

The Fatal Message

By John Kendrick Bangs

CHARACTERS:

MR. THADDEUS PERKINS, in charge of the curtain. MRS. THADDEUS PERKINS, cast for Lady Ellen. MISS ANDREWS, cast for the maid. MR. EDWARD BRADLEY, an under-study. MRS. EDWARD BRADLEY, cast for Lady Amaranth. MR. ROBERT YARDSLEY, stage-manager. MR. JACK BARLOW, cast for Fenderson Featherhead. MR. CHESTER HENDERSON, an absentee. JENNIE, a professional waitress.

The scene is laid in the library of the Perkins mansion, on the afternoon of the day upon which an amateur dramatic performance is to be held therein. The Perkins house has been given over to the dramatic association having the matter in charge. At right of library a scenic doorway is hung. At left a drop-curtain is arranged, behind which is the middle hall of the Perkins dwelling, where the expected audience are to sit. The unoccupied wall spaces are hung with paper-muslin. The apartment is fitted up generally to resemble an English drawing-room; table and chair at centre. At rear stands a painted-canvas conservatory entrance, on left of which is a long oaken chest. The curtain rising discovers Mrs. Perkins giving a few finishing touches to the scene, with Mr. Perkins gazing curiously about the room.

Perkins. Well, they've transformed this library into a scene of bewitching beauty--haven't they? These paper-muslin walls are a dream of loveliness. I suppose, as the possessor of all this, I ought to be supremely happy--only I wish that canvas conservatory door hadn't been tacked over my reference-books. I want to look up some points about--

Mrs. Perkins. Oh, never mind your books, Thaddeus; it's only for one night. Can't you take a minute's rest?

Perkins. One night? I like that. It's been there two already, and it's in for to-night, and all day to-morrow, I suppose. It'll take all day to-morrow to clean up, I'll wager a hat. I'm beginning to rue the hour I ever allowed the house of Perkins to be lured into the drama.

Mrs. Perkins. You're better off than I am. I've got to take part, and I don't half know my lines.

Perkins. I? I better off? I'd like to know if I haven't got to sit out in front and watch you people fulfil your diabolical mission in your doubly diabolical way, and grin at the fearful jokes in the dialogue I've been listening to for weeks, and make the audience feel that they are welcome when they're not. What's been done with my desk?

Mrs. Perkins. It's down in the laundry. You're about as--

Perkins. Oh, is it? Laundry is a nice place for a desk. Plenty of starch handy to stiffen up a writer's nerve, and scrubbing-boards galore to polish up his wits. And I suppose my papers are up in the attic?

Mrs. Perkins. No; they're stowed away safely in the nursery. Now please don't complain!

Perkins. Me? Complain? I never complain. I didn't say a word when Yardsley had my Cruikshanks torn from their shelves and chucked into a clothes-basket and carried into the butler's pantry, did I? Did I say as much as one little word? I wanted to say one little word, I admit, but I didn't. Did I? If I did, I withdraw it. I'm fond of this sort of thing. The greatest joy in life is to be found in arranging and rearranging a library, and I seem to be in for joy enough to kill. What time are the--these amateur Thespians coming?

Mrs. Perkins (looking at her watch). They're due now; it's half-past four. (Sits down and opens play-book. Rehearses.) No, not for all the world would I do this thing, Lord Muddleton. There is no need to ask it of me. I am firm. I shall--

Perkins, Oh, let up, my dear! I've been getting that for breakfast, dinner, and tea for two weeks now, and I'm awfully tired of it. When I asked for a second cup of coffee at breakfast Sunday, you retorted,

"No, not for all the world would I do this thing, Lord Muddleton!"
When I asked you where my dress ties were, you informed me that it was "what baseness," or words to that effect; and so on, until I hardly know where I am at. (Catches sight of the chest.) Hello! How did that happen to escape the general devastation? What are you going to do with that oak chest?

Mrs. Perkins. It is for the real earl to hide in just before he confronts Muddleton with the evidence of his crime.

Perkins. But--that holds all my loose prints, Bess. By Jove! I can't have that, you know. You amateur counterfeiters have got to understand just one thing. I'll submit to the laundering of my manuscripts, the butler's-pantrying of my Cruikshanks, but I'll be hanged if I'll allow even a real earl, much less a base imitation of one, to wallow in my engravings.

Mrs. Perkins. You needn't worry about your old engravings. They're perfectly safe, I've put them in the Saratoga trunk in the attic. (Rehearsing.) And if you ask it of me once again, I shall have to summon my servants to have you shown the door. Henry Cobb is the friend of my girlhood, and--

Perkins. Henry Cobb be--

Mrs. Perkins. Thaddeus!

Perkins. I don't care, Bess, if Henry Cobb was the only friend you ever had. I object to having my prints dumped into a Saratoga trunk in order that he may confront Muddleton and regain the lost estates of Puddingford by hiding in my chest. A gay earl Yardsley makes, anyhow; and as for Barlow, he looks like an ass in that yellow-chrysanthemum wig. No man with yellow hair like that could track such a villain as Henderson makes Muddleton out to be. Fact is, Henderson is the only decent part of the show.

Mrs. Perkins (rehearsing). What if he is weak? Then shall I still more strongly show myself his friend. Poor? Does not--

Perkins. Oh, I suppose it does--(Bell rings.) There comes this apology for a real earl, I fancy. I'll let him in myself. I suppose Jennie has got as much as she can do sweeping my manuscripts out of the laundry, and keeping my verses from scorching the wash. [Exit.

Mrs. Perkins. It's too bad of Thaddeus to go on like this. As if I hadn't enough to worry me without a cross husband to manage. Heigho!

Enter Perkins with Yardsley. Yardsley holds bicycle cap in hand.

Yardsley. By Jove! I'm tired. Everything's been going wrong to-day. Overslept myself, to begin with, and somebody stole my hat at the club, and left me this bicycle cap in its place. How are you getting along, Mrs. Perkins? You weren't letter perfect yesterday, you know.

Mrs. Perkins. I'm getting it all right, I think. I've been rehearsing all day.

Perkins. You bet your life on that, Henry Cobb, real Earl of Puddingford. If you aren't restored to your estates and title this night, it won't be for any lack of suffering on my part. Give me your biking cap, unless you want to use it in the play. I'll hang it up. [Exit.

Yardsley. Thanks. (Looks about the room.) Everything here seems to be right.

Perkins returns.

Mrs. Perkins (rehearsing). And henceforth, my lord, let us understand one another.

Perkins. Certainly, my dear. I'll go and have myself translated. Would you prefer me in French, German, or English?

Yardsley. I hope it goes all right to-night. But, I must say, I don't like the prospect. This beastly behavior of Henderson's has knocked me out.

Perkins. What's the matter with Henderson?

Mrs. Perkins. He hasn't withdrawn, has he?

Yardsley. That's just what he has done. He sent me word this morning.

Mrs. Perkins. But what excuse does he offer? At the last moment, too!

Yardsley. None at all--absolutely. There was some airy persiflage in his note about having to go to Boston at six o'clock. Grandmother's sick or something. He writes so badly I couldn't make out whether she was rich or sick. I fancy it's a little of both. Possibly if she wasn't rich he wouldn't care so much when she fell ill. That's the trouble with these New-Englanders, anyhow--they've always got grandmothers to fall down at crucial moments. Next time I go into this sort of thing it'll be with a crowd without known ancestors.

Perkins. 'Tisn't Chet's fault, though. You don't suspect him of having poisoned his grandmother just to get out of playing, do you?

Mrs. Perkins. Oh, Thaddeus, do be serious!

Perkins. I was never more so, my dear. Poisoning one's grandmother is no light crime.

Yardsley. Well, I've a notion that the whole thing is faked up. Henderson has an idea that he's a little tin Booth, and just because I called him down the other night at our first rehearsal he's mad. That's the milk in the cocoanut, I think. He's one of those fellows you can't tell anything to, and when I kicked because he wore a white tie with a dinner coat, he got mad and said he was going to dress the part his own way or not at all.

Perkins. I think he was right.

Yardsley. Oh yes, of course I'm never right. What am I stage-manager for?

Perkins. Oh, as for that, of course, you are the one in authority, but you were wrong about the white tie and the dinner coat. He was a bogus earl, an adventurer, wasn't he?

Yardsley. Yes, he was, but--

Perkins. Well, no real earl would wear a white tie with a dinner coat unless he were visiting in America. I grant you that if he were going to a reception in New York he might wear a pair of golf trousers with a dinner coat, but in this instance his dress simply showed his bogosity, as it were. He merely dressed the part.

Yardsley. He doesn't want to make it too plain, however, so I was right after all. His villany is to come as a painful surprise.

Mrs. Perkins. But what are we to do? Have you got anybody else to take his part?

Yardsley. Yes. I telegraphed right off to Bradley, explained as far as I could in a telegram without using all the balance in the treasury, and he answered all right. Said he'd bone at the part all day, and would be here at five letter perfect.

Mrs. Perkins (with a sigh of relief). Good. He's very quick at learning a thing. I imagine it will be all right. I've known him to learn a harder part than that in five hours. It'll be pleasanter for Emma, too. She didn't like those scenes she had as Lady Amaranth the adventuress with Henderson. He kept her off the middle of the stage all the time; but with her husband it will be different.

Perkins. I'll bet on that! No good-natured husband of a new women ever gets within a mile of the centre of the stage while she's on it. She'll have stage room to burn in her scenes with Brad.

Mrs. Perkins. I think it was awfully mean of Mr. Henderson, though.

Yardsley. Disgusting.

Perkins. It was inconsiderate. So hard on his grandmother, too, to be compelled to knock under just to get him out of a disagreeable situation. She ought to disinherit him.

Yardsley. Oh, it's easy enough to be sarcastic.

Perkins. That's so, Bob; that's why I never am. It's commonplace. (Bell rings.) Ah, there's the rest of the troupe, I guess. [Exit.

Yardsley (looking at his watch). It's about time. They're twenty minutes late.

Mrs. Perkins (rehearsing). So once for all, Lord Muddleton-- (derisively)--ha, ha! Lord Muddleton! that *is* amusing. You--Lord Muddleton! Ha, ha! Once for all, Lord Muddleton. I acquaint you with my determination. I shall not tell Henry Cobb what I have discovered, since I have promised, but none the less he shall know. Walls have ears--even that oaken chest by yinder wonder--

Yardsley (irritated). Excuse me, Mrs. Perkins; but really you must get that phrase right. You've called it yinder wonder at every rehearsal we've had so far. I know it's difficult to get right. Yonder window is one of those beastly combinations that playwrights employ to make the Thespian's pathway to fame a rocky one; but you must get over it, and say it right. Practise it for an hour, if need be--yonder window, yonder winder--I mean, yonder window--until it comes easy.

Mrs. Perkins (meekly). I have, and it doesn't seem to do any good. I've tried and tried to get it right, but yonder window is all I can say.

Yardsley. But yinder window is--I should say, yonder window is correct.

Mrs. Perkins. Well, I'm just going to change it, that's all. It shall be yonder casement.

Yardsley. Good idea. Only don't say yonder basement by mistake.

Enter Perkins, followed by Barlow.

Perkins. Here's Mr. Featherhead. He's rehearsing too. As I opened the door he said, "Give me good-morrow."

Barlow (smiling). Yes; and Thaddeus replied, "Good-yesterday, me friend," in tones which reminded me of Irving with bronchitis. What's this I hear about Henderson's grandmother?

Yardsley. Thrown up the part.

Barlow. His grandmother?

Yardsley. No--idiot--Henderson. He's thrown up his grandmother--oh, hang it!--you know what I mean.

Mrs. Perkins. I hope you're not going to get nervous, Mr. Yardsley. If you break down, what on earth will become of the rest of us?

Yardsley. I hope not--but I am. I'm as nervous as a cat living its ninth life. Here we are three or four hours before the performance, and no one knows whether we'll be able to go through it or not. My reputation as a manager is at stake. Barlow, how are you getting along on those lines in the revelation scene?

Barlow. Had 'em down fine on the cable-car as I came up. Ha-ha! People thought I was crazy, I guess. I was so full of it I kept repeating it softly to myself all the way up; but when we got to that Fourteenth Street curve the car gave a fearful lurch and fairly shook the words "villanous viper" out of me; and as I was standing when we began the turn, and was left confronting a testy old gentleman upon whose feet I had trodden twice, at the finish, I nearly got into trouble.

Perkins (with a laugh). Made a scene, eh?

Barlow (joining in the laugh). Who wouldn't? Each time I stepped on his foot he glared--regular Macbeth stare--like this: "Is this a jagger which I see before me?" (Suits action to word.) But I never let on I saw, but continued to rehearse. When the lurch came, however, and I toppled over on top of him, grabbed his shoulders in my hands to keep from sprawling in his lap, and hissed "villanous viper" in his face, he was inclined to resent it forcibly.

Yardsley. I don't blame him. Seems to me a man of your intelligence ought to know better than to rehearse on a cable-car, anyhow, to say nothing of stepping on a man's corns.

Barlow. Of course I apologized; but he was a persistent old codger, and demanded an explanation of my epithet.

Perkins. It's a wonder he didn't have you put off. A man doesn't like to be insulted even if he does ride on the cable.

Barlow. Oh, I appeased him. I told him I was rehearsing. That I was an amateur actor.

Mrs. Perkins. And of course he was satisfied.

Barlow. Yes; at least I judge so. He said that my confession was humiliation enough, without his announcing to the public what he thought I was; and he added, to the man next him, that he thought the public was exposed to enough danger on the cable cars without having lunatics thrust upon them at every turning.

Perkins. He must have been a bright old man.

Mrs. Perkins. Or a very crabbed old person.

Barlow. Oh, well, it was an experience, but it rather upset me, and for the life of me I haven't been able to remember the opening lines of the scene since.

Perkins. Well, if the audience drive you off the stage, you can sue the cable company. They ought to be careful how they lurch a man's brains out.

Yardsley. That's right--joke ahead. It's fun for you. All you've got to do is to sit out in front and pull the curtain up and down when we ring a bell. You're a great one to talk about brains, you are. It's a wonder to me you don't swoon under your responsibility.

Mrs. Perkins (rehearsing). So once for all, as he says, so say I--

Perkins. Ah! Indeed! You take his part, do you?

Mrs. Perkins (rehearsing). You must leave this house at once and forever. I once thought I loved you, but now all is changed, and I take this opportunity to thank my deliverer, Fenderson Featherhead--

Perkins. Oh--ah--rehearsing. I see. I thought you'd gone over to the enemy, my dear. Featherhead, step up and accept the lady's thanks. Cobb, join me in the dining room, and we'll drown our differences in tasting the punch, which, between you and me, is likely to be the best part of to-night's function, for I made it myself though, if Tom Harkaway is in the audience, and Bess follows out her plan of having the flowing bowl within reach all the evening, I'm afraid it'll need an under-study along about nine o'clock. He's a dry fellow, that Harkaway.

[Exit Perkins, dragging Yardsley by the arm.

Barlow (calling after them). Don't you touch it, Bob. It's potent stuff. One glass may postpone the performance.

Yardsley (from behind the scenes). Never fear for me, my boy. I've got a head, I have.

Barlow. Well, don't get another. (Turning to Mrs. Perkins.) Suppose we rehearse that scene where I acquaint you with Cobb's real position in life?

Mrs. Perkins. Very well. I'm ready. I'm to sit here, am I not? [Seats herself by table.

Barlow. And I come in here. (Begins.) Ah, Lady Ellen, I am glad to find you alone, for I have that to say--

Mrs. Perkins. Won't you be seated, Mr. Featherhead? It was such a delightful surprise to see you at the Duchess of Barncastle's last evening. I had supposed you still in Ireland.

Barlow (aside). Good. She little thinks that I have just returned from Australia, where I have at last discovered the identity of the real Earl of Puddingford, as well as that of this bogus Muddleton, who, by his nefarious crime, has deprived Henry Cobb of his patrimony, of his

title, aye, even of his name. She little wots that this--this adventurer who has so strongly interested her by his nepotic--

Mrs. Perkins (interrupting). Hypnotic, Mr. Barlow.

Barlow. What did I say?

Mrs. Perkins. Nepotic.

Barlow. How stupid of me! I'll begin again.

Mrs. Perkins (desperately). Oh, pray don't. Go on from where you left off. That's a fearfully long aside, anyhow, and I go nearly crazy every time you say it. I don't know what to do with myself. It's easy enough for Mr. Yardsley to say occupy yourself somehow, but what I want to know is, how? I can't look inquiringly at you all that time, waiting for you to say "Ireland! Oh, yes--yes--just over from Dublin." I can't lean against the mantel-piece and gaze into the fire, because the mantel-piece is only canvas, and would fall down if I did.

Barlow. It's a long aside, Mrs. Perkins, but it's awfully important, and I don't see how we can cut it down. It's really the turning- point of the play, in which I reveal the true state of affairs to the audience.

Mrs. Perkins (with a sigh). I suppose that's true. I'll have to stand it. But can't I be doing some sewing?

Barlow. Certainly not. You are the daughter of a peer. They never sew. You might be playing a piano, but there's hardly room on the stage for that, and, besides, it would interfere with my aside, which needs a hush to be made impressive. Where did I leave off?

Mrs. Perkins. Hypnotic power.

Barlow. Oh yes. (Resumes rehearsing.) She little wots that this-- this adventurer who has so strangely interested her with his hypnotic power is the man who twenty years ago forged her father's name to the title-deeds of Burnington, drove him to his ruin, and subsequently, through a likeness so like as to bewilder and confuse even a mother's

eyes, has forced the rightful Earl of Puddingford out into a cruel world, to live and starve as Henry Cobb.

[Bell.

Mrs. Perkins. Ah, I fancy the Bradleys are here at last. I do hope Edward knows his part.

Enter Yardsley.

Yardsley. They've come, and we can begin at last.

Enter Perkins, Miss Andrews, and Mr. and Mrs. Bradley.

Mrs. Perkins. Take off your things, Emma. Let me take your cloak, Dorothy. Does Edward feel equal--

Mrs. Bradley. He says so. Knows it word for word, he says, though I've been so busy with my own--[They go out talking.

Yardsley. Well, Brad, how goes it? Know your part?

Bradley. Like a book. Bully part, too.

Barlow. Glad you like it.

Bradley. Can't help liking it; it's immense! Particularly where I acquaint the heroine with the villainy that--

Barlow. You? Why--

Enter Mrs. Bradley, Miss Andrews, and Mrs. Perkins.

Mrs. Perkins (to Bradley). So glad you're going to play with us.

Bradley. So am I. It's a great pleasure. Felt rather out in the cold until--
-

Barlow. But, I say, Brad, you don't--

Yardsley. Howdy do, Mrs. Bradley? Good-afternoon, Miss Andrews. We all seem to be here now, so let's begin. We're a half-hour late already.

Barlow. I'm ready, but I want to--

Yardsley. Never mind what you want, Jack. We haven't time for any more talking. It'll take us an hour and a half, and we've got to hustle. All off stage now except Mrs. Perkins. (All go out; Yardsley rings bell.) Hi, Perkins, that's your cue!

Perkins. What for?

Yardsley. Oh, hang it!--raise the curtain, will you?

Perkins. With pleasure. As I understand this thing, one bell signifies raise curtain when curtain's down; drop curtain when curtain is up.

Yardsley. Exactly. You know your part, anyhow. If you remember not to monkey with the curtain except when the bell rings, and then change its condition, no matter what it may be, you can't go wrong. Now begin. (Bell. Perkins raises curtain.) Now, of course, I'm not supposed to be on the stage, but I'll stay here and prompt you. Enter Lady Ellen. Come along, Mrs. Perkins. Please begin.

Mrs. Perkins. I thought we'd decided that I was to be sitting here when the curtain went up?

Yardsley. So we did. I'd forgotten that.--We'll begin all over again. Perkins, drop that curtain. Perkins!

Perkins. What?

Yardsley. Drop the curtain.

Perkins. Where's the bell? I didn't hear any bell ring.

Yardsley. Oh, never mind the bell! Let her down.

Perkins. I beg your pardon, but I positively refuse. I believe in doing things right. I'm not going to monkey. Ring that bell, and down she comes; otherwise--

Yardsley. Tut! You are very tiresome this afternoon, Thaddeus. Mrs. Perkins, we'll go ahead without dropping the curtain. Now take your place.

[Mrs. Perkins seats herself by table, picks up a book, and begins to read.

Mrs. Perkins (after an interval, throwing book down with a sigh). Heigho! I cannot seem to concentrate my mind upon anything to-night. I wonder why it is that once a woman gives her heart into another's keeping--[Bell rings. Perkins lets curtain drop.

Yardsley. What the deuce did you drop that curtain for, Thaddeus?

Perkins. The bell rang, didn't it?

Yardsley. Yes, you idiot, but that's supposed to be the front-door bell. Lady Amaranth is about to arrive--

Perkins. Well, how was I to know? Your instructions to me were positive. Don't monkey with curtain till bell rings. When bell rings, if down, pull her up; if up, pull her down. I'm not a connoisseur on bells--
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Yardsley. You might pay some attention to the play.

Perkins. Now look here, Bob. I don't want to quarrel with you, but it seems to me that I've got enough to do without paying attention to your part of the show. What am I? First place, host; second place, head usher; third place, curtain-manager; fourth place, fire department; fifth place, Bess says if children holler, go up and see what's the matter other words, nurse--and on top of this you say keep an eye on the play. You must think I've as many eyes as a President's message.

Mrs. Perkins. Oh dear, Teddy! do behave. It's simple enough--

Perkins. Simple enough? Well, I like that. How am I to tell one bell from another if--

Yardsley (dryly). I suppose if the clock strikes ten you'll seesaw the curtain up and down ten times, once for each stroke--eh?

Bradley (poking his head in at the door). What's the matter in here? Emma's been waiting for her cue like a hundred-yards runner before the pistol.

Perkins. Oh, it's the usual trouble with Yardsley. He wants me to chaperon the universe.

Yardsley. It's the usual row with you. You never want to do anything straight. You seem to think that curtain's an elevator, and you're the boy--yanking it up and down at your pleasure, and--

Mrs. Perkins. Oh, please don't quarrel! Can't you see, Ted, it's growing late? We'll never have the play rehearsed, and it's barely three hours now before the audience will arrive.

Perkins. Very well--I'll give in--only I think you ought to have different bells--

Yardsley. I'll have a trolley-car gong for you, if it'll only make you do the work properly. Have you got a bicycle bell?

Mrs. Perkins. Yes; that will do nicely for the curtain, and the desk push-button bell will do for the front-door bell. Have you got that in your mind, Teddy dear?

Perkins. I feel as if I had the whole bicycle in my mind. I can feel the wheels. Bike for curtain, push for front door. That's all right. I wouldn't mind pushing for the front door myself. All ready? All right. In the absence of the bicycle bell, I'll be its under-study for once. B-r-r-r-r-r-r! [Raises curtain.

Yardsley. Now, Mrs. Perkins, begin with "I wonder why--"

Mrs. Perkins (rehearsing). I wonder why it is that once a woman gives her heart into another's keeping--(Bell.) Ah, the bell. It must be he at last. He is late this evening.

Enter Miss Andrews as maid, with card on tray.

Miss Andrews. Lady Amaranth, me luddy.

Yardsley. Lydy, Miss Andrews, lydy--not luddy.

Miss Andrews. Lydy Amaranth, me lady.

Yardsley. And please be consistent with your dialect. If it's Lydy Amaranth, it's Lydy Ellen.

Miss Andrews. Lydy Amaranth, me lydy.

Mrs. Perkins. What? Lydy Amaranth? She?

Yardsley. Oh dear! Excuse me, Mrs. Perkins, but you are not the maid, and cockney isn't required of you. You must not say lydy. Lady is--

Mrs. Perkins (resignedly). What? Lady Amaranth? She? What can she want? Show her up. [Exit Miss Andrews.]

Perkins. That's a first-class expression for an adventuress. *Show her up!* Gad! She ought to be shown up.

Mrs. Perkins. What can she want?

Enter Mrs. Bradley.

Mrs. Bradley. Ah, my dear Lady Ellen! What delight to find you at home! (Aside.) He is not here, and yet I could have sworn--

Mrs. Perkins. To what am I to attribute this pleasure, Lady Amaranth? I do not presume to think that you have come here without some other motive than that of a mere desire to see me. I do not suppose that even

you pretend that since the contretemps of Tuesday night at the Duchess of Barncastle's our former feeling--

Mrs. Bradley. Ellen, I have come to tell you something. To save you from a vile conspiracy.

Mrs. Perkins. I am quite well able, Lady Amaranth, to manage my own affairs--

Mrs. Bradley. But you do not know. You love Lord Muddleton--

Mrs. Perkins (toying with her fan). Oh! Indeed! And who, pray, has taken you into my confidence? I was not aware--

Mrs. Bradley. Hear me, Ellen--

Mrs. Perkins. Excuse me, Lady Amaranth! but you have forgotten that it is only to my friends that I am known as--

Mrs. Bradley. Then Lady Ellen, if it must be so. I know what you do not--that Henry Cobb is an escaped convent--

Yardsley. Convict, not convent.

Mrs. Bradley. Is an escaped convict, and--

Mrs. Perkins. I am not interested in Henry Cobb.

Mrs. Bradley. But he is in you, Ellen Abercrombie. He is in you, and with the aid of Fenderson Featherhead--

[Bell. Perkins lets curtain drop half-way, but remembers in time, and pulls it up again.

Perkins. Beg pardon. String slipped.

Mrs. Bradley. Too late. Oh, if he had only waited!

Enter Miss Andrews.

Miss Andrews. Mr. Featherhead, Leddy Eilen.

Yardsley. Ellen, Ellen; and lydy, not leddy.

Mrs. Bradley. Hear me first, I beg.

Mrs. Perkins. Show him in, Mary. Lady Amaranth, as you see, I am engaged. I really must be excused. Good-night.

Mrs. Bradley (aside). Foiled! Muddleton will be exposed. Ah, if I could only have broken the force of the blow! (Aloud.) Lady Ellen, I will speak. Fenderson Featherhead--

Enter Bradley and Barlow together. Both. Is here, Lady Amaranth.

[Each tries to motion the other off the stage.

Yardsley. What the deuce does this mean? What do you think this play is--an Uncle Tom combination with two Topsys?

Barlow. I told him to keep out, but he said that Fenderson Featherhead was his cue.

Bradley (indignantly). Well, so it is; there's the book.

Yardsley. Oh, nonsense, Brad! Don't be idiotic. The book doesn't say anything of the sort.

Bradley. But I say it does. If you--

Barlow. It's all rot for you to behave like this, Bradley.

Perkins. Isn't it time something happened to the curtain? The audience will get panicky if they witness any such lack of harmony as this. I will draw a veil over the painful scene. B-r-r-r-r. (Drops curtain.) B-r-r-r-r.

[Raises it again.

Yardsley. We won't dispute the matter, Bradley. You are wrong, and that's all there is about it. Now do get off the stage and let us go ahead. Perkins, for Heaven's sake, give that curtain a rest, will you?

Perkins. I was only having a dress-rehearsal on my own account, Bob. Bike bell, curtain. Push bell, front door. Trolley gong, nothing--

Bradley. Well, if you fellows won't--

Yardsley (taking him by the arm and walking him to side of stage). Never mind, Brad; you've made a mistake, that's all. We all make mistakes at times. Get off, like a good fellow. You don't come on for ten minutes yet. (Exit Bradley, scratching his head in puzzled meditation.) Go ahead now, Barlow.

Mrs. Bradley. But, Mr. Yardsley, Edward has--

Yardsley. We'll begin with your cue.

Mrs. Bradley. Fenderson Featherhead--

Barlow. Is here, Lady Amaranth.

Mrs. Bradley. But--

Yardsley. No, no! Your word isn't "but," Mrs. Bradley. It's (consulting book)--it's: "Insolent! You will cross my path once too often, and then--

Enter Bradley.

Mrs. Bradley. I know that, but I don't say that to him!

Bradley. Of course not. She says it to me.

Barlow. Well, of all the stupidity--

Perkins. Another unseemly fracas. Another veil. B-r-r-r-r. (Drops curtain.) There may be a hitch in the play, but there won't be in this curtain. I tell you that right now. B-r-r-r-r.

[Raises curtain.

Mrs. Perkins. Well, I don't pretend to understand the difficulty. She certainly does say that to Featherhead.

Barlow. Of course!--it's right there in the book.

Bradley. That's exactly what I say. It's in the book; but you would come on.

Barlow. Well, why shouldn't I?

Enter Miss Andrews.

Miss Andrews. What seems to be the trouble?

Perkins. I give it up. Collision somewhere up the road.

Yardsley (turning over the leaves of the play-book). Oh, I see the trouble--it's all right. Bradley is mixed up a little, that's all. "Fenderson Featherhead" is his cue--but it comes later, Brad.

Bradley. Later? Well (glances in book)--no--it comes now,

Barlow. Are you blind? Can you read? See there! [Points into book.

Yardsley. No--you keep still, Jack. I'll fix it. See here, Bradley. This is the place you are thinking of. When Cobb says to Lady Ellen "Fenderson Featherhead," you enter the room, and in a nervous aside you mutter: "What, he! Does he again dare to cross my path?" That's the way of it.

Barlow. Certainly--that's it, Brad. Now get off, and let me go on, will you?

Mrs. Perkins. I'm sure it's a perfectly natural error, Mr. Bradley.

Mrs. Bradley. But he's right, my dear Bess. The others are wrong. Edward doesn't--

Bradley. I don't care anything about it, but I'm sure I don't know what else to do. If I am to play Fenderson--

Barlow (in amazement). You?

Yardsley (aghast). Fenderson? By all that is lovely, what part have you learned?

Bradley. The one you told me to learn in your message--Featherhead, of course.

Barlow. But that's my part!

Mrs. Perkins. Of course it is, Mr. Bradley. Mr. Barlow is to be--

Mrs. Bradley. But that's what Edward was told. I saw the message myself.

Yardsley (sinking into a chair dejectedly). Why, Ed Bradley! I never mentioned Featherhead. You were to be Muddleton!

Bradley. Me?

Mrs. Bradley. What?

Yardsley. Certainly. There's nothing the matter with Barlow, and he's cast for Featherhead. You've learned the wrong part!

Bradley (searching his pockets). Here's the telegram. There (takes message from pocket), read that. There are my instructions.

Yardsley (grasps telegram and reads it. Drops it to floor). Well, I'll be jiggered!

[Buries his face in his hands.

Mrs. Perkins (picking up message and reading aloud). "Can you take Fenderson's part in to-night's show? Answer at once. Yardsley."

Barlow. Well, that's a nice mess. You must have paresis, Bob.

Perkins. I was afraid he'd get it sooner or later. You need exercise, Yardsley. Go pull that curtain up and down a half-dozen times and it'll do you good.

Bradley. That telegram lets me out.

Mrs. Bradley. I should say so.

Perkins. Lets us all out, seems to me.

Yardsley. But--I wrote Henderson, not Fenderson. That jackass of a telegraph operator is responsible for it all. "Will you take Henderson's part?" is what I wrote, and he's gone and got it Fenderson. Confound his--

Mrs. Perkins. But what are we going to do? It's quarter-past six now, and the curtain is to rise at 8.30.

Perkins. I'll give 'em my unequalled imitation of Sandow lifting the curtain with one hand. Thus. [Raises curtain with right hand.

Yardsley. For goodness' sake, man, be serious. There are seventy- five people coming here to see this performance, and they've paid for their tickets.

Mrs. Perkins. It's perfectly awful. We can't do it at all unless Mr. Bradley will go right up stairs now and learn--

Mrs. Bradley. Oh, that's impossible. He's learned nearly three hundred lines to-day already. Mr. Barlow might--

Barlow. I couldn't think of it, Mrs. Bradley. I've got as much as I can do remembering what lines I have learned.

Perkins. It would take you a week to forget your old part completely enough to do the other well. You'd be playing both parts, the way Irving does when he's irritated, before you knew it.

Yardsley. I'm sure I don't know what to do.

Perkins. Give it up, eh? What are you stage-manager for? If I didn't own the house, I'd suggest setting it on fire; but I do, and it isn't fully insured.

Mrs. Perkins. Perhaps Miss Andrews and Mr. Yardsley could do their little scene from Romeo and Juliet.

Mrs. Bradley. Just the thing.

Yardsley. But I haven't a suitable costume.

Perkins. I'll lend you my golf trousers, and Bess has an old shirt- waist you could wear with 'em. Piece it out a little so that you could get into it, and hang the baby's toy sword at your side, and carry his fireman's hat under your arm, and you'd make a dandy- looking Romeo. Some people might think you were a new woman, but if somebody were to announce to the audience that you were not that, but the Hon. R. Montague, Esq., it would be all right and exceedingly amusing. I'll do the announcing with the greatest of pleasure. Really think I'd enjoy it.

Miss Andrews. I think it would be much better to get up Mrs. Jarley's waxworks.

Perkins. Oh dear, Miss Andrews, never. Mrs. Jarley awakens too many bitter memories in me. I was Mrs. Jarley once, and--

Yardsley. It must have been awful. If there is anything in life that could be more horrible than you, with your peculiar style of humor, trying to do Jarley, I--

Perkins. Oh, well, what's the odds what we do? We're only amateurs, anyhow. Yardsley can put on a pair of tight boots, and give us an impression of Irving, or perhaps an imitation of the Roman army at the battle of Philippi, and the audience wouldn't care, as long as they had a good supper afterwards. It all rests with Martenelli whether it's a go-to-night. If he doesn't spoil the supper, it'll be all right. I have observed that the principal factors of success at amateur dramatics are an expert manipulation of the curtain, and a first-class feed to put the

audience in a good-humor afterwards. Even if Martenelli does go back on us, you'll have me with the curtain--

Mrs. Perkins. Thaddeus!

Yardsley. By Jove! that's a good idea--we have got you. You can read Henderson's part!

Perkins. What--I?

Barlow. Certainly.

Bradley. Just the very thing.

Miss Andrews. Splendid idea.

Perkins. Oh--but I say--I can't, you know. Nonsense! I can't read.

Yardsley. I've often suspected that you couldn't, my dear Thaddeus; but this time you must.

Perkins. But the curtain--the babies--the audience--the ushering--the fire department--it is too much. I'm not an octopus.

Barlow (taking him by the arm and pushing him into chair). You can't get out of it, Ted. Here--read up. There--take my book.

[Thrusts play-book into his hand.

Bradley. Here's mine, too, Thaddeus. Read 'em both at once, and then you'll have gone over it twice.

[Throws his book into Perkins's lap.

Perkins. I tell you--

Mrs. Perkins. Just this once, Teddy--please--for me.

Yardsley. You owe it to your position, Perkins. You are the only man here that knows anything about anything. You've frequently said so.

You were doing it all, anyhow, you know--and you're host--the audience are your guests--and you're so clever and--

Perkins. But--

Enter Jennie.

Jennie. Dinner is served, ma'am. [Exit.

Yardsley. Good! Perk, I'll be your under-study at dinner, while you are studying up. Ladies and gentlemen, kindly imagine that I am host, that Perkins does not exist. Come along, Mrs. Bradley. Miss Andrews, will you take my other arm? I'll escort Lady Amaranth and the maid out. We'll leave the two Featherheads to fight it out for the Lady Ellen. By-by, Thaddeus; don't shirk. I'll come in after the salade course and hear you, and if you don't know your lesson I'll send you to bed without your supper.

[All go out, leaving Perkins alone.

Perkins (forcing a laugh). Ha! ha! ha! Good joke, confound your eyes! Humph! very well. I'll do it. Whole thing, eh? Curtain, babies, audience, host. All right, my noble Thespians, wait! (Shakes fist at the door.) I *will* do the whole thing. Wait till they ring you up, O curtain! Up you will go, but then--then will I come forth and read that book from start to finish, and if any one of 'em ventures to interfere I'll drop thee on their most treasured lines. They little dream how much they are in the power of you and me!

Enter Jennie.

Jennie. Mrs. Perkins says aren't you coming to dinner, sir; and Mr. Yardsley says the soup is getting cold, sir.

Perkins. In a minute, Jennie. Tell Mrs. Perkins that I am just learning the last ten lines of the third act; and as for Mr. Yardsley, kindly insinuate to him that he'll find the soup quite hot enough at 8.30.

[Exit Jennie. Perkins sits down, and, taking up two books of the play, one in each hand, begins to read.

[CURTAIN]