

THE CLOWN

A CRAYON SKETCH



A-LALA-I-TI, cried the clown, as he turned to leave the arena with his wee pony. He wore a large false nose of violet hue, a white sack-like costume with black spots dotted about it, and a tiny cylinder-shaped hat poised over one ear upon an elaborate periwig. His arms waved like the sails of a windmill, he turned suddenly to grasp the pony's tail, then lifted it bodily in the air for a second, with another loud "*Ha-lala-i-ti*," made his final bow and retired; the pony stepping daintily backwards and bowing, too, in obedience to its master's signal, the vast audience applauding vociferously.

After a moment's pause, a bell rang, and a ponderous white horse, gay with scarlet trappings and platform on back, was led in, and, tripping close behind, in elaborate ballet dress, came its rider, among a troupe of boisterous Pierrots carrying large paper hoops; a crowd of servants closed the procession—it was one of the most attractive turns, and the stables were practically deserted.

It was very quiet there in the dim light of a few oil lamps, only an occasional rustle of straw, or the clank of a bridle as some restive steed pawed the ground, or moved across its stall. Here in a long row stood horses of every description, the uncertain light flickering on the silken coats of bay and chestnut thoroughbreds, on the shapely limbs of milk-white arabs, and the rippling mane and tail of heavy cart-horses. Beyond these again, in smaller stalls, ponies, donkeys, goats, and performing dogs had their quarters.

More than one head was turned when the clown's voice broke the stillness with a cheery "Well done, Fifi." The pony walked demurely into his own stall, waiting until his master, having discarded his false nose and diminutive hat, pulled down a bundle of hay from the rack overhead and shook it out before him, when Fifi rubbed himself up against his master's leg much as a cat might have done, in a kind of grateful caress. It was a dainty little toy thing,

perfect in build, although the jet black crest reached little higher than the man's knee, and he had to stoop low to stroke the shining silken coat as he murmured, "Like it? Ah, you rascal, you have nothing to grumble at!"

Leaving the pony to munch his hay at leisure the clown sat himself down on an overturned bucket, unbuttoned his white costume, loosened its collar, and slowly wiped his thickly powdered face. From some mysterious pocket he next extracted a flask and took a long pull at its contents, then, leaning forward, he let his head sink upon his hands—a well-shaped head set on broad shoulders, the neck muscles all exposed by the open collar.

Sitting so quietly here he seemed a very different being from the merry-maker of the arena. There, with his false nose and the queer black arabesques painted about his eyes, his face wore a look of saucy fooling, of self-satisfaction and impudent self-assertion; now, the black paint, carelessly smudged off, has stuck in his eyebrows, accentuating the brilliancy of dark eyes deep set in the deadly whiteness of his face, a pallor for which powder alone is not responsible, for deep lines of care are plainly visible in both cheek and brow. His expression has grown hard and stern as though he held himself severely in hand to check some passionate outburst; lost in thought, and thoughts evidently of no pleasant description. Yet what should make him sad? A handsome salary, plenty to eat, an ungrudging supply of drinks, should surely make an earthly paradise for this rough son of the stable, to say nothing of the applause that greets his every action, the consciousness of his supremacy in the arena, and of his position as the spoilt child of the company.

Thought, to such as he, is surely a mere physical function! Why, then, this change? Is it possible that, apart from the animal side of his existence, there lies within this massive frame some intuition of hidden forces, of longings, hopes, fears, and sudden gleams of passion? Who, seeing him now, could doubt it? a whole elegy of pain and reproach is in those dark eyes and in that despondent figure. Is this the real man? Was all that fooling, despite its spontaneity, mere fooling? Was he trying to convince himself, as well as his audience, that his buffoonery was really amusing? Was he laughing, not only for the entertainment of the crowd who laughs—and pays, but also to stifle for the moment the tears that fill his heart?

By-and-by footsteps and the clinking of spurs resounded on the paved floor, and a tall woman in a riding habit came through the stable, side by side with an officer in the uniform of the Belgian Guards. As they passed the pony's stall, laughing and talking gaily, the woman glanced sharply at the clown, sitting there on his bucket, immovable as a statue, then, as quickly, she

averted her head, a sullen expression on her handsome face. She linked her arm into that of her companion and lent elaborate attention to his next remark. "*Dieu ! que c'est drôle !*" she repeated twice with a shrill laugh and mocking gesture.

The clown's eyes followed her every movement ; hungry eyes that still gazed blankly at the quivering door as it banged to behind her.

There was a convulsive twitch in the clasped hands, a momentary movement as of some wild beast ready to spring, then with a deep sigh, the old expression of dumb resignation came over his face, and once more he seemed lost in thought.

After a while "*La Belle Clotilde*" returned—alone this time, but the clown made no sign, only he dropped his head a little lower upon his hands, so that his red periwig alone was visible above them. She came straight up to him. "Jack!" she said, imperatively, striking her riding whip sharply against her green riding skirt, "Jack! I've told you, once for all, I will not stand your prying. What made you come here to sit and stare? Fool! Don't do it again, Jack, or my patience will come to an end."

The clown never stirred.

"Do you hear? I forbid you to pass my window, to sit spying upon me. It is all of a piece—nonsense. Listen Jack," she continued, and she pushed up the red periwig with the tip of her whip, dropping her voice to a slightly more ingratiating tone ; "I was only chaffing, Jack. Let me have three louis d'or! I am in a hurry! I'm not one to be kept waiting, you know that ; Jack! do you hear?" she added, in a rapidly rising crescendo, but Jack kept silence.

"Are you drunk, man, or not drunk enough? Give me the money! At once! Have you lost your tongue, you fool?"

Her face flushed darkly, and as no answer came, she struck him a sharp blow across the back :

"Jack! you silly fool!" she cried in positive fury, "Don't you hear me talking to you? How dare you?"

Still he did not move.

"*La Belle Clotilde*" stood there before him, her trailing skirt grasped hard in one clenched hand, her cheeks aflame, her foot tapping angrily, then, with a sudden effort, she so far mastered her temper as to find words again. She returned to the charge :

"Jack," she said, "Jack ;" she lingered on the last word until it became almost a caress : "It is so silly of you to give yourself these airs—and I want some money so badly."

Without raising his eyes, the clown stooped forward to pick up a straw from the floor; he thrust it between his lips, closed his teeth upon it, and muttered: "For him?"

"That is nothing to you. Well—if you must know—yes. He has been unlucky—he must back his luck once more—and to-night. He shall stand you a supper."

The clown shook his head.

"Well then, imagine the money is for *me*, I ask you for it. I will pay it all back together."

Jack shook his head once more.

"You don't want it back? So much the better, but, Jack, don't be all night about it, hurry up."

Her temper was rising again, but she kept it under.

"Jack, you will stand me a supper to-night?" she said. Again the bowed head made an emphatic negation.

"Don't you care to?" She dropped the trailing skirt, let herself slip down on to the straw at his feet, and laid a hand on his knees:

"Don't be stupid, Jack—give over this nonsense, you know I—like you. Lend me the money now, quickly, and——" She tried to pull down his hands.

Suddenly he tossed up his head and thrust her away, not roughly, but with the firm touch of one determined to be obeyed, then, drawing from his pocket a clumsy purse, he poured its contents into her lap.

"There, you've got the money," he muttered, hoarsely, "now—go!"

"Jack, after the performance——" She would have touched his hand again, but he drew it hastily back.

"Go—go, I said," he whispered, almost voiceless with emotion.

"*La Belle Clotilde*" rose slowly, gathering up her money; slowly she walked the length of the stable, turning at the end: "Jack! Jack!"

She waited in vain for a word, a look, then flounced out with a shrug of her shapely shoulders.

The clown never moved, but the pony thrust his neck over the rail of his stall and grabbed at his arm. "Fifi! Come along then." There was a sharp whinny of delight, and the tiny stallion pushed up against the swing bar, all impatience. His master stretched out his hand, unfastened it, and, once free, Fifi trotted straight up to him, pushed himself between the clown's knees and laid a black muzzle upon his shoulder. He seemed to know something was amiss.

There came over the stern face an expression of intense, almost pathetic

joy, the tears welled up in his eyes as in those of a mother when her child of its own accord first stretches out tiny hands to hers. "Fifi, my pet, my only pet!" His voice failed him and he pressed his lips against the silky mane, and so the stablemen found them later on, Fifi cocking his ears and sweeping his long tail to and fro in delighted satisfaction.

In the arena "*La Belle Clotilde*" was delighting her audience by a brilliant display "*à la haute école*," sharing pretty equally with her handsome bay stallion the admiration of a group of cavalry officers who stood just within the archway. Foremost among these was the well-known figure of Captain René, glass in eye, his dandified features wreathed in smiles of approbation. Here in the circus he was *persona grata*. A really good judge of horseflesh, he took, or professed to take, as keen an interest in every fresh performer, every novel trick, as did any member of the company. Although known to be practically penniless, he always contrived to be in the smartest, most extravagant set in the regiment, and even here was the most lavish of all. None of his companions gave such champagne suppers, none was so quick to detect the weak points of a horse, nor so ready with compliments and bouquets for a fair *équestrienne*. It was easy enough to be generous from a full purse, but René alone could stand unlimited drinks from empty pockets. His popularity was unbounded with almost the whole staff. "*La Belle Clotilde*" rode out amidst thunders of applause. The programme announced "A marvellous somersault trick over eight horses," and Jack the Clown, with the stereotyped grin of his profession once more upon his face, made his bow for the second time.

He busied himself for a few moments dressing three horses into line, playing endless tricks at the expense of the grooms, and indulging in the most extravagant acrobatic feats; then with a single bound he was upon the spring-board, his lithe figure curled itself into a ball as he turned his somersault once—twice—and landed beyond the horses with a ringing "*Ha-lala-i-ti!*"

One by one, more horses were led up, until a prolonged series of somersaults carried him, thanks to his indefatigable muscles, across the backs of eight big horses, and still he was not satisfied.

He cried out for two more, to the loudly expressed delight of the audience.

There was a momentary deliberation among the stablemen, for none of the other horses were trained for this particular trick, but Jack was not to be denied, he held up two fingers imperatively and evoked a roar of laughter with the words, "Two! two more horses, not donkeys like yourselves! two

horses!" The ring master gave a sign of assent, and to fill up the pause Jack pretended to fall off the board, stood on his head, and proceeded to wriggle himself through the tan to the side of the horse farthest from him. Hand over hand he mounted by its tail, and then stood in well-feigned alarm upon its back. Taking off his hat, he spun it upon his chin, his nose, twirled it round and round, flung it in the air, catching it now on one foot, now on the other, now again on his head, flung it up again, missed it, grabbed at it with one hand, and as he jumped once more into the ring tossed it right away. It made a wide curve and landed—was it merely by accident?—full in the face of Captain René. The clown laughed. "The clown's muzzle!" he cried, and just then the two fresh horses were trotted in. They were not used to being forced into such close line, and fretted at the contact with the others; first one, then another got restive, until the whole ten were fidgeting and nervous.

There was a fresh burst of music from the orchestra, a cry of "Steady, steady, now!" from the grooms, and once more a white figure shot from the spring-board. There was a wild scream, a panic-stricken rush of horses and stablemen, and in the ring there lay a shapeless, inert mass; a flutter of white frilling, a quiver of painted eyelids—a dead clown.

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