

The Avenging Phonograph

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This verdict of 'Suicide during temporary insanity' the Mayor had so confidently anticipated, that he experienced no particular sensation of relief when he heard the foreman of the jury actually pronounce the words that assured his safety. It simply seemed to him that no other result had been possible. Every single detail of the crime he had arranged with the utmost care, and with that admirable mixture of prudence, forethought, and determination which had raised him from a barefooted boy selling newspapers in the street to be Mayor of the town and one of its most prominent business men. No one knew of the connection between him and the dead man; even if any chance suspicion of foul play did arise he was the last man on whom that suspicion would fall, and his heart swelled within him with the consciousness of his absolute and perfect safety. He looked round the court now with that decorous expression of subdued melancholy the tragic death of a fellow-citizen required, and he conceived a scorn for these smug, smiling folk whose self-complacence he could so shatter by a word.

'If I were just to jump on a chair and say "This man was murdered, and I did it,"' he thought to himself, 'how they would all stare and shudder.'

A grim smile touched his firm-set lips, and he was so confident in his own strength that he even played a little with the idea, picturing the horror and consternation of the crowd, before he set the thought aside.

The court was clearing now, and he went out with the others, who respectfully made way for His Worship. The chemist, whose place of business was next to his own, came and walked by his side, and they chatted in subdued tones about this unfortunate business which had so disturbed the even tenor of the little town's placid life.

'Frankly,' said the Mayor, 'while I do not blame the jury, I consider their verdict more merciful than just.'

The chemist agreed. It seemed he cherished a certain resentment against the dead man. He spoke of him rather hardly, and the Mayor pleaded mildly for a more

charitable judgement.

‘After all, he is dead,’ he said, ‘and death covers everything.’

‘Yes, but the way he took to die—the way of it,’ insisted the chemist. ‘Such things may be common enough in great cities, but here one feels it as a blot upon us all—a stain upon the fair fame of the town,’ he said, waving a lean hand in the air.

‘It is certainly most regrettable,’ said the Mayor; ‘but still, no one knows what troubles he may have had.’

But the chemist would not be placated. He hinted that he wished the jury had brought in a verdict of ‘Felo-de-se’.

‘Self-murder is self-murder,’ he declared, sawing up and down with his lean right hand, ‘and there can be no excuse for it.’

‘Still,’ the mayor urged with a secret smile, ‘it is possible we do not know the whole truth about the affair.’

‘We know quite enough,’ said the chemist, with severity. ‘Besides,’ he added, thoughtfully, ‘he owed me nine and sevenpence, which I suppose now I shall never get.’

The Mayor agreed that the recovery of this debt was doubtful, and as the chemist turned to enter his shop he glanced after him with amused scorn.

‘By Jove,’ he said to himself lightly, ‘I have half a mind to tell him, just to see him shiver. The chattering fool, how he would gasp if he knew!’

It amused him greatly to think of the look that would spread over the chemist’s lean and hollow countenance if he knew the truth, and he allowed his mind to play with this fancy for some minutes.

He went up to his office and answered two or three business letters, but he felt he had earned a holiday, and he returned home early. After dinner, which he ate with a keen appetite, he sat down with a good cigar and a glass of weak whisky and water, and in his mind he went over the whole affair again. In the evidence given before the coroner there had been various mistakes and small discrepancies, all of which he had noticed with keen interest.

For example, the smart detective fellow had put the time of death at half-past seven, while in reality it had been two hours later. The mistake had pleased the Mayor immensely, as showing how even the police could blunder. Why, what chance had they of finding out the truth when they began by making such a mistake as that?

Then again, the doctor had sworn that death must have been instantaneous, while the Mayor knew very well that the dying man had retained his consciousness for some minutes. He had lain and looked up at his slayer, and in his fast glazing eyes had been a stare of wild amazement, not reproach, not accusation, not anger or threat, only absolute astonishment. Even his victim in the very moment of death, reflected the Mayor, had not been able to realise his guilt, and this thought pleased him so much that he burst into a harsh laugh.

His wife, mild and frightened, sat opposite to him, engaged as usual with her knitting, and the unexpected sound so startled her that she actually spoke without being spoken to.

'This suicide,' she said, 'is very terrible, is it not?'

'A stain upon the fair fame of the town,' he answered, mocking the babbling chemist. He always permitted himself more licence when alone with his wife than at any other time, for he knew the awe in which she held him, and his imitation of the chemist's tone was palpable. 'Self-murder is a dreadful crime,' he said.

'Dreadful,' she agreed. She dropped a stitch in her knitting and paused to pick it up. 'Dreadful,' she sighed again, 'and I suppose the dear Rector will not permit him to be buried in the churchyard,' and her amiable and vacant countenance took on an expression of the deepest horror.

'I expect not,' said the Mayor, and for the first time a real desire seized him to tell his secret. For there was a latent cruelty in his nature that now was wakening to stronger life, and he perceived quite plainly how if he told her she would gasp and shrink before the dreadful knowledge, and stare and mutter and presently die, crushed beneath its awful weight. But he set aside the thought, for to speak would be to imperil his own safety.

He sat in silence, sipping his whisky, and his thoughts were pleasant. What if there was one lay dead, branded with the name of suicide? Self-preservation was

the first law of nature, and he had merely removed a man whose existence threatened his own. Even if there were a God—a point on which the Mayor entertained the gravest doubts—surely He must see quite clearly that even by the silly standard of the world the Mayor was certainly no worse than anyone else, and probably a great deal better than most.

He finished his whisky, yawned, and observed that it was bedtime. Really, the day had been more trying than he had quite realised, and he felt tired. As he undressed he pushed the window open and leaned out, enjoying the fragrant sweetness of the night air. He was not used to notice such things, but tonight he did. It all seemed wonderfully quiet and still, this little town that slumbered there so peacefully in the kindly darkness, and then it came into his mind how he could shatter all this peace and serenity by just opening his lips and shouting a certain thing aloud. How they would all stir and buzz, like an overturned hive of bees. A policeman passing by paused to throw the light of his lantern over the house, and the Mayor called down to him.

‘A nice evening, Tompkins,’ he said; ‘anything stirring?’

‘Yes, Your Worship, a lovely night,’ answered the man. ‘No, Your Worship, nothing stirring.’

‘Good night, Tompkins,’ said the Mayor.

‘Good night, Your Worship,’ replied the man.

He went stolidly on his way, and the Mayor listened to his heavy and slow steps dying away in the distance. It amused him to reflect how different the man’s demeanour would have been if he had only known. But he did not know, and he never would, and there lay the joke; and the Mayor was so confident in his own strength that again he was able to play with the idea of dropping into the police-station and telling them all about it, till he fell into a gentle and quiet slumber from which he woke next morning happy and refreshed.

He felt in extra good spirits, and when he got to his office he found intelligence waiting him of the unexpectedly successful completion of some business that would mean a really large sum of money in his pocket.

‘If this had only come a week ago,’ he reflected, ‘perhaps he might be alive

today. But, after all, it's as well as it is, for I remember,' thought the Mayor, 'that he always annoyed me.'

Later he went to a meeting of the council and listened to an interminable discussion on the 'Late sad event which has so disturbed our town and cast so dark a stain upon its fair fame.' This phrase was the chemist's contribution to the lengthy argument about the most fitting successor to the office the dead man had held. Some wanted the office that had been so disgraced abolished altogether. The Mayor listened to it very patiently, amusing himself by picturing the different expressions that would come on each man's face if he were to rise and say:

'But all your talk is founded on the belief that this man committed suicide, whereas, in truth, I killed him.'

But this time, bored by the long discussion, he played with the thought so long that suddenly he was aware of a quick fear lest it should change from an amusement to a necessity. He sat upright and called the councillor just then speaking to order with some asperity, and then he became angry that such an absurd idea should have had power to chill him with so deadly a fear.

After the meeting was over he walked away with the Rector, of whom he inquired whether there was not some ancient tale of a king who could not keep a secret, and so told it to the reeds on the river bank?

The Rector said there was, and told him the story, adding that a secret, when of a guilty nature, was a great burden.

'There are many I've kept,' observed the Mayor, with a sudden tightening of his grim lips, as he thought of this last one he was keeping so well, and of how pale and terrified the Rector would look if he told it him.

But the story of this old burdened king, who, in his anxiety for relief from the intolerable burden of his silence, spoke at last to the treacherous reeds, though it aroused his liveliest contempt, yet somehow never left his mind. He found himself thinking of it intently one day as he stared into the window of the local bicycle maker, who also dealt in phonographs.

'One of these would have suited the old boy better than his reeds,' he reflected as he went away, and that afternoon he left business early and went for a long

solitary walk on the downs above the town.

A poignant desire controlled his feet, and though he said to himself that he would not and that he must not, presently he found himself in a position from which he could look down upon the actual scene of the grim tragedy of a few days before. There was the hedge behind which he had crept, there the ditch in which he had crouched, and there was the little gully down into which the dying man had fallen after receiving the fatal blow.

'I killed him,' said the Mayor aloud, and he looked around him and then half in fear up at the broad blue sky above.

But the sky remained untroubled and the earth unheeding. The sun still shone, all nature still laughed with the joy of early summer, from a distance a rabbit watched him cautiously, and near by a bird perched on a bush and sang its loudest.

'I killed him,' he said again; 'but, Lord, where's the satisfaction of saying so where no one can hear or make any reply?'

Suddenly he perceived that his forehead was damp, and he knew that this was because what he had feared had come to pass—that what had been an idle fancy indulged in for amusement had now taken on an aspect of necessity.

'But I'll not speak,' he said, 'I'll keep silence.'

He struck his hand upon his lips as though he held them treacherous and would chastise them, and walked straight back to the town, keeping his teeth tightly clenched all the way. Opposite the bicycle maker's he paused again and then went in to inquire about getting a new machine. From bicycles he went on to talk of phonographs, and presently inquired about their cost. It seemed he had some idea of using one in business to dictate his letters into, and he wished to know if that could be done. The bicycle maker assured him that it could, and showed him how, but the Mayor seemed captious and hard to please. Indeed, had not the bicycle maker been an adroit and persistent salesman the Mayor would probably have gone away without making any decision, and, as it was, all he would consent to was that one should be sent up to his house for him to try.

'It was only a passing fancy; I expect it would be more trouble than it would be worth,' he said, and the next day he received with an angry growl the

information that the phonograph he had ordered was in his study.

But, after a time, he went and sat in the study, looking oddly at the machine standing on the table. For long he sat there, staring down the brass mouth of the recorder. It had been sent up all ready, so that he knew all he had to do was to speak into the trumpet and his words would be engraved on the wax, ready to be reproduced and spoken back to him at his will. Presently he got up and locked the door and window and drew the blind as though he were preparing for an afternoon snooze. Then he went back and, picking up the poker, looked sideways at the machine as though he were about to break it into little pieces, and yet were afraid it might understand his purpose and defend itself in some way at once unexpected and terrible. The thought all the time was hot in his mind that if he once told this thing his secret and let it tell it back to him, then once he had heard another voice pronouncing those dread words of guilt and horror, he would no longer have any desire to speak them aloud in the ear of the world in the way that had first amused him and then obsessed him.

Suddenly he dropped the poker and began to talk eagerly, swiftly, very softly, and as he thus whispered to the machine, with its gulping trumpet ear, a deep peace grew within him, and a sense of certain, sweet security.

'That's done,' he said exultingly, as he jumped up the moment he had finished and rushed to the window.

Throwing it open, he leaned out to draw in deep breaths of the fresh, open air, and only now, by the intensity of his relief, did he understand how great had been the strain upon him. He remained there for a little, full of his new sense of perfect security. He enjoyed this sensation of relief and the freshness of the air so much that he decided to stroll round the garden before returning to hear the machine talk and then destroying it for ever, and with it the nightmare of oppression and desire that had lain so heavily on him these last few days.

He left his study and went into the drawing-room, where his wife was knitting.

'Emily,' he said, knowing that to her his word was absolute law, 'I have left that phonograph on the study table. See that no one goes near it.'

'Very well, dear,' she answered meekly, and he was well assured of her obedience. 'Are you going to keep it?' she asked.

'No,' he answered violently, 'they are silly things—stupid, troublesome, idiotic.' He abused it angrily for a moment or two, deriving a certain pleasure from speaking scornfully of this machine that had witnessed his weakness. 'No,' he concluded, 'I certainly shall not keep it.'

'I'm very glad,' said his wife, 'I never liked the things. I can't think it right somehow for a voice to be speaking where no one is. Of course I know it's very clever, but I can't think it right for all that.'

'Well, mind you see no one touches it,' said the Mayor. He did not usually give reasons for what he told her to do, but now he added: 'It is out of order apparently, for it won't work properly, and I don't want them to be able to say anyone else meddled with it.'

'Very well,' answered his wife, obediently, 'I will see it is not touched.'

He heard the renewed click of her knitting needles as he went out, and he was certain that she would never dream of disobeying him.

He walked for a few minutes in the garden, feeling an odd pleasure in knowing that his secret was safe in a little wooden box with a sort of trumpet on its top, that stood upon his study table. It was good to know the secret was there, and no longer on his mind, and good, too, to know that in a moment he would return and destroy the box and it together for evermore. But when he went back to the study the table was bare, and he looked at it for a long time before he went into the drawing-room and, standing softly by the door, asked in a low tone where the phonograph was.

'Oh, the man came for it from the shop, dear,' his wife answered, as still her knitting needles clicked placidly on. 'I told him you said it was out of order, so he took it away. He said he could soon put it to rights, and he wanted to know if he might bring another one instead.'

The Mayor did not answer, but he came nearer to her, going cautiously, holding by the wall, and she watched him as the deer watches the crouching tiger, for it was in his mind that he would kill her, and somehow she understood that quite distinctly. Neither of them spoke as he drew unsteadily nearer, and then she leaped up and fled, with her ball of wool bounding grotesquely behind her. She fled, only knowing that she was very greatly afraid, but he made no attempt to

follow her. She never stayed till she reached her mother's house, where she spent the night, but in the morning she came back, arriving just as some men brought in the unpleasantly wet body of the Mayor that they had just taken from the river, from the pool a little below the old mill.

'For my part,' said the bicycle maker later that day, 'I am certain he was not right in his mind, for yesterday night he sent me back a phonograph he said was out of order, and when I came to look at it I found it had never been started. Now,' said the bicycle maker indignantly, 'can a man be in his right senses when he talks into a machine without setting it going and then says it is out of order because it makes no record?'

'For my part,' returned the chemist, 'I regard it as a stain upon the fair fame of the town. I wonder who the council will appoint mayor.'

Personally he considered he had the best right to the position, but the bicycle maker expressed no opinion on the subject. For his part, he thought the builder round the corner, his brother-in-law, ought to be offered the post.

As for the late Mayor's wife, she put up a specially fine monument to his memory, bearing the text: 'He giveth his beloved sleep.' Later on she married the chemist.