

"TALKING of lovely women," remarked the actor, "the most perfect, the most adorable, the most divine one I ever met had one small defect. At least, most people, I suppose, would consider it a defect. She was a murderess. However, as Wilde said, the fact that a man is a poisoner has nothing to do with his prose. And in the case I'm thinking of it certainly had nothing to do with her charm.

"Of course I have no actual cast-iron proof. My evidence would be laughed to scorn in a court of law, if one could imagine haling that glorious being into such a dreadful place. Anyway, since it all took place over thirty years ago, and, to my everlasting regret, I read in the paper only a few mornings back that she was dead, the situation does not arise.

"It was before I came to London, and I was on tour with a Number One company. For a youngster I had quite a good part. It wasn't a difficult one, but it was fairly long, and I was frightfully pleased at having got it. We were playing at one of the south coast watering places, when I saw her first—this divine creature.

She was sitting in a box and a man was with her, and whenever I glanced in their direction her eyes were fixed on me.

“ Now, at twenty-five, a very soothing and pleasant sensation enwraps one when a lovely woman favours one so obviously. And when the next night found her there again, and the night after—this time alone—yours truly began to expand visibly. Being tolerably well favoured by nature in the matter of a face I leapt, like the damned fool I was, to the obvious conclusion that this adorable being had fallen in love with me.

The note was brought round to my dressing-room on the fourth night. To my disappointment she had not been in her usual box, but the note more than atoned. I found it lying on the table, and the man who was sharing with me started to pull my leg. However, I soon shut him up, and then found to my concealed annoyance that my hands were positively shaking with excitement. Of course he shouted with laughter, and after a while I started to laugh too.

“ ‘ Adorable man,’ he jeered. ‘ Overcome by the beauty of your face and the marvel of your histrionic ability. . . . Go on : open it. Probably the landlady’s daughter asking for an autograph ! ’

“ ‘ Go to blazes,’ I cried, and sat down to read it.

“ It was short, but it raised me into the seventh heaven of bliss.

“ *Dear Mr. Trayne, [it ran],*

“ *You will probably think this note a little peculiar, coming, as it does, from a complete stranger. I have watched your show for the last three nights from one of the stage boxes, and, without wishing to flatter you in the slightest degree, there is no doubt that you stand out head and shoulders from the rest of the caste—good though they all of them are.*

“ *To come to the object of this letter. I have a certain request to make of you which, I trust, you will see your way to granting. As it is much too long to write, will you come and lunch with me to-morrow, at one o'clock? I shall be alone, and, since you have no matinée, we can take our time. The address you will see above.*

“ *Yours sincerely.*

“ *Violet Berningham.*

“ *P.S.—I don't think you will find the granting of the request unpleasant, so that, unless I hear from you to the contrary, I shall expect you.*

“ Well, with a letter like that from a woman like that, what would you do? It merely became a question of watching the hands of

the clock go round, and swearing because they didn't go faster. Of course, it could only mean one thing: she had fallen desperately in love with me. And did I blame her? No—perish the thought: far from it. It showed a very proper appreciation of a deuced fine specimen of manhood. And the only thing that worried me at all was whether she was married or not.

“I reached her hotel at one sharp, and as I walked in a man whose face was vaguely familiar passed me. And suddenly I realised that he was the man who had been with her the first two nights in the box. Moreover, though he only glanced at me quite casually in passing, I thought I read a certain cynical amusement in his eyes.

“I frowned a little angrily, and then I forgot all about him. *She* was coming towards me with the sweetest smile and hand outstretched.

“How nice of you to come,” she remarked, and I give you my word, I could only stand and stare at her like the village idiot.

“Seen from the stage she had been beautiful: from close she was ten times more so. Superlatives are always dangerous; but the loveliness of that woman deserves a double-dyed superlative. And everything about her was in keeping—clothes, hands, feet, As I say, I stood there goggling like a callow boy.

“ ‘I’ve ordered lunch in my private sitting-room,’ she went on. ‘I loathe feeding with other people, don’t you? And when we’ve finished perhaps you can spare me half an hour or so?’

“I hastened to assure her that I could and would spare her the entire afternoon if she wanted it.

“ ‘I mustn’t monopolise you to that extent,’ she laughed. ‘Or I shall have hundreds of irate girls after me.’

“And so we started lunch. Half-way through I was in love with her; when the coffee came I was in a condition of blithering imbecility. She was wearing a wedding ring, and once or twice I wondered if the man who had passed me in the hall was her husband. But there didn’t seem to be any male traces in the room, such as pipes or tobacco, and after a time I ceased to worry. As I say, I was beyond human hope when the meal came to an end.

“ ‘Tell me, Mr. Trayne,’ she said, after I had obtained her permission to smoke, ‘when does your tour come to an end?’

“ ‘In two months,’ I told her.

“ ‘And what will you be doing then?’

“ ‘I wish I could tell you, Mrs. Berningham,’ I laughed. ‘But I’m afraid the futures of touring actors are not mapped out as closely as that.’

“ ‘ You’re not going to be a touring actor for long, my dear man,’ she said. ‘ But we’ll talk about that later. Two months, you say. That brings us to the end of September. Would you be free for the first few days of October?’ ”

“ ‘ Free as air,’ I told her. ‘ But to do what?’ ”

“ ‘ To act in a little sketch with me. Of course I’m only an amateur, and you’re outstanding. But—perhaps . . .’ ”

“ And then I completely lost my head. She was looking at me half sideways, with a faintly provocative smile, and the next thing I knew was that I was on my knees beside her chair and that she was in my arms.

“ But—enough. Over that portion of the entertainment I will draw the veil of reticence ; as your host I must consider your digestions. Sufficient to say, that the standard of her kissing was, if possible, higher than the standard of her looks.

“ At last she pushed me away and pointed to a chair.

“ ‘ Go and sit down, Mr. Man, and behave yourself,’ she ordered. ‘ I want to discuss the play with you.’ ”

“ It appeared that she lived in Surrey ; and that there was an urgent need of supplying a home for incurable dipsomaniacs, or lost cats, or something, in the village adjoining. That necessitated funds, and the idea was to get

up a show. You know the sort of thing: depressing *tableaux-vivants* and a conjurer.

“ Her notion was that the main item should be a small play in which she and I should play the principal parts. My notion was that anything which enabled me to see her as often as possible was good enough for me. I hardly listened, in fact, to her explanations as to the difficulty of finding young men in the neighbourhood who could act; and how she wanted the thing to be a great success. What I did listen to was when she began to tell me as to why she had asked me.

“ Heavens above! What a man will swallow when he's young and infatuated. But I will say one thing in defence of myself: she did it amazingly well. She was an absolute artist, and she would have taken in ninety-nine men out of a hundred. You see, there was no reason why my suspicions should have been aroused. Women have become infatuated with men before now, and they will undoubtedly do so again. And I merely regarded it as an astounding piece of luck on my part that the one who had honoured me was so marvellously attractive.

“ ‘ And now I've told you far more than it's good for you to know,’ she said at length. ‘ I want you to talk to me. No! I don't want you to make love to me; you're to sit where you are and smoke a cigarette. Tell me about

your plans for the future; tell me about yourself. Because I think that perhaps I may be a little mixed up in that future. . . . Don't you. . . . No, you're to sit down and be sensible. Just talk. . . . You know, I adore your voice.'

"And so I sat and talked. She was that rare specimen—the perfect listener. She knew exactly when to put in a remark, and when to keep silent; she knew how to make a man talk his best. And she could dream your dreams and see your visions, and colour each one for you a little more vividly."

For a moment or two the actor paused and stared at the fire.

"As I told you at the beginning," he continued quietly, "it all happened thirty years ago. And yet, old and cynical as I am now and realising as I do that I was a dupe and a catspaw all through, I still say that, with that woman beside him a man could have reached the topmost peak.

"However, I'll get on with it. I left her that afternoon walking on air. She was going to send the sketch to me so that I could learn my part before we started rehearsing in October. And it was only as I sat down to dinner in my lodgings that it dawned on me that she'd never even mentioned the question of her husband. I wondered if he was going to take any part in the play and what sort of a fellow he was. I felt it couldn't be the man who had been

with her at the theatre, and who had passed me as I entered the hotel. No one could have behaved with such cool equanimity if he had known, that his wife was proposing to spend several hours alone with another man. Guessing, too, something of the truth: realising that she must be immensely attracted by that other man to do such a thing.

“No: it was impossible—out of the question. And yet—who was he? Was he another would-be lover whom I had beaten in the race, but who was man of the world enough to take it as he had? Did he perhaps think that I was just a passing infatuation that would die away as quickly as it had been born? Poor fool! Poor, silly fool! Though I took off my hat to him for his sportsmanship. To lose such a prize and keep a stiff upper lip was a bit of a strain on a man.

“She wasn't in the theatre that night, and after the show was over I went for a stroll along the front. It was a glorious night—warm and delightful—and after a while I sat down on the beach with my back against the wall of the esplanade. The band had long since finished, though a few couples still sat about. But it was late, and most people had gone to bed, which was just what I wanted.

“I felt I had to be alone to dream over that wonderful afternoon. I was still in a completely dazed condition, and the thought of

bed was an impossibility. So I sat on, seeing the most wonderful visions of the future. Only to come back to earth suddenly with a wild feeling of joy. From just above me had come her voice. And I was on the point of dashing up the steps towards her, when I realised that she couldn't be alone.

"The faint smell of a cigar was in the air—so her companion was a man. I heard his voice vaguely, and began to see red on the spot. They were just above me, leaning over the railings, and I, sitting in the darkness below, was invisible. But I could see the glow of his cigar not six feet above me: I could see the outline of her head against the sky. Who was it; who was this cursed fellow who dared to poach on my preserves? The man she had been with at the theatre? And once again I very nearly darted up the steps.

"But I didn't, and sometimes now I'm sorry I didn't. For if I had gone up those steps I shouldn't have heard the remark she made to him just before they both moved away. And I shouldn't have had my little bit of evidence which would have been laughed to scorn in a court of law. It might have made me happier; I don't know. Anyway, I sat on there in the darkness and I heard the remark.

"*Mo, ami*, it is getting a little chilly; let us go in. Of course the whole thing is a

matter of careful arrangement, but on the one main point you may set your mind absolutely at rest. The similarity is simply incredible; more marked even in a room than on the stage. I tell you that I myself would not be able to tell the difference if my eyes were shut.'

" Then they moved away, and after a time I, too, got up to go. And as might be expected, the part of the remark which boiled and seethed in my mind consisted of four short words. 'Let us go in!' It implied—— Heavens! What didn't it imply? Or was it just a conventional phrase?

" As for the rest of the remark, though I'd heard and noted every word subconsciously, it made no impression on me whatever. To me the one main point was, 'let us go in.' I couldn't get beyond that. And it was still the one main point when the tour ceased at Bristol at the end of September.

" During the whole of those two months I never saw her, and I only heard from her once. It was a short line, written from her club in London, to say she had found what she thought was a suitable sketch and that she would send it along in due course. And in the meantime I was to keep my head turned towards the dazzling goal—my own theatre in London.

" So I wrote back five pages of the most passionate adoration, and received in return—

the sketch. And I confess that after I'd read the thing through I felt rather as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over me. I had expected something a little powerful: something with some drama in it: something where she and I could let ourselves go.

"Instead of that, I waded through twenty pages of the most drivelling piffle I've ever set eyes on. I am thankful to say that I have completely forgotten its name and that of the human horror who wrote it. But I do remember that the part I had to play was that of a curate who had an impediment in his speech.

"And then, at Bristol, I got another letter from her which made it all clear. I felt a fool for not having understood before.

" 'I know it's the most ghastly rot,' she wrote, 'but you wouldn't believe the difficulties of an audience like we shall have for an amateur show. One damn, and the whole house would file out. I've read hundreds of the beastly things, and though you won't believe it there are many even worse than the one I chose. Never mind . . . There are other things to do besides act—at any rate, act on the stage. *N'est-ce pas, mon ami?*

" 'And now a word of warning. You will of course stay with us, and you must know that my husband is a great recluse. He had a very terrible accident a few years ago which deprived him of his sight. It also disfigured him, and

he is morbidly sensitive about his appearance. So don't be surprised if his manner is a little strange.

“ ‘Come by the nine o'clock train, and the brougham shall meet you at the station. I can't ask you down earlier because I shall be out all day. I'm terribly busy organising everything—but it's not the show I'm thinking of so much as . . . Well, I'll tell you that later.’

“ As I say, it made everything clear. With a provincial village audience it was undoubtedly exactly the type of drivel to go down. The letter also cleared up another point: the man who had been with her in the theatre was evidently not her husband. And it was just as I was once again cogitating as to who he was that I noticed a postscript.

“ ‘By the way, my dear, I have had to do one thing which I know you will understand. It would be absolutely suicidal in this neighbourhood if it came out that I had met you before. Everyone would immediately leap to the worst conclusions. Even my husband might wonder, and we certainly don't want that, do we? So I have given it out that an agency in London is going to procure a suitable actor to fill the part, and that I don't even know his name. We must meet *apparently* as strangers.’

“ By George!” laughed the Actor. “as I look back now I become increasingly staggered.

Age cannot wither the wondrous and simple beauty of that plot in all its cold-blooded unscrupulousness. It was a work of art, and as such it must be judged. I cannot see one detail that was neglected, or one unnecessary risk that was run. It was a cast-iron certainty from the moment the tapes went up.

“However—to get on with it. I left London by the nine o’clock train, and arrived at my destination about ten. And as I got out on to the platform a man brushed past me who was evidently going on by my train. Just for a moment the light of the solitary lamp fell on his face, and I recognised him at once. The same man again—confound the fellow! I couldn’t get away from him. Moreover, he had evidently come down in the brougham, for the inside smelt strongly of smoke.

“However, I soon forgot him: was I not going to see my divinity again in a few minutes—hold her in my arms? The horses seemed to crawl: my hands were clammy: you know—all the usual symptoms. And then when I saw her I very nearly forgot the postscript instruction.

“She came across the hall towards me dressed in some grey gauzy stuff, and she was more wonderful than ever. And I gave a step forward—an uncontrollable step—before I remembered that we had never met before.

“‘Mr. Trayne, I believe,’ she said, and held

out her hand. 'It is very good of you to come and help us.'

" 'Not at all,' I murmured.

" 'But as the cause is very deserving perhaps you will overlook our defects,' she went on with a smile. 'Now would you like to see your room or shall we have a rehearsal at once?'

" She'd turned so that her back was towards the butler, and she gave me the suspicion of a wink. So you can be pretty certain which of the alternatives I chose.

" 'All right: I hope I'm word perfect,' she said. 'Take Mr. Trayne's things up to his room, Wilson, and see that we are not disturbed for the next half-hour or so. Don't forget, Mr. Trayne, that you must be merciful. . . . I'm only a beginner. . . .'

" She was leading the way across the hall as she spoke.

" 'Let's come in here.' She opened the door, and I followed her into a largish room. It was half smoking-room, half library, and at the opposite end was an opening in the wall across which stretched some heavy black curtains.

" 'We shan't be disturbed in here.'

" She'd shut the door behind her, and with it she'd shut out pretence. The change in her voice—I can hear it now.

" 'We shan't be disturbed in here.' . . .

" 'Oh! my darling,' she said. 'Kiss me—'

kiss me—and go on kissing me. Dinner to-night was an ordeal: I thought I'd never get through it—waiting for this. These last two months have been too terrible.'

"Well, I kissed her—and kissed her—and went on kissing her, and there is no gainsaying the fact that an onlooker during the next ten minutes or so would have had his money's worth. Robert—whom I gathered was the blind husband—had gone to bed: Wilson had received orders that we were not to be disturbed, and things undoubtedly hummed.

"And then a little abruptly—I can distinctly remember a slight feeling of surprise at the abruptness—she stood up. She had been sitting in a chair facing the black curtains—I thought of that afterwards—and she suddenly pushed away my arms.

"'Adorable man,' she said, 'I've just thought of something. It's a little surprise for you. I'll be back in a minute or two.'

"And the next moment she had left the room.

"I don't know how long it was before I noticed it," continued the Actor after a little pause—"that motionless bulge in the curtains. At first I paid no attention to it, and then the hair began to prick at the back of my scalp. For it seemed to me that the curtains had shaken slightly. It was close to one end, that bulge, and it was of the size and shape that would be made by a man.

“ I suppose a man of action would have done something : though what was to be done God knows. All that I did was to sit in my chair and sweat, with my tongue bone dry and the glass in my hand shaking so uncontrollably that the whisky was spilling all over the carpet. For I realised instinctively what had happened. Robert had not gone to bed : we were caught.

“ And then I heard a funny noise : it was myself trying to scream. For a hand had appeared from behind the curtain : a hand that groped along the wall. It was tanned and sinewy, and again I heard that funny noise. For I couldn't move : I sat there petrified with horror, even though I knew what that hand was groping for. It was the switch, and, at last, it found what it sought. And the next instant the room was in darkness.

“ It's a confession of weakness, I suppose, but I've hated real darkness ever since. And the darkness in that room was the most intense thing I've ever known. There wasn't a glimmer of light : just utter blackness that pressed in on one almost as if it was tangible. And still I sat there incapable of movement.

“ The glass had fallen out of my nerveless fingers, and I could feel the liquid soaking through my sock and into my shoe. And it was the physical sensation of wetness that restored some semblance of activity to my

brain. Somehow or other I must get to the door—save myself and warn the girl.

“ So I made a desperate effort and lurched to my feet. Then I gave a dive in the direction, as I thought, of the door. And out of the darkness there came a low laugh. I blundered on : took a table with a crash, spun round and was lost. All sense of direction was gone : I was just staggering round blindly in that inky darkness.

“ Once again he laughed, and this time there was a note of triumph in his voice. I stood stock still : a new and hideous thought had suddenly occurred to me. The husband was blind : the darkness was no handicap to him. So that my only hope lay in making no sound. If I could get to the wall, and then creep along it, sooner or later I must reach the door. I took a step back, and another and another, feeling behind me the whole time as I moved. Suddenly my hand encountered a table, and I tried desperately to visualise the room. Where had the tables been : how many were there ? And I couldn't remember a darned thing.

“ I ran my fingers along it trying to find the end, and at that moment I heard his breathing quite distinctly. He was close to me, and a wild, unreasoning panic seized me. I lurched back knocked over the table, and felt a hand like a steel bar get me by the throat.

“ ‘ Proof at last, you vile swine,’ came in a

voice that was half snarl, half shout of triumph. 'And I'm going to kill you.'

"I tried to scream, but his other hand was over my mouth. I tried to struggle: I was utterly powerless in his grasp. A strong man might have made some sort of a show, but I lay no claim to physical strength. And in that man's hands I felt like a baby.

"I don't know how long we fought: everything is a bit confused. I know that I heard his wild laughter through the roaring in my head, for an eternity, so it seemed to me, before the light went on. Violet was standing by the black curtains with a revolver in her hand. And even as I saw her her husband shifted one hand from my throat, whipped a long stiletto out of his pocket, and drove it with all his force into my chest.

"His grip relaxed, and I sank down. And in the last few moments before everything became blank, I heard scream after scream and the shot of a revolver. Then—oblivion."

The Actor paused and mixed himself a whisky and soda.

"Now had the knife been the eighth of an inch more to the right I should not be telling you this story to-night. The double funeral of Robert and your humble servant would have taken place simultaneously. Honestly I think that in many ways she quite liked me, and that she was glad the wound was not fatal.

But from the point of view of the perfect work of art—which I maintain her plot was—the fact that I didn't die constituted the one flaw.

"I gather it was some four days before I regained consciousness to find myself in a nursing home. A doctor was standing at the foot of the bed, and seated in the window was my adored woman.

"'Splendid,' said the doctor. 'Don't move: lie quite still, Mr. Trayne. How are you feeling?'

"Violet, her dear face terribly strained, had risen and was standing beside him.

"'All right, thanks,' I said. 'A bit tied up round the chest, that's all.'

"'You're thoroughly tied up round the chest,' he laughed. 'And you've had about the closest shave of death I've ever known. Now, Mrs. Berningham, I will give you just five minutes with him. Please see he doesn't move.'

"'My dear,' she said brokenly after he had gone, 'if you had died.'

"'But I didn't, sweetheart,' I answered. 'And I'm not going to. Tell me what happened.'

"'He rushed at me,' she whispered, 'and I shot him through the heart. He's dead.'

"'Good God!' I muttered. 'But what do people say?'

"'I had to make up my mind on the spur of the moment,' she answered. 'The servants

came rushing in, and I had to say something. And so I said he'd suddenly gone mad: that we'd been rehearsing the play, and that he had dashed out and attacked you. Then I rushed into his room and got his revolver. And when I saw him stab you and then spring at me I fired.'

" ' But do they believe it ? ' I cried.

" ' Yes, dear, yes. Everybody believes it: why shouldn't they? He's always been moody and morose, and just lately he's been worse. And nobody knows that we've ever met before. There we were rehearsing that silly play, and he suddenly tries to kill us both. They've found a verdict that he was a homicidal maniac. You see—I couldn't tell the truth, could I ? '

" And then the doctor came back and announced that time was up, so that I hadn't time to warn her about the man whom I had seen at the station. He knew we'd met before. And she didn't come alone again: though she found a chance of whispering that it wasn't that she didn't want to. And then she went abroad: her nerves had given way.

" It was all rather beautiful, wasn't it? To the world at large it was merely a shocking tragedy in which a man had suddenly gone mad. It was cynically remarked by a few people who knew the play that such a thing was only to be expected: but to attempt to murder a complete stranger and your wue is a

somewhat drastic way of showing your disapproval.

"To me it was merely the eternal triangle in which, if the man had indeed gone mad, it was not to be wondered at. But it would have been her life or his, and anyway my lips were sealed. And it wasn't until two years later that I began to wonder, and finally ceased wondering and, in my own mind, knew.

"At first my assumption had been that, after a decent interval, she would marry me. And I'll say this for her: she disabused my mind of the notion very sweetly and gradually. It wasn't that she wasn't fond of me, but that the whole thing had been so terrible that she wanted to try and obliterate it from her life. And if I was with her. . . . Perhaps, in years to come we could meet again—when things might be different. . . . But now she couldn't bear it. . . .

"And so on, and so forth. I swallowed it whole until one night when a man came round to see me. I'd got to London then, and he came in after the show.

"'Have you ever met Lord Raynor?' he asked after we'd talked for a bit.

"'Not that I'm aware of,' I said.

"'I met him out in Rapallo a few weeks ago. I couldn't think what it was at the time that puzzled me, but I've got it now. It's your two voices. Every note, every inflection is exactly

the same. I mean it's positively staggering. And you're not a bit alike to look at. As a matter of fact I've got a snapshot of him.'

"He handed it over, and dimly out of the distance I realised he was still talking. For in the group was Violet, and Lord Raynor was the man who had been with her in the box and who had passed me on the platform.

"I got rid of him somehow after a while and sat there thinking.

"The similarity is simply incredible. . . . I tell you that I myself would not be able to tell the difference if my eyes were shut. . . .'

"By Gad! you fellows, when the damning truth first came home to me it shook my world. I got over it in time, as one gets over everything. But just at first I nearly went off my head.

"Everything from start to finish had been part of a carefully thought-out plot. Raynor was her lover: had always been her lover. And the blind husband stood in the way. Probably he suspected. 'Proof at last,' he'd said to me. Raynor had been dining there, and at the last crucial moment she substituted me.

"That poor devil when he attacked me was attacking a voice: the voice of the man he hated. She knew he was behind that curtain the whole time, and it was when she saw the curtain shake that she left the room. She

knew he'd try to kill me: she hoped he'd succeed. And what greater proof of homicidal mania could be had. To kill an utter stranger for no apparent reason. . . .

"So she got her husband's money, and she got her lover—she married him a few months later—and the sole item on the debit side to be one dead mummer.

"Gorgeous, wasn't it. . . . Except for the mummer.

"For all that she was the most adorable woman I've ever known."