, looked amazed over this unexpected intelligence.

"Saint-Prosper was the marquis' ward?" he cried.

The attorney transferred his gaze from the expressive features of his client to the open countenance of the manager. "Yes," he said.

"And would have inherited this property but for Constance?"

"Exactly. But you knew him, Mr. Barnes?"

"He was an occupant of the chariot, sir," replied the manager, with some feeling. "We met in the Shadengo valley. The company was in sore straits, and—and—to make a long story short, he joined our band and traversed the continent with us. And so he was the marquis' ward! It seems almost incredible."

"Yes," affirmed Culver; "when General Saint-Prosper, his father, died, Ernest Saint-Prosper, who was then but a boy, became the marquis' ward and a member of his household."

"Well, well, how things do come

He stood for a moment watching them.

about!" ruminated Barnes. "To think he should have been the prospective heir and Constance the real one!"

"Where is he now?" asked the attorney thoughtfully.

"He has gone to Mexico; enlisted. But how do you know he"—

"Had expectations? The marquis told me about a quarrel they had had. He was a stanch imperialist, the young man as firm a republican. What would be the natural outcome? They parted in bitter anger."

"And then the marquis made him his heir?" exclaimed the manager incredulously. "How do you reconcile that?"

The attorney smiled. "Through the oddity of my client. 'Draw up my will,' said the marquis to me one day, 'leaving all my property to this republican young dog. That will cut off the distant relatives who made the sign of the cross behind my back, as though I were the evil one. They expect it all. He expects nothing. It will be a rare joke. I leave them my affection and the privilege of having masses said for my soul.' The marquis was always of a satirical temperament."

"So it seems," commented the manager. "But he changed his mind and his will again?"

"After he met Miss Carew."

"Met me!" exclaimed Constance, aroused from a maze of reflection.

"Near the cathedral. He walked and talked with you."

"That poor old man"—

"And then came here, acknowledged you as his daughter and drew up the final document."

"That accounts for a call I had from him," cried Barnes, telling the story of the marquis' visit. "Strange I did not suspect something of the truth at the time," he concluded, "for his manner was certainly unusual."

A perplexed light shone in the girl's eyes. She clasped and unclasped her hands quickly, turning to the lawyer.

"Their quarrel was only a political difference?" she asked at length.

"Yes," said the other slowly. "Saint-Prosper refused to support the fugitive king. Throughout the parliamentary government, the restoration under Louis XVIII. and the reign of King Charles X. the marquis had ever a devout faith in the divine right of monarchs. He annulled his marriage in England with your mother to marry the Duchess d'Argens, a relative of the royal princess. But Charles abdicated, and the duchess died. All this, however, is painful to you, Miss Carew?"

"Only such as relates to my mother," she replied in a clear tone. "I suppose I should feel grateful for this fortune, but I am afraid I do not. Please go on."

Culver leaned back in his chair, his glance bent upon a discolored statue of Psyche in the courtyard. "Had the marquis attended to his garden, like Candide or your humble servant, and eschewed the company of kings, he might have been as care free as he was wretched. His monarchs were knocked down like ninepins. Louis XVIII. was a man of straw, Charles X. a feather top and Louis Philippe a toy ruler. The marquis' domestic life was as unblest as his political career. The frail duchess left him a progeny of scandals. These, the only offspring of the iniquitous dame, were piquantly dressed in the journals for public parade. Fancy, then, his delight in disinheriting his wife's relatives and leaving you, his daughter, his fortune and his name!"

"His name!" she repeated sadly. With averted face she watched the fountain in the garden. "If he had given it to my mother," she continued, "but now—I do not care for it. Her name is all I want." Her voice trembled, and she exclaimed passionately: "I should rather Mr. Saint-Prosper would keep the property and I—my work. After denying my mother and deserting her, how can I accept anything from him?"

"Under the new will," said Culver, "the estate does not revert to Mr. Saint-Prosper in any event. But you might divide it with him," he added suddenly.

"How could I do that?" she asked without looking up.

"Marry him," laughed the attorney.

But the jest met with scant response, his fair client remaining motionless as a statue, while Barnes gazed at her furtively. Culver's smile gradually faded. Uncertain how to proceed, realizing his humor had somehow miscarried, he was not sorry when the manager arose, saying:

"Well, my dear, it is time we were at the theater."

"Won't you accept this nosegay from my garden, Miss Carew?" urged the lawyer in a propitiatory tone as they were leaving.

And the attorney not only accompanied them to the door, but downstairs to the street, where he stood for a moment watching them drive down the thoroughfare. Then he slowly returned, breathing heavily—invidious contradiction of his youthful assumption—and shaking his head as he mounted to his room.

"Culver, you certainly put your foot in it that time!" he muttered. "How she froze at my suggestion! Has there been some passage of arms between them? Apparently! But here am I, pondering over romances, with all this legal business staring me in the face!" His glance swept a chaos of declarations, bills, affidavits and claims. "Contions, bills, affidavits and claims. "Contions, bills, affidavits and claims. "Contions