



# The Man on the Box

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE DRAMA UNROLLS.

It is half after eight; the curtain rises; the music of a violin is heard coming from the music-room: Col. Annesley is discovered sitting in front of the wood fire, his chin sunk on his breast, his hands hanging listlessly on each side of the chair, his face deeply lined. From time to time he looks at the clock. I can imagine no sorer picture than that of this loving, tender-hearted, wretched old man as he sits there, waiting for Karloff and the ignominious end. Fortune gone with the winds, poverty leering into his face, shame drawing her red fingers across his brow, honor in sackcloth and ashes!

And but two short years ago there had not been in all the wide land a more contented man than himself, a man with a conscience freer. God! Even yet he could hear the rolling, whirring ivory ball as it spun the circle of that fatal night at Monte Carlo. Man does not recall the intermediate steps of his fall, only the first step and the last. In his waking hours the colonel always heard the sound of it, and it rattled through his troubled dreams. He could not understand how everything had gone as it had. It seemed impossible that in two years he had dissipated a fortune, sullied his honor, beggared his child. It was all so like a horrible dream. If only he might wake; if only God would be so merciful as to permit him to wake! He hid his face. There is no hell save conscience makes it.

The music laughed and sighed and laughed. It was the music of love and youth; joyous, rollicking, pulsing music.

The colonel sprang to his feet suddenly, his hands at his throat. He was suffocating. The veins gnarled on his neck and brow. There was in his heart a pain as of many knives. His arms fell: of what use was it to struggle? He was caught, trapped in a net of his own contriving.

Softly he crossed the room and stood by the portiere beyond which was the music-room. She was happy, happy in youth and ignorance! she could not see all those sprightly measures, her spirit as light and conscience-free; she could sing, she could laugh, she could dance. And all the while his heart was breaking, breaking!

"How shall I face her mother?" he groaned.

The longing which always seizes the guilty to confess and relieve the mind came over him. If only he dared rush in there, throw himself at her feet, and stammer forth his wretched tale! She was of his flesh, of his blood; when she knew she would not wholly condemn him . . . No, no! He could not. She honored and trusted him now; she had placed him on so high a pedestal that it was utterly impossible for him to disillusion her young mind, to see for ever and ever the mute reproach in her honest eyes, to feel that though his arm encircled her she was beyond his reach . . . God knew that he could not tell this child of the black gulf he had dugged for himself and her.

The bell sang its buzzing note; there was the sound of crunching wheels on the driveway; the music ceased abruptly. Silence. A door opened and closed. A moment or so later Karloff, preceded by the girl, came into the study. She was grave because she remembered Mrs. Chadwick. He was grave also; he had various reasons for being so.

"Father, the count tells me that he has an engagement with you," she said. She wondered if this appointment in any way concerned her.

"It is true, my child. Leave us and give orders that we are not to be disturbed."

She scrutinized him sharply. How strangely hollow his voice sounded! Was he ill?

"Father, you are not well. Count, you must promise me not to keep him long, however important this interview may be. He is ill and needs rest," and her loving eyes caressed each line of care in her parent's furrowed cheeks.

Annesley smiled reassuringly. It took all the strength of his will, all that remained of a high order of courage, to create this smile. He wanted to cry out to her that it was a lie, a mockery. Behind that smile his teeth grated.

"I shall not keep him long, Mademoiselle," said the count. He spoke gently, but he studiously avoided her eyes. She hesitated for a moment on the threshold; she knew not why. Her lips even formed words, but she did not speak. What was it? Something oppressed her. Her gaze wandered indecisively from her father to the count, from the count to her father.

"When you are through," she finally said, "bring your cigars into the music-room."

"With the greatest pleasure, Mademoiselle," replied the count. "And pray, if you so desire, our business is such that your music will be as a pleasure added."

Her father nodded; but he could not force another smile to his lips. The brass rings of the portiere rattled, and she was gone. But she left behind a peculiar tableau, a tableau such as is formed by those who stand upon ice which is about to sink and engulf them.

The two men stood perfectly still. I doubt not that each experienced the same sensation, that the same thought occurred to each mind, though it came from different avenues: love and shame. The heart of the little clock on the mantel beat tick-tock, tick-tock; a log crackled and fell between the irons sending up a shower of evanescent sparks; one of the long windows giving out upon the veranda creaked mysteriously.

Karloff was first to break the spell. He made a gesture which was eloquent of his distaste of the situation.

"Let us terminate this as quickly as possible," he said.

"Yes, let us have done with it before I lose my courage," replied the colonel, his voice thin and quivering. He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. His hand shone white and his nails darkly blue.

The count stepped over to the table, reached into the inner pocket of his coat, and extracted a packet. In this packet was the enormous sum of \$180,000 in notes of \$1,000 denomination: that is to say, 180 slips of paper redeemable in gold by the government which had issued them. On top of this packet lay the colonel's note for \$20,000. (It is true that Karloff never accepted money from his government in payment for his services; but it is equally true that for every penny he laid out he was reimbursed by Russia.)

Karloff placed the packet on the table, first taking off the note, which he carelessly tossed beside the banknotes.

"You will observe that I have not bothered with having your note discounted. I have fulfilled my part of the bargain; fulfill yours." The count thrust his trembling hands into his trousers pockets. He desired to hide this embarrassing sign from his accomplice. Annesley went to a small safe which stood at the left of the fireplace and returned with a packet somewhat bulkier than the count's. He dropped it beside the money, shudderingly, as though he had touched a poisonous viper.

"My honor," he said simply. "I had never expected to sell it so cheap."

There was a pause, during which neither man's gaze swerved from the other's. There was not the slightest, not even the remotest, fear of treachery; each man knew with whom he was dealing; yet there they stood, as if fascinated. One would have thought that the colonel would have counted his money, or Karloff his plans; they did neither. Perhaps the colonel wanted Karloff to touch the plans first, before he touched the money; perhaps Karloff had the same desire, only the other way around.

The colonel spoke.

"I believe that is all," he said quietly. The knowledge that the deed was done and that there was no retreat gave back to him a particle of his former coolness and strength of mind. It had been the thought of committing the crime that had unnerved him. Now that his bridges were burned, a strange, unnatural calm settled over him.

The count evidently was not done. He moistened his lips. There was a dryness in his throat.

"It is not too late," he said; "I have not yet touched them."

"We shall not indulge in moralizing, if you please," interrupted the colonel, with savage irony. "The moment for that has gone by."

"Very well," Karloff's shoulders settled; his jaws became aggressively angular; some spirit of his predatory forbears touched his face here and there, hardening it. "I wish to speak in regard to your daughter."

"Enough! Take my honor and be gone!" The colonel's voice was loud and rasping.

Karloff rested his hands on the table and inclined his body toward the colonel.

"Listen to me," he began. "There is in every man the making and the capacity of a great rascal. Time and opportunity alone are needed—and a motive. The other night I told you that I could not give up your daughter. Well, I have not given her up. She must be my wife."

"Must?" The colonel clenched his hands.

"Must. To-night I am going to prove myself a great rascal—with a great motive. What is Russia to me? Nothing. What is your dishonor or my own? Less than nothing. There is only one thing, and that is my love for your daughter." He struck the table and the flame of the student-lamp rose violently. "She must be mine, mine! I have tried to win her as an honorable man tries to win the woman he loves; now she must be won by an act of rascality. Heaven nor hell shall force me to give her up. Yes, I love her; and I lower myself to your level to gain her."

"To my level! Take care, I am still a man with a man's strength," cried the colonel.

Karloff swept his hands across his forehead. "I have lied to myself long enough, and to you. I can see now that I have been working solely toward one end. My country is not to be considered, neither is yours. Do you realize that you stand wholly and completely in my power?" He ran his tongue across his lips, which burned with fever.

"What do you mean?"—hoarsely.

"I mean that your daughter must become my wife, or I shall notify your government that you have attempted to betray it."

"You dishonorable wretch!" The

colonel balled his fists and protruded his nether lip. Only the table stood between them.

"That term or another, it does not matter. The fact remains that you have sold to me the fortification plans of your country; and though it be in times of peace, you are none the less guilty and culpable. Your daughter shall be my wife."

"I had rather strangle her with these hands!"—passionately.

"Well, why should I not have her for my wife? Who loves her more than I? I am rich; from hour to hour, from day to day, what shall I not plan to make her happy? I love her with all the fire and violence of my race and blood. I can not help it. I will not, can not live without her! Good God, yes! I recognize the villainy of my action. But I am mad to-night."

"So I perceive," The colonel gazed wildly about the walls for a weapon. There was not even the usual ornamental dagger.

A window again stirred mysteriously. A few drops of rain splashed on the glass and zigzagged down to the sash.

"Sooner or later your daughter must know. Request her presence. It rests with her, not with you, as to what course I must follow," Karloff was extraordinarily pale, and his dark eyes reflecting the dancing flames, sparkled like rubies.

He saw the birth of horror in the elder's eyes, saw it grow and grow. He saw the colonel's lips move spasmodically, but utter no sound. What was it he saw over his (the count's) shoulders and beyond? Instinctively he turned, and what he saw chilled the heat of his blood.

There stood the girl, her white dress marble-white against the dark wine of the portiere, an edge of which one hand clutched convulsively. Was it Medusa's beauty or her magic that turned men into stone? My recollection is at fault. At any rate, so long as she remained motionless, neither man had the power to stir. She held herself perfectly erect; every fiber in her young body was tense. Her beauty became weirdly powerful, masked as it was with horror, doubt, shame, and reproach. She had heard; little or much was of no consequence. In the heat of their variant passions, the men's voices had risen to a pitch that penetrated beyond the room.

Karloff was the first to recover, and he took an involuntary step toward her; but she waved him back disdainfully.

"Do not come near me. I loathe you!" The voice was low, but every note was strained and unmusical.

He winced. His face could not have stung or burned more hotly had she struck him with her hand.

"Mademoiselle!"

She ignored him. "Father, what does this mean?"

"Agony!" The colonel fell back into his chair, pressing his hands over his eyes.

"I will tell you what it means!" cried Karloff, a rage possessing him. He had made a mistake. He had misjudged both the father and the child. He could force her into his arms, but he would always carry a burden of hate. "It means that this night you stand in the presence of a dishonored parent, a man who has squandered your inheritance over gambling tables, and who, to recover these misused sums, has sold to me the principal fortification plans of his country. That is what it means, Mademoiselle."

She grasped the portiere for support.

"Father, is this thing true?" Her voice fell to a terror-stricken whisper.

"Oh, it is true enough," said Karloff. "God knows that it is true enough. But it rests with you to save him. Become my wife, and yonder fire shall swallow his dishonor—and mine. Refuse, and I shall expose him. After all, love is a primitive state, and with it we go back to the beginning; before it honor or dishonor is nothing. To-night there is nothing, nothing in the world save my love for you, and the chance that has given me the power to force you to be mine. What a fury and a tempest love produces! It makes an honorable man of the knave, a rascal of the man of honor; it has toppled thrones, destroyed nations, obliterated races. . . . Well, I have become a rascal. Mademoiselle, you must become my wife." He lifted his handsome head resolutely.

Without giving him so much as a glance, she swept past him and sank on her knees at her father's side, taking his hands by the wrists and pressing them down from his face.

"Father, tell him he lies. Tell him he lies!" Ah, the entreaty, the love, the anxiety, the terror that blended her tones!

He strove to look away.

"Father, you are all I have," she cried brokenly. "Look at me! Look at me and tell him that he lies! . . . You will not look at me? God have mercy on me, it is true then!" She rose and spread her arms toward heaven to entreat God to witness her despair. "I did not think or know that such base things were done. . . . That these loving hands should have helped to encompass my father's dishonor, his degradation! . . . For money! What is money? You knew, father, that what was mine was likewise yours. Why did you not tell me? I should have laughed; we should have begun all over again; I could have earned a living with my music; we should have been honest and happy. And now! . . . And I drew those plans with a heart full of love and happiness. Oh, it is not that you gambled, that you have foolishly wasted a fortune; it is not these that hurt here,"—pressing her heart. "It is the knowledge that you, my father, should let me draw those horrible things. It hurts! Ah, how it hurts!" A sob choked her. She knelt again at her parent's side and flung her arms around the unhappy, wretched man. "Father,

you have committed a crime to shield a foolish act. I know, I know! What you have done you did for my sake, to give me back what you thought was my own. Oh, how well I know that you had no thought of yourself; it was all for me, and I thank God for that. But something has died here, something here in my heart. I have been so happy! . . . too happy! My poor father!" She laid her head against his breast.

"My heart is broken! Would to God that I might die!" Annesley threw one arm across the back of the chair and turned his face to his sleeve.

Karloff, a thousand arrows of regret and shame and pity quivering in his heart, viewed the scene moodily, doggedly. No, he could not go back; there was indeed a wall behind him: pride.

"Well, Mademoiselle?"

She turned, still on her knees.

"You say that if I do not marry you, you will ruin my father, expose him?"

"Yes,"—thinly.

"Listen. I am a proud woman, yet will I beg you not to do this horrible thing—force me into your arms. Take everything, take all that is left; you can not be so utterly base as to threaten such a wrong. See!"—extending her lovely arms, "I am on my knees to you!"

"My daughter!" cried the father.

"Do not interrupt me, father; he will relent; he is not wholly without pity."

"No, no! No, no!" Karloff exclaimed, turning his head aside and repelling with his hands, as if he would stamp out the fires of pity which, at the sound of her voice, had burst anew in his heart. "I will not give you up!"

She drew her sleeves across her eyes and stood up. All at once she wheeled upon him like a lioness protecting its young. In her wrath she was as magnificent as the wife of Aeneas at the funeral pyre of that great captain. [To Be Continued.]

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