

## **The Lost Silk Hat**

BY EDWARD JOHN DUNSANY

PERSONS

THE CALLER  
THE LABORER  
THE CLERK  
THE POET  
THE POLICEMAN

*Scene: A fashionable London street.*

*The Caller stands on a doorstep, "faultlessly dressed," but without a hat. At first he shows despair, then a new thought engrosses him.*

*Enter the Laborer.*

THE CALLER

Excuse me a moment. Excuse me--but--I'd be greatly obliged to you if--if you could see your way--in fact, you can be of great service to me if--

THE LABORER

Glad to do what I can, sir.

CALLER

Well, all I really want you to do is just to ring that bell and go up and say--er--say that you've come to see to the drains, or anything like that, you know, and get hold of my hat for me.

LABORER

Get hold of your 'at!

CALLER

Yes. You see, I left my hat behind most unfortunately. It's in the drawing-room (*points to window*), that room there, half under the long sofa, the far end from the door. And if you could possibly go and get it, why I'd be (*The Laborer's expression changes*)--Why, what's the matter?

LABORER (*firmly*)

I don't like this job.

CALLER

Don't like this job! But my dear fellow, don't be silly, what possible harm--?

LABORER

Ah-h. That's what I don't know.

CALLER

But what harm can there possibly be in so simple a request? What harm does there seem to be?

LABORER

Oh, it seems all right.

CALLER

*Well*, then.

LABORER

All these crack jobs do seem all right.

CALLER

But I'm not asking you to rob the house.

LABORER

Don't seem as if you are, certainly, but I don't like the looks of it; what if there's things what I can't 'elp taking when I gets inside?

CALLER

I only want my hat--Here, I say, please don't go away--here's a sovereign, it will only take you a minute.

LABORER

*What I want to know--*

CALLER

Yes?

LABORER

--Is what's *in* that hat?

CALLER

What's *in* the hat?

LABORER

Yes; that's what I want to know.

CALLER

What's *in* the hat?

LABORER

Yes, you aren't going to give me a sovereign--?

CALLER

I'll give you two sovereigns.

LABORER

You aren't going to give me a sovereign, and rise it to two sovereigns, for an *empty* hat?

CALLER

But I must have my hat. I can't be seen in the streets like this. There's nothing *in* the hat. What do you think's in the hat?

LABORER

Ah, I'm not clever enough to say that, but it looks as if the papers was in that hat.

CALLER

The papers?

LABORER

Yes, papers proving, if you can get them, that you're the heir to that big house, and some poor innocent will be defrauded.

CALLER

Look here, the hat's absolutely empty. I *must* have my hat. If there's anything in it you shall have it yourself as well as the two pounds, only get me my hat.

LABORER

Well, that seems all right.

CALLER

That's right, then you'll run up and get it?

LABORER

Seems all right to me and seems all right to you. But it's the police what you and I have got to think of. Will it seem all right to them?

CALLER

Oh, for heaven's sake--

LABORER

Ah!

CALLER

What a hopeless fool you are.

LABORER

Ah!

CALLER

Look here.

LABORER

Ah, I got you there, mister.

CALLER

Look here, for goodness sake don't go.

LABORER

Ah! (*Exit*)

[*Enter the Clerk.*

CALLER

Excuse me, sir. Excuse my asking you, but, as you see, I am without a hat. I shall be extraordinarily obliged to you if you would be so very good as to get it for me. Pretend you have come to wind the clocks, you know. I left it in the drawing-room of this house, half under the long sofa, the far end.

CLERK

Oh, er--all right, only--

CALLER

Thanks so much, I am immensely indebted to you. Just say you've come to wind the clocks, you know.

CLERK

I--er--don't think I'm very good at winding clocks, you know.

CALLER

Oh, that's all right, just stand in front of the clock and fool about with it. That's all they ever do. I must warn you there's a lady in the room.

CLERK

Oh!

CALLER

But that's all right, you know. Just walk past up to the clock.

CLERK

But I think, if you don't mind, as there's someone there--

CALLER

Oh, but she's quite young and very, very beautiful and--

CLERK

Why don't you get it yourself?

CALLER

That is impossible.

CLERK

Impossible?

CALLER

Yes, I have sprained my ankle.

CLERK

Oh! Is it bad?

CALLER

Yes, very bad indeed.

CLERK

I don't mind trying to carry you up.

CALLER

No, that would be worse. My foot has to be kept on the ground.

CLERK

But how will you get home?

CALLER

I can walk all right on the flat.

CLERK

I'm afraid I have to be going on. It's rather later than I thought.

CALLER

But for goodness sake don't leave me. You can't leave me here like this without a hat.

CLERK

I'm afraid I must, it's later than I thought.

*(Exit)*

*[Enter the Poet.*

CALLER

Excuse me, sir. Excuse my stopping you. But I should be immensely obliged to you if you would do me a very great favor. I have unfortunately left my hat behind while calling at this house. It is half under the long sofa, at the far end. If you could possibly be so kind as to pretend you have come to tune the piano and fetch my hat for me I should be enormously grateful to you.

POET

But why cannot you get it for yourself?

CALLER

I cannot.



POET

If you would tell me the reason perhaps I could help you.

CALLER

I cannot. I can never enter that house again.

POET

If you have committed a murder, by all means tell me. I am not sufficiently interested in ethics to wish to have you hanged for it.

CALLER

Do I look like a murderer?

POET

No, of course not. I am only saying that you can safely trust me, for not only does the statute book and its penalties rather tend to bore me, but murder itself has always had a certain fascination for me. I write delicate and fastidious lyrics, yet, strange as it may appear, I read every murder trial, and my sympathies are always with the prisoner.

CALLER

But I tell you I am not a murderer.

POET

Then what have you done?

CALLER

I have quarrelled with a lady in that house and have sworn to join the Bosnians and die in Africa.

POET

But this is beautiful.

CALLER

Unfortunately I forgot my hat.

POET

You go to die for a hopeless love, and in a far country; it was the wont of the troubadours.

CALLER

But you will get my hat for me?

POET

That I will gladly do for you. But we must find an adequate reason for entering the house.

CALLER

You pretend to tune the piano.

POET

That, unfortunately, is impossible. The sound of a piano being unskilfully handled is to me what the continual drop of cold water on the same part of the head is said to be in countries where that interesting torture is practised. There is--

CALLER

But what are we to do?

POET

There is a house where kind friends of mine have given me that security and comfort that are a poet's necessity. But there was a

governess there and a piano. It is years and years since I was able even to see the faces of those friends without an inward shudder.

CALLER

Well, we'll have to think of something else.

POET

You are bringing back to these unhappy days the romance of an age of which the ballads tell us that kings sometimes fought in no other armor than their lady's nightshirt.

CALLER

Yes, but you know first of all I must get my *hat*.

POET

But why?

CALLER

I cannot possibly be seen in the streets without a hat.

POET

Why not?

CALLER

It can't be done.

POET

But you confuse externals with essentials.

CALLER

I don't know what you call essentials, but being decently dressed in London seems pretty essential to me.

POET

A hat is not one of the essential things of life.

CALLER

I don't want to appear rude, but my hat isn't quite like yours.

POET

Let us sit down and talk of things that matter, things that will be remembered after a hundred years. (*They sit*) Regarded in this light one sees at once the triviality of hats. But to die, and die beautifully for a hopeless love, that is a thing one could make a lyric about. That is the test of essential things--try and imagine them in a lyric. One could not write a lyric about a hat.

CALLER

I don't care whether you could write a lyric about my hat or whether you couldn't. All I know is that I am not going to make myself absolutely ridiculous by walking about in London without a hat. Will you get it for me or will you not?

POET

To take any part in the tuning of a piano is impossible to me.

CALLER

Well, pretend you've come to look at the radiator. They have one under the window, and I happen to know it leaks.

POET

I suppose it has an artistic decoration on it.

CALLER

Yes, I think so.

POET

Then I decline to look at it or to go near it. I know these decorations in cast iron. I once saw a pot-bellied Egyptian god, named Bes, and he was *meant* to be ugly, but he wasn't as ugly as these decorations that the twentieth century can make with machinery. What has a plumber got to do with art that he should dare to attempt decoration?

CALLER

Then you won't help me.

POET

I won't look at ugly things and I won't listen to ugly noises, but if you can think of any reasonable plan I don't mind helping you.

CALLER

I can think of nothing else. You don't look like a plumber or a clock-winder. I can think of nothing more. I have had a terrible ordeal and I am not in the condition to think calmly.

POET

Then you will have to leave your hat to its altered destiny.

CALLER

Why can't you think of a plan? If you're a poet, thinking's rather in your line.

POET

If I could bring my thoughts to contemplate so absurd a thing as a hat for any length of time no doubt I could think of a plan, but the very triviality of the theme seems to scare them away.

CALLER (*rising*)

Then I must get it myself.

POET

For Heaven's sake, don't do that! Think what it means!

CALLER

I know it will seem absurd, but not so absurd as walking through London without it.

POET

I don't mean that. But you will make it up. You will forgive each other, and you will marry her and have a family of noisy, pimply children like everyone else, and Romance will be dead. No, don't ring that bell. Go and buy a bayonet, or whatever one does buy, and join the Bosnians.

CALLER

I tell you I can't without a hat.

POET

What is a hat! Will you sacrifice for it a beautiful doom? Think of your bones, neglected and forgotten, lying forlornly because of hopeless love on endless golden sands. "Lying forlorn!" as Keats said. What a word! Forlorn in Africa. The careless Bedouins going past by day, at night the lion's roar, the grievous voice of the desert.

CALLER

As a matter of fact, I don't think you're right in speaking of it as desert. The Bosnians, I believe, are only taking it because it is supposed to be the most fertile land in the world.

POET

What of that? You will not be remembered by geography and statistics, but by golden-mouthed Romance. And that is how Romance sees Africa.

CALLER

Well, I'm going to get my hat.

POET

Think! Think! If you enter by that door you will never fall among the foremost Bosnians. You will never die in a far-off, lonely land to lie by immense Sahara. And she will never weep for your beautiful doom and call herself cruel in vain.

CALLER

Hark! She is playing the piano. It seems to me that she might be unhappy about it for years. I don't see much good in that.

POET

No. *I* will comfort her.

CALLER

I'm damned if you do! Look here! I don't mind saying, I'm damned if you do.

POET

Calm yourself. Calm yourself. I do not mean in that way.

CALLER

Then what on earth do you mean?

POET

I will make songs about your beautiful death, glad songs and sad songs. They shall be glad because they tell again the noble tradition of the troubadours, and sad because they tell of your sorrowful destiny and of your hopeless love.

I shall make legends also about your lonely bones, telling perhaps how some Arabian men, finding them in the desert by some oasis, memorable in war, wonder who loved them. And then as I read them to her, she weeps perhaps a little, and I read instead of the glory of the soldier, how it overtops our transitory--

CALLER

Look here, I'm not aware that you've ever been introduced to her.

POET

A trifle, a trifle.

CALLER

It seems to me that you're in rather an undue hurry for me to get a Jubu spear in me; but I'm going to get my hat first.

POET

I appeal to you. I appeal to you in the name of beautiful battles, high deeds, and lost causes; in the name of love-tales told to cruel maidens and told in vain. In the name of stricken hearts broken like beautiful harp-strings, I appeal to you.

I appeal in the ancient holy name of Romance: *do not ring that bell.*

*[Caller rings the bell.]*



POET (*sits down, abject*)

You will marry. You will sometimes take a ticket with your wife as far as Paris. Perhaps as far as Cannes. Then the family will come; a large sprawling family as far as the eye can see (I speak in hyperbole). You'll earn money and feed it and be like all the rest. No monument will ever be set up to your memory but--

[*Servant answers bell. Caller says something inaudible. Exit through door.*]

POET (*rising, lifting hand*)

But let there be graven in brass upon this house: Romance was born again here out of due time and died young. (*He sits down*)

[*Enter Laborer and Clerk with Policeman. The music stops.*]

POLICEMAN

Anything wrong here?

POET

Everything's wrong. They're going to kill Romance.

POLICEMAN (*to Laborer*)

This gentleman doesn't seem quite right somehow.

LABORER

They're none of them quite right to-day.

[*Music starts again.*]

POET

My God! It is a duet.

POLICEMAN

He seems a bit wrong somehow.

LABORER

You should 'a seen the other one.

CURTAIN