

AN HOUR OF AGONY.

[CONTINUED.]

"All right, sir." The waiter was as quick as I, and scarcely giving me time to disengage the last button he caught away the garment, and bundling it up, vanished in the crowd.

"Eh! hi! stop, you! Good heavens—no—it's impossible! And yet—nearly on us—what shall I do?"

A horrible fact had revealed itself. In making my hurried toilet, I had actually buttoned on my overalls, mistaking my black dress pants!

What was to become of me? Garments, indeed, were there—garments even too ample and obstructive. I had worn; while dressing, a pair of wide but short trousers, once used in a Chinese burlesque, written by my friend Skelton for the delectation of a private circle, and which, being intended for that occasion only, was adorned with devices, grotesque and terror striking representing in colors crimson, green and blue.

And these about my neck, I had brought with me to the Lumberer's Hall. A chill shot through me as I realized the full extent of the misadventure. I staggered back faintly against the wall, and endeavored to collect myself.

Glancing around the corner of the screen, I observed, with a shudder, that the company were taking their places, while the ladies in the gallery had risen and were directing so concentrated a fire of eyes upon the entrance, where the valiant lion queller had paused to return the salute that greeted him, that to escape had become impossible. I must remain where I was; till able to concert with some compassionate attendant some plan of escape.

There was the settling murmur and buzz, the "gentlemen, pray silence. For grace!" and the "stand still, waiters!" in a voice of authority, grace followed, and the noise of feeding; but the next intelligible words from my very soul.

"Remove that screen!" Instantly I clutched and held it back. There came a violent tug; but there was too much at stake for feeble defiance, and I held on with a desperate tenacity, and the screen alone can't yet!"

"Quick, now, with that screen!" said the voice of authority. "What's the matter?"

"There's a gent, behind, a olding of it back," said some officious booby. "Here— you!" I gasped, "five shilling! ten! twenty! five pounds. Fetch—brown overall! forget thou—let the screen alone can't yet!"

"Must do it, sir," explained the waiter. "The headliners can't come by. Stop! there's a vacant seat. Taint three steps off."

"That's mine," I groaned. "Ow lucky! Now just you slip into it as I shift the screen, so's to put you. Tuck the table-knives well into your waist, and nobody'll be the wiser. One, two, three. Off you go!"

Off it was necessary to go, for he caught away my defense, but extended the folding arms of the screen so as nearly to touch the vacant seat. In that instant, however, I had a faint idea of myself fairly seated at the board, the friend who should have accompanied me at my side.

"You take it very coolly, old fellow," remarked the latter. "I fancied that at these dinner punctuations."

"I take it coolly, very coolly," I replied. "And it is for your sake I am doing so. May I ask you to spare as much adjacent table as you are compatible with your personal convenience?"

"Table-cloth assuredly. But why?" "There are reasons—hidden reasons. But of that hereafter. A glass of wine."

"My friend is very amiable with Charley," remarked my companion in the sepulchral tone he is given to use when charging the hostess.

Charley Skelton, who never, so far as it is ascertained, had a relative in the world, dressed always in the deepest mourning. He never laughs, outwardly. He is mirth itself, within. He has written burlesques by the score. To Skelton is due the evocation of words that have baffled the skill of the most accomplished tormentors of the English language.

"My friend, confide in me," continued Dick, smacking his lips for the Lumberer Burgundy is not to be tasted every day. "You are ill at ease."

"At the knees. A trifle." "To remember one's trouble in such a scene is weak."

"To forget one's trousers is madness," I whispered, with clenched teeth, in his ear. "One's—!" ejaculated Skelton, faintly, as he turned upon me a countenance naturally wan and lengthy, but now whitened.

My friend gazed at me scornfully. "So far above his murmured. 'So well—so singular below!' No to now in this brilliant assembly—grace, as I perceive, with the presence of many beautiful (and giggling) women—would imagine that you sitting here so well got up, radiant with artificial mirth, are a type of Milton's sin!"

I replied, curtly, that I accepted the situation, as he was pleased to term it, with the calmness that comes of experience, and that having done all that man could do, I awaited the deities of fate and the arrival of the waiter, when I had offered a sovereign to smuggle in my overalls at the first opportune moment.

"A wretched fellow for you, my boy, there's to be no speech making!" continued Skelton. "We would have had you on your defenses long in no time."

"Have you seen the least like gentleman?" asked a portly member of the guild on my left, as he politely offered the card.

There was a catalogue of at least twenty names, with names appended as proposers, and, as proposing that of the guests of the evening, the Baron de Bete Faure, "Elegiacal Character."

At the same moment a note was placed in my hands. It was from the chairman. "Oblige us. We know your ready eloquence. Baron struck with your face and manner. Wish to hear you speak. Touch up the lines."

Sketching out my pencil-case, I wrote, "Thank you very much, and I will speak this morning. Should create more astonishment than interest if forced upon my legs."

To be continued.

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