

# The Actor's Tale

By Renton Nicholson

It was about the latter end of the autumn of 1835, when I was professionally pedestrianizing between Exeter and Plymouth. I need hardly say I had not a farthing in my pocket by the time I reached my destination, I had become so tired, and the night was so far advanced, that there was no possibility of procuring even the means of getting a bed. Wearied, hungry, and in a very desponding mood, I stood leaning against a low wall in front of some humble and very suspicious-looking tenements, near one of the outskirts of the town, when a tall, powerfully-built and sturdy fellow suddenly emerged from one of the houses. After eyeing me earnestly for a few moments, he exclaimed:

“Fine night, sir!”

“Very,” replied I, turning round and facing him; “and it’s well it is, for I believe I shall have to ramble about the town till morning.”

“Indeed!” exclaimed the stranger, coming close up to me, and staring me full in the face; then, after a pause, adding “Come in to my house, sir; you’ll find a good fire there, at all events and perhaps we may even be able to accommodate you with a bed.”

Of course, I gladly accepted this invitation, and followed the stranger into his abode, which I then discovered to be the very next to the one in front of which I had been standing. Proceeding along a narrow passage, until we came to its extremity, we entered a spacious apartment, that presented the appearance of a sort of combined kitchen and taproom, though, otherwise, the house bore no affinity to a public-house, being, in fact, a private lodging-house for the accommodation of “travellers” of the lowest class, and of whom the kitchen was completely full. This place was both long and wide, and had a grate with a blazing fire in it at the extreme end, and a lamp fixed to the wall above the mantel-piece. On either side of the apartment, and at the end near the door, were tables and benches, where sat the individuals I have been speaking of—as motley a group as perhaps were ever collected together under one roof. There was an old, hatchet-faced looking fellow, dressed in very ragged seafaring apparel. Next to him sat a female, whom he called his “missis”—a short, thick-set drab of a woman, aged about forty, wretchedly dressed, and exhibiting a countenance that bore the most palpable and painful traces of mental and bodily suffering. Then there was a youngster, a lad of about eighteen, with a remarkably wild, bright eye, and a cocked-up nose—his eyes and his limbs, in fact, his whole body, being as restless as a monkey’s. He was amusing himself by practising sleight-of-hand with a couple of halfpence. Near him was a tall, good-looking man, of about five-and-twenty, dressed in a shabby-genteel style, but singularly clean and neat, and wearing a white neckcloth beautifully starched, and tied in a bow of the very newest fashion. This fellow assumed the character of a valet out of place, and relied chiefly upon his style of dressing for the pecuniary assistance he obtained. Associated with him, and seated by his side, was a flashily-dressed female, in a very palpable state of inebriation. Opposite to her, with her back to the window, before which fluttered a ragged curtain, sat the landlady of the house, a remarkably tall, Amazonian-made woman, with rather handsome though coarse features, and freckled complexion. I had a faint recollection of having met her somewhere before, in the course of my travels.

“Do you know this gentleman, Polly?” inquired my host. The woman fixed her gaze upon me for a moment, and then, shaking me by the hand, exclaimed: “Why, to be sure; it’s Mr Melville.”

Seeing, however, that I was still in great perplexity fully to remember her, she continued:

“Why, don’t you recollect the fair at Weldon, and the show that caught fire on the green? You were there with Abram’s company, playing in the barn, you know. My husband and I have often talked of you since, I can assure you.”

“You recollect us, don’t you?” said the husband.

“I do now,” said I; the circumstance he had mentioned fully reminding me of the active part I had taken in saving the poor fellow’s van and its contents from being utterly destroyed by the flames, and also in my having assisted him in realizing a subscription from the townspeople, on account of the loss he had sustained.

“And so you have given up travelling,” said I—

“And turned respectable, you see,” replied my host, laughingly; “but, come,” continued he, “sit down by the fire, and warm yourself—take this chair; you and I’ll have a pipe together, and you shall taste some of my brandy—the right sort, and no mistake.”

Saying this, he took up a lighted candle that had been placed on the table for the use of some of the lodgers who were going up to bed, and quitted the room; at which moment, the very musical tones of a female voice were heard in the passage, singing the commencement of the song, “I’ve journeyed over many lands”, with so much spirit, expression, and taste, that my attention was immediately attracted, and I turned my head in the direction from whence the sounds proceeded.

“Here’s Kate; a little bit sprung, as usual!” exclaimed the youth with the cocked-up nose.

“What a sweet voice,” said I, involuntarily expressing my admiration.

“Poor thing!” whispered my hostess across the table, at the same time significantly putting her finger to her forehead, and adding: “she’s a little cranky—Crazy Kate, they call her—you must not mind her.”

I nodded assent, and again turning my eyes towards the door, beheld the girl we had been speaking of standing before me. She was a young creature, apparently not more than fifteen, and remarkably interesting in her appearance—a circumstance that arose from the fact of her being very pretty, of a very elegant figure (though rather *petite*), and also from the extraordinary contrast that her style of dress presented, not only to that of other females in the room, but to the common mode of attire among persons in her reckless sphere of life generally. Perhaps I cannot give you a better idea of her, than by saying at once, without entering into minutiae, that she was dressed precisely in the usual style of a stage ballad-singer, not excepting even the laced bodice, the mittens, the cottage-bonnet, and the streamers of blue ribbon flying at each side of it.

“Would you like to hear a song, sir?” said she, coming up to me, playfully, and prefacing her address with a sort of stage-curtsey; “but,” continued she, with the utmost *naiveté*, “I ought hardly to ask you, for you look uncommonly as if you belonged to the player-folks”—a remark which produced considerable laughter, and in which I myself very heartily joined.

I was exceedingly struck with the girl, and felt extremely desirous to hear her sing, but by the time the laughter had subsided, she seemed not only entirely to have forgotten her offer, but the frolicsome vivacity that had given her such a sparkling air on entering the room, had suddenly changed to gloom, and she had seated herself at one end of a bench close to the door, evidently suffering under one of those sudden attacks of melancholy to which persons afflicted as she was (especially when further affected, however slightly, by intoxication) are extremely liable.

“Come, Kate,” said my hostess, “what a bad memory you have got; you offered to sing this gentleman a song.”

“Did I?” replied the girl, despondingly; “did I say I’d sing? Well, I will; one song, mind—no more”; then throwing back her head against the wall, with one hand resting in her lap, and with the other seemingly tracing with her finger some letters among a quantity of tobacco ashes that had been emptied on the table before her, she began the following song:

The sun was sinking in time west,  
To close the shining day,  
The eve when first my eyes were blest  
With sight of Harry May.

We vow’d to love each other long,  
Upon life’s chequered way;  
And oft my merry mountain song  
Was tuned for Harry May.

The trader with his spreading sails  
Did bear my love away.  
And now my broken heart bewails  
The loss of Harry May.

The marriage-bells in happy peal  
A transient joy convey,  
For as I list their sounds reveal—  
“Oh, come to Harry May!”

The old moon, when she’s shining bright,  
Behind a cloud will stay,  
To weep with me in tearful light,  
For my poor Harry May.

And when the great sea-sigh is heard,  
Bowed down by woe I pray;  
The whisper of the ocean-bird  
Says—“Mourn for Harry May.”

Towards the close of time song, the girl’s voice faltered extremely; and as the concluding words of time last stanza died upon her lips, tears gushed down her checks, and, burying her face in her hands, she sobbed convulsively.

“Piping again, Kate, eh! What a silly wench you are to be thinking so of a chap that’s been food for the sharks long ago,” said the youngster with the turned-up nose.

The girl took no notice, but immediately quitted the room in company with the “valet” and his companion, who, at the conclusion of Kate’s song, had risen, and taken up the candle that the landlord had brought back to light them up to bed.

“Unhappy creature that,” remarked I to mine host, as he took his seat at the end of a form by my side, and proceeded to mix a couple of enormous goblets of brandy-and-water.

“A melancholy sight, indeed; so young and fascinating, too. Evidently been extremely well brought up—the more the pity.”

“Do you know anything of her history?” inquired I.

“Only what we have been able to pick up from the girl herself, in her moments of more perfect sanity.”

“Well, try the brandy-and-water—genuine, you see”; and then he added, in sort of half-whisper “the spirit is so strong, that it is not easy to make it mingle with the water; without some pains, it will float on the surface. Taste it.”

“Anybody can tell how you get this,” said I, in a whisper after I had tasted it. “Capital!”

“Is it not? Bless you, we supply all the publicans in the town, and a great many other people besides. Well, about this girl we were speaking of; she has been in Plymouth nearly a year, under precisely the same circumstances in which you see her now. From all we can get out of her, it seems that the cause of her malady is a disappointment in love—some young fellow between whom and herself there arose a passionate attachment; but his friends discovered the acquaintance, and not at all approving of it, they sent him to sea. The vessel was wrecked, and all hands on board perished; an event which, when it came to the knowledge of this poor girl, affected her so deeply, that, on recovering from the appalling paroxysm of the shock, she was found to be insane, just in the same degree as we now see her.”

“And you don’t even know where she comes from?”

“No.”

“But what does she do here?”

“Goes about singing; it’s a part of her madness.”

“Strange!”

“Yes; at times her mind wanders terribly, and then we have heard her talking to herself about her ‘dear Harry’; and from all that can be gleaned, it appears that when her lover was parted from her he managed to send her a letter, informing her he should escape from the service the first opportunity, return to England, and land at this port, Plymouth—though for what actual purpose, or with what intent, it is impossible even to surmise. The girl, it seems, brooded over this letter, until, under the influence of her malady, she actually conceived that her lover had returned, and was waiting to meet her here, the letter produced by his friends relative to his death being a mere fabrication invented by them to deceive her. She eluded the care of her friends, and fled from her home hither, where she is a daily visitor at the docks, to see what vessels come in, and at night she is to be seen at all the taverns and public-houses singing ballads, hoping in the course of her rounds to meet her long absent lover. She takes great pains with that stage style of dress, wishing to make herself as conspicuous as possible, that she may be sure to attract *his* notice.”

“A most extraordinary delusion,” observed I; “it’s a pity she cannot be saved from such a life.”

“I don’t know that,” replied my host; “generally speaking, she appears perfectly happy; and it is only when the fact of her lover’s death forces itself upon her, that she seems to suffer much affliction. If she were to be removed from hence, and deprived of the practical indulgence in her delusion, I verily believe she would die from grief—it’s meat and drink to her.”

“Meat and drink, eh! Very unwholesome nourishment, I am afraid, though, even to say the best of it. Now, this—”

“What, the brandy?” cried he, laying hold of the bottle; “no, there’s no delusion about that; it’s the real, genuine., unadulterated—”

And here he was interrupted by a violent knocking at the street-door, so loud and aristocratic, that the effect was rather more ludicrous than startling; and turning round to his wife with a facetious air, he exclaimed:

“That must be either the Marquis of Waterford or Prince Albert! The head hotel is full, I suppose; and so, knowing the respectability of my house, they are sending their customers hither.”

Then bidding his wife to go and hook out a pair of clean sheets that had not got any holes in them, he left the room, to ascertain of what class and quality his clamorous visitors actually were.

There was hardly anybody in the room except myself, the hostess, and a thick-set, Dutch-built, seaman-like looking fellow, stretched out, half asleep, on one of the benches, but who, the instant he heard the knocking, sprang up with a sort of bull-dog growl, as if he scented in the distance some intruders whom he did not at all approve of. Just at that moment was heard the noise, as of a rush, into the house, the moment the door was opened, and the words: “In the Queen’s name—you know us,” uttered in a most determined and authoritative tone; then the sound of heavy and hurried footsteps, and—a couple of Excise-officers, followed closely by the landlord rushed into the room.

“Quick, quick, the brandy!” exclaimed his wife, just as the officers were entering; and instantly seizing the bottle of brandy and glasses, I dashed them all underneath the grate, and hurriedly raked the broken pieces so as to bury them in the ashes. The officers were just in time to discover what I had done, and after gazing surlily at the remnants, and sniffing up the smell of the brandy, to the great amusement of mine host, turned round fiercely upon me, and began pouring upon me a host of threats and invectives for having been the means of depriving them of their booty.

“Come, come!” exclaimed mine host, “I’ll have no bullying here; make your search, if you have got one to make; get what evidence you can, and be off, or else—”

The sentence was finished in dumb-show, by the display of a brace of pistols, which he pulled from his pocket, and proceeded to handle in such a way as to leave no doubt about the nature of time threat intended, and the speedy execution of it. The officers, evidently calmed by this movement, contented themselves with growling out a few oaths, and exhibited their search-warrant, declaring that they meant to search the house.

“Search, and be—!” said my host.

And without giving him time to utter the concluding anathema, the officers abruptly reiterated time avowal of their intent to proceed with the search instantly, and hastened to leave the room for that purpose, followed by the landlord and the sailor whom, it will be remembered, their entrance had awakened from his slumber. In a few minutes afterwards, the officers were heard departing; the landlord sarcastically taking leave of them at the street-door, by regretting they should have had so much useless trouble, and hoping that they would not again inflict upon themselves such laudable anxiety without a better chance of some remunerative profit.

“Got rid of the old scoundrels, at last,” exclaimed he, reentering time room; “and now, we will go out and have a quiet glass together, as we have been prevented from enjoying it at home.” After desiring his wife not to sit up for him, and putting the key of the street-door into his pocket, he led me out of the house, down the street, and through a variety of blind turnings, until, at last, we arrived at a corner public-house, into which we made our way by a side entrance; and here I was introduced to the band of smugglers with whom my conductor was associated. We entered a back-parlour, which I found entirely filled by men of the character and description I advert to—rough, athletic, adventurous-looking fellows—some attired in Guernsey shirts, and some in blue

jackets, but all dressed in the garb of sailors. My conductor was received very cordially, and on my being introduced to the party as an old acquaintance who had once rendered him most material service under very urgent circumstances, I was instantly greeted with all the cordiality of a friend; and on my companion stating what had occurred within the officers that evening, and also being pleased to say, that I was a very clever actor, every one present evinced such an eagerness to prove his respect for so distinguished a guest, that glasses of brandy-and-water were set before me as fast as I could drink them. I remember little else of the details of that evening, except that, happening, among the variety of songs I was compelled to sing, to give Dibdin's ballad of "Wapping Old Stairs", one of the smugglers asked me whereabouts the stairs were situated, and evinced the most amusing mixture of surprise and credulity on my informing him that they had recently been removed from their original locality, and now formed the ascent to the Duke of York's column—a species of emblematical stepping-stones to glory, which he seemed to think very appropriate, inasmuch as, said he, "If it had not been for the British navy, our armies never would have been able to get a footing anywhere." The night passed on, and my perceptive faculties rapidly became oblivious, until at last I fell asleep, partly under the influence of the liquids I had imbibed, and partly from being wearied by the day's journey.

The next morning, I seemed to have awoke out of a trance. I found myself in one of the beds of a large double-bedded room, very comfortably furnished. The second bed was empty, and did not appear to have been occupied. It was some time before I could recollect the events that had occurred on the preceding night; but at last I succeeded in bringing them to mind, so far as to be able fully to understand that I had been put to bed at a public-house, somewhere in the outskirts of the town, and on getting out of bed, to dress, I found my clothes lying on the floor, just as if somebody had pulled them off for me, and let them drop there. Well, thought I, I had no money to be robbed of, whoever may have performed the office of valet; and then I went on dressing until I had finished, when, taking up my hat, which was lying flat upon the brim, I beheld, to my utter gratification and astonishment, a sovereign lying under it, and placed so conspicuously, that it was utterly impossible I could help seeing it. I concluded instantly that I was indebted for it to the generosity of my *quondam* friend, the smuggler, and hastened down stairs determined to find his abode and go and thank him, but on inquiring of the landlady, all I could learn was that my bed had been paid for by one among a party of strange men who had brought me there in a state of utter insensibility on the previous night. I went out, and endeavoured to retrace my steps in the supposed direction of the smuggler's abode, and I even made inquiries at several lodging-houses of a similar kind, but without success, until at last I became so dreadfully mystified and bewildered respecting the reality of everything which had occurred, that I actually got my sovereign changed for the express purpose of being fully convinced that, at all events as regarded the reality of a piece of coin so valuable, I could not be labouring under any delusion. Strange to say, however, although I remained at Plymouth two or three days, and made considerable search, I was obliged to leave at last without discovering the abode of my friend the smuggler, nor has it since ever fallen to my lot to renew any acquaintance of a similarly romantic and gratifying character.