

# **The Little Hard-Faced Old Gentleman**

Theodore S. Fay

# Table of Contents

<u>The Little Hard-Faced Old Gentleman</u> .....	1
<u>Theodore S. Fay</u> .....	1
<u>THE LITTLE, HARD-FACED OLD GENTLEMAN</u> .....	1

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## THE LITTLE, HARD-FACED OLD GENTLEMAN.

I was passing from my office one day, to indulge myself with a walk, when a little, hard-faced old man, with a black coat, broad-brimmed hat, velvet breeches, shoes and buckles, and gold-headed cane, stopped me, standing directly in my path. I looked at him. He looked at me. I crossed my hands before me patiently, forced my features into a civil smile, and waited the development of his intentions; not being distinctly certain, from his firm, determined expression, whether he was "a spirit of health or goblin damned," and whether his intents were "wicked or charitable" that is, whether he came to discontinue or subscribe, to pay a bill or present one, to offer a communication or a pistol, to shake me by the hand or pull me by the nose. Editors now-a-days must always be on their guard. For my part, I am peaceable, and much attached to life, and should esteem it exceedingly disagreeable to be either shot or horsewhipped. I am not built for action, but love to sail in quiet waters; cordially eschewing gales, waves, water-spouts, sea-serpents, earthquakes, tornadoes, and all such matters, both on sea and land. My antipathy to a horsewhip is an inheritance from boyhood. It carried me across Cæsar's bridge, and through Virgil and Horace. I am indebted to it for a tolerable understanding of grammar, arithmetic, geography, and other occult sciences. It enlightened me not a little upon many algebraic processes, which, to speak truth, presented, otherwise, but slender claims to my consideration. It disciplined me into a uniform propriety of manners, and instilled into my bosom early rudiments of wisdom, and principles of virtue. In my maturer years, the contingencies of life have thrust me, rather abruptly, if not reluctantly, into the editorial fraternity, (heaven bless them, I mean them no disrespect,) and in the same candor which distinguishes my former acknowledgments, I confess that visions of this instrument have occasionally obtruded themselves, somewhat forcibly upon my fancy, in the paroxysms of an article, dampening the glow of composition, and causing certain qualifying interlineations and prudent erasures, prompted by the representations of memory or the whispers of prudence. The reader must not fancy, from the form of my expression, that I have ever been horsewhipped. I have hitherto escaped, (for which heaven be praised!) although my horizon has been darkened by many a cloudy threat and thundering denunciation.

Nose-pulling is another disagreeable branch of the editorial business. To have any part of one pulled is annoying; but there is a dignity about the nose impatient even of observation or remark; while the act of taking hold of it with the thumb and finger, is worse than murder, and can only be washed out with blood. Kicking, cuffing, being turned out of doors, being abused in the papers, &c., are bad, but these are mere minor considerations. Indeed many of my brother editors rather pique themselves upon some of them, as a soldier does on the scars obtained in fighting the battles of his country. They fancy that, thereby, they are invested with claims upon their party, and suffer indefinite dreams of political eminence to be awakened in their bosoms. I have seen a fellow draw his hat fiercely down over his brow, and strut about, with insufferable importance, on the strength of having been thoroughly kicked by the enemy.

This is a long digression, but it passed rapidly through my mind, as the little, hard-faced old gentleman stood before me, looking at me with a piercing glance and a resolute air. At length, unlike a ghost, he spoke first:

## The Little Hard-Faced Old Gentleman

"You are the editor?" &c.

A slight motion of acquiescence with my head, and an affirmative wave of my hand, a little leaning toward the majestic, announced to my unknown friend the accuracy of his conjecture.

The little old gentleman's face relaxed he took off his broad-brimmed hat and laid it down with his cane carefully on the table, then seized my hand and shook it heartily. People are so polite and friendly when about to ask a favour.

"My dear sir," said he, "this is a pleasure I have long sought vainly. You must know, sir, I am the editor of a theatrical weekly a neat thing in its way here's the last number." He fumbled about in his pocket, and produced a red-covered pamphlet.

"I have been some time publishing it, and, though it is admitted by all acquainted with its merits, to be clearly the best thing of the kind ever started this side of the Atlantic, yet people do not seem to take much notice of it. Indeed, my friends tell me, that the public are not fully aware of its existence. Pray let me be indebted to you for a notice. I wish to get fairly afloat. You see, I have been too diffident about it. We modest fellows allow our inferiors to pass us often. I will leave this number with you. Pray, pray give it a good notice."

He placed in my hands the eleventh number of the "North American Thespian Magazine," devoted to the drama, and also to literature, science, history, and the arts. On reading over the prospectus, I found it vastly comprehensive, embracing pretty much every subject in the world. If so extensive a plan were decently filled up in the details, the "North American Thespian Magazine" was certainly worth the annual subscription money, which was only one dollar. I said so under my "literary notices," in the next impression of my journal; and, although I had not actually read the work, yet it sparkled so with asterisks, dashes, and notes of admiration, that it looked interesting. I added in my critique, that it was elegantly got up, that its typographical execution reflected credit on the publishers, that its failure would be a grievous reproach to the city, that its editor was a scholar, a writer, and a gentleman, and was favorably known to the literary circles by the eloquence, wit, and feeling of his former productions. What those productions were, I should have been rather puzzled to say, never having read, or even heard of them. This, however, was the cant criticism of the day, which is so exorbitant and unmeaning, and so universally cast in one mould, that I was in some tribulation, on reading over the article in print, to find that I had omitted the words "native genius," which possess a kind of commonlaw-right to a place in all articles on American literary productions. Forth, however, it went to the world, and I experienced a philanthropic emotion in fancying how pleased the little hard-faced old gentleman would be, with these flattering encomiums on his "Thespian Magazine."

The very day my paper was out, as I was sitting "full fathom five" deep in an article on "the advantages of virtue," (an interesting theme, upon my views of which I rather flattered myself,) I was startled by three knocks at the door, and my "come in" exhibited to view the broad-brimmed hat of the hardfaced old gentleman, with his breeches, buckles, gold-headed cane, and all. He laid aside his hat and cane with the air of a man who has walked a great way, and means to rest himself a while. I was very busy. It was one of my inspired moments. Half of a brilliant idea was already committed to paper. There it lay a fragment a flower cut off in the bud a mere outline an embryo; and my imagination cooling like a piece of red-hot iron in the open air. I raised my eyes to the old gentleman, with a look of solemn silence, retaining my pen ready for action, with my little finger extended, and hinting in every way, that I was "not i' the vein." I kept my lips closed. I dipped the pen in the ink-stand several times, and held it hovering over the sheet. It would not do. The old gentleman was not to be driven off his ground by shakes of the pen, ink-drops, or little fingers. He fumbled about in his pockets, and drew forth the red-covered "North American Thespian Magazine," devoted to the drama, &c., number twelve. He wanted "a *good* notice. The last was rather general. I had not specified its peculiar claims upon the public. I had *copied* nothing. That sort of critique did no good. He begged me to *read* this *carefully* to *analyze* it to give it a *candid* examination." I was borne down by his emphatic manner; and being naturally of a civil deportment as well

## The Little Hard-Faced Old Gentleman

as, at that particular moment, in an impatient, feverish hurry to get on with my treatise on the "advantages of virtue," which I felt now oozing out of my subsiding brain with an alarming rapidity, I promised to read, notice, investigate, analyze to the uttermost extent of his wishes, or at least of my ability.

I could scarcely keep myself screwed down to common courtesy till the moment of his departure; a proceeding which he accomplished with a most commendable self-possession and deliberate politeness. When he was fairly gone, I poked my head out, and called my boy.

"Peter."

"Sir."

"Did you see that little old gentleman, Peter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Should you know him again, Peter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if he ever come here again, Peter, tell him I am not in."

"Yes, sir."

I re-entered my little study, and closed the door after me with a slam, which could only have been perceptible to those who knew my ordinary still and mild manner. There might have been also a slight accent in my way of turning the key, and (candor is a merit!) I could not repress a brief exclamation of displeasure at the little old gentleman with his magazine, who had broken in so provokingly upon my "essay on virtue." "Virtue or no virtue," thought I, "I wish him to the d."

My room is on the ground-floor, and a window adjoining the street lets in upon me the light and air through a heavy crimson curtain, near which I sit and scribble. I was just enlarging upon the necessity of resignation, while the frown yet lingered on my brow, and was writing myself into a more calm and complacent mood, when another knock at the door. As I opened it, I heard Peter's voice asserting, sturdily, that I had "gone out." Never dreaming of my old enemy, I betrayed too much of my person to withdraw, and I was recognized, and pounced upon by the little old gentleman, who had come back to inform me, that he intended, as soon as the increase of his subscription would permit, to enlarge and improve the "North American Thespian Magazine," and to employ all the writers in town. "I intend also," said he, and he was in the act of again laying aside that everlasting hat and cane, when a cry of fire in the neighborhood, and the smell of the burning rafters attracted him into the street, where, as I feared, he escaped unhurt. In many respects fires are calamities; but I never saw a more forcible exemplification of Shakspeare's remark, "there is some spirit of good in things evil," than in the relief afforded me on the present occasion. I wrote, after that, with my door locked. This I knew was, from the confined air, prejudicial to my health; but what was dyspepsy or consumption to that little hard-faced old gentleman to those breeches to that broad-brimmed hat to those buckles to that gold-headed cane!

"Remember, Peter," said I, the second morning after the foregoing, "I have gone out."

"Where have you gone?" inquired Peter, with grave simplicity. "They always ask me where you have gone, sir. The little man with the hat, was here last night, and wanted to go after you."

"Forbid it heaven! I have gone to Albany, Peter, on business."

## The Little Hard-Faced Old Gentleman

I can hear in my room pretty much what passes in the adjoining one, where visitors first enter from the street. I had scarcely got comfortably seated, in a rare mood for poetry, giving the last touches to a poem, which, whatever might be the merits of Byron and Moore, I did not think altogether indifferent, when I heard the little old gentleman's voice inquiring for me.

"I *must* see him; I have important business," it said.

"He has gone out," replied Peter, in an under tone, in which I could detect the consciousness that he was uttering a bouncer.

"But I *must* see him," said the voice.

"The scoundrel!" muttered I.

"He is not in town, sir," said Peter.

"I will not detain him a single minute. It is of the greatest importance. He would be very sorry, *very*, should he miss me."

I held my breath there was a pause I gave myself up for lost when Peter replied firmly,

"He is in Albany, sir. Went off at five o'clock this morning."

"Be back soon?"

"Don't know."

"Where does he stay?"

"Don't know."

"I'll call to-morrow."

I heard his retreating footsteps, and inwardly resolved to give Peter a half-dollar, although he deserved to be horsewhipped for his readiness at deception. I laughed aloud triumphantly, and slapped my hand down upon my knee with the feelings of a fugitive debtor, who, hotly pursued by a sheriff's officer, escapes over the line into another county and snaps his fingers at Monsieur Bailiff. I was aroused from my merry mood of reverie by a touch on my shoulder. I turned suddenly. It was the hardfaced little old gentleman, peeping in from the street. His broad-brimmed hat and two-thirds of his face were just lifted above the window-sill. He was evidently standing on tiptoe; and the window being open, he had put aside the curtain, and was soliciting my attention with the end of his cane.

"Ah!" said he, "is it you? Well, I *thought* it was you. Though I wasn't sure. I won't interrupt you. Here are the proofs of number thirteen; you'll find something glorious in that just the thing for you don't forget me next week good by. I'll see you again in a day or two."

I shall not cast a gloom over my readers by dwelling upon my feelings. Surely, surely, there are sympathetic bosoms among them. To them I appeal. I said nothing. Few could have detected any thing violent or extraordinary in my manner, as I took the proofs from the end of the little old gentleman's cane, and laid them calmly on the table. I did not write any more about "virtue" that morning. It was out of the question. Indeed my mind scarcely recovered from the shock for several days.

## The Little Hard-Faced Old Gentleman

When my nerves are in any way irritated, I find a walk in the woods a soothing and agreeable sedative. Accordingly, the next afternoon, I wound up the affairs of the day earlier than usual, and set out for a ramble through the groves and along the shore of Hoboken. I was soon on one of the abrupt acclivities, where, through the deep rich foliage of the intertwining branches, I overlooked the Hudson, the wide bay, and the superb, steeped city, stretching in a level line of magnificence upon the shining waters, softened with an overhanging canopy of thin haze. I gazed at the picture, and contemplated the rivalry of nature with art, striving which could most delight. As my eye moved from ship to ship, from island to island, and from shore to shore now reposing on the distant blue, then revelling in the nearer luxuriance of the forest green, I heard a step in the grass, and a little ragged fellow came up, and asked me if I was the editor of the . . . I was about replying to him affirmatively, when his words arrested my attention. "A little gentleman with a hat and cane," he said, "had been inquiring for the editor, &c., at the adjoining hotel, and had given him sixpence to run up into the woods and find him." I rushed precipitately, as I thought, into the thickest recesses of the wood. The path, however, being very circuitous, I suddenly came into it, and nearly ran against a person whom it needed no second glance to recognize, although his back was luckily toward me. The hat, the breeches, the cane, were enough. If not, part of a red-covered pamphlet, sticking out of the coatpocket, was. "It must be number thirteen!" I exclaimed; and as the little old gentleman was sauntering north, I shaped my course with all possible celerity in a southerly direction.

In order to protect myself for the future, I took precautionary measures; and in addition to having myself denied, I kept the window down, and made my egress and ingress through a door round the corner, as Peter told me he had several times seen the little old gentleman, with a package in his hand, standing opposite the one through which we usually entered, and looking at the office wistfully.

By means of these arrangements, I succeeded in preserving my solitude inviolate, when, to my indignation, I received several letters, from different parts of the country, written by my friends, and pressing upon me, at the solicitation of the little old gentleman, the propriety of giving the "Thespian Magazine" a good notice. I tore the letters, each one as I read them, into three pieces, and dropped them under the table. Business calling me, soon after, to Philadelphia, I stepped on board the steamboat, exhilarated with the idea that I was to have at least two or three weeks respite. I reached the place of my destination about five o'clock in the afternoon. It was lovely weather. The water spread out like unrippled glass, and the sky was painted with a thousand varying shadows of crimson and gold. The boat touched the shore, and while I was watching the change of a lovely cloud, I heard the splash of a heavy body plunged into the water. A sudden sensation ran along the crowd, which rushed from all quarters towards the spot; the ladies shrieked, and turned away their heads; and I perceived that a man had fallen from the deck, and was struggling in the tide, with only one hand held convulsively above the surface. Being a practised swimmer, I hesitated not a moment, but flung off my hat and coat, and sprang to his rescue. With some difficulty I succeeded in bearing him to a boat and dragging him from the stream. I had no sooner done so, than to my horror and astonishment, I found I had saved the little hard-faced old gentleman. His snuff-colored breeches were dripping before me his broad-brimmed hat floated on the current but his cane (thank heaven!) had sunk for ever. He suffered no other ill consequences from the catastrophe, than some injury to his garments and the loss of his cane. His gratitude for my exertions knew no bounds. He assured me of his conviction that the slight acquaintance previously existing between us, would now be ripened into intimacy, and informed me of his intention to lodge at the same hotel with me. He had come to Philadelphia to see about a plate for his sixteenth number, which was to surpass all its predecessors, and of which he would let me have an early copy, that I might *notice* it as it deserved.