

Harlequin and Columbine

Booth Tarkington

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I

For a lucky glimpse of the great Talbot Potter, the girls who caught it may thank that conjunction of Olympian events which brings within the boundaries of one November week the Horse Show and the roaring climax of the football months and the more dulcet, yet vast, beginning of the opera season. Some throbbing of attendant multitudes coming to the ears of Talbot Potter, he obeyed an inward call to walk to rehearsal by way of Fifth Avenue, and turning out of Forty-fourth Street to become part of the people-sea of the southward current, felt the eyes of the northward beating upon his face like the pulsing successions of an exhilarating surf. His Fifth Avenue knew its Talbot Potter.

Strangers used to leisurely appraisals upon their own thoroughfares are apt to believe that Fifth Avenue notices nothing; but they are mistaken; it is New York that is preoccupied, not Fifth Avenue. The Fifth Avenue eye, like a policeman's, familiar with a variety of types, catalogues you and replaces you upon the shelf with such automatic rapidity that you are not aware you have been taken down. Fifth Avenue is secretly populous with observers who take note of everything.

Of course, among these peregrinate great numbers almost in a stupor so far as what is closest around them is concerned; and there are those, too, who are so completely busied with either the consciousness of being noticed, or the hope of being noticed, or the hatred of it, that they take note of nothing else. Fifth Avenue expressions are a filling meal for the prowling lonely joker; but what will most satisfy his cannibal appetite is the passage of the self-conscious men and women. For here, on a good day, he cannot fail to relish some extreme cases of their whimsical disease: fledgling young men making believe to be haughty to cover their dreadful symptoms, the mask itself thus revealing what it seeks to conceal; timid young ladies, likewise treacherously exposed by their defenses; and very different ladies, but in similar case, being retouched ladies, tinted ladies; and ladies who know that they are pretty at first sight, ladies who chat with some obscured companion only to offer the public a treat of graceful gestures; and poor ladies making believe to be rich ladies; and rich ladies making believe to be important

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ladies; and many other sorts of conscious ladies. And men ah, pitiful! pitiful the wretch whose hardihood has involved him in cruel and unusual great gloss and unsheltered tailed coat. Any man in his overcoat is wrapped in his castle; he fears nothing. But to this hunted creature, naked in his robin's tail, the whole panorama of the Avenue is merely a blurred audience, focusing upon him a vast glare of derision; he walks swiftly, as upon fire, pretends to careless sidelong interest in shop-windows as he goes, makes play with his unfamiliar cane only to be horror-stricken at the flourishings so evoked of his wild gloves; and at last, fairly crawling with the eyes he feels all over him, he must draw forth his handkerchief and shelter behind it, poor man, in the dishonourable affectation of a sneeze!

Piquant contrast to these obsessions, the well-known expression of Talbot Potter lifted him above the crowd to such high serenity his face might have been that of a young Pope, with a dash of Sydney Carton. His glance fixed itself, in its benign detachment, upon the misty top of the Flatiron, far down the street, and the more frequent the plainly visible recognitions among the north-bound people, the less he seemed aware of them. And yet, whenever the sieving current of pedestrians brought momentarily face to face with him a girl or woman, apparently civilized and in the mode, who obviously had never seen him before and seemed not to care if it should be her fate never to repeat the experience, Talbot Potter had a certain desire. If society had established a rule that all men must instantly obey and act upon every fleeting impulse, Talbot Potter would have taken that girl or woman by the shoulders and said to her: What's the matter with you!

At Forty-second Street he crossed over, proceeded to the middle of the block, and halted dreamily on the edge of the pavement, his back to the crowd. His face was toward the Library, with its two annoyed pet lions, typifying learning, and he appeared to study the great building. One or two of the passersby had seen him standing on that self-same spot before; in fact, he always stopped there whenever he walked down the Avenue.

For a little time (not too long) he stood there; and thus absorbed he was, as they say, a Picture. Moreover, being such a popular one, he attracted much interest. People paused to observe him; and all unaware of their attention, he suddenly smiled charmingly, as at some gentle pleasantry in his own mind something he had remembered from a book, no doubt. It was a wonderful smile, and vanished slowly, leaving a rapt look; evidently he was lost in musing upon architecture and sculpture and beautiful books. A girl whisking by in an automobile had time to guess, reverently, that the phrase in his mind was: A Stately Home for Beautiful Books! Dinner-tables would hear, that evening, how Talbot Potter stood there, oblivious of everything else, studying the Library!

This slight sketch of artistic reverie completed, he went on, proceeding a little more rapidly down the Avenue; presently turned over to the stage door of Wallack's, made his way through the ensuing passages, and appeared upon the vasty stage of the old theatre, where his company of actors awaited his coming to begin the rehearsal of a new play.

II

First act, please, ladies and gentlemen!

Thus spake, without emotion, Packer, the stage-manager; but out in the dusky auditorium, Stewart Canby, the new playwright, began to tremble. It was his first rehearsal.

He and one other sat in the shadowy hollow of the orchestra, two obscure little shapes on the floor of the enormous cavern. The other was Talbot Potter's manager, Carson Tinker, a neat, grim, small old man with a definite appearance of having long ago learned that after a little while life will beat anybody's game, no matter how good. He observed the nervousness of the playwright, but without interest. He had seen too many.

Young Canby's play was a study of egoism, being the portrait of a man wholly given over to selfish ambitions

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finally attained, but at the cost of every good thing in his life, including the loss of his honour, his lady-love, and the trust and affection of his friends. Young Canby had worked patiently at his manuscript, rewriting, condensing, pouring over it the sincere sweat of his brow and the light of his boarding-house lamp during most of the evenings of two years, until at last he was able to tell his confidants, rather huskily, that there was not one single superfluous word in it, not one that could possibly be cut, nor one that could be changed without altering the significance of the whole work.

The moment was at hand when he was to see the vision of so many toilsome hours begin to grow alive. What had been no more than little black marks on white paper was now to become a living voice vibrating the actual air. No wonder, then, that tremors seized him; Pygmalion shook as Galatea began to breathe, and to young Canby it was no less a miracle that his black marks and white paper should thus come to life.

Miss Ellsling! called the stage-manager. Miss Ellsling, you're on. You're on artificial stone bench in garden, down right. Mr. Nippert, you're on. You're over yonder, right cen –

Not at all! interrupted Talbot Potter, who had taken his seat at a small table near the trough where the footlights lay asleep, like the row of night-watchmen they were. Not at all! he repeated sharply, thumping the table with his knuckles. That's all out. It's cut. Nippert doesn't come on in this scene at all. You've got the original script there, Packer. Good heavens! Packer, can't you ever get anything right? Didn't I distinctly tell you Here! Come here! Not garden set, at all. Play it interior, same as act second. Look, Packer, look! Miss Ellsling down left, in chair by escritoire. In heaven's name, can you read, Packer?

Yessir, yessir. I see, sir, I see! said Packer with piteous eagerness, taking the manuscript the star handed him. Now, then, Miss Ellsling, if you please

I will have my tea indoors, Miss Ellsling began promptly, striking an imaginary bell. I will have my tea indoors, to-day, I think, Pritchard. It is cooler indoors, to-day, I think, on the whole, and so it will be pleasanter to have my tea indoors to-day. Strike bell again. Do you hear, Pritchard?

Out in the dimness beyond the stage the thin figure of the new playwright rose dazedly from an orchestra chair.

What what's this? he stammered, the choked sounds he made not reaching the stage.

What's the matter? The question came from Carson Tinker, but his tone was incurious, manifesting no interest whatever. Tinker's voice, like his pale, spectacled glance, was not tired; it was dead.

Tea! gasped Canby. People are sick of tea! I didn't write any tea!

There isn't any, said Tinker. The way he's got it, there's an interruption before the tea comes, and it isn't brought in.

But she's ordered it! If it doesn't come the audience will wonder

No, said Tinker. They won't think of that. They won't hear her order it.

Then for heaven's sake, why has he put it in? I wrote this play to begin right in the story

That's the trouble. They never hear the beginning. They're slamming seats, taking off wraps, looking round to see who's there. That's why we used to begin plays with servants dusting and 'Well-I-never-half-past-nine-and-the-young-master-not-yet- risen!

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I wrote it to begin with a garden scene, Canby protested, unheeding. Why

He's changed this act a good deal.

But I wrote

He never uses garden sets. Not intimate enough; and they're a nuisance to light. I wouldn't worry about it.

But it changes the whole signifi

Well, talk to him about it, said Tinker, adding lifelessly, I wouldn't argue with him much, though. I never knew anybody do anything with him that way yet.

Miss Ellsling, on the stage, seemed to be supplementing this remark. Roderick Hanscom is a determined man, she said, in character. He is hard as steel to a treacherous enemy, but he is tender and gentle to women and children. Only yesterday I saw him pick up a fallen crippled child from beneath the relentless horses' feet on a crossing, at the risk of his very life, and then as he placed it in the mother's arms, he smiled that wonderful smile of his, that wonderful smile of his that seems to brighten the whole world! Wait till you meet him. But that is his step now and you shall judge for yourselves! Let us rise, if you please, to give him befitting greeting.

What what! gasped Canby.

Sh! Tinker whispered.

But all I wrote for her to say, when Roderick Hanscom's name is mentioned, was 'I don't think I like him.' My God!

Sh!

The Honourable Robert Hanscom! shouted Packer, in a ringing voice as a stage-servant, or herald.

It gives him an entrance, you see, murmured Tinker. Your script just let him walk on.

And all that horrible stuff about his 'wonderful smile!' Canby babbled. Think of his putting that in himself.

Well, you hadn't done it for him. It is a wonderful smile, isn't it?

My God!

Sh!

Talbot Potter had stepped to the centre of the stage and was smiling the wonderful smile. Mildred, and you, my other friends, good friends, he began, for I know that you are all true friends here, and I can trust you with a secret very near my heart

Most of them are supposed never to have seen him before, said Canby, hoarsely. And she's just told them they could judge for themselves when

They won't notice that.

You mean the audience won't

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No, they won't, said Tinker.

But good heavens! it's 'Donald Gray,' the other character, that trusts him with the secret, and he betrays it later. This upsets the whole

Well, talk to him. I can't help it.

It is a political secret, Potter continued, reading from a manuscript in his hand, and almost a matter of life and death. But I trust you with it openly and fearlessly because

At this point his voice was lost in a destroying uproar. Perceiving that the rehearsal was well under way, and that the star had made his entrance, two of the stage-hands attached to the theatre ascended to the flies and set up a great bellowing on high. Lower that strip! You don't want that strip lowered, I tell you! Oh, my Lord! Can't you lower that strip! Another workman at the rear of the stage began to saw a plank, and somebody else, concealed behind a bit of scenery, hammered terrifically upon metal. Altogether it was a successful outbreak.

Potter threw his manuscript upon the table, a gesture that caused the shoulders of Packer to move in a visible shudder, and the company, all eyes fixed upon the face of the star, suddenly wore the look of people watching a mysterious sealed packet from which a muffled ticking is heard. The bellowing and the sawing and the hammering increased in fury.

In the orchestra a rusty gleam of something like mummified pleasure passed unseen behind the spectacles of old Carson Tinker. Stage-hands are the devil, he explained to the stupefied Canby. Rehearsals bore them and they love to hear what an actor says when his nerves go to pieces. If Potter blows up they'll quiet down to enjoy it and then do it again pretty soon. If he doesn't blow up he'll take it out on somebody else later.

Potter stood silent in the centre of the stage, expressionless, which seemed to terrify the stage-manager. Just one second, Mr. Potter! he screamed, his brow pearly with the anguish of apprehension. Just one second, sir!

He went hotfoot among the disturbers, protesting, commanding, imploring, and plausibly answering severe questions. Well, when do you expect us to git this work done? We got our work to do, ain't we? until finally the tumult ceased, the saw slowing down last of all, tapering off reluctantly into a silence of plaintive disappointment; whereupon Packer resumed his place, under a light at the side of the stage, turning the pages of his manuscript with fluttering fingers and keeping his eyes fixed guiltily upon it. The company of actors also carefully removed their gaze from the star and looked guilty.

Potter allowed the fatal hush to continue, while the culpability of Packer and the company seemed mysteriously to increase until they all reeked with it. The stage-hands had withdrawn in a grieved manner somewhere into the huge rearward spaces of the old building. They belonged to the theatre, not to Potter, and, besides, they had a union. But the actors were dependent upon Potter for the coming winter's work and wages; they were his employees.

At last he spoke: We will go on with the rehearsal, he said quietly.

Ah! murmured old Tinker. He'll take it out on somebody else. And with every precaution not to jar down a seat in passing, he edged his way to the aisle and went softly thereby to the extreme rear of the house. He was an employee, too.

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III

It was a luckless lady who helped to fulfil the prediction. Technically she was the ingenue ; publicly she was Miss Carol Lyston ; legally she was a Mrs. Surbilt, being wife to the established leading man of that ilk, Vorly Surbilt. Miss Lyston had come to the rehearsal in a condition of exhausted nerves, owing to her husband's having just accepted, over her protest, a road engagement with a lady–star of such susceptible gallantry she had never yet been known to resist falling in love with her leading–man before she quarrelled with him. Miss Lyston's protest having lasted the whole of the preceding night, and not at all concluding with Mr. Surbilt's departure, about breakfast–time, avowedly to seek total anaesthesia by means of a long list of liquors, which he named, she had spent the hours before rehearsal interviewing female acquaintances who had been members of the susceptible lady's company a proceeding which indicates that she deliberately courted hysteria.

Shortly after the outraged rehearsal had been resumed, she unfortunately uttered a loud, dry sob, startlingly irrelevant to the matter in hand. It came during the revelation of Roderick Hanscom's" secret, and Potter stopped instantly.

Who did that?

Miss Lyston, sir, Packer responded loyally, such matters being part of his duty.

The star turned to face the agitated criminal. Miss Lyston, he said, delaying each syllable to pack it more solidly with ice, will you be good enough to inform this company if there is anything in your lines to warrant your breaking into a speech of mine with a horrible noise like that?

Nothing.

Then perhaps you will inform us why you do break into a speech of mine with a horrible noise like that?

I only coughed, Mr. Potter, said Miss Lyston,