

She was a plump little woman, whose eyes still shone brightly under her grey hair, and whose face, in spite of its wrinkles, still beamed with good humour and kindness of heart.

Admitted by a servant girl, the Author strode at once into the sitting-room, and found the little Lady seated before a large table near the window, and looking the picture of absolute despair.

"Oh, Charles," she cried the moment he appeared, "I'm so glad you've come. Mrs. Mount Stephen has just sent us this present from the Cape to decorate the new drawing-room."

The Author cast one glance at the table, groaned, and collapsed into a chair. He could scarcely believe his eyes! The table was strewn all over with the brilliant feathers and plumage of many peacocks, some unset, others already fashioned into beautiful screens and fans.

"Good heavens," he cried, "it is a conspiracy! We are ruined! More peacocks' feathers! More ill luck! Why, in God's name, did you take them in?"

"I did not know what the box contained! When I saw what the present was I almost fainted away! But I have sent for a man to come and fetch them. Of course, he will be glad to buy them, for they are really magnificent."

The Author paced furiously up and down the room, and as he did so told the lady in angry periods of what had taken place at the theatre.

"The villain came to rehearsal with one of the infernal things in his buttonhole; and when I remonstrated accused me—

me—of superstition! Of course the play is done for, and who knows what further calamity this visitation of argus-eyed horrors portends! I read the piece to the company on a Friday, too, if you remember!"

The Lady nodded, and gave vent to a deep sigh, while the Author rang the bell to summon the waiting maid.

"Take those infernal things into the front sitting-room. A man is coming to look at them—when he comes let me know."

It took the girl several journeys to and fro, with both arms loaded, to remove the unwelcome gifts; but it was done at last, and then the Lady looked piteously up at her friend.

"Perhaps, after all, Charles," she said, "peacocks' feathers are not so *very* unlucky!" and when he snorted angrily, she added, "At any rate, it's absurd, perhaps, to worry over such a trifle."

"No doubt you think me a fool!" retorted the Author, "but let me tell you that I'm not in the least superstitious. It's the impudence, the audacity of the whole thing that annoys me! It's nothing short of a conspiracy against my peace of mind."

There was no more to be said, and a very gloomy hour followed, during which the Author sulked over his tea in the drawing-room, and declined, all overtures to further conversation. At last, when the tension had become more and more unbearable, the servant announced that a gentleman was below waiting to see him.

"The man at last!" growled the Author, and shuffled downstairs into the front sitting-room, which looked out upon the busy streets. On a table close to the window lay the great collection of peacocks' feathers, and bending over them, with his back to the Author as he entered, was a man.

"I want you to price these things and take them away instantly," said the Author, "I don't want to keep them; but of course they're worth something—a few sovereigns, at any rate, so—"

As he spoke the man turned and showed to the Author's astonished gaze the face of the impudent Comedian who had been dismissed that very morning.

"You here?" gasped the Author, recoiling in horror, "why in the devil's name—"

"Forgive my intrusion, sir," said Thornton respectfully, "I have come to beg your pardon!"

His flippant manner had quite departed—his voice was low and respectful; there were tears in his eyes.

"I've been thinking it over, and I see how badly I behaved. You are a great author and I'm only a poor mummer, and—and I'd no right

to speak to you as I did. But the fact is I was in trouble—I'd left sickness at home—and, and I've not come here to ask you to give me back the part—I suppose I can't play it—but to tell you how it happened that I came to rehearsal with that peacock's feather."

The Author listened stupefied, at a loss what to say or do. The Comedian proceeded:—

"The fact is, sir, that everybody doesn't associate ill luck with peacocks' feathers. My poor wife doesn't; and this morning, when I was going to rehearsal, she put that feather into my coat and said, 'Take this for luck, Jack; you know peacocks' feathers always bring luck to me, and, God willing, this one will bring luck to your engagement and make the piece a great success.' That's all, sir! I thought I'd like to tell you and to let you know I'm not such a cad as I'm afraid you think me."

So saying, he bowed deeply, and hat in hand moved towards the door before the Author could ejaculate a word; but in the doorway he came face to face with the little Lady of the house, who had been listening to every word of the interview.

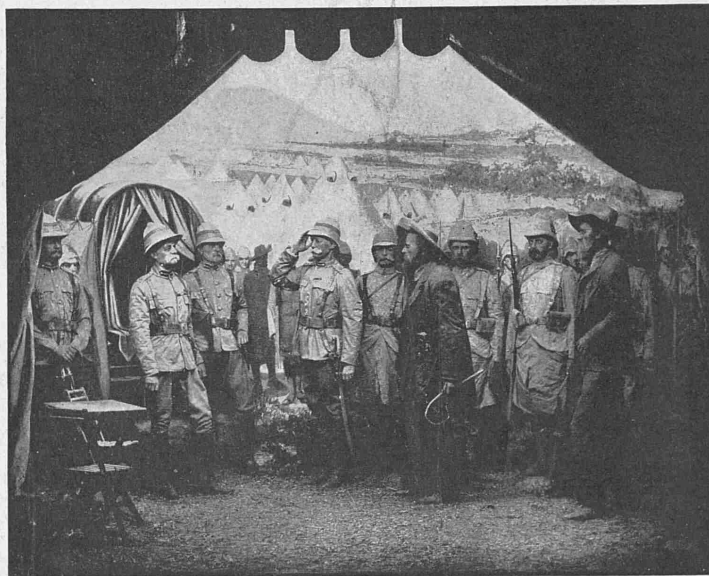
"Charles," said the little lady, while the Comedian bowed to her, "ask the gentleman to leave his address!"

The Comedian started—the Author looked puzzled.

"His address?" murmured the latter.

"Yes, you may want to write to him in case the part should still be open."

The Comedian sighed and drew out a card.



WAR IN WAX: CRONJE'S SURRENDER TO LORD ROBERTS, AT MADAME TUSSAUD'S

"I live there, in Bloomsbury," he said, handing it to the Lady with a bow, "and of course I should be glad of another chance; but I know I am not very clever in that line of business, and—and—Good evening! Forgive me for having troubled you!"

The next moment he was gone, leaving the Author and the little Lady face to face with each other. There was silence for a few moments; then the Lady went to the door and said, "Come in."

A man entered with a tradesman's bow.

"The man to look at the feathers, Charles," said the Lady.

The Author, who had seemed lost in thought, grunted surlily, and the Lady pointed to the collection of ornaments gathered on the table near the window. A very brief inspection was sufficient.

"They're a fine collection, but not much in my line," said the man, "I don't mind giving you ten pounds for the lot."

The bargain was at once concluded—the man paid down the amount in gold, and carried off his purchase, leaving the Author and the little Lady alone together.

"Thank God we've got rid of them," ejaculated the great man—"I'm only afraid though that the bad luck will remain with the money. We ought to have given them away."

"Charles," said the little Lady solemnly, "it's a judgment on us!"

"Eh? What?" exclaimed the Author.

"A judgment and a lesson for being so uncharitable. Couldn't you see that the poor

fellow who came here to-day was heartbroken? I believe his wife is not only ill, but dying. I believe that both he and she are *starving*." He looked *hungry*, Charles, as well as wretched, and you—you couldn't see it! O, you men! You men!"

The Author stood absolutely aghast, then, growling to himself like an angry bear, he moved towards the room door and entering the lobby began putting on his overcoat of furs.

In a shabbily furnished sitting-room on a second floor in Bloomsbury a pale young woman lay stretched on a sofa, and by her, holding her thin hand, sat the Light Comedian.

"Never mind, darling," he was saying, "after all I've done my best, and I believe God will help us through!"

"It is my fault," cried his wife. "If I had never given you that peacock's feather—"

As she spoke the door opened, and the landlady of the house, with the words "A gentleman to see you," ushered in the familiar figure of the Author, who was beaming and smiling, hat in hand.

"A thousand pardons," he cried, while the Comedian sprang to his feet, "I insisted on not being announced. My dear madam, don't disturb yourself, I implore you. I want a few words with your husband, that is all."

Never surely was such a transformation! Rhadamanthus was wreathed in smiles, and in another minute he was seated in Thornton's place by the sofa, talking cheerily to the invalid.

"The fact is, my dear madam, I have a beastly temper. I behaved like a dog, madam, and I have come to apologise. Hold your tongue, sir!" he continued, turning round on the Light Comedian, "hold your tongue, and leave your charming wife to settle this little affair. As for you, turn up sharp at rehearsal to-morrow or I'll talk to you!"

It was a miracle—in five minutes the great man was chatting there like an old friend.

"I'm so sorry about the peacock's feather," said Mrs. Thornton at last, "I really did think them lucky, sir."

"They are lucky, madam," returned the Author. "By —, they shall be lucky! You're right, and I'm wrong; and I'm an old fool, madam!"

Then, volubly and kindly, he questioned her about her illness, and with wonderful gentleness and tact elicited the fact that they were very poor and in pressing need of money. At last he rose, raised the lady's hand to his lips with a courtly grace peculiar to him when he was pleased to be amiable, and bade her good-bye. The Comedian followed him out of the room.

"How can I thank you, sir," he began, "for letting me keep the part."

"Don't thank me, thank your delightful wife, sir, and—look here, sir," continued the Author, fumbling in his pocket and producing a small bag which he thrust nervously into Thornton's hand, "This is for *her*, sir. A present from another good woman; and a proof, if any proof were needed, that peacocks' feathers are *not* unlucky!"

In another minute he had descended the stairs and disappeared. The Comedian's first impulse was to follow, but he was too stupefied and amazed; instead of doing so he ran back to his wife's side to show her the bag which had been placed in his hand, then opening it he poured its contents on to the sofa—ten golden sovereigns—the very sovereigns, indeed, which had been paid that afternoon for the peacocks' feathers.

What more remains to be said in order to prove the truth that this story, though founded on fact, is in reality a Fairy Tale? The play was produced in due course, and with enormous success, and, still more wonderful, the Light Comedian made the hit of the production, thereby beginning a most distinguished career as a London actor. He and the Author afterwards became fast friends, and very often, when they met together for business or pleasure, the great man would dig the Actor in the ribs and cry with a chuckle, "Well, Thornton, what about those unlucky Peacocks' Feathers?"

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