

# THE PHANTOM CIRCUS.

By UNA ARTEVELDE TAYLOR.



It was Bank Holiday at a watering-place on the South Coast, an August midday of lapis-lazuli skies, blazing sunshine, and glittering, ripple-veined sea. The expanse of dun-yellow sands beneath the slanting cliffs of the wide-winged bay were aswarm with human life; the shadowed space beneath the long, black-planked, white-railed pier, the eating-stalls, the booths of cheap wares and provisions, dear to the tripper, were thronged. Legions of excursionists were disgorged by steamers which coasted the shores; files of holiday-makers passed through the pier toll-gates to picnic in the shade of the lines of bathing-machines; boys, girls, babies, in troops; bathers, boaters, hordes of tourists, contingents of nursery maids, peopled the beach. Entertainments to suit all ages, tastes, and conditions of life abounded. Punch and Judy, niggers, acrobats, open-air preachers, bade for popularity. Wares temporal and wares spiritual were exposed in all their sordid cheapness as the morning hours passed.

At noon a general exodus took place. Children sauntered up landwards from the water's edge; knots of fishermen, red-capped, blue-jerseyed, loitered about the pier-head; the eating-stalls were momentarily deserted by their younger clients. An idle expectancy held the adults on the watch, while a wave of excitement spread amongst the children. The big circus, the "Monster Show," advertised by flaring placards on every hoarding throughout the sea-town, was announced to parade the principal thoroughfares at noon, and already the thud of distant drum-beats, the truculent blare of brass instruments, made themselves audible to attentive ears.

The high-road skirted the cliffs, ascending steeply to east and to west, but at the pier-head, between hill and hill, was a wide semicircular, level space, and here the spectacle

of the circus procession might be seen to best advantage in all its fantastic incongruities, its sham barbaric glitter, its counterfeited of Eastern trappings, its bedraggled braveries and tarnished finery—a medley of the music-hall and the backwoods, with its vague suggestions of adventure, and its puerile reminiscences of pantomime burlesque.

A stir and then a hush amongst the waiting crowd. An outrider in scarlet appeared upon the eastern slope of the road—a second—a third—the advance guard to the main body. Soon the lumbering train of vans, gilt and painted, shaped like colossal toys from a shop-window, veered into sight. The tired horses were thrown sharply back on their haunches as they essayed the steep descent; the rough grooms who walked beside whipped them up to a quick trot as they approached the level ground, calling a halt on the opposite ascent while the more laggard waggons retrieved their place in the straggling, single-file march, to proceed with slackening pace towards the inland-lying quarters of the town.

One by one, in the rear of the vans, the *dramatis personæ* of the show made their appearance, whether their species were man or beast. Piebald ponies, streaked and speckled horses, some led, caparisoned and prancing, some saddled, some harnessed, passed by. The riders were tanned and dusty, with the nervous, hardy, alert faces appertaining to the vagrant circus-performing race. A clown on stilts took his stand at the centre of the semicircle, advertising in loud speech the characters of his costumed comrades, joking noisily with the nearer bystanders, claiming here and there an old acquaintance. The circus was an annual visitor to the locality, and Jim Drake had many a friend amongst the townfolk. Erratic tandems, driven by girls in tawdry fancy dress, masked in paint and powder, followed the lead of the "lady rider," in habit and hat. The performing elephant plodded after, a quartette of camels behind, with blue-beaded, red-leather trappings, mangy, pitiful, and morose. There was again a pause and a longer break in the train, while at the top of the hill the men

adjusted extra drag-chains to the ponderous cage on wheels, where, in black evening dress, the lion-tamer sat at one end, his captive beasts, restless, savage, cowed, and half drugged, occupying the other half of the vehicle.

There was a sudden access of interest amongst the bystanders as, at the steepest dip of the hill, one of the drags gave way. The sharp jerk threw the beast inmates within the iron bars into close proximity to the human—there was no partition between. The clown, watching, sprang off his stilts and ran up the hill—the tamer was old Hudson, his friend. The faces of the circus attendants, who knew the peril, changed; the crowd, who half knew, laughed—the brutalities of ignorance are immense.

A moment later the incident was forgotten; the drags were readjusted, the van drove heavily on. A new attraction diverted the attention of the spectators, for next in order came the sharpshooter, Daly, who, after other cowboy exploits, shot an apple from his wife's head at the close of each performance. He was mounted on a roan, rode in a high Spanish saddle, wore a slouched sombrero, and his gun was slung over his shoulders. A faint cheer greeted him; like Drake, he was a familiar figure to annual frequenters of the watering-place. His wife, in boy's dress, fair-haired, with peaked white face and spangled green tunic, drove a miniature Cinderella car in front of the team of dwarf ponies who brought up the rear. And the procession closed with the cumbrous band-car, drawn by cream-coloured horses and hung with coloured balls, on which, at a giddy height, the Queen of the Arena was enthroned in glittering and precarious state, with the sparkling tinsel of her crown and the dyed yellow of her hair.

So the display—sordid, gaudy, vulgar—passed by, and, mingling unseen with the living figures of the coloured pageantry, Death, on his lean horse, held the hour-glass behind the gaily-bedizened car of the wire-walker, beckoned with outstretched hand to the lion-tamer seated in his ambulant cage, and touched with warning finger the shoulder of the gymnast. And the crowd, though blind, was dimly conscious that that sinister spectre lurked amidst the gaily-accounted pageant—the consciousness lent excitement to the show. It was a scene in the *Danse Macabre* which mediævalism omitted to portray.

The last string of ponies, the battering of the drum-beats, the discordant uproar of the brass, receded further and further into the

distance. Children, trippers, loiterers, dispersed to eat, drink, and make merry, after the manner of the excursionist, while the circus pitched its tents on the camping-ground, where waste moorlands of heather and gorse and bramble fringed the squalid suburbs of seaside villadom.

## II.

It was late afternoon. Daly, the sharpshooter, *alias* the New William Tell, stood at the open door of a workmen's lodging-house, one of the slate-roofed line of cottages recently erected along the moorland high-road skirting the circus encampment. Mrs. Daly lodged there, eschewing the rough accommodation and rougher companionship of the caravanserai. It was the last concession to forfeited gentility. Poor little Nellie—vain, pretty, shallow—had sought six years ago to better her condition. A school-teacher in the village school, she had married the "gentleman born," who, in those bygone days, played lovers' parts in travelling companies, and won—the zest of clandestine meetings contributing to illusion—Nellie, the parish Cinderella, to follow his fortunes. She never loved him—that he learnt soon enough. "But now we must sink or swim together," Daly had laughed, with the cheerful acquiescence in destiny of a kindly reprobate.

They sank, and sank rapidly. The circus was the last stage of Daly's descent in the social scale. Theatre, music-hall, circus; the ladder on whose rung Nellie had set her feet led downwards. Nellie herself was called upon to share what she called his disgrace. Minnie, the girl-rider, who played with Daly the New William Tell "act" in the shooting scene of each daily performance, had struck. Daly drank, and drank hard. It was not safe for anyone, so Minnie, Jim Drake's sweetheart, declared, and Jim stood by her in the dispute with the manager. "Then Mrs. Daly shall do it herself," the manager decreed; "then, perhaps, she'll keep him sober," else "Daly might go."

So it was that Nellie must take her rank with the girl-riders and the rest of the circus folk, and only in the matter of lodging could she assert any distinction. It was a bitter pill, and it rankled sorely, but "one must live," Nellie said to herself. It is a superstitious belief in a superfluous necessity shared by many others in divers straits.

Daly had kept sober for many a week

since. He had the merit of his vices. He was kindly and generous, light-minded and worthless spendthrift as he was. Nellie was ill-tempered, fretful. Her ill-temper was born of the relics of self-respect; regret for past gentility envenomed her life and embittered her tongue. Her cheeks were thin, her face peaked, her features sharpened — for Nellie's youth had died young — but Daly was fond of her still. More, he loved her, if intermittently, with something strangely like a lover's fondness. The world had been hard for Nellie; a worse woman would have fared better — would have found consolations Nellie despised. With a selfish contrition, in which he found satisfaction, he was sorry for her unhappiness; he was sorry for his share in it. All he could do now for her welfare was, when occasion demanded it, to keep sober. It was nervous work, that shooting scene, for a woman unused to it.

He tried sobriety, but the weather was scorching, the roads long and thick with dust. When he came round, an hour after the afternoon performance, she had given him one look of disgust, and then turned away.

He lingered on uneasily; he knew his hand had been shaky that afternoon, and he knew she knew it.

"Don't sulk, Nell," he said. "It's all right." If she heard, she gave no sign. "I'll be all right this evening," he went on shamefacedly. "I won't take any more.

Come, Nell; the air's like a furnace. Come and stroll around till we're wanted."

He waited a moment, came a step nearer, made a half move to lay his hand on her shoulder. She jerked it aside.

"I say, drop that stitching," he repeated, "and come along."



"It's not safe; there'll be an accident."

She shook her head. She was arranging her tarnished tinsels for the night's show. A woman's vanity has many qualities of the eternal.

"Someone must do the work," she muttered surlily.

Daly laughed.

"Very well, then, I'm off; but I'll keep sober, I promise you."

Daly strolled away, leaving Nellie to her tinsels. "I promise!" Poor promises! *Dieu dispose.*

Two hours later, Nellie was waiting her "turn" in the tent that served for green-room. Someone came to the door and called her by name. It was the manager.

"Mrs. Daly, your husband's drunk again! Jim says he's as bad as ever—clean drunk, I tell you."

"He's not!" Nellie came forward, sullen and angry.

"Well, I suppose you know. It's your look-out, anyway."

The audience was waiting, the manager was in a temper. "It's you who will suffer if anything goes wrong."

"He's not drunk, I tell you," Nellie repeated defiantly.

"All right, then. Hurry up; you're late. Time's just up." The manager went.

There was still a few minutes' delay. Daly was shooting at glass balls; Nellie could hear the applause, and, between clapping and clapping, the clink of bullets upon the glass.

A girl-rider, who had been jumping through paper rings, ran in hurriedly.

"Why, Mrs. Daly, you aren't going on to-night?" she asked. It was Minnie, whose place Nellie was occupying. "Daly's worse than ever; he's shooting like mad. It's not safe; there'll be an accident."

"That's my business. Clear out!" Nellie answered shortly. "I'm wanted."

She pushed past the girl.

"Who'd have thought she had so much grit?" Minnie, unresentful of the repulse, murmured to herself, looking after her with something of admiration.

"Makes you nervous to see." Jim, the clown, had joined her. "But then, poor old Daly, he'll pull himself together, you bet. He's that proud of Nellie—and fond, too."

Nellie took her stand in the big round tent. Daly had shot straight, drunk and sober, times out of number. Why not tonight—why not?

She lifted the gilt apple, showed her teeth; they were white and even between the red paint of her lips as she smiled the set smile of music-hall convention to the audience. Even now she was pretty in her slimness and fair-haired grace. The audience cheered, and Nellie straightened her figure as she balanced the apple on her head. The band played its loudest, the drum beat the rhythm.

Daly, on horseback, entered at a gallop. The well-trained beast knew its work; it stopped dead short at a given spot; the band stopped playing. Daly threw himself off the saddle. Nellie's quick eyes saw that he staggered slightly as he took a step forward. He lifted his gun mechanically, paused, looked vacantly round, and reached out a hand to steady himself against the motionless horse. Someone laughed a loud grating laugh. Still Daly hesitated. A voice from the crowd called "Fire away, old boy!" and there was a hiss. Nellie heard it all—the laugh, the voice, the hiss.

What was Daly waiting for? The gas-lights flickered in her eyes. He was taking aim at last, his hand was on the trigger. Was it the gas that was blown to and fro in the draught of the windy night, or did she see his hand shake? No—yes! He aimed—he was aiming too low! Dazed with terror, she gathered herself together to spring aside. It was too late! A sharp report, a cloud of grey smoke, the smell of burnt powder, a woman's scream. The gilt apple rolled from the square of carpet and sank in the sand. Nellie had fallen. A burst of applause filled the tent; the audience shouted, they clamoured for an encore. Then came a moment's questioning; an instinct of disaster spread. Nellie did not stir. Daly stood a moment rigid. Then he had dropped his gun and was bending over her. Was it part of the play? If so, it was played to the life. There was a murmur, a hum of voices, the inarticulate murmur of curiosity. Suddenly the word "accident" passed from mouth to mouth. They lifted Nellie from the sand, and Daly stood by in horror. The spectators had seen the last of the play.

The lean rider had taken his part in the show. Living is, after all, the embryo of dying—break the shell and see.

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They carried Nellie to the nearest van, and laid her on the mattress hastily stretched from seat to seat within. The green tunic was stained, the fair hair disordered, her face was ghastly under its rouge. Men and girls gathered in groups about the doorway stair; horses were tethered around. Within, Daly crouched on the floor by her side. There was a stir; a doctor, hastily summoned, arrived, the manager with him.

"I warned her; she wouldn't listen. I told her he was drunk." The manager vociferated excuse and explanation.

Jim, the clown, leaned against the off-

wheel. Minnie was speaking to a circle of listeners.

"She wouldn't listen," the girl was repeating with excited importance. "I was the last to speak to her. She was always that proud—she'd listen to no one!"

"It was sheer murder, it was, to shoot when he was that drunk!" a man said hoarsely.

"Shut up!" The clown turned angrily on the two. "You shut up, both of you! It will go hard with him, anyhow."

The manager and the doctor mounted the short steps. The doctor went in, the manager stood at the entrance. Nellie opened her blue eyes, and turned them slowly under their half-closed lids till they rested on Daly's bent head. There was a hush without and within. The bystanders strained their ears to catch what passed.

"He was drunk—I warned her he was drunk!" The manager's voice penetrated Nellie's semi-consciousness. A gleam of intelligence revived, for a moment the haze of death lifted. The dying woman raised herself painfully, with gasping breath, from the propped-up pillow.

"He wasn't!" she whispered, and in the silence the hoarse, loud whisper reached even the watchers without. "He wasn't! I moved!"

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The bracken had sprung, summer by summer, the heather and gorse had blossomed, over the trampled enclosure where Nellie played the last scene of her meagre little life. Where the circus pitched its tents, and the tethered horses browsed, new houses in raw and red-bricked hideousness defaced the moorland. Only a nameless grave in the common cemetery remained to tell of the soon-forgotten incident.

Again it was August. The steamer's strident scream was heard at the pier-head; tourists in yet denser swarms populated the sea-town; children dug, bathed, shouted, and ate on the shore; the sands were alive with the human insect. As the feeding hour approached, the various shore and sand entertainments were suspended. The dog Toby, neck-frill unloosed, was seated near the box where Judy and her fellow-puppets reposed from their labours. The prayer-meeting had quavered forth its last hymn, and the troops of men, women, children, nursery maids, plodded up through the heavy sand from the water's edge. There was the tension of storm to come in the breathless, heated air; the glaring blue of sky and sea was yellowed over with a

hot haze; the flat water lapped almost inaudibly against the seaweeded spars of the pier as the tide receded to its farthest limit.

Near the white railings that flank the toll-gate, a couple of strolling acrobats, a man and a younger performer, little more than a boy, were resting from their arduous toil of entertaining the idle. The boy, his close-cropped head reposing on a red roll of carpet, lay half asleep, lean and tanned. But his sleep was like the sleep of a watch-dog; he caught every word of the talk when the elder man addressed his companion, a brown-faced woman, whose sturdy figure, weather-beaten skin, and some nameless quality of feature and movement, betokened that she, too, belonged to the wandering confraternity of road-farers.

"First time I've been here since," the man was saying. "Poor Daly! Wonder what's happened to him? Drunk himself sober at last, maybe, as old Hudson the lion-tamer said when Dick Smith broke his neck off the wire. D'you remember, Minnie? I knew something was going to happen; that very morning I told Dick he'd better look to the wire."

"You was always imagining things was going to happen," answered Minnie, ex-rider of the Circus, contemptuously.

Jim Drake took no notice of her interruption.

"D'you remember Daly? Poor chap! It was rough on the little woman he married; she never held up her head after he took to drink."

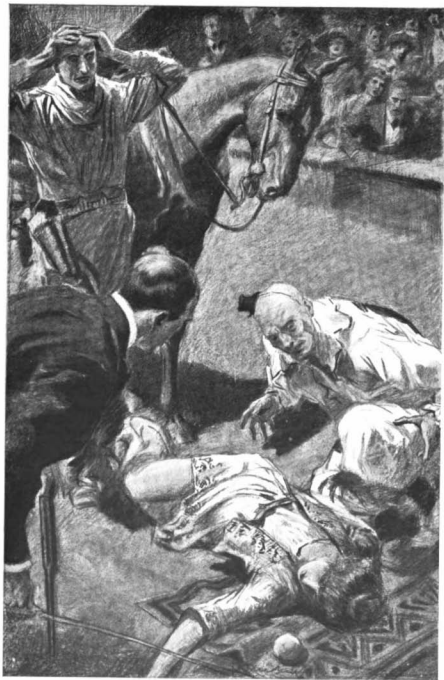
"Guess she drove him to it! She was a stuck-up piece of trumpery!" said Minnie sharply.

"What's it all about?" asked the boy, his eyes blinking under their white lids set in the brown of his face.

"Old circus days, sonnie, when Minnie and me was in the Circus. Might have been yesterday." The man maundered on; he had but lately resorted to the tap-room at the big white hotel at the foot of the hill. "Poor Daly! He took it hard, did Daly."

"You're as bad as Daly," observed Minnie, with an indifference born of habitude.

"Hang it," the man said, "I'm not for shooting jobs!" Then his mind strayed back to his broken train of reminiscences. "It's just as if it was yesterday—the old hand lunging away the same tune it played when she came on for her turn. How she looked! Anyone could see death on her. I knew it was coming, I did, just as when



"Was it part of the play?"

Dick broke his neck—I see'd death on her."

The acrobat's hard-lined face, with the hardy grey eyes, alert for all his drinking, had taken a new expression; he was gazing intently up the eastward high-road. He gave a sudden start, with a smothered oath.

"Look!" he said suddenly. "What's that?"

"What? What's the matter?" said the startled woman.

"Hallo, what's up?" asked the lad, roused.

Jim was staring—stupidly, rigidly staring—his eyes were blank and fixed.

"I say, are you gone blind?" Minnie exclaimed.

"Look—look! There's the old show itself!" Jim cried, catching her by the arm. He gripped her wrist like a vice. "Look alive, Minnie! There they come! There's the old piebald, and Will Godden's team. Heavens, he'll run down those perambulators if they don't run! Here, sonnie, up with you! Here's the whole blessed show a-coming along!"

The boy, his jersey rolled back to the elbows above the blue tattooing of his arms, sprang to his feet. "Where? Which way?" he said.

"Jim, let go; you're out of your senses!" The woman's voice, raised in angry altercation, caught the ear of the bystanders. Two or three sailors gathered round, people turned to see.

"There's nothing there, Jim—nothing."

Jim never moved his gaze.

"There's Jennie Deans driving," he went on, with deeper absorption, but lowered voice, "and old Solomon, lame as ever and his trunk all awry, and Fitzgerald himself, bossing it all, and there's old Hudson in his cage—there, on the top of the hill——"

The crowd round thickened.

"What's up?" one asked another.

Jim's voice had sunk to a monotonous undertone. "Why the devil don't the band

play them up? How slow they come! It's like—it's like a funeral!"

Again a man near spoke.

"It's only a drunken mountebank. Says there's a circus coming down the road, hung with black trappings and a hearse alongside."

But some contagion of oppression, a nightmare of vague disquiet, had crept over the nearest bystanders. No one responded to the jest.

"I say, Jim, come out of that." An old acquaintance touched him on the shoulder. "Don't go on staring at nothing."

"There's Daly riding the roan, and—Heavens, there's his wife behind!"

The man's face was strained with terror. Minnie felt his grasp relax. She slunk frightened and tearful to the boy's side.

Suddenly Jim made a swift step forward.

"The drag's broke on the lion van!" he shouted. "Hudson'll be done for!"

Involuntarily the circle of spectators had made way. But with the movement Jim paused. A blank look of utter bewilderment succeeded to the tense gaze. He looked to right and to left. With a muttered exclamation he staggered back to the rails.

"But it was there! I saw it—I saw it," he murmured, "and it's gone—clean gone!"

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In Ward B of the great London hospital, the midday August sun scarcely penetrated the dense atmosphere of the yellow summer fog. The heat was stifling, the flowers on the central table withered. Doors and windows stood wide open, but no breath of air entered. Two or three nurses stood at the entrance of the ward as the ward sister went by.

"Poor old Daly's gone at last." One of the nurses stopped her. "Off his head, as usual—fancied he was riding with a circus caravan, called out the drag-chain was off the lions' van."

"It was himself wanted the drag-chain in his day, I'll be thinking," was the sister's dry response as she passed in to her work.