

# THE TIMES

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### THE TIMES.

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### THE DRAMA OF A WIG.

WHAT a sigh was that! not noisy, but profound and eloquent at once of an old grief and a fresh perplexity. Bob Withers, the gentleman in his shirt-sleeves before the mirror, had heaved that sigh every night for ten years, simultaneously with the act of removing from his head the fine chestnut wig which conceals the almost complete destitution of the natural covering. The grief is therefore an old one, but an element of perplexity has mingled with this night's sigh more lately—namely since having wooed and won Angie McLane in his wig, he has been screwing up his courage to the point of revealing to her that it is a wig, as he feels in fairness he ought to do. He has put it off, never finding the right opportunity for the confession, until now the wedding is but a month off, and the task seems harder, more impossible, than ever. He is at present spending a couple of days at the house of the McLanes in the country, with a view to getting acquainted with the family. For the sake of enjoying unalloyed the pleasure of Angie's society for this short time, he has compromised with his conscience by resolving at once on leaving to write to her, and tell the truth, and by no means to procrastinate further.

Meantime the process of getting acquainted with the family does not get on very prosperously. Bob is a poor match in the parental point of view, and a bitter disappointment to the McLanes. Nothing but Angie's resolute character could have extorted the grudging consent which their engagement had at length received. The family consisted, besides Angie, of her father and mother, and two brothers, John and George. Mr. McLane kept his room, being a confirmed invalid. John, strong willed and arrogant in temper, ruled the family with a rod of iron—George being kinder tempered, but of much less strength of character. Angie was the only member of the family whom John could not rule, and she had carried the point of her engagement against his bitter opposition. Mrs. McLane was a mere shuttlecock between John and Angie, receiving an impulse from one which lasted till the other got hold of her. John had accepted the engagement with an exceedingly bad grace, and made scarcely a decent pretense of concealing from Bob his contempt and his desire to find any pretext for forcing a quarrel. This was particularly unpleasant and demoralizing to Bob, because the injury to his own self-respect by the sense of the tacit deceit he was guilty of as to his wig left him unable to meet John's overbearing insolence with the quiet dignity he would have liked to assume.

After going to bed he lay awake a couple of hours thinking over these embarrassing circumstances, and the delightful fact of Angie's love, to which they were offsets. In the course of his tossings he became aware that his seal ring, was not on his finger, and instantly remembered that, after using it for a forfeit in a parlor game that evening, he had forgotten to replace it. Vexation at his carelessness instantly made him awake. The ring must be on the library-table. If not, then he knew not where; and there, it might be fished by a servant in the morning. Association made it invaluable, and he found himself so uneasy about its safety that all he could do was to quietly step down stairs in his stockings without disturbing any one, and make sure about it. He knew that he could, even in the dark, steer his way straight to the library. In this sleepless, excited state of

his mind the slight tinge of adventure in his plan had an attraction.

Jumping out of bed he put on a part of his clothes, and softly opening the door of his room, went across the hall and down the stairs to the ground floor. It was quite dark, but he found his way easily, having a good typographic instinct. From the lower hall he entered the dining-room, and from that to the library. The sea-coal fire in the grate was still flickering brightly, illuminating the sumptuously furnished room with a faint, soft glow of peculiarly rich effect.

There on the table his ring glittered in the fitful firelight, and, as he slipped it on his finger, he felicitated himself on his successful enterprise. The room was so charmingly cosy that he felt it would be a sin not to linger awhile. So, throwing himself on a sofa before the grate, he fell into a delightful reverie.

Just there in that chair, Angie had sat during the evening, and there he pictured her again, finally going and leaning over it in a caressing attitude, fondly cheating himself. Over there had sat Mrs. McLane, and the chair-back at once transfixed him with two critical eyes, till he was fain to look away. The brothers were there and there.

Bob chuckled with a cosy sense of surreptitiousness as he thought how they would stare could they see him now. The subtle pleasure of clandestine things is doubtless partly the exaggeration of the personality which takes place as the pressure of other minds is withdrawn. To persons of Bob's sensitive mental atmosphere that pressure is painful when such minds are hostile, and often irksome even when they are friendly, if not in perfect accord. So that now it was with a positively voluptuous sensation that his personality expanded till it filled the whole room.

The fire burned, and busily flew the shuttles of his fancy, weaving once again the often-varied patterns of the future. Those shuttles had little leisure now-a-days, for all the web must be unravelled and rewoven, that through it all might run the golden thread of Angie's love. How rarely did it light up the fabric, before so dull and dark!

The bronze mantle-clock sounded with a silvery tinkle the hour of two, but the sound fell apparently unheeded on the ear of the dreamer. It was a full minute before the impression reached his mind. There are times when the thoughts throng so that each new sensation has to take its place in the cue and wait its turn to get attention. Then he stirred and roused himself, emerging reluctantly from the warm, voluptuous atmosphere of imagination, as one leaves an enervating bath. He had been lying thus a full hour, and it was high time to return to bed. He left the library and started across the dining room with a hasty step.

Perhaps long gazing at the fire had dazzled his eyes, or perhaps his haste, together with an undue confidence in his skill in navigation by dead reckoning, rendered him less careful than when he had come down. However that may be, a light stand which he had easily avoided then, he now blundered fully upon.

Everybody knows that when one stubs the toe in the dark, instead of delivering the blow when the foot is moving slowest, at the beginning or the end of the step, it always happens so that the toe strikes with the maximum momentum. So it was this time. If Bob had been kicking football he could not have made a nicer calculation of force, and the shock sent the stand completely over.

It would have made noise enough anyhow, but it must happen that on this stand the family silver was laid out for breakfast, and the clangor was similar to that of Apollo's silver bow, when he let fly at the Grecian host before Troy.

Bob stood paralyzed with horror. Even the anguish of a terribly stubbed toe was forgotten in an overpowering sense of the awful mess he had made, and the unimaginable consequences that would at once ensue. As the hideous clangor and clatter rang through the house, scattering its sacred silence, he shrank together and made himself small, as if he could impart a sympathetic shrinkage to the noise. The racket to his own ears was splitting enough, but he felt, in addition, as if he heard it with the ears

of all the family, and he wilted before the conception of the feelings that were at that moment starting up in their minds toward the unknown cause of it.

His first rational idea was, to bolt for his room, and gain it before any one was fairly roused. But the shock had so scattered his wits that he could not at once recollect his bearings, and he realized, with indescribable sensations, that he was lost. He consumed precious moments bumping himself all about the room before he found the right door.

As he reached the foot of the staircase, voices were audible above, and lights were gleaming down. His retreat was cut off, he could not get back to his room without being discovered. He now distinguished the voice of Mrs. McLane in an agitated tone entreating somebody to be careful and not to get shot, and the gruff voices of the brothers responding, and then their steps rapidly descending the stairs. Should he go up and take the risk of a volley while announcing himself? It would be a pretty tableau. Presenting himself in such a guise and under such circumstances, what sort of a reception could he expect from John, who treated him with undisguised contempt in the drawing-room and whose study it was to place him at a disadvantage? He might have hesitated longer, but at this moment the voice of Angie, crying down to her brothers to be careful, decided him. He could not face her under such terribly false circumstances, and without his wig.

All this took place far quicker than I can write it. The glimmer of the descending lamp already shone dimly in the hall, and Bob frantically looked about him for a hiding-place. But all the furniture stood up too high from the floor, and the corners were distressingly bare. He sprang into the dining-room, but in the dark he could not see how the land lay, and hurried on into the library.

The dying fire still shed a dim light around, and he eagerly canvassed the various possibilities of concealment which the room offered. Youthful experience in the game of hide-and-seek now stood him in good stead, and showed him at a glance the inutility as refuges of half a dozen places that would have deluded one less practiced by the spacious but too easily guessed shelter they afforded.

Vainly seeking a refuge, he ran around the apartment like a rat in a trap. He heard the brothers in the dining-room picking up the silver and wondering to find it all there, when, obeying a sudden inspiration, he clambered upon a lofty bookcase that ran across one end of the room, arching about the dining-room door, and reaching within a few feet of the ceiling. In cold blood he never could have sealed it. Lying at full length upon the top of the bookcase with his back to the wall, the bulge of him was still visible from the further part of the room, in case it should occur to his pursuers to look so high.

The latter now entered the library; and, peering over the edge of the bookcase, Bob recognized with singular sensations the two gentlemen with whom he had been quietly conversing a little earlier in the evening. Then they were arrayed in faultless evening dress, and their manner, although supercilious enough, was calm and polished. Now he saw them half dressed, with dishevelled hair—John carrying a student's lamp in his left hand, and in his right an ugly looking sword-cane with its blade painfully naked, while George held a revolver at full cock.

Talking in a low tone, as they called one another's attention to various spots where possibly the burglar might be concealed, they went slowly from corner to corner; probing every recess with the sword, and in an attitude of strained attention to every sound. Their faces, grotesquely lit by the mingled fire and lamp light, showed a fierce hunter's look that made Bob fairly sick.

He did not dare to look at them long lest the magnetism of his gaze should attract their involuntary attention. Nay he even made a frantic effort not to think of them, from the fear that some physical current might have the same effect—for he believed strongly, though vaguely, in the mysteries of animal magnetism, and had a notion that a person sensitive to such influences might

detect the presence of his victim by the very terror the latter had of him.

He could scarcely believe his fortune when, a moment later, the two brothers passed again beneath him back into the dining room.

From there they went on through the rooms beyond, and the sound of their footsteps died away entirely.

Perhaps five minutes after, they returned—that is, as far as the dining-room—and Bob gathered from their conversation that they had found one of the fastenings in the basement in a condition indicating that the burglar might have escaped there.

Mrs. McLane and Angie, having satisfied themselves that the coast was clear, descended to the dining-room, and a lively discussion of all aspects of the problem ensued, which was highly edifying to Bob.

Then the conversation became still more interesting, as it turned on himself. He heard Mrs. McLane saying:

"He must be a hard sleeper, for I knocked several times on his door."

Then one of the brothers granted something contemptuously, and he heard Angie's voice excusing him on the ground that he must be tired after his long journey.

"Are you sure you looked everywhere in the library?" was Mrs. McLane's next question, at which a cold sweat started out on Bob's face. He had just begun to feel quite comfortable.

John and George, however, declared that they had looked everywhere.

"Did you look under the sofa?"

"Behind the window-curtains?"

"In that dark corner by the bookcase?" asked the ladies, in succession.

Ingenious cruelty of fate! Even Angie was racking her brain to guess his hiding place. What if it should be she who hit upon it!

Bob drew a breath of relief as John replied with some asperity, to all these questions, that he had told them once that they looked everywhere.

This silenced them, but Angie said, a moment after:

Just let me ask one more question?"

"Did you look on top of the book-case?"

It seemed to Bob that he died then, and came to life again to hear John reply, contemptuously:

"Over the bookcase? There's no room there; and if there were, no body but a monkey could get up."

"There's room enough," persisted Angie, "and I have often noticed when sitting in the library, what a nice hiding-place it would be. What if he should be up there now, and hear what I'm saying!" she added in an agitated whisper.

"Nonsense!" says John.

"Well, there is no harm in looking, anyway," said Mrs. McLane.

"Come along, then," grumbled John, "You shall see for yourselves."

At this Bob shut his eyes, and turned his face to the wall. The ostrich instinct is the human instinct of despair. He tried to fly away from himself, and leave his body there as a derelict. The effort was desperate, and seemed almost successful. But he could not quite sever the connection, though his soul appeared to be hovering over his body, only attached by a single thread—but a thread which, alas! would not break.

A moment after they all passed through the door directly beneath him, and, going clear to the other end of the library, stood on tip-toe, and peered at his hiding-place. There seemed to be eyes in his back, which felt their scrutiny. But the lamp they carried did not suffice to bring out his figure clearly.

"I'm sure I see something," said Angie, getting up on a chair.

"It's only the shadow of the fire-light," replied John.

"Light the gas and let us make sure," said Mrs. McLane.

George stood up on a chair under the chandelier, and lighted one of the burners.

An inarticulate ejaculation fell from every mouth. A human figure was distinctly visible, reclining along the top of the bookcase, with his face toward the wall. The ladies would have forthwith run away but for the fact that one door of the room was directly beneath the bookcase, and the other close to it. Upon Bob's paralyzed senses fell the sharp words of John:

"We've got you. Get down!"

He did not move, but at the summons his soul, with inexpressible reluctance and disgust, began to return from the end of its floating thread, and re-inhabit the quarters for which it could not quite shake off responsibility.

"Get up, or I'll shoot!" said George.

"Oh, don't shoot him!" cried Mrs. McLane, while Bob, still motionless, dimly hoped he would.

"Get up!" reiterated John; and he did get up. His own will was inactive, and John's was the force that moved his muscles. He turned around and sat up, his legs dangling over the edge of the bookcase, and his wet, white, wretched face blankly directed toward the group—a most pitiable figure.

"Jump down," said John; "and, if you try to escape, you will get shot!"

Bob let himself drop without regard to how he was to alight, and in consequence was severely bruised against a chair and the edges of the bookcase.

He stood facing the group. His eyes mechanically sought Angie's. What was his surprise not to perceive in her expression of mingled curiosity and fright the slightest sign of recognition! A glance showed him that it was the same with the others. John and George evidently supposed they were dealing with an ordinary burglar, and the others were apparently quite as devoid of suspicion as to his identity. His wig! He had forgotten all about it. That explained their singular demeanor.

The bald man in stockings, trousers and shirt, caught hiding in the library after an attempt on the silver, quite naturally failed to recall to their minds the youth of rather foppish attire and luxuriant locks who bade them good-night a few hours previous. As this fact and its explanation broke upon Bob's mind he felt an immense sense of relief instantly followed by a more poignant perception of the inextinguishable falsity and cruel absurdity of his position. He had little time to think it over and determine his best course.

John stepped forward, and with the point of his cane-sword motioned him into a corner, thus leaving the way clear to the ladies, who at once hurried into the dining-room, throwing glances of fear and aversion upon Bob as they passed. Angie paused at the doorway and asked:

"What are you going to do, with the dreadful man?"

Bob even then was able to notice that he had never seen her so ravishingly beautiful as now, with her golden hair falling over her charming *deshabille*, while her eyes scintillated with excitement. She would not have been seen by him in such an undress toilet, but, with a feeling of being doubted he perceived that she now regarded him as she would have an animal.

"George and I will attend to him. You had better go to bed," replied John to her question; and then he sent George after some cord, meanwhile standing in front of Bob with a cocked revolver. Had he scanned his prisoner closely, he might have detected something familiar in his lineaments, but in careless contempt he took him in with a sweeping glance as an average burglar, whose identity was a question for the police.

Bob had not uttered a word. In the complex falsity of his position he could not indeed muster presence of mind to resolve on any course, but regarded with a kind of fatuity the extraordinary direction events were taking. But when George returned with the rope, and ordered him to put his hands behind him, he said in a tone so quiet that it surprised himself:

"Hold on, Mr. McLane; this joke has gone far enough. I am Robert Withers, at your service, and respectfully decline to be considered in the light of a burglar any further."

George's jaw dropped with astonishment, and John was scarcely less taken aback.

"D—d if it isn't! ejaculated the former, after a moment, in a tone of incredulous conviction, as he recognized at once the voice and now the features of Bob; "but where's your hair?"

Bob blushed painfully.

"I wear a wig," he replied, "and to-night, coming down stairs after you were all abed to get my ring which I had left on the table here, I did not fully dress. Going back, it was my luck to