# DUNCAN NORMAN

# THE MOTHER

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# The Mother

**Duncan N.**

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# Содержание

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## BY PROXY

It will be recalled without effort – possibly, indeed, without interest – that the obsequies of the old Senator Boligand were a distinguished success: a fashionable, proper function, ordered by the young widow with exquisite taste, as all the world said, and conducted without reproach, as the undertaker and the clergy very heartily agreed. At the Church of the Lifted Cross, the incident of the child, the blonde lady and the mysteriously veiled man, who sat in awe and bewildered amazement where the shadows gave deepest seclusion, escaped notice. Not that the late Senator Boligand was in life aware of the existence of the child or the lady or the strange fellow with the veil. Nothing of the sort. The one was the widow of Dick Slade, the other his son, born in wedlock; and the third was the familiar counsellor and intimate of them all. The Senator was for once turned to good account: was made contributor to the sweetness of life, to the comfort of the humble. That was all. And I fancy that the shade of the grim old robber, lurking somewhere in the softly coloured gloom of the chancel, was not altogether averse to the farce in which his earthly tabernacle was engaged…

When Dick Slade died in the big red tenement of Box Street, he died as other men die, complaining of the necessity; and his son, in the way of all tender children, sorely wept: not because his father was now lost to him, which was beyond his comprehension, but because the man must be put in a grave – a cold place, dark and suffocating, being underground, as the child had been told.

"I don't want my father," he woefully protested, "to be planted!"

"Planted!" cried the mother, throwing up her hands in indignant denial. "Who told you he'd be planted?"

"Madame Lacara."

"She's a liar," said the woman, composedly, without resentment. "We'll cut the *planting* out of *this* funeral." Her ingenuity, her resourcefulness, her daring, when the happiness of her child was concerned, were usually sufficient to the emergency. "Why, darling!" she exclaimed. "Your father will be taken right up into the sky. He won't be put in no grave. He'll go right straight to a place where it's all sunshine – where it's all blue and high and as bright as day." She bustled about: keeping an eye alert for the effect of her promises. She was not yet sure how this glorious ascension might be managed; but she had never failed to deceive him to his own contentment, and 'twas not her habit to take fainthearted measures. "They been lying to you, dear," she complained. "Don't you fret about graves. You just wait," she concluded, significantly, "and see!"

The boy sighed.

"Poddle and me," she added, with a wag of the head to convince him, "will show you where your father goes."

"I wish," the boy said, wistfully, "that he wasn't dead."

"Don't you do it!" she flashed. "It don't make no difference to him. It's a good thing. I bet he's glad to be dead."

The boy shook his head.

"Yes, he is! Don't you think he isn't. There ain't nothing like being dead. Everybody's happy – when they're dead."

"He's so still!" the boy whispered.

"It feels fine to be still – like that."

"And he's so cold!"

"No!" she scorned. "He don't feel cold. You think he's cold. But he ain't. That's just what you *think*. He's comfortable. He's glad to be dead. Everybody's glad to be dead."

The boy shuddered.

"Don't you do that no more!" said the woman. "It don't hurt to be dead. Honest, it don't! It feels real good to be that way."

"I – I – I don't think I'd like – to be dead!"

"You don't have to if you don't want to," the woman replied, thrown into a confusion of pain and alarm. To comfort him, to shield him from agony, to keep the shadow of fear from falling upon him: she desired nothing more; and she was content to succeed if but for the moment. "I tell you," she continued, "you never will be dead – if you don't want to. Your father wanted to be dead. 'I think, Millie,' says he, 'I'd like to be dead.' 'All right, Dick,' says I. 'If you want to, I won't stand in your way. But I don't know about the boy.' 'Oh,' says he, 'the boy won't stand in my way.' 'I guess that's right, Dick,' says I, 'for the boy loves you.' And so," she concluded, "he died. But *you* don't have to die. You'll never die – not unless you want to." She kissed him. "Don't you be afraid, dear!" she crooned.

"I'm not – afraid."

"Well, then," she asked, puzzled, "what *are* you?"

"I don't know," he faltered. "I think it makes me – sick at the – stomach."

He had turned white. She took him in her arms, to comfort and hearten him – an unfailing device: her kisses, her warm, ample bosom, her close embrace; he was by these always consoled…

Next day, then, in accordance with the woman's device, the boy and his mother set out with the veiled man for the Church of the Lifted Cross, where the obsequies of Senator Boligand were to take place. It was sad weather – a cold rain falling, the city gray, all the world black-clad and dripping and sour of countenance. The veiled man said never a word; he held the boy's hand tight, and strode gloomily on – silent of melancholy, of protest, of ill temper: there was no knowing, for his face was hid. The woman, distinguished by a mass of blinding blonde hair and a complexion susceptible to change by the weather, was dressed in the ultra-fashionable way – the small differences of style all accentuated: the whole tawdry and shabby and limp in the rain. The child, a slender boy, delicately white of skin, curly headed, with round, dark eyes, outlooking in wonder and troubled regard, but yet bravely enough, trotted between the woman and the man, a hand in the hand of each… And when they came to the Church of the Lifted Cross; and when the tiny, flickering lights, and the stained windows, and the shadows overhead, and the throbbing, far-off music had worked their spell upon him, he snuggled close to his mother, wishing himself well away from the sadness and mystery of the place, but glad that its solemn splendour honoured the strange change his father had chosen to undergo.

"Have they brought papa yet?" he whispered.

"Hush!" she answered. "He's come."

For a moment she was in a panic – lest the child's prattle, being perilously indiscreet, involve them all in humiliating difficulties. Scandal of this sort would be intolerable to the young Boligand widow.

"Where is he?"

"Don't talk so loud, dear. He's down in front – where all the lights are."

"Can't we go there?'

"No, no!" she whispered, quickly. "It isn't the way. We must sit here. Don't talk, dear; it isn't the way."

"I'd like to – kiss him."

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed. "It isn't allowed. We got to sit right here. That's the way it's always done. Hush, dear! Please don't talk."

With prayer and soulful dirges – employing white robes and many lights and the voices of children – the body of Senator Boligand was dealt with, in the vast, dim church, according to the forms prescribed, and with due regard for the wishes of the young widow. The Senator was an

admirable substitute; Dick Slade's glorious ascension was accomplished. And the heart of the child was comforted by this beauty: for then he knew that his father was by some high magic admitted to the place of which his mother had told him – some place high and blue and ever light as day. The fear of death passed from him. He was glad, for his father's sake, that his father had died; and he wished that he, too, might some day know the glory to which his father had attained.

But when the earthly remains of the late distinguished Senator were borne down the aisle in solemn procession, the boy had a momentary return of grief.

"Is that papa in the box?" he whimpered.

His mother put her lips to his ear. "Yes," she gasped. "But don't talk. It isn't allowed."

The veiled man turned audibly uneasy. "Cuss it!" he fumed.

"Oh, father!" the boy sobbed.

With happy promptitude the veiled man acted. He put a hand over the boy's mouth. "For God's sake, Millie," he whispered to the woman, "let's get out of here! We'll be run in."

"Hush, dear!" the woman commanded: for she was much afraid.

After that, the child was quiet.

From the room in the Box Street tenement, meantime, the body of Dick Slade had been taken in a Department wagon to a resting-place befitting in degree.

"Millie," the veiled man protested, that night, "you didn't ought to fool the boy."

"It don't matter, Poddle," said she. "And I don't want him to feel bad."

"You didn't ought to do it," the man persisted. "It'll make trouble for him."

"I can't see him hurt," said the woman, doggedly. "I love him so much. Poddle, I just can't! It hurts *me*."

The boy was now in bed. "Mother," he asked, lifting himself from the pillow, "when will I die?"

"Why, child!" she ejaculated.

"I wish," said the boy, "it was to-morrow."

"There!" said the woman, in triumph, to the man. "He ain't afraid of death no more."

"I told you so, Millie!" the man exclaimed, at the same instant.

"But he ain't afraid to die," she persisted. "And that's all I want."

"You can't fool him always," the man warned.

The boy was then four years old…

# THE RIVER

Top floor rear of the Box Street tenement looked out upon the river. It was lifted high: the activities of the broad stream and of the motley world of the other shore went silently; the petty noises of life – the creak and puff and rumble of its labouring machinery, – straying upward from the fussy places below, were lost in the space between.

Within: a bed, a stove, a table – the gaunt framework of home. But the window overlooked the river; and the boy was now seven years old, unknowing, unquestioning, serenely obedient to the circumstances of his life: feeling no desire that wandered beyond the familiar presence of his mother – her voice and touch and brooding love.

It was a magic window – a window turned lengthwise, broad, low, small-paned, disclosing wonders without end: a scene of infinite changes. There was shipping below, restless craft upon the water; and beyond, dwarfed in the distance, was a confusion of streets, of flat, puffing roofs, stretching from the shining river to the far, misty hills, which lay beside the sea, invisible and mysterious.

But top floor rear was remote from the river and the roofs. From the window – and from the love in the room – the boy looked out upon an alien world, heard the distant murmur, monotonously proceeding, night and day: uncomprehending, but unperturbed…

In the evening the boy sat with his mother at the window. Together they watched the shadows gather – the hills and the city and the river dissolve: the whole broad world turn to points of light, twinkling, flashing, darting, in the black, voiceless gulf. Nor would she fail to watch the night come, whether in gentle weather or whipping rain: but there would sit, the boy in her arms, held close to her breast, her hand straying restlessly over his small body, intimately caressing it.

The falling shadows; the river, flowing unfeelingly; the lights, wandering without rest, aimless, forever astray in the dark: these were a spell upon her.

"They go to the sea!" she whispered, once.

"The ships, mother?"

She put his head in the hollow of her shoulder, where her cheek might touch his hair: all the time staring out at the lights on the river.

"All the ships, all the lights on the river," she said, hoarsely, "go out there."

"Why?"

"The river takes them."

He was made uneasy: being conscious of the deeper meaning – acutely aware of some strange dread stirring in her heart.

"Maybe," he protested, "they're glad to go away."

She shook her head. "One night," she said, leaning towards the window, seeming now to forget the boy, "I seen the sea. All the lights on the river go different ways – when they get out there. It is a dark and lonesome place – big and dark and lonesome."

"Then," said he, quickly, "you would not like to be there."

"No," she answered. "I do not like the sky," she continued; "it is so big and empty. I do not like the sea; it is so big and dark. And black winds are always blowing there; and the lights go different ways. The lights," she muttered, "go different ways! I am afraid of the dark. And, oh!" she moaned, suddenly crushing him to her breast, rocking him, in an agony of tenderness, "I am afraid of something else. Oh, I am afraid!"

"Of what?" he gasped.

"To be alone!" she sobbed.

He released himself from her arms – sat back on her knee: quivering from head to foot, his hands clenched, his lips writhing. "Don't, mother!" he cried. "Don't cry. We will not go to the sea. We *will* not!"

"We must," she whispered.

"Oh, why?"

She kissed him: her hand slipped under his knees; and she drew him close again – and there held him until he lay quiet in her arms.

"We are like the lights on the river," she said. "The river will take us to a place where the lights go different ways."

"We will not go!"

"The river will take us."

The boy was puzzled: he lifted his head, to watch the lights drift past, far below; and he was much troubled by this mystery. She tried to gather his legs in her lap – to hold him as she used to do, when he was a child at her breast; but he was now grown too large for that, and she suffered, again, the familiar pain: a perception of alienation – of inevitable loss.

"When?" he asked.

She let his legs fall. "Soon," she sighed. "When you are older; it won't be long, now. When you are a little wiser; it will be very soon."

"When I am wiser," he pondered, "we must go. What makes me wiser?"

"The wise."

"Are you wise?"

"God help me!" she answered.

He nestled his head on her shoulder – dismissing the mystery with a quick sigh. "Never mind," he said, to comfort her. "You will not be alone. I will be with you."

"I wonder!" she mused.

For a moment more she looked out; but she did not see the river – but saw the wide sea, wind-tossed and dark, where the great multitude of lights went apart, each upon its mysterious way.

"Mother," he repeated, reproachfully, mystified by her hesitation, "I will always be with you."

"I wonder!" she mused.

To this doubt – now clear to him beyond hope – there was instant response: strangely passionate, but in keeping with his nature, as she knew. For a space he lay rigid on her bosom: then struggled from her embrace, brutally wrenching her hands apart, flinging off her arms. He stood swaying: his hands clenched, his slender body aquiver, as before, his dark eyes blazing reproach. It gave her no alarm, but, rather, exquisite pleasure, to watch his agony. She caught him by the shoulders, and bent close, that by the night-light, coming in at the window, she might look into his eyes: wherein, swiftly, the flare of reproach turned to hopeless woe. And she was glad that he suffered: exalted, so that she, too, trembled.

"Oh," he pleaded, "say that I will always be with you!"

She would not: but continued to exult in his woeful apprehension.

"Tell me, mother!" he implored. "Tell me!"

Not yet: for there was no delight to be compared with the proved knowledge of his love.

"Mother!" he cried.

"You do not love me," she said, to taunt him.

"Oh, don't!" he moaned.

"No, no!" she persisted. "You don't love your mother any more."

He was by this reduced to uttermost despair; and he began to beat his breast, in the pitiful way he had. Perceiving, then, that she must no longer bait him, she opened her arms. He sprang into them. At once his sobs turned to sighs of infinite relief, which continued, until, of a sudden, he was hugged so tight that he had no breath left but to gasp.

"And you will always be with me?" he asked.

"It is the way of the world," she answered, while she kissed him, "that sons chooses for themselves."

With that he was quite content…

For a long time they sat silent at the window. The boy dreamed hopefully of the times to come – serenity restored. For the moment the woman was forgetful of the foreshadowed days, happy that the warm, pulsing little body of her son lay unshrinking in her arms: so conscious of his love and life – so wishful for a deeper sense of motherhood – that she slipped her hand under his jacket and felt about for his heart, and there let her fingers lie, within touch of its steady beating. The lights still twinkled and flashed and aimlessly wandered in the night; but the spell of the river was lifted.

# A GARDEN OF LIES

Withal it was a rare mood: nor, being wise, was she given to expressing it in this gloomy fashion. It was her habit, rather, assiduously to woo him: this with kisses, soft and wet; with fleeting touches; with coquettish glances and the sly display of her charms; with rambling, fantastic tales of her desirability in the regard of men – thus practicing all the familiar fascinations of her kind, according to the enlightenment of the world she knew. He must be persuaded, she thought, that his mother was beautiful, coveted; convinced of her wit and gaiety: else he would not love her. Life had taught her no other way… And always at break of day, when he awoke in her arms, she waited, with a pang of anxiety, pitilessly recurring, lest there be some sign that despite her feverish precautions the heedless world had in her nightly absence revealed that which she desperately sought to hide from him…

Thus, by and by, when the lamp was alight – when the shadows were all chased out of the window, driven back to the raw fall night, whence they had crept in – she lapsed abruptly into her natural manner and practices. She spread a newspaper on the table, whistling in a cheery fashion, the while covertly observing the effect of this lively behaviour. With a knowing smile, promising vast gratification, she got him on her knee; and together, cheek to cheek, her arm about his waist, they bent over the page: whereon some function of the rich, to which the presence of the Duchess of Croft and of the distinguished Lord Wychester had given sensational importance, was grotesquely pictured.

"Now, mother," said he, spreading the picture flat, "show me you."

"This here lady," she answered, evasively, "is the Duchess of Croft."

"Is it?" he asked, without interest. "She is very fat. Where are you?"

"And here," she proceeded, "is Lord Wychester."

"Mother," he demanded, "where are *you*?"

She was disconcerted; no promising evasion immediately occurred to her. "Maybe," she began, tentatively, "this lady here – "

"Oh, no!" he cried, looking up with a little laugh. "It is not like you, at all!"

"Well," she said, "it's probably meant for me."

He shook his head; and by the manner of this she knew that he would not be deceived.

"Perhaps," she said, "the Duchess told the man not to put me in the picture. I guess that's it. She was awful jealous. You see, dear," she went on, very solemnly, "Lord Wychester took a great fancy to me."

He looked up with interest.

"To – my shape," she added.

"Oh!" said he.

"And that," she continued, noting his pleasure, "made the Duchess hot; for *she's* too fat to have much of a figure. Most men, you know," she added, as though reluctant in her own praise, "do fancy mine." She brushed his cheek with her lips. "Don't you think, dear," she asked, assuming an air of girlish coquetry, thus to compel the compliment, "that I'm – rather – pretty?"

"I think, mother," he answered, positively, "that you're very, very pretty."

It made her eyes shine to hear it. "Well," she resumed, improvising more confidently, now, "the Duchess was awful mortified because Lord Wychester danced with me seventeen times. 'Lord Wychester,' says she, 'what *do* you see in that blonde with the diamonds?' 'Duchess,' says he, 'I bet the blonde don't weigh over a hundred and ten!'"

There was no answering smile; the boy glanced at the picture of the wise and courtly old Lord Wychester, gravely regarded that of the Duchess of Croft, of whose matronly charms, of whose charities and amiable qualities, all the world knows.

"What did she say?" he asked.

"'Oh, dear me, Lord Wychester!' says she. 'If you're looking for bones,' says she, 'that blonde is a regular glue-factory!'"

He caught his breath.

"'A regular glue-factory,'" she repeated, inviting sympathy. "That's what she said."

"Did you cry?"

"Not me!" she scorned. "Cry? Not me! Not for no mountain like her!"

"And what," he asked, "did Lord Wychester do?"

"'Back to the side-show, Duchess!' says Lord Wychester. 'You're too fat for decent company. My friend the Dook,' says he, 'may be partial to fat ladies and ten-cent freaks; but *my* taste runs to slim blondes.'"

No amusement was excited by Lord Wychester's second sally. In the world she knew, it would have provoked a shout of laughter. The boy's gravity disquieted her.

"Did you laugh?" he asked.

"Everybody," she answered, pitifully, "give her the laugh."

He sighed – somewhat wistfully. "I wish," he said, "that *you* hadn't."

"Why not!" she wondered, in genuine surprise.

"I don't know."

"Why, dear!" she exclaimed, a note of alarm in her voice. "It isn't bad manners! Anyhow," she qualified, quick to catch her cue, "I didn't laugh much. I hardly laughed at all. I don't believe I *did* laugh."

"I'm glad," he said.

Then, "I'm sure of it," she ventured, boldly; and she observed with relief that he was not incredulous.

"Did the Duchess cry?"

"Oh, my, no! 'Waiter,' says the Duchess, 'open another bottle of that wine. I feel faint.'"

"What did Lord Wychester do then?"

"He paid for the wine." It occurred to her that she might now surely delight him. "Then he wanted to buy a bottle for me," she continued, eagerly, "just to spite the Duchess. 'If *she* can have wine,' says he, 'there isn't no good reason why *you* got to go dry.' But I couldn't see it. 'Oh, come on!' says he. 'What's the matter with you? Have a drink.' 'No, you don't!' says I. 'Why not?' says he." She drew the boy a little closer, and, in the pause she patted his hand. "'Because,' says I," she whispered, tenderly, "'I got a son; and I *don't want him to do no drinking when he grows up*!'" She paused again – that the effect of the words and of the caress might not be interrupted. "'Come off!' says Lord Wychester," she went on; "'you haven't got no son.' 'You wouldn't think to look at me,' says I, 'that I got a son seven years old the twenty-third of last month.' 'To the tall timber!' says he. 'You're too young and pretty. I'll give you a thousand dollars for a kiss.' 'No, you don't!' says I. 'Why not?' says he. 'Because,' says I, 'you don't.' 'I'll give you two thousand,' says he."

She was interrupted by the boy; his arms were anxiously stealing round her neck.

"'Three thousand!' says he."

"Mother," the boy whispered, "did you give it to him?"

Again, she drew him to her: as all mothers will, when, in the twilight, they tell tales to their children, and the climax approaches.

"'Four thousand!' says he."

"Mother," the boy implored, "tell me quick! What did you say?"

"'Lord Wychester,' says I, 'I don't give kisses,' says I, 'because my son doesn't want me to do no such thing! No, sir! Not for a million dollars!'"

She was then made happy by his rapturous affection; and she now first perceived – in a benighted way – that virtue was more appealing to him than the sum of her physical attractions. Upon this new thought she pondered. She was unable to reduce it to formal terms, to be sure; but she felt

a new delight, a new hope, and was uplifted, though she knew not why. Later – at the crisis of their lives – the perception returned with sufficient strength to illuminate her way…

Presently the boy broke in upon her musing. "It was blondes Lord Wychester liked," he remarked, with pride; "wasn't it, mother?"

"Slim blondes," she corrected.

"Bleached blondes?"

She was appalled by the disclosure; and she was taken unaware: nor did she dare discover the extent, the significance, of this new sophistication, nor whence it came, lest she be all at once involved in a tangle of explanation, from which there could be no sure issue. She sighed; her head drooped, until it rested on his shoulder, her wet lashes against his cheek – despairing, helpless.

"What makes you sad?" he asked.

Then she gathered impetuous courage. She must be calm, she knew; but she must divert him. "See," she began, "what it says about your mother in the paper!" She ran her finger down a long column of the fulsome description of the great Multon ball – the list of fashionables, the costumes. "Here it is! 'She was the loveliest woman at the dance.' That's me. 'All the men said so. What if she is a bleached blonde? Some people says that bleached blondes is no good. It's a lie!'" she cried, passionately, to the bewilderment of the boy. "'God help them! There's honest people everywhere.' Are you listening? Here's more about me. 'She does the best she can. Maybe she *don't* amount to much, maybe she *is* a bleached blonde; but she does the best she can. She never done no wrong in all her life. She loves her son too much for that. Oh, she loves her son! She'd rather die than have him feel ashamed of her. There isn't a better woman in the world, There isn't a better mother – '"

He clapped his hands.

"Don't you believe it?" she demanded. "Don't you believe what the paper says?"

"It's true!" he cried. "It's all true!"

"How do you know," she whispered, intensely, "that it's all true?"

"I – just —*feel* it!"

They were interrupted by the clock. It struck seven times…

In great haste and alarm she put him from her knee; and she caught up her hat and cloak, and kissed him, and ran out, calling back her good-night, again and again, as she clattered down the stairs… In the streets of the place to which she hurried, there were flaming lights, the laughter of men and flaunting women, the crash and rumble and clang of night-traffic, the blatant clamour of the pleasures of night; shuffling, blear-eyed derelicts of passion, creeping beldames, peevish children, youth consuming itself; rags and garish jewels, hunger, greasy content – a confusion of wretchedness, of greed and grim want, of delirious gaiety, of the sins that stalk in darkness… Through it all she brushed, unconscious – lifted from it by the magic of this love: dwelling only upon the room that overlooked the river, and upon the child within; remembering the light in his eyes and the tenderness of his kiss.

# THE CELEBRITY IN LOVE

While the boy sat alone, in wistful idleness, there came a knock at the door – a pompous rat-tat-tat, with a stout tap-tap or two added, once and for all to put the quality of the visitor beyond doubt. The door was then cautiously pushed ajar to admit the head of the personage thus impressively heralded. And a most extraordinary head it was – of fearsome aspect; nothing but long and intimate familiarity could resign the beholder to the unexpected appearance of it. Long, tawny hair, now sadly unkempt, fell abundantly from crown to shoulders; and hair as tawny, as luxuriantly thick, almost as long, completely covered the face, from every part of which it sprang, growing shaggy and rank at the eyebrows, which served to ambush two sharp little eyes: so that the whole bore a precise resemblance to an ill-natured Skye terrier. It is superfluous to add that this was at once the face and the fortune of Toto, the Dog-faced Man, known in private life, to as many intimates as a jealous profession can tolerate, as Mr. Poddle: for the present disabled from public appearance by the quality of the air supplied to the exhibits at Hockley's Musee, his lungs being, as he himself expressed it, "not gone, by no means, but gittin' restless."

"Mother gone?" asked the Dog-faced Man.

"She has gone, Mr. Poddle," the boy answered, "to dine with the Mayor."

"Oh!" Mr. Poddle ejaculated.

"Why do you say that?" the boy asked, frowning uneasily. "You always say, 'Oh!'"

"Do I? 'Oh!' Like that?"

"Why do you do it?"

"Celebrities," replied Mr. Poddle, testily, entering at that moment, "is not accountable. Me bein' one, don't ask me no questions."

"Oh!" said the boy.

Mr. Poddle sat himself in a chair by the window: and there began to catch and vent his breath; but whether in melancholy sighs or snorts of indignation it was impossible to determine. Having by these violent means restored himself to a state of feeling more nearly normal, he trifled for a time with the rings flashing on his thin, white fingers, listlessly brushed the dust from the skirt of his rusty frock coat, heaved a series of unmistakable sighs: whereupon – and by this strange occupation the boy was quite fascinated – he drew a little comb, a little brush, a little mirror, from his pocket; and having set up the mirror in a convenient place, he proceeded to dress his hair, with particular attention to the eyebrows, which, by and by, he tenderly braided into two limp little horns: so that 'twas not long before he looked much less like a frowsy Skye terrier, much more like an owl.

"The hour, Richard," he sighed, as he deftly parted his hair in the middle of his nose, "has came!"

With such fond and hopeless feeling were these enigmatical words charged that the boy could do nothing but heave a sympathetic sigh.

"You see before you, Richard, what you never seen before. A man in the clutches," Mr. Poddle tragically pursued, giving a vicious little twist to his left eyebrow, "of the tender passion!"

"Oh!" the boy muttered.

"'Fame,'" Mr. Poddle continued, improvising a newspaper head-line, to make himself clear, "'No Shield Against the Little God's Darts.' Git me? The high and the low gits the arrows in the same place."

"Does it – hurt?"

"Hurt!" cried Mr. Poddle, furiously. "It's perfectly excrugiating! Hurt? Why – "

"Mr. Poddle, excuse me," the boy interrupted, "but you are biting your mustache."

"Thanks," said Mr. Poddle, promptly. "Glad to know it. Can't afford to lose no more hirsute adornment. And I'm give to ravagin' it in moments of excitement, especially sorrow. Always tell me."

"I will," the boy gravely promised.

"The Pink-eyed Albino," Mr. Poddle continued, now released from the necessity of commanding his feelings, in so far as the protection of his hair was concerned, "was fancy; the Circassian Beauty was fascination; the Female Sampson was the hallugination of sky-blue tights; but the Mexican Sword Swallower," he murmured, with a melancholy wag, "is – "

"Mr. Poddle," the boy warned, "you are – at it again."

"Thanks," said Mr. Poddle, hastily eliminating the danger. "What I was about to remark," was his lame conclusion, "was that the Mexican Sword Swallower is *love*."

"Oh!"

The Dog-faced Man snapped a sigh in two. "Richard," he insinuated suspiciously, "what you sayin', 'Oh!' for?"

"Wasn't the Bearded Lady, love?"

"Love!" laughed Mr. Poddle. "Ha, ha! Far from it! Not so! The Bearded Lady was the snare of ambition. 'Marriage Arranged Between the Young Duke of Blueblood and the Daughter of the Clothes-pin King. Millions of the Higgleses to Repair the Duke's Shattered Fortunes.' Git me? 'Wedding of the Bearded Lady and the Dog-faced Man. Sunday Afternoon at Hockley's Popular Musee. No Extra Charge for Admission. Fabulous Quantity of Human Hair on Exhibition At the Same Instant. Hirsute Wonders To Tour the Country at Enormous Expense.' Git me? Same thing. Love? Ha, ha! Not so! There's no more love in *that*," Mr. Poddle concluded, bitterly, "than – "

"Mr. Poddle, you are – "

"Thanks," faltered Mr. Poddle. "As I was about to remark when you – ah – come to the rescue – love is froze out of high life. Us natural phenomenons is the slaves of our inheritages."

"But you said the Bearded Lady was love at last!"

"'Duke Said To Be Madly In Love With the American Beauty,'" Mr. Poddle composedly replied.

"I don't quite – get you?"

"Us celebrities has our secrets. High life is hollow. Public must be took into account. 'Sacrificed On His Country's Altar.' Git me? 'Good of the Profession.' Broken hearts – and all that."

"Would you have broken the Bearded Lady's heart?"

Mr. Poddle was by this recalled to his own lamentable condition. "I've gone and broke my own," he burst out; "for I'm give to understand that the lovely Sword Swallower is got entangled with a tattooed man. Not," Mr. Poodle hastily added, "with a *real* tattooed man! Not by no means! Far from it! *He's only half done!* Git me? His legs is finished; and I'm give to understand that the Chinese dragon on his back is gettin' near the end of its tail. There *may* be a risin' sun on his chest, and a snake drawed out on his waist; of that I've heard rumors, but I ain't had no reports. Not," said Mr. Poddle, impressively, "what you might call undenigeable reports. And Richard," he whispered, in great excitement and contempt, "that there half-cooked freak won't be done for a year! He's bein' worked over on the installment plan. And I'm give to understand that she'll wait! Oh, wimmen!" the Dog-faced Man apostrophized. "Took by shapes and complexions – "

"Mr. Poddle, excuse me," the boy interrupted, diffidently, "but your eyebrow – "

"Thanks," Mr. Poddle groaned, his frenzy collapsing. "As I was about to say, wimmen is like arithmetic; there ain't a easy sum in the book."

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.