THE HAUNTED AUTHOR

Marcus Clarke

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'What can I do for you, sir?' I asked blandly, astonished. He was a tall broad−shouldered man in a rough pea−jacket, and scowled portentously.

'Put me into an honest livelihood,' he answered. It was such a strange request that I could only stare. 'Don't you understand?' he said, seating himself with rough vehemence, 'I want to become a reputable member of society. I want some honest employment.'

'But, my good sir, why do you come to me? Your motive is most excellent, but an honest employment is the last thing at my disposal.'

'That be blowed!' said he, 'you could give me a fortune if you liked, you know you could. But I don't want that. No, I'm fly to that game! You'll have some blessed elder brother, that nobody knowed of, coming back from New Zealand and succeeding to the ancestral mansion; or you'll get me pitched out of my gilded chariot at the church door, and marry my wife, that ought to be, to somebody else. I know you. I only want a modest competence, nobody interfers with that.'

'Your language is even more mysterious than your appearance, my friend,' I said.

'Pshaw!' said he (I never heard a man outside a book said 'pshaw' −− never), 'don't you know me?'

I looked at him steadily, and it seemed that I ought to know him, that hat, that pea−jacket, that knotted scarf around his muscular throat, those fierce eyes −− all were familiar to me. . .

'You don't happen to have any marks about you?' I asked, while a cold sweat broke out upon my brow.

He laughed −− that bitter laugh which I had described so often.

'I have a peculiar mole on the back of my neck, the tip of my left ear is shot away, my right side still bears the mark of Pompey's claws when he defended his young mistress Alice in the lonely swamp. I have lost the little finger of my right hand, and have three pear−shaped wens, besides the usual allowance of strawberry marks.'

There was no mistaking him. It was my Villain! I knew his bloodthirsty nature, and dreaded the tremendous struggle which experience told me was to follow.

'But why come here?' I urged.

'I am sick of it,' said my villain, doggedly. 'I ain't to be badgered any more. It ain't a respectable business. First I was Jabez Jamrack, then Black Will the Smuggler, then Curlewis Carleyon, then a Poacher, then a Burglar, then an Unjust Steward, and now I'm an Escaped Convict.'

It was true. The unhappy creature before me had figured −− in my world−renowned novels −− in all those capacities. . .

'It ain't because I'm out all nights in all sorts of weather, mostly thunderous. It ain't because I'm often drunk, always in debt, and totally disreputable. It ain't because I've murdered a large variety of mothers, and brought the grey 'airs of a corresponding number of aged fathers with sorrow to the grave. It ain't because my langwidge is altogether ridiculous, and I leave out more "h"s' and put in more oaths in my conversation than any natural man did yet. It ain't that. No!' he cried, waxing wroth, 'it's because I'm always left at the end of the third volume, if I'm still alive, without hope of mercy or promise of repentance.'

I shuddered.

'Take some brandy,' I said, and pushed him the decanter. He took it, and filling half−a−tumbler with neat spirit drained it at a gulp. I knew he would. The Beast −− under my direction −− invariably took his liquor in that fashion . . .

'Is it right? Is it just, guvernor? . . . Your comic servant winds up with the chambermaid. Your aristocratic villain, the Marquis, my master, who poisons his niece, and shoots his aunt with an air−gun, he's all right . . . he's never hung in chains, or tuk to Newgate, or starved to death in a deserted drive on the diggings in Bend−i−go. . . But why waste words? Are we not alone here? No sound but the whistling of the wind in the wide chimneys of the moated grange; no footsteps but that of the midnight mouser as she creeps stealthily to her prey. Ha, ha! Thou art mine, and −−' . . .

Ha, ha, indeed! I guessed how it would happen. My experience as a novel−writer told me as much. Just as the enraged ruffian advanced to seize me . . . a new−comer appeared upon the scene.

By his wavy hair, square−toed Wellingtons, massive watch chain, and handkerchief that hung from the right hand pocket of his shooting coat, I knew him at once.

He was Sir Aubrey de Briancourt.

'Assist me!' I exclaimed.

The look of scorn he gave me was sufficient to daunt a bolder man, but I knew of a spell by which I could compel him.

'Hist!' I said, in a thrilling whisper. 'Proud scion of a lordly house, there is another Sir Aubrey. Refuse me aid, and young Fairfield will assume your name and title. These minions are beyond my power, but remember you are to be continued in our next.'

The threat made pale the cheek even of one whose ancestors had bled on Bosworth, and the baronet waved a white hand towards the back door.

'Take my cabriolet, dog!' he said, with that courtesy which characterizes the British aristocrat. . .

I need scarcely remark that I leapt into the cabriolet, and was soon driving with the rapidity of lightning towards Goodman's Gully.

Fast behind came the echo of hooves. The lightning flashed incessantly, and the negro who held the reins was white with fear.

All at once a man clad in a red shirt jumped from behind a bush and seized the head of the mare.

'Who are you?' I cried.

'The most abused of all,' said he. 'I am the Typical Digger! I am the man whom you and the others of your tribe have made to eat banknotes as sandwiches. I have shod my horse with gold and swilled champagne −− which I detest −− out of stable buckets. . . Am I to pass my life in finding repeatedly gigantic nuggets, and being perpetually robbed of the same? Must I never shave? Shall the tyranny of the fictionmonger compel me to sleep in my boots?'

'Calm yourself, my friend,' I said, 'There is not much harm done. I know of some poor fellows whom the fictionmongers have treated much more rudely.'

At that instant, the demoniac howls of my pursuers were borne upon the blast.

'That may be,' roared the Digger of Romance, 'But I will be revenged on thee. Come!'

The cabriolet disappeared in the distance −− there was never a cabriolet yet that did not do so under such circumstances −− and my captor led me away.

He paused at the door of the usual bush inn (how well I knew it), and striking three blows upon the door (they invariably struck three loud blows), we were admitted into a long apartment. I beheld with astonishment that all the personages whom I had imagined the creatures of my own too fertile brain were there.

'Wretch!' cried the fair Madeline, 'why did you not unite me to the Duke? You know you only changed your mind at the last moment.'

'Monster,' said the lovely Violet, 'You made me pass three nights of horror in the Red Farm, when one stroke of your pen would have freed me.' . . .

'Christian dog!' roared Mordecai the Jew, 'I was born with charitable impulses, and should have lent in peace the humble shilling upon the ragged coat of poverty, had not your felon soul plunged me into crime to gratify the tastes of a blood−and−thunder loving public.'

'And I,' remarked Henry Mortimer, with that cynical smile that I had so often depicted, curling his proud lip, 'did I wish to throw my elder brother down a well in order to succeed to his name and heritage? No! I loved him fondly, madly, as you took pains to state in your earlier chapters.' . . .

'Away with him!' hissed Lady Millicent, the Poisoner. 'I knew not of the deadly power of strychnine until he told me.' . . .

"Twas he that let me linger in consumption for forty pages folio!' cried Coralie de Belleisle, the planter's daughter.

"Twas he that blighted my voluptous contours with an entirely unnecessary railway accident!' wept the lovely Geraldine.

'Away with him!'

'Mercy!' I cried, gazing in terror on their well−known lineaments.

'Mercy!' cried the Lost Heiress, Isabelle Beaumanoir, 'when for two long hours you deliberated whether my sainted mother or the poacher's wife should give me birth! Mercy for thee! Oh, no, no, no!' . . .

I trembled over the abyss.

'Why seek to dispel my ennui with this espieglerie, mon ami,' said the soft tones of the Count in his native tongue. 'Sacre, let the pauvre petit escape, my dejeuner at the fourchette awaits. The coup d'oeil is superb, the tout ensemble all that could be desired. Voila.'

The digger swung me over the yawning grave. All the buttons in my waistcoat gave way, and for an instant my life hung literally by a thread.

'Will you make me respectable?' said the Villain.

'Never.'

The button cracked. I was going, going −− gone, when the alarm−bell sounded, the door was burst open, and

. . . Bridget entered. 'It is the boy from the printers' for the proofs,' said she.

'Tell him to wait,' said I; and wiping the sweat from my intellectual brow, I seized my pen, and in ten lines had got my Villain comfortably in irons at Norfolk Island.