

In The Morgue

BY SADA COWAN

Copyright, 1920, by Stewart & Kidd Company. All rights reserved.

IN THE MORGUE is reprinted from "The Forum" by special permission of Miss Sada Cowan. Application for right of performing IN THE MORGUE must be made to Miss Sada Cowan, The Authors' League, New York City.

IN THE MORGUE

A PLAY BY SADA COWAN

[PLACE: *In the morgue of a foreign city.*]

[SCENE: *A small almost empty room with the rear wall of glass. Before this glass black curtains are drawn. An old man ... Caren ... sits at a low table, well forward, sorting and arranging papers, writing from time to time. A lamp upon the table, is so shaded as to concentrate the light and throws Caren's wicked face into sharp relief. The room conveys a feeling of unfriendliness, coldness and gloom. Caren is old, so old he is somewhat decrepit ... hard, shrill and tottering. His features are sharp, his fingers are as talons. He seems almost as a vulture ... perhaps for hovering too long among the unbeloved dead.*]

CAREN [*calling to some one behind the black curtain*]. What was the number of that last one?

HELPER [*putting out his head*]. Thirteen. [*He disappears.*]

CAREN [*writes and repeats*]. Thirteen....

VOICES [*are heard, rough and harsh, from in back of the curtains*]. Shove that stiff up! He's got more room than what's coming to him.

CAREN [*calling, without rising*]. Who is it you're moving?

VOICE. Thirteen. Any reason why he should sprawl?

CAREN. Not a bit. Shove him along.

[*The curtains part. There is a swift vision of brilliant light within, and bodies laid out upon tables of ice.*]

KRAIG [*a man, scarcely more than a boy, over-wrought and hysterical, with his hands pressed close to his throbbing temples, bursts out*]. Oh.... Oh! Let me stay here just a moment away from that horror.

CAREN [*glancing up from his writing and smiles*]. You're all the same the first day.

KRAIG. Oh.... Oh!

CAREN. That last one got you ... eh?

KRAIG [*bitterly*]. So young ... so young!

CAREN. Must have been a good looker. Much as you can tell the way his face is banged up. I'll bet his own mother wouldn't know him.

KRAIG [*turning aside*]. Don't!

CAREN [*titters*]. He ... he ... he! Number thirteen...! I hope he ain't superstitious.

KRAIG. He has nothing more to fear.

CAREN [*with dread*]. There's no tellin'.

KRAIG. He's dead.... [*Enviously.*] ... Dead!

CAREN [*angry*]. Fool!

KRAIG [*watching through the glass at the placid figure, enviously*].
Dead!

CAREN [*exasperated*]. Bah!

KRAIG [*suddenly has a hideous thought and turns swiftly to Caren*].
You think it was fair...? He went of his own free will?

CAREN. Eh...? What put that into your head?

KRAIG. No clothes ... naked!

CAREN. A lot of them do that when they take the plunge. It ain't so
easy to identify them. It saves a lot of bother, too. We stick 'em on the
slabs a while and then....

KRAIG [*shuddering*]. Don't! It makes me cold ... cold! [*Again he
parts the curtains and looks through the glass.*] He's so calm ... so
still. I wonder if he suffered first! [*With a clutch of hatred in his
voice.*] I wonder if--he starved!

CAREN. That soft white kitten? Not much. Did you get a squint at his
hands? He's never even tied his own tie.

KRAIG [*laughs*]. And he's here!

CAREN [*looking at Kraig*]. This is a funny job for a kid like you to
pick.

KRAIG [*turning away*]. I'm not as young as I look. I've got three little
ones already. [*With deep anguish.*] And another on the way.

CAREN. It's a queer hang out for a kid like you, just the same.

KRAIG [*hysterically, almost beside himself*]. I tell you ... there's
another on the way.

CAREN. What do you mean by that?

KRAIG. Nothing! [*A pause, then bitterly.*] Oh there's one joy down here. You can burrow and hide like a rat from it all. The damn carriages don't roll by before your eyes. The women don't!... Oh, those women, how I hate them. Their silks, their jewels, their soft white skins. Fed! Clothed! Housed!... [*Clenching his fists.*] While Martha starves! Oh, God! They drive by laughing and I could choke them! Listen what happened. [*He comes closer to Caren and speaks fanatically.*] Yesterday in the park I stood there ... shivering ... wondering! And all at once the mad hate came into my heart and I felt that I could kill. [*Caren looks alarmed.*] And then... Ha ... ha ... ha! Then... The King... The King drove by. [*Laughing bitterly, and with a great flourish.*] And off came my hat! [*Making fun of himself.*] My hat came off my head, Old Man, and I bowed and cringed [*vehemently*] WITH THE HATE IN MY HEART. I could have torn the warm furs from his throat and wrapped my fingers in their place [*his hands clench spasmodically*]. Ugh!

CAREN [*thoroughly alarmed*]. Hush.... Hush! You mustn't talk so of our King. A nice young boy he is.

KRAIG. Oh the hate ... the hate. Perhaps it will leave me here in this hall of the dead. [*Glancing about.*] It all seems so level here. So level.

CAREN [*with the first faint touch of sympathy*]. You're right. Here's the one spot on earth where you get fair play. That's what I like. There ain't no rich and there ain't no poor. And there ain't no class nor nothing. Every man gets a square deal here ... a square deal.

KRAIG. Perhaps that's worth dying for--a square deal.

CAREN. Dying ... bah! Wait until you've seen a few more of them slung on the slabs. You'll lose your longing for death. I'm an old man, but....

KRAIG. If only I can see more of it. If only I can bear it.

CAREN. The pay's not bad?

KRAIG. It would be bad at any price.

CAREN [*shaking his finger childishly*]. Tut ... tut! We're fair here ... fair. There ain't no flowers ... he ... he ... he ... and there ain't no song [*he chuckles*], but....

KRAIG [*with intense passion, pacing to and fro, and never pausing, while he speaks very rapidly*]. If only the living could have what is spent on the dead. All the waste ... the hateful waste. Flowers wilting in dead hands. Stones weighing down dead hearts. While living bodies famish and living eyes burn for the sight of beauty. Oh, I wonder the dead don't scream out at our madness. I wonder the graves don't burst with the pain of it all.

CAREN. Have they shut me up with a maniac? Have you gone stark out of your mind?

[*There is a loud knocking on the door, to the right.*]

CAREN [*opens it a crack and peeps out cautiously*]. What do you want?

VOICE. Let me in.

CAREN. Get away.

VOICE [*piteously, clamoring*]. Let me look once ... just once.

CAREN [*harshly*]. Got a pass?

VOICE. No ... no. Oh, let me in.

CAREN [*bangs the door shut*]. Get away.

VOICE [*brokenly*]. Let me look once ... just once. [*Caren opens the door a crack.*] Are there any ... women?

CAREN. Women? Of course, there's women ... always women. What is it you've craving? The sight of the beauties or the smell of their stinking flesh? Go on ... get out. This isn't a bawdy house. [*He slams the door to and walks away.*]

KRAIG. What is it he wants?

CAREN. A peep at the stiffs. Probably looking for his girl. [*He passes out of sight, behind the black curtain.*]

KRAIG. Oh! [*Cautiously he peeps after Caren, then opens the door a crack and calls in a whisper*]. Man!... You can see the new ones through the panel there. Lift up the curtain. There's two. A blond haired girl and a boy. [*He turns swiftly as the curtains part and Caren reënters. Softly he shuts the door, then stands watching into the hallway through a glass partition.*] Poor soul!

CAREN [*mumbles as he returns*]. There's something queer about that last young stiff.

KRAIG. Number thirteen?

CAREN. Yes, number thirteen. You may have been right after all. Perhaps it wasn't fair play to put him in the river. There's some mystery ... something wrong. [*Tittering.*] He ... he ... he! Not number thirteen for nothing.

KRAIG [*watching outside*]. How do you know there's anything wrong?

CAREN. That's telling, Sonny. [*With deep meaning.*] But you get wise quick ... looking at the dead.

KRAIG. Ugh!

CAREN. People are telephoning and messengers are on the way. Pah ... things like this are a nuisance. They keep one late. What are you watching?

KRAIG. That man who was here at the door. He doesn't go away. I wonder what keeps him here.

CAREN. Conscience! Scared to death he'll find his girl. Afraid not to look for her.

KRAIG. You mean?...

CAREN. Oh, there's just two things drives people into the water. The men ... 'cause they've got too little inside 'em.... The women....

KRAIG [*furious*]. Stop!

CAREN [*alarmed, yet brazen ... scratching his head*]. He ... he ... he!
Pretty clever little joke. He ... he!

[*Kraig begins to pace the room, his hands pressed to his temples.*]

CAREN. I must tell that to the boys inside. [*He starts to go.*] Pretty clever little joke!...

KRAIG [*watching, excitedly*]. There's something wrong with the fellow. I'd better see.

CAREN [*pausing*]. You'd better shut your eyes and see nothing.

KRAIG. He is staggering.

CAREN. Let him stagger.

KRAIG. He may be ill. He may be--starving.

CAREN. He's come to a good place to lose his appetite.

KRAIG. Oh, let me see what's wrong with him ... please.

CAREN. You go out that door and you don't come back. [*A pause.*] I guess you'll stay.

KRAIG [*looks his hatred*]. Just as you say.

[*Outside the door there is a short, sharp scream.*]

VOICE. Maria!

KRAIG. He's fallen.

CAREN. He'll get up.

KRAIG. I wonder what happened.

CAREN. Perhaps he got a peep at the new blonde. [*There is now a violent banging on the door.*]

KRAIG. He's here.

[*Caren opens the door cautiously a crack.*]

VOICE [*outside*]. My woman!... Maria!

CAREN. If you can identify her shut up your racket. Go to the first door at the right and make arrangements to take her away.

VOICE [*crushed and broken*]. Maria.

CAREN. Shut up! Bottle the tears until you get home. The first door to the right.

VOICE [*pleading*]. Cover her. For the love of the Lord ... cover her. Don't let her lie like that.

CAREN. Ain't she covered enough to suit you?

VOICE. Cover her ... cover her.

CAREN. Afraid she'll catch cold? Go on ... get out! [*He slams the door.*]

KRAIG [*walks to the black curtains and parts them slightly*]. His woman ... his LOVE. [*Sighing and glancing towards the door.*] Poor devil!

CAREN. What's the matter with you, Softy?

KRAIG. Nothing. I was just thinking.

CAREN. Don't be a fool.

KRAIG [*again walking back and looking at the woman*]. Couldn't we cover her just a little? The sheet seems to have slipped.

CAREN. And no harm done. Meat's meat.

KRAIG [*dreamily*]. Her hair would cover her like a mantle. How soft and white she is. And how happy she seems. I wonder just when that look came into her face. It surely wasn't there when she plunged into the river.

CAREN [*annoyed*]. You ought to be nurse maid to a doll baby. What are you anyway?

KRAIG [*indifferently*]. A dreamer ... a creator ... a starver!

CAREN. Well, you're the wrong sort for in here. This is one place where you get down to facts; truth. No lies, no frills, no dreams. Dreams don't count [*banging his fist for emphasis*]. Money don't count. Power don't count ... beauty don't count. Nothing counts.

KRAIG [*hotly*]. Then it's not truth if beauty and dreams don't count. That's what we starved for, Martha and I.

CAREN [*softening a little*]. Well, you won't starve here. It's a fair place ... fair. The King himself wouldn't be treated no different than a beggar. The man with brains and the man without.... [*The curtains part and a helper enters.*]

HELPER. Some one wants to blink at number thirteen. He's got two swell dames with him. Can they go in?

CAREN. If their permit's all right. Yes. Bring them in.

HELPER. They won't come in here. They want to go in the private way.

CAREN. I know there's some mystery about number thirteen....

HELPER. Yes, there is. He's a swell ... a big one. I shouldn't wonder if...

CAREN. Go on. Get out. [*The helper goes.*]

KRAIG. Aren't you going to cover the boy before you let them enter?

CAREN. If they can't see him how are they going to know him? He ain't a tailor's dummy.

KRAIG. It all seems horrible.

CAREN. I guess you'll never see a second day at this.

KRAIG. Oh.... Oh, I don't know.

CAREN. You think I'm going to tuck on a few extras just because he's a swell. [*Yelling.*] Don't I keep telling you 'til there's not a breath left in my body, that there ain't no class here? [*The helper reënters and hears the last words. He stands breathless.*] Tramp or gentleman, they're all alike. Now get that into your head and let it grow.

HELPER [*has been stammering trying to speak*]. I oughtn't to tell. They'd kill me if they knew. It's to be kept a secret, but....

CAREN. What's the matter?

HELPER. Number thirteen.... [*Stammering.*] He ... he....

CAREN. Well, what about him?

HELPER. He ain't a loafer. He ain't a tramp. He ain't even a gentleman. He....

CAREN. Who is he? Quick!

HELPER. Our.... [*Exultantly.*] Our King!

CAREN [*open-mouthed, aghast*]. Our ... King!

KRAIG [*laughing triumphantly*]. Ha ... ha ... ha ... ha--HERE! [*He clasps his hands together.*]

CAREN [*excited*]. Are you mad, Boy, mad? Our King! Oh!

[*Kraig laughs. Both men stare at him horrified.*]

HELPER [*to Caren*]. Ain't you got a flag or something ... some little mark of respect to cover his nibs?

CAREN [*to Kraig*]. Run upstairs and get that big silk flag that.... [*as Kraig does not move*]. Go.

KRAIG [*immovable, abruptly ceasing to laugh*]. No.

CAREN [*threateningly*]. What do you mean? No?

KRAIG [*hysterically*]. This is one place in the world where all are treated fair. Dreams don't count. POWER don't count. There's no rich, no poor....

CAREN. Shut up and get that flag.

KRAIG. You're going to cover him ... but she.... Oh! [*Both men disappear behind the curtains, cringing and bowing to people within. Caren, with his back to the curtains, does not realize that he is alone.*] Even death can't level. No ... not even death. [*For a second he stares ahead of him piercingly into space, standing taut and rigid. Then commences to laugh in pure hysteria as*

[*The Curtain Slowly Falls.*]