

The Anticipator

By Morley Roberts

“Of course, I admit it isn’t plagiarism,” said Carter Esplan, savagely; “it’s fate, it’s the devil, but is it the less irritating on that account? No, no!”

And he ran his hand through his hair till it stood on end. He shook with febrile excitement, a red spot burned on either cheek, and his bitten lip quivered.

“Confound Burford and his parents and his ancestors! The tools to him that can handle them,” he added after a pause, during which his friend Vincent curiously considered him.

“It’s your own fault, my dear wild man,” said he; “you are too lazy. Besides, remember these things—these notions, motives—are in the air. Originality is only the art of catching early worms. Why don’t you do the things as soon as you invent them?”

“Now you talk like a bourgeois, like a commercial traveller,” returned Esplan, angrily. “Why doesn’t an apple-tree yield apples when the blossoms are fertilized? Why wait for summer, and the influences of wind and sky? Why don’t live chickens burst new-laid eggs? Shall parturition tread sudden on conception? Didn’t the mountain labour to bring forth a mouse? And shall—”

“Your works of genius do not require a portion of the eternity to which they are destined?”

“Stuff!” snarled Esplan; “but you know my method. I catch the suggestion, the floating thistledown of thought, the title, maybe; and then I leave it, perhaps without a note, to the brain, to the subliminal consciousness, the sub-conscious self. The story grows in the dark of the inner, perpetual, sleepless soul. It may be rejected by the artistic tribunal sitting there; it may be bidden to stand aside. I, the outer I, the husk-case of heredities, know nothing of it, but one day I take the pen and the hand writes it. This is the automatism of art, and I—I am nothing, the last only of the concealed individualities within me. Perhaps a dumb ancestor attains speech, and yet the Complex Ego Esplan must be anticipated in this way!”

He rose and paced the lonely club-smoking-room with irregular steps. His nerves were evidently quivering, his brain was wild. But Vincent, who was a physician, saw deeper. For Esplan’s speech was jerky, at times he missed the right word; the speech centres were not under control.

“What of morphine?” he thought. “I wonder if he’s at it again, and is to-day without his quantum.” But Esplan burst out once more.

“I should not care so much if Burford did them well, but he doesn’t know how to write a story. Look at this last thing of mine—of his. I saw it leaping and alive; it rang and sang, a very Maenad; it had red blood. With him it wasn’t even born dead; it squeaks puppetry, and leaks sawdust, and moves like a lay figure, and smells of most manifest manufacture. But I can’t do it now. He has spoilt it for ever. It’s the third time. Curse him, and my luck! I work when I must.”

“Your calling is very serious to you,” said Vincent, lazily. “After all, what does it matter? What are stories? Are they not opiates for cowards’ lives? I would rather invent some little instrument, or build a plank bridge across a muddy stream, than write the best of them.”

Esplan turned on him.

“Well, well,” he almost shouted; “the man who invented chloroform was great, and the makers of it are useful. Call stories chloral, morphia, bromides, if you will, but we give ease.”

“When it might be better to use blisters.”

“Rot!” answered Esplan, rudely. “In any case, your talk is idle. I am I, writers are writers—small, if you will, but a result and a force. Give me a rest. Don’t talk ideal poppycock!”

He ordered liqueur brandy. After drinking it his aspect changed a little, and he smiled.

“Perhaps it won’t occur again. If it does, I shall feel that Burford is very much in my way. I shall have to—”

“Remove him?” asked Vincent.

“No, but work quicker. I have something to write soon. It would just suit him to spoil.”

The talk changed, and soon afterwards the friends parted. Esplan went to his chambers in Bloomsbury. He paced his sitting-room idly for a few minutes, but after a while he began to feel the impulse in his brain; his fingers itched, the semi-automatic mood came on. He sat down and wrote, at first slowly, then quicker, and at last furiously.

It was three in the afternoon when he commenced work. At ten o’clock he was still at his desk, and the big table on which it stood was strewn with tobacco-ashes and many pipes. His hair again stood on end, for at intervals he ran his damp hands through it. His eyes altered like opals; at times they sparkled and almost blazed, and then grew dim. He changed at each sentence; he mouthed his written talk audibly; each thought was reflected in his pale mobile face. He laughed and then groaned; at the crisis, tears ran down and blurred the already undecipherable script. But at eleven he rose, stiff in every limb, and staggering. With difficulty he picked the unpagged leaves from the floor, and sorted them in due order. He fell into his chair.

“It’s good, it’s good!” he said, chuckling; “what a queer devil I am! My dumb ancestors pipe oddly in me. It’s strange, devilish strange; man’s but a mouthpiece, and crazy at that. How long has this last thing been hatching? The story is old, yet new. Gibbon shall have it. It will just suit him. Little beast, little horror, little hog, with a divine gold ring of appreciation in his grubbing snout.”

He drank half a tumbler of whisky, and tumbled into bed. His mind ran riot.

“My ego’s a bit fissured,” he said. “I ought to be careful.”

And ere he fell asleep he talked conscious nonsense. Incongruous ideas linked themselves together, he sneered at his brain’s folly, and yet he was afraid. He used morphine at last in such a big dose that it touched the optic centre and subjective lightnings flashed in his dark room. He dreamed of an “At Home,” where he met big, brutal Burford wearing a great diamond in his shirt-front.

“Bought by my conveyed thoughts,” he said. But looking down he perceived that he had yet a greater jewel of his own, and soon his soul melted in the contemplation of its rays, till his consciousness was dissipated by a divine absorption into the very Nirvana of Light.

When he woke the next day, it was already late in the afternoon. He was overcome by yesterday’s labour, and, though much less irritable, he walked feebly. The trouble of posting his story to Gibbon seemed almost too much for him; but he sent it, and took a cab to his club, where he sat almost comatose for many hours.

Two days afterwards he received a note from the editor, returning his story. It was good, but—

“Burford sent me a tale with the same motive weeks ago, and I accepted it.”

Esplan smashed his thin white hand on his mantelpiece, and made it bleed.

That night he got drunk on champagne, and the brilliant wine seemed to nip and bite and twist every nerve and brain cell. His irritability grew so extreme that he lay in wait for subtle, unconceived insults, and meditated morbidly on the aspect of innocent strangers. He gave the waiter double what was necessary, not because it was particularly deserved, but because he felt

that the slightest sign of discontent on the man's part might lead to an uncontrollable outburst of anger on his own.

Next day, he met Burford in Piccadilly, and cut him dead with a bitter sneer.

"I daren't speak to him—I daren't!" he muttered.

And Burford, who could not quite understand, felt outraged. He himself hated Esplan with the hatred of an outpaced, outsailed rival. He knew his own work lacked the diabolical certainty of Esplan's—it wanted the fine phrase, the right red word of colour, the rush and onward march to due finality, the bitter, exact conviction, the knowledge of humanity that lies in inheritance, the exalted experience that proves received intuitions. He was, he knew, a successful failure, and his ambition was greater even than Esplan's. For he was greedy, grasping, esurient, and his hollowness was obvious even before Esplan proved it with his ringing touch.

"He takes what I have done, and does it better. It's malice, malice," he urged to himself.

And when Esplan placed his last story, and the world remembered, only to forget in its white-hot brilliance, the cold paste of Burford's Paris jewel, he felt hell surge within him. But he beat his thoughts down for a while, and went on his little, laboured way.

The success of the story and Burford's bitter eclipse helped Esplan greatly, and he might have got saner if other influences working for misery in his life had not hurt him. For a certain woman died, one whom none knew to be his friend, and he clung to morphine, which, in its increase, helped to throw him later.

And at last the crash did come, for Burford had two stories, better far than his usual work, in a magazine that Esplan looked on as his own. They were on Esplan's very motives; he had them almost ready to write. The sting of this last bitter blow drove him off his tottering balance; he conceived murder, and plotted it brutally, and then subtly, and became dominated by it, till his life was the flower of the insane motive. It altered nothing that a reviewer pointed out the close resemblance between the two men's work, and, exalting Esplan's genius, placed one writer beyond all cavil, the other below all place.

But that drove Burford crazy. It was so bitterly true. He ground his teeth, and hating his own work, hated worse the man who destroyed his own conceit. He wanted to do harm. How should he do it?

Esplan had long since gone under. He was a homicidal maniac, with one man before him. He conceived and wrote schemes. His stories ran to murder. He read and imagined means. At times he was in danger of believing he had already done the deed. One wild day he almost gave himself up for this proleptic death. Thus his imagination burnt and flamed before his conceived path.

"I'll do it, I'll do it," he muttered; and at the club the men talked about him.

"To-morrow," he said, and then he put it off. He must consider the art of it. He left it to bourgeon in his fertile brain. And at last, just as he wrote, action, lighted up by strange circumstances, began to loom big before him. Such a murder would wake a vivid world, and be an epoch in crime. If the red earth were convulsed in war, even then would it stay to hear that incredible, true story, and, soliciting deeper knowledge, seek out the method and growth of means and motive. He chuckled audibly in the street, and laughed thin laughter in his room of fleeting visions. At night he walked the lonely streets near at hand, considering eagerly the rush of his own divided thoughts, and leaning against the railings of the leafy gardens, he saw ghosts in the moon shadows and beckoned them to converse. He became a nightbird and was rarely seen.

“To-morrow,” he said at last. To-morrow he would really take the first step. He rubbed his hands and laughed as he pondered near home, in his own lonely square, the finer last details which his imagination multiplied.

“Stay, enough, enough!” he cried to his separate mad mind; “it is already done.”

And the shadows were very dark about him. He turned to go home.

Then came immortality to him in strange shape. For it seemed as though his ardent and confined soul burst out of his narrow brain and sparkled marvellously. Lights showered about him, and from a rose sky lightnings flashed, and he heard awful thunder. The heavens opened in a white blaze, and he saw unimaginable things. He reeled, put his hand to his stricken head, and fell heavily in a pool of his own blood.

And the Anticipator, horribly afraid, ran down a by-street.