

Blackmask Online -- The Nature Faker

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Richard Herrick was a young man with a gentle disposition, much money, and no sense of humor. His object in life was to marry Miss Catherweight. For three years she had tried to persuade him this could not be, and finally, in order to convince him, married some one else. When the woman he loves marries another man, the rejected one is popularly supposed to take to drink or to foreign travel. Statistics show that, instead, he instantly falls in love with the best friend of the girl who refused him. But, as Herrick truly loved Miss Catherweight, he could not worship any other woman, and so he became a lover of nature. Nature, he assured his men friends, does not disappoint you. The more thought, care, affection you give to nature, the more she gives you in return, and while, so he admitted, in wooing nature there are no great moments, there are no heart-aches. Jackson, one of the men friends, and of a frivolous disposition, said that he also could admire a landscape, but he would rather look at the beautiful eyes of a girl he knew than at the Lakes of Killarney, with a full moon, a setting sun, and the aurora borealis for a background. Herrick suggested that, while the beautiful eyes might seek those of another man, the Lakes of Killarney would always remain where you could find them. Herrick pursued his new love in Connecticut on an abandoned farm which he converted into a "model" one. On it he established model dairies and model incubators. He laid out old-fashioned gardens, sunken gardens, Italian gardens, landscape gardens, and a game preserve.

The game preserve was his own especial care and pleasure. It consisted of two hundred acres of dense forest and hills and ridges of rock. It was filled with mysterious caves, deep chasms, tiny gurgling streams, nestling springs, and wild laurel. It was barricaded with fallen tree-trunks and moss-covered rocks that had never felt the foot of man since that foot had worn a moccasin. Around the preserve was a high fence stout enough to keep poachers on the outside and to persuade the wild animals that inhabited it to linger on the inside. These wild animals were squirrels, rabbits, and raccoons. Every day, in sunshine or in rain, entering through a private gate, Herrick would explore this holy of holies. For such vermin as would destroy the gentler animals he carried a gun. But it was turned only on those that preyed upon his favorites. For hours he would climb through this wilderness, or, seated on a rock, watch a bluebird building her nest or a squirrel laying in rations against the coming of the snow. In time he grew to think he knew and understood the inhabitants of this wild place of which he was the overlord. He looked upon them not as his tenants but as his guests. And when they fled from him in terror to caves and hollow tree-trunks, he wished he might call them back and explain he was their friend, that it was due to him they lived in peace. He was glad they were happy. He was glad it was through him that, undisturbed, they could live the simple life.

His fall came through ambition. Herrick himself attributed it to his too great devotion to nature and nature's children. Jackson, he of the frivolous mind, attributed it to the fact that any man is sure to come to grief who turns from the worship of God's noblest handiwork, by which Jackson meant woman, to worship chipmunks and Plymouth Rock hens. One night Jackson lured Herrick into New York to a dinner and a music hall. He invited also one Kelly, a mutual friend of a cynical and combative disposition. Jackson liked to hear him and Herrick abuse each other, and always introduced subjects he knew would cause each to lose his temper.

But, on this night, Herrick needed no goading. He was in an ungrateful mood. Accustomed to food fresh from the soil and the farmyard, he sneered at hothouse asparagus, hothouse grapes, and cold-storage quail. At the music hall he was even more difficult. In front of him sat a stout lady who when she shook with laughter shed patchouli and a man who smoked American cigarettes. At these and the steam heat, the nostrils of Herrick, trained to the odor of balsam and the smoke of open wood fires, took offense. He refused to be amused. The monologue artist, in whom Jackson found delight, caused Herrick only to groan; the knockabout comedians

he hoped would break their collar-bones; the lady who danced Salome, and who fascinated Kelly, Herrick prayed would catch pneumonia and die of it. And when the drop rose upon the Countess Zichy's bears, his dissatisfaction reached a climax.

There were three bears—a large papa bear, a mamma bear, and the baby bear. On the programme they were described as Bruno, Clara, and Ikey. They were of a dusty brown, with long, curling noses tipped with white, and fat, tan-colored bellies. When father Bruno, on his hind legs and bare feet, waddled down the stage, he resembled a Hebrew gentleman in a brown bathing suit who had lost his waist-line. As he tripped doubtfully forward, with mincing steps, he continually and mournfully wagged his head. He seemed to be saying: "This water is much too cold for me." The mamma bear was dressed in a poke bonnet and white apron, and resembled the wolf who frightened Little Red Riding-Hood, and Ikey, the baby bear, wore rakishly over one eye the pointed cap of a clown. To those who knew their vaudeville, this was indisputable evidence that Ikey would furnish the comic relief. Nor did Ikey disappoint them. He was a wayward son. When his parents were laboriously engaged in a boxing-match, or dancing to the "Merry Widow Waltz," or balancing on step-ladders, Ikey, on all fours, would scamper to the foot-lights and, leaning over, make a swift grab at the head of the first trombone. And when the Countess Zichy, apprised by the shouts of the audience of Ikey's misconduct, waved a toy whip, Ikey would gallop back to his pedestal and howl at her. To every one, except Herrick and the first trombone, this playfulness on the part of Ikey furnished great delight.

The performances of the bears ended with Bruno and Clara dancing heavily to the refrain of the "Merry Widow Waltz," while Ikey pretended to conduct the music of the orchestra. On the final call, Madame Zichy threw to each of the animals a beer bottle filled with milk; and the gusto with which the savage-looking beasts uncorked the bottles and drank from them greatly amused the audience. Ikey, standing on his hind legs, his head thrown back, with both paws clasping the base of the bottle, shoved the neck far down his throat, and then, hurling it from him, and cocking his clown's hat over his eyes, gave a masterful imitation of a very intoxicated bear.

"That," exclaimed Herrick hotly, "is a degrading spectacle. It degrades the bear and degrades me and you."

"No, it bores me," said Kelly.

"If you understood nature," retorted Herrick, "and nature's children, it would infuriate you."

"I don't go to a music hall to get infuriated," said Kelly.

"Trained dogs I don't mind," exclaimed Herrick. "Dogs are not wild animals. The things they're trained to do are of USE. They can guard the house, or herd sheep. But a bear is a wild beast. Always will be a wild beast. You can't train him to be of use. It's degrading to make him ride a bicycle. I hate it! If I'd known there were to be performing bears to-night, I wouldn't have come!"

"And if I'd known you were to be here to-night, I wouldn't have come!" said Kelly. "Where do we go to next?"

They went next to a restaurant in a gayly decorated cellar. Into this young men like themselves and beautiful ladies were so anxious to hurl themselves that to restrain them a rope was swung across the entrance and page boys stood on guard. When a young man became too anxious to spend his money, the page boys pushed in his shirt front. After they had fought their way to a table, Herrick ungraciously remarked he would prefer to sup in a subway station. The people, he pointed out, would be more human, the decorations were much of the same Turkish-bath school of art, and the air was no worse.

"Cheer up, Clarence!" begged Jackson, "you'll soon be dead. To-morrow you'll be back among your

tree-toads and sunsets. And, let us hope," he sighed, "no one will try to stop you!"

"What worries me is this," explained Herrick. "I can't help thinking that, if one night of this artificial life is so hard upon me, what must it be to those bears!"

Kelly exclaimed, with exasperation: "Confound the bears!" he cried. "If you must spoil my supper weeping over animals, weep over cart-horses. They work. Those bears are loafers. They're as well fed as pet canaries. They're aristocrats."

"But it's not a free life!" protested Herrick. "It's not the life they love."

"It's a darned sight better," declared Kelly, than sleeping in a damp wood, eating raw blackberries-----"

"The more you say," retorted Herrick, "the more you show you know nothing whatsoever of nature's children and their habits."

"And all you know of them," returned Kelly, is that a cat has nine lives, and a barking dog won't bite. You're a nature faker." Herrick refused to be diverted.

"It hurt me," he said. "They were so big, and good-natured, and helpless. I'll bet that woman beats them! I kept thinking of them as they were in the woods, tramping over the clean pine needles, eating nuts, and--and honey, and-----"

"Buns!" suggested Jackson.

"I can't forget them," said Herrick. "It's going to haunt me, to-morrow, when I'm back in the woods; I'll think of those poor beasts capering in a hot theatre, when they ought to be out in the open as God meant they-----"

"Well, then," protested Kelly, "take 'em to the open. And turn 'em loose! And I hope they bite YOU!"

At this Herrick frowned so deeply that Kelly feared he had gone too far. Inwardly, he reproved himself for not remembering that his friend lacked a sense of humor. But Herrick undeceived him.

"You are right!" he exclaimed. "To-morrow I will buy those bears, take them to the farm, and turn them loose!"

No objections his friend could offer could divert him from his purpose. When they urged that to spend so much money in such a manner was criminally wasteful, he pointed out that he was sufficiently rich to indulge any extravagant fancy, whether in polo ponies or bears; when they warned him that if he did not look out the bears would catch him alone in the woods, and eat him, he retorted that the bears were now educated to a different diet; when they said he should consider the peace of mind of his neighbors, he assured them the fence around his game preserve would restrain an elephant.

"Besides," protested Kelly, "what you propose to do is not only impracticable, but it's cruelty to animals. A domesticated animal can't return to a state of nature, and live."

"Can't it?" jeered Herrick. "Did you ever read 'The Call of the Wild'?"

"Did you ever read," retorted Kelly, "what happened at the siege of Ladysmith when the oats ran low and they drove the artillery horses out to grass? They starved, that's all. And if you don't feed your bears on milk out of a bottle they'll starve too."

"That's what will happen," cried Jackson; those bears have forgotten what a pine forest smells like. Maybe it's a pity, but it's the fact. I'll bet if you could ask them whether they'd rather sleep in a cave on your farm or be headliners in vaudeville, they'd tell you they were 'devoted to their art.'"

"Why!" exclaimed Kelly, "they're so far from nature that if they didn't have that colored boy to comb and brush them twice a day they'd be ashamed to look each other in the eyes."

"And another thing," continued Jackson, "trained animals love to 'show off.' They're children. Those bears ENJOY doing those tricks. They ENJOY the applause. They enjoy dancing to the 'Merry Widow Waltz.' And if you lock them up in your jungle, they'll get so homesick that they'll give a performance twice a day to the squirrels and woodpeckers."

"It's just as hard to unlearn a thing as to learn it," said Kelly sententiously. "You can't make a man who has learned to wear shoes enjoy going around in his bare feet."

"Rot!" cried Herrick. "Look at me. Didn't I love New York? I loved it so I never went to bed for fear I'd miss something. But when I went 'Back to the Land,' did it take me long to fall in love with the forests and the green fields? It took me a week. I go to bed now the same day I get up, and I've passed on my high hat and frock coat to a scarecrow. And I'll bet you when those bears once scent the wild woods they'll stampede for them like Croker going to a third alarm."

"And I repeat," cried Kelly, "you are a nature faker. And I'll leave it to the bears to prove it."

"We have done our best," sighed Jackson. "We have tried to save him money and trouble. And now all he can do for us in return is to give us seats for the opening performance."

What the bears cost Herrick he never told. But it was a very large sum. As the Countess Zichy pointed out, bears as bears, in a state of nature, are cheap. If it were just a bear he wanted, he himself could go to Pike County, Pennsylvania, and trap one. What he was paying for, she explained, was the time she had spent in educating the Bruno family, and added to that the time during which she must now remain idle while she educated another family.

Herrick knew for what he was paying. It was the pleasure of rescuing unwilling slaves from bondage. As to their expensive education, if they returned to a state of ignorance as rapidly as did most college graduates he knew, he would be satisfied. Two days later, when her engagement at the music hall closed, Madame Zichy reluctantly turned over her pets to their new manager. With Ikey she was especially loath to part.

"I'll never get one like him," she walled Ikey is the funniest four-legged clown in America. He's a natural-born comedian. Folks think I learn him those tricks, but it's all his own stuff. Only last week we was playing Paoli's in Bridgeport, and when I was putting Bruno through the hoops, Ikey runs to the stage-box and grabs a pound of caramels out of a girl's lap—and swallows the box. And in St. Paul, if the trombone hadn't worn a wig, Ikey would have scalped him. Say, it was a scream! When the audience see the trombone snatched bald-headed, and him trying to get back his wig, and Ikey chewing it, they went crazy. You can't learn a bear tricks like that. It's just genius. Some folks think I taught him to act like he was intoxicated, but he picked that up, too, all by himself, through watching my husband. And Ikey's very fond of beer on his own account. If I don't stop them, the stage hands would be always slipping him drinks. I hope you won't give him none."

"I will not!" said Herrick.

The bears, Ikey in one cage and Bruno and Clara in another, travelled by express to the station nearest the

Herrick estate. There they were transferred to a farm wagon, and grumbling and growling, and with Ikey howling like an unspanked child, they were conveyed to the game preserve. At the only gate that entered it, Kelly and Jackson and a specially invited house party of youths and maidens were gathered to receive them. At a greater distance stood all of the servants and farm hands, and as the wagon backed against the gate, with the door of Ikey's cage opening against it, the entire audience, with one accord, moved solidly to the rear. Herrick, with a pleased but somewhat nervous smile, mounted the wagon. But before he could unlock the cage Kelly demanded to be heard. He insisted that, following the custom of all great artists, the bears should give a farewell performance."

He begged that Bruno and Clara might be permitted to dance together. He pointed out that this would be the last time they could listen to the strains of the "Merry Widow Waltz." He called upon everybody present to whistle it.

The suggestion of an open-air performance was received coldly. At the moment no one seemed able to pucker his lips into a whistle, and some even explained that with that famous waltz they were unfamiliar.

One girl attained an instant popularity by pointing out that the bears could waltz just as well on one side of the fence as the other. Kelly, cheated of his free performance, then begged that before Herrick condemned the bears to starve on acorns, he should give them a farewell drink, and Herrick, who was slightly rattled, replied excitedly that he had not ransomed the animals only to degrade them. The argument was interrupted by the French chef falling out of a tree. He had climbed it, he explained, in order to obtain a better view.

When, in turn, it was explained to him that a bear also could climb a tree, he remembered he had left his oven door open. His departure reminded other servants of duties they had neglected, and one of the guests, also, on remembering he had put in a long-distance call, hastened to the house. Jackson suggested that perhaps they had better all return with him, as the presence of so many people might frighten the bears. At the moment he spoke, Ikey emitted a hideous howl, whether of joy or rage no one knew, and few remained to find out. It was not until Herrick had investigated and reported that Ikey was still behind the bars that the house party cautiously returned. The house party then filed a vigorous protest. Its members, with Jackson as spokesman, complained that Herrick was relying entirely too much on his supposition that the bears would be anxious to enter the forest. Jackson pointed out that, should they not care to do so, there was nothing to prevent them from doubling back under the wagon; in which case the house party and all of the United States lay before them. It was not until a lawn-tennis net and much chicken wire was stretched in intricate thicknesses across the lower half of the gate that Herrick was allowed to proceed. Unassisted, he slid back the cage door, and without a moment's hesitation Ikey leaped from the wagon through the gate and into the preserve. For an instant, dazed by the sudden sunlight, he remained motionless, and then, after sniffing delightedly at the air, stuck his nose deep into the autumn leaves. Turning on his back, he luxuriously and joyfully kicked his legs, and rolled from side to side.

Herrick gave a shout of joy and triumph. "What did I tell you!" he called. "See how he loves it! See how happy he is."

"Not at all," protested Kelly. "He thought you gave him the sign to 'roll over.' Tell him to 'play dead,' and he'll do that." "Tell ALL the bears to 'play dead,'" begged Jackson, "until I'm back in the billiard-room."

Flushed with happiness, Herrick tossed Ikey's cage out of the wagon, and opened the door of the one that held Bruno and Clara. On their part, there was a moment of doubt. As though suspecting a trap, they moved to the edge of the cage, and gazed critically at the screen of trees and tangled vines that rose before them.

"They think it's a new backdrop," explained Kelly.

But the delight with which Ikey was enjoying his bath in the autumn leaves was not lost upon his parents. Slowly and clumsily they dropped to the ground. As though they expected to be recalled, each turned to look at the group of people who had now run to peer through the wire meshes of the fence. But, as no one spoke and no one signalled, the three bears, in single file, started toward the edge of the forest. They had of cleared space to cover only a little distance, and at each step, as though fearful they would be stopped and punished, one or the other turned his head. But no one halted them. With quickening footsteps the bears, now almost at a gallop, plunged forward. The next instant they were lost to sight, and only the crackling of the underbrush told that they had come into their own.

Herrick dropped to the ground and locked himself inside the preserve.

"I'm going after them," he called, "to see what they'll do."

There was a frantic chorus of entreaties.

"Don't be an ass!" begged Jackson. "They'll eat you." Herrick waved his hand reassuringly.

"They won't even see me," he explained. "I can find my way about this place better than they can. And I'll keep to windward of them, and watch them. Go to the house," he commanded. "I'll be with you in an hour, and report."

It was with real relief that, on assembling for dinner, the house party found Herrick, in high spirits, with the usual number of limbs, and awaiting them. The experiment had proved a great success. He told how, unheeded by the bears, he had, without difficulty, followed in their tracks. For an hour he had watched them. No happy school-children, let loose at recess, could have embraced their freedom with more obvious delight. They drank from the running streams, for honey they explored the hollow tree-trunks, they sharpened their claws on moss-grown rocks, and among the fallen oak leaves scratched violently for acorns. So satisfied was Herrick with what he had seen, with the success of his experiment, and so genuine and unselfish was he in the thought of the happiness he had brought to the beasts of the forests, that for him no dinner ever passed more pleasantly. Miss Waring, who sat next to her host, thought she had seldom met a man with so kind and simple a nature. She rather resented the fact, and she was inwardly indignant that so much right feeling and affection could be wasted on farmyard fowls, and four-footed animals. She felt sure that some nice girl, seated at the other end of the table, smiling through the light of the wax candles upon Herrick, would soon make him forget his love of "Nature and Nature's children." She even saw herself there, and this may have made her exhibit more interest in Herrick's experiment than she really felt. In any event, Herrick found her most sympathetic' and when dinner was over carried her off to a corner of the terrace. It was a warm night in early October, and the great woods of the game preserve that stretched below them were lit with a full moon.

On his way to the lake for a moonlight row with one of the house party who belonged to that sex that does not row, but looks well in the moon-light, Kelly halted, and jeered mockingly.

"How can you sit there," he demanded, "while those poor beasts are freezing in a cave, with not even a silk coverlet or a pillow-sham. You and your valet ought to be down there now carrying them pajamas."

"Kelly," declared Herrick, unruffled in his moment of triumph, "I hate to say, 'I told you so,' but you force me. Go away," he commanded. "You have neither imagination nor soul."

"And that's true," he assured Miss Waring, as Kelly and his companion left them. "Now, I see nothing in what I accomplished that is ridiculous. Had you watched those bears as I did, you would have felt that sympathy that exists between all who love the out-of-door life. A dog loves to see his master pick up his stick and his hat to take him for a walk, and the man enjoys seeing the dog leaping and quartering the fields before him.

They are both the happier. At least I am happier to-night, knowing those bears are at peace and at home, than I would be if I thought of them being whipped through their tricks in a dirty theatre." Herrick pointed to the great forest trees of the preserve, their tops showing dimly in the mist of moonlight. "Somewhere, down in that valley, he murmured, "are three happy animals. They are no longer slaves and puppets—they are their own masters. For the rest of their lives they can sleep on pine needles and dine on nuts and honey. No one shall molest them, no one shall force them through degrading tricks. Hereafter they can choose their life, and their own home among the rocks, and the ----" Herrick's words were frozen on his tongue. From the other end of the terrace came a scream so fierce, so long, so full of human suffering, that at the sound the blood of all that heard it turned to water. It was so appalling that for an instant no one moved, and then from every part of the house, along the garden walks, from the servants' quarters, came the sound of pounding feet. Herrick, with Miss Waring clutching at his sleeve, raced toward the other end of the terrace. They had not far to go. Directly in front of them they saw what had dragged from the very soul of the woman the scream of terror.

The drawing-room opened upon the terrace, and, seated at the piano, Jackson had been playing for those in the room to dance. The windows to the terrace were open. The terrace itself was flooded with moonlight. Seeking the fresh air, one of the dancers stepped from the drawing-room to the flags outside. She had then raised the cry of terror and fallen in a faint. What she had seen, Herrick a moment later also saw. On the terrace in the moon-light, Bruno and Clara, on their hind legs, were solemnly waltzing. Neither the scream nor the cessation of the music disturbed them. Contentedly, proudly, they continued to revolve in hops and leaps. From their happy expression, it was evident they not only were enjoying themselves, but that they felt they were greatly affording immeasurable delight to others. Sick at heart, furious, bitterly hurt, with roars of mocking laughter in his ears, Herrick ran toward the stables for help. At the farther end of the terrace the butler had placed a tray of liqueurs, whiskeys, and soda bottles. His back had been turned for only a few moments, but the time had sufficed.

Lolling with his legs out, stretched in a wicker chair, Herrick beheld the form of Ikey. Between his uplifted paws he held aloof the base of a decanter; between his teeth, and well jammed down his throat, was the long neck of the bottle. From it issued the sound of gentle gurgling. Herrick seized the decanter and hurled it crashing upon the terrace. With difficulty Ikey rose. Swaying and shaking his head reproachfully, he gave Herrick a perfectly accurate imitation of an intoxicated bear.