

Drama of Twenty-Four Hours

A moan thrilled the heavy night air. The form of a woman stood out dimly against the blank beyond on the very verge of the river pier. Two white arms were flung on high. A wild face was upturned to the ashen, pitiless heavens. White lips uttered something like a curse, which was heard by the dull-eared wind only.

Three hundred bells, in as many quarters of the great city, clanged 12 and the 300 iron tongues were still for an hour.

The flash of a body in the inky waters smote on the midnight; the waters with a sudden shock, stirred squeaking ship and leviathanic pier with an ague-like tremor. The woman's form on the dock was gone.

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Mr. Banker Jeekyll was a sort of animated exclamation point—a kind of human interjection, always on the point of breaking out in exclamatory monosyllables. He talked in interjections, walked in interjections, acted interjectionally, did business in interjections. Mr. Detective Ferret was a tool of his—that is, translated into lengthened prose the stenographic memoranda of interjections that formed the dialect of principal.

At 10 o'clock that evening Mr. Banker Jeekyll had sent for Mr. Detective Ferret on urgent business.

“Miss Vancouver is at large!” interjected Jeekyll.

“Well!” rejoined Ferret, half in the way of asking a question and half in the manner of an exclamation.

“Poor thing! I think she'll make away with herself,” ventured Jeekyll, with an Americanism; “but you must get some clue to her whereabouts immediately. I should never forgive myself if she did—never. My own sister's daughter, you are aware, Mr. Ferret, and heiress of the estate of my later brother-in-law, Mr. Vancouver.”

Mr. Jeekyll looked the impersonation of anxiety—was, for the moment, a great grief expressed in a single human interjection, at least apparently.

Mr. Ferret looked up at Mr. Jeekyll furtively, with a sort of diagonal inquisitiveness in his small, cunning eyes. Mr. Ferret, in the course of his whole professional experience, had never looked at anybody directly.—His glances always seemed to fly off at a tangent from the side of his head.

“Well,” repeated Ferret, still half interrogatively, and with an expression that said or might have said, if Mr. Jeekyll had peered sharply into his face, “I'd like to know exactly what you mean, Mr. Jeekyll.”

Twenty-four
June 17, 1880

“A cool thousand, Ferret, if you bring news within six hours. I shall be up all night; I’m so worried you know, about poor Ida,” replied Banker Jeckyll, and the two understood each other thoroughly.

Ida Vancouver was a young lady of twenty. For three years she had been a prisoner in her room, under the care of her uncle and guardian, and his selected physicians, nurses, and attendants.

“It was a mental malady,” Mr. Jeckyll said, and so said physician and attendants. “Her poor mother used to have turns,” went on Mr. Jeckyll; “but the late Mr. Vancouver always took great pains to conceal it.”

Then, too, Mr. Jeckyll was so considerate—so sympathetic.

“I can’t have the heart to send her to an asylum,” he used to say in his grief stricken way. She’s my own sister’s daughter—the only relative I have in the world; and if she is violent sometimes, so long as I have a dollar she shall be taken care of at home.”

The neighbors gossiped: “How generous is Mr. Jeckyll”—though there were those who whispered suspicions, and were scouted for so doing.

At seventeen, Ida Vancouver had become intimate with William Hamilton, a young specimen of legal anatomy. The stern guardian had forbidden Hamilton to enter the house, and from that date the young lady had been gradually going mad. So ran the rumor, and most people believed, for Banker Jeckyll was influential, as incarnate hard cash is apt to be.—There is a certain divinity in cash, especially in Fifth Avenue circles, and Banker Jeckyll was the divinity incarnate.

Mr. Hamilton was conceited—not more so than men usually are—but conceited enough, nevertheless, to believe that Miss Vancouver had gone mad on his account. It was so romantic to think so; and, for the sake of the romance, Mr. Hamilton was able to bear his loss with pathetic resignation. It was 1 o’clock at night when Ferret pulled the bell at the door of the 5th avenue palace. Three hundred iron tongues, in as many quarters of the city, had almost simultaneously clanged 1, and the million-mouthed metropolis was sound asleep. Its 2,000,000 eyes, with here and there a pair of exceptions, were shut in slumber, and Mr. Ferret had not the slightest suspicion that Miss Vancouver’s two blue eyes were among the exceptions.

Ferret was admitted with a shawl under his arm that Jeckyll identified. He had traced Miss Vancouver to the pier, but had not been in time to prevent the accident. Here he sent an optical dispatch to Mr. Jeckyll, which questioned, “Have I done right?” Mr. Jeckyll, by optical dispatch, answered, “Yes,” and the conversation went on, the latter dispensing the promised thousand.

The detective had seen Miss Vancouver drop from the pier; and had heard the splash; had picked up the evidence of her identity. There was no doubt as to the fact—Miss Vancouver was dead and might be carried to the morgue any day, having been cast up by the sea for identification. So reasoned Mr. Jeckyll, secretly resolving to keep an eye on the morgue, and, in instance of Miss Vancouver’s body being picked up, to identify it and impress the public with magnificent obsequies.

“The effect,” argued the banker, internally—“the effect on the circle in which I move will be worth the trouble.”

The banker carried out his resolution, but in vain. The opportunity for the magnificent funeral was never presented.

At 12:30 the next day a lady entered one of the great Broadway catacombs, and studied her way to the office of William Hamilton.

“Was Mr. Hamilton in?”

“Mr. Hamilton was in, but engaged,” suggested the gentlemanly partner.

“Would the gentleman be so kind as to take a card to Mr. Hamilton?”

“With pleasure.”

The visitant scribbles her name on an office card, which the gentlemanly partner, begging her to be seated, takes to the inner sanctum.

“Lady’s card, sir. She’s waiting for an interview.”

Mr. Hamilton glances at the name, and a cadaverous pallor overspreads his face with a sudden wave. The quickness with which he becomes disengaged is marvelous.

“I’ll see her immediately,” gasps Mr. Hamilton, spasmodically, and the partner disappears to escort the visitant to the inner office.

“Mr. Hamilton will see you at once. This way, madame,” and the two, three years separated, are face to face.

The explanation that ensues is neither complimentary to Mr. Hamilton’s acumen nor to his vanity; but he bears it in consideration of the Vancouver two millions and a Mrs. Hamilton whose sanity is unquestionable.

Three hundred clocks in as many quarters of the city clang 10. Mr. Jeckyll walks up and down in the 5th avenue mansion, speculating as to whether poor Ida’s body will be found. A carriage stops at the door, and a lady and gentleman alight; the gentleman rings and sends in his cards.

“What in the deuce can the young popinjay want with me?” queries Banker Jeckyll, internally. “Admit Mr. Hamilton,” orders he, blandly externally; and the gentleman enters with a lady on his arm. In the worn out metaphor of “Hudibras,” Banker Jeckyll smells a rat but is not quite sure.

“Permit me to present Mrs. Hamilton, Mr. Jeckyll,” smiles the visitor blandly, but with a certain tinge of sardonicism apparent.

Mrs. Hamilton lifts the heavy veil that covers the face that applied for lodging at the station-house the night before.

“It is I, dear uncle, and guardy,” murmurs the same musical voice that had so fascinated the lawyer—only the voice is a trifle less pathetic and has an undercurrent of sarcastic laughter in it.

Mr. Jeckyll’s tongue is not equal even to an interjection at the moment.

“I knew how you’d grieve, guardy, dear, so I just dropped a cobble-stone in the water, left my shawl to be picked up by Mr. Ferret, and crept away on my hands and knees. Still, I had a hard night of it, guardy.”

With a gasp, Banker Jeckyll staggered to a chair, and, with a moan, sank down as if he had been wounded.

Banker Jeckyll was dead. Apoplexy, Dr. Quackengush called it; and the magnificent funeral came about as intended—only Banker Jeckyll was in the coffin instead of Banker Jeckyll’s niece. Stark and stiff, Mr. Jeckyll looked the exclamation point incarnate even in death, and was buried at the expense of the two millions.

“Cleverly outwitted,” muttered Ferret, when he heard the news; “but my fifty thousand never’ll come—never.”

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