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OF PLAYS

THE PROPOSAL



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BOSTON

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THE PROPOSAL

A Monologue for a Gentleman

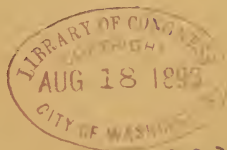
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THE PROPOSAL.

SCENE. — EDWARD STEWART'S room in a New York boarding-house of the present time.

STEWART (*outside*). Called to see me? A lady? (*Enters.*) Who the deuce could it have been? (*Holds the door ajar as if speaking to some one outside.*) What! Left an umbrella for me, and said I would understand? (*Closes the door.*) An umbrella! Can it be? . . . It is! My umbrella that I bought yesterday morning and lost yesterday afternoon! It was a good idea of mine to have my name and address engraved on the handle. I'm blessed if I ever expected to see the umbrella again, though, after that stout man walked off with it. It's bad enough to be absent-minded, and it's worse to have a conscience; but when these two evils combine in a single individual—well, that single individual is apt at times to find life a burden. Now, that's just my case. My absent-mindedness is something phenomenal; it is forever getting me into all manner of scrapes. On the other hand, my conscience is abnormal; it is a morbid growth. I am ashamed of it, but I can't help it. And that's how I came to lose my umbrella. I boarded an elevated train yesterday afternoon with my brand-new umbrella in my hand, found a seat, for a wonder—or as much of a seat as the stout man next to me did not overflow into, and was soon—well—in fact, I was wondering whether if I were to ask Lucy to be mine, there would be any chance—or rather I was revolving in my mind how I should say it, and what she would reply, and what would happen then, and—sweet Lucy, how I do love that girl! But that's not what I started out to say. Let me see, where was I? Oh, yes. All of a sudden I started up with the impression that I had passed my station; but I hadn't, we were only at Twenty-third Street and I was going to One Hundred and Twenty-fifth. As I rose, I saw an umbrella fall. My stout neighbor had just stepped off the car, and the gateman had pulled the bell-rope. It flashed upon me that my fat friend was forgetting his umbrella. Without a moment's hesitation, I picked it up, rushed out upon the platform of the now moving car, and throwing the umbrella out as far as I could, I shouted at the top of my voice: "Hey, there; you've forgotten your umbrella!" The obese individual turned around at the sound of my voice and looked puzzled; but, before

I lost sight of him I had the satisfaction of seeing one of the station employees hand him the umbrella. Then I went back to my seat with an easy conscience, to discover that I had forced my own brand-new umbrella upon the unsuspecting stout gentleman. That's what comes of having an abnormal conscience! Of course I stopped at the next station and took the train back to Twenty-third Street, and of course I didn't find the slightest trace of the umbrella or the least clew to the identity of the fat man. But what I should like to know is how that identical umbrella now finds its way back to me, and from the hands of a lady too. Perhaps "Mrs. Stout Gentleman" is afflicted with a conscience too, which prevents her from keeping the umbrellas purloined by her husband. (*Opens the umbrella. A letter and a newspaper fall out.*)

Hello, what's this! A letter—and a newspaper. (*Examining the letter.*) It's addressed to me. Queer way of sending a letter, done up in an umbrella. Looks like a woman's writing. (*Reading.*) "My dear, dear friend." Her dear, dear friend. That's a curious way for a woman to address a man she's never met. "My dear, dear friend, I trust it will not seem unwomanly in me to style you thus, for although our acquaintance has been of short duration as measured by the arbitrary standards of men, the thrilling circumstances under which we met surely give me the privilege of thus addressing one who has earned my everlasting gratitude." What the deuce does the woman mean? "I had hoped to see you this morning and to convey to you in my own name, as well as in that of my six little fatherless angels, the heartfelt thanks which emotion prevented me from adequately expressing last night. Owing to my intense excitement at the time, I am ashamed to say that your very features are unknown to me. I saw you as in a dream. But I hope soon to have the privilege of renewing an acquaintance—may I say a friendship—which on my part, at least, shall continue until my dying day. Very, very sincerely your friend, Julia Simpkins.

"P. S. I return your umbrella. From it I found your name and address."

By Jove, that's a remarkable document; "thrilling circumstances under which we met—everlasting gratitude—six little fatherless angels"—my fair correspondent appears to be a widow—"—emotion—intense excitement—a friendship which, on my part at least, shall continue until my dying day." I suppose my stout friend generously loaned my umbrella to this interesting widow during the shower yesterday afternoon. But who would have supposed him capable of inspiring such tender, I may say such fervid, sentiments in the heart of a fair stranger, and by such commonplace methods, too? True, the sentimental widow admits she did not see the features of this Don Juan *au parapluie*. (*Picks up the envelope.*) Hello, here's a second postscript on the envelope which I had not seen. (*Reading.*) "See marked article in the enclosed copy of the *Herald*." Marked article, eh? (*Opening the paper.*) Here it is. (*Reading.*) "A Modest Hero."

What's this? (*Reads again.*) "As the ferry-boat was leaving the slip a beautiful young woman rushed down the gangway. In her excitement she did not notice that the boat had already started, nor did she see a gentleman who stood on the end of the bridge waving a farewell with his umbrella to some friend on the boat. When Mrs. Julia Simpkins took in the situation it was already too late. She was unable to come to a sudden stop on the slippery incline, and ran full tilt into the gentleman, who was unaware of her presence. The force of the collision caused him to lose his balance, and in an instant, to the horror of the spectators, both were lost to sight beneath the icy waters of the East River. Presently they rose to the surface. Mrs. Simpkins, with admirable presence of mind, had thrown her arms about the gentleman's neck, and was clinging to him with the energy of despair, while he struggled heroically with the buffeting waves, and endeavored to scale the slippery piles. When at length the couple were saved from their perilous position the lady's arms were still twined about her brave rescuer's neck, and she sobbed hysterically upon his manly breast. This touching scene drew many a sympathetic tear from the eyes of the spectators." How romantic. "But the blushing hero of this adventure, with the modesty which is always characteristic of true courage, slipped off unobserved and without even leaving his name. He had, however, forgotten his umbrella, on which was found the name Edward Stewart, 5061 Lexington Avenue."

My umbrella, by Jove! The alleged hero must have been my stout friend of the elevated train. Ha! ha! he must have floated like a cork. I can imagine him floundering in the water with a buxom widow clinging to his neck, while he struggled to free himself, and spluttered, half choked with salt water and fear. Ha! ha! Those reporters are comical fellows. But I wish they could have left my name out of this ridiculous affair. Well, let's see the end of it. (*Reading.*) "Who knows but that this adventure may prove only the beginning of a charming romance? All honor and happiness to the modest hero, Edward Stewart!" Yes, it says distinctly "the modest hero, Edward Stewart." I see how it was. Of course, they thought the umbrella belonged to the stout party. Modest hero! How well that looks in print. (*Glancing over the paper.*) When you come to read it attentively that is really a very well-written account. I can see just how it happened. A gentleman is waving a farewell—perhaps to his sweetheart, who is on the ferry-boat—just as I might have been doing to Lucy. Suddenly, without a moment's warning, he finds himself in the river. A human being is beside him. Calm, in the midst of danger, forgetting himself for his fellow-being, feeling the anxious and admiring gaze of his distracted sweetheart upon him (*excitedly, forgetting himself*), I grasped the sinking form of the young woman in one hand, and amid the deafening applause of the crowd I bore her safely to the shore. Then, exhausted and dripping with the icy waters of

the East River, I reached Lucy's side just in time to catch her fainting form. When, with slowly returning consciousness, her beautiful eyes met mine, they yielded the thrilling though unspoken message of requited love! How beautiful! How inspiring! How little we realize the latent sublimity of human character until occasion brings it to the light!

I wonder if Lucy has read the paper to-day. (*Looking at the paper.*) "A Modest Hero!" I shouldn't be at all surprised if she has, for I have heard her say that she made it a point to read the news every day. Perhaps she is reading it at this very minute! I hope she will not feel jealous of the charming widow. I don't know, though; perhaps a little wholesome jealousy would be favorable to my prospects. I have always heard and read that a woman never really appreciates her suitor's qualities until some other woman has discovered them. Of course my conduct shall be irreproachable in this matter, but I don't care if she feels just a trifle — just the least bit — jealous. If she does, she will be able to realize how I feel when I see her with that puppy, J. Montague Smythe, confound him! I wonder if it wouldn't be a good time now to send her that proposal which I spent three nights in composing, and which I have carried in my pocket ever since, because I have not dared to send it? (*Takes paper from his pocket.*) Let me see. This is the one in blank verse, this is the sonnet, ah! here it is. (*Examining the document.*) Yes, that is really quite good, and I shall never have a better chance than the present to send it.

I must make a clean copy of it, though, for the date on this one has grown old since it was written. (*Sits himself at table and writes.*) It's curious how sanguine I feel about this to-day. I was never able to get my courage to the sticking-point before; but I have often heard that the men who are bravest in the face of danger are the most arrant cowards in the presence of the woman they love. I suppose there is a good deal of truth in that. There now, there's my last card. If this does not win the game, nothing will. But I am hopeful; I feel that my star is in the ascendant to-day. Now, then, to send the question whose answer will decide my fate. Oh, by the way, I suppose I shall have to make some sort of a reply to the fair widow. (*Conceitedly.*) And I may as well cut short this sentimental business at the start. Let me see. (*Writing.*) "Mrs. Julia Simpkins . . . Dear Madam . . . I have to acknowledge the receipt of your kind favor of this date . . . together with my umbrella . . . which I regret you should have had . . . the trouble of attending to (*repeating*) of attending to . . . That's formal enough, I should think, as a starter. . . . (*Writing.*) I am not aware of having done anything to merit the complimentary things you are pleased to write; but, if I have been of service to a fellow-being in any way (*hesitating*) in any way . . . the fact that he is a lady . . . no, that won't do — (*writing*) that fact is of itself sufficient reward. Most respectfully yours, Edward Stewart."

There. Now for the address. (*Addresses two envelopes.*) "Miss Lucy Vanderveer, 5073 Lexington Avenue;" "Mrs. Julia Simpkins." (*Seals the letters and rings bell, then goes to the door, which he opens.*) Mary (*to some one outside*), I wish you would have these two letters despatched at once. This one is for Miss Vanderveer at No. 5073, three doors from the corner. You might take that yourself. The other you can send by a district messenger. (*Closes door.*) Well, the deed is done! The die is cast! And now all that remains for me to do is to await the word that shall decide my fate. It will take Mary, say, three minutes to reach the Vanderveers', then say it takes five minutes more before the letter reaches Lucy's hands. Allow fifteen minutes for Lucy to read and answer the letter. In less than half an hour I shall probably know—Ah, darling, if you do but consent! If? Why do I say "if"? She will, she must, she shall be mine! Heavens! What if she should refuse me? I was perhaps too impatient. I should have waited a month or two longer. I should have spoken to her myself instead of trusting my fate to ink and paper. My eyes would have been eloquent, even if my tongue had failed me. My emotion would have touched her, while the cold written words will leave her unmoved. Yes, I have made a mistake. (*Rushes for the door.*) Mary! Mary! She's gone! Perhaps I can catch her! (*Takes his hat and rushes out, returning after an instant with a letter in his hand.*)

Too late! Just as I reached the front door, I ran into the servant who was bringing me back the answer. (*Sadly.*) An answer so soon! It must be "no." She would not have replied so promptly if it had been "yes." (*Turning the letter over in his hands.*) I don't dare to open it. Still, the word is written now; it will avail me nothing to defer the blow. (*Opens the letter.*) Eh! What! (*Reading.*) "There is evidently some mistake here. If you have nothing particular to do, drop in for a few minutes. I shall be at home all the afternoon." Some mistake! Hello, why's she written this on the back of my letter! (*Turning letter over.*) By Jove! I've sent her the wrong letter. Ha! ha! ha! I don't wonder she couldn't understand it. Well, so much the better. I'll go this afternoon, I'll go at once, and I'll tell her that I love her, that I adore her, and that she must be mine. For once my absent-mindedness has served me a good turn. (*Puts on his hat and starts to go out. Suddenly recollecting.*) Heavens! If I sent Miss Vanderveer the letter I intended for Mrs. Simpkins, then I must have sent Mrs. Simpkins the letter I meant for Miss Vanderveer. Good gracious, I am lost! I have proposed to the widow! Oh, pshaw, she will see of course that it is a mistake.

Will she, though? Here's the rough draft. Let me see. (*Reads.*) "I can no longer refrain from writing the words which I longed to but dared not utter yesterday before parting from you. I love you! I loved you from the first moment that my eyes rested on your beauty and grace; and in the comparatively short time

which has ensued, I have learned to appreciate and admire those qualities of mind and heart which place you so far above any woman I have ever known. I do not presume to imagine that I have already won your affection in return, but if there is the slightest ray of hope, pray give me the benefit of the doubt, until I can strive to gain, and, if possible, to deserve, the prize for which I would gladly lay down my life." (*Despairingly.*) Of course the widow will take all that to herself. There is nothing there to indicate that it was not intended for her. Why, fool that I was, I have not even addressed Lucy by name. I am lost! lost! lost! (*Falls back overcome into a chair. Then suddenly brightening up.*) Perhaps she'll refuse me. Heavens, if she only would! But no, I shall have no such luck as that. She'll accept me. I may as well make up my mind to that. The only question now is, what shall I do then? Marry her? It makes my blood run cold when I think of six little orphans calling me papa; six little angels to trot around at night, to cherish, and provide for, and . . . and spank. I might as well marry an orphan asylum at once, and be done with it. But then, on the other hand, if I refuse to marry her I shall be ruined just the same, for like as not I shall land into the horrible notoriety of a breach-of-promise suit! On the strength of that letter any intelligent jury will convict me without leaving their seats. And in either case I am sure to lose Lucy. I can't survive the disgrace! Well, death is easy when there is nothing to live for! (*A knock is heard.*) A knock! It is my knell! It announces the message of death! (*Struggling to be firm.*) Come in! Come in, I say! (*Goes to the door.*) A district messenger with the widow's acceptance! (*As if to some one outside.*) What? Couldn't find the address? Brought back the letter? Oh, my dear, dear boy, you have saved my life! I double your salary! I adopt you! I make you heir to all I — to all I owe! Here; here's a dollar for you, and — and tell your mother to embrace you for me! (*Returning from door, capering and dancing wildly about the room.*) Saved! Saved from the orphan asylum! I live again! I am resurrected, and I shall marry Lucy Vanderveer! I'll go to her at once! I'll fly on the wings of love! (*Picks up his coat, hat and umbrella, and exit hastily.*)

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