

The Man On The Kerb

BY ALFRED SUTRO
A DUOLOGUE

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

JOSEPH MATTHEWS MARY (HIS WIFE)

TIME--*The present*

SCENE--*Their home in the West End*

Produced at the Aldwych Theatre on March 24, 1908

THE MAN ON THE KERB

SCENE: *An underground room, bare of any furniture except two or three broken chairs, a tattered mattress on the stone floor and an old trunk. On a packing-chest are a few pots and pans and a kettle. A few sacks are spread over the floor, close to the empty grate; the walls are discoloured, with plentiful signs of damp oozing through. Close to the door, at back, is a window, looking on to the area; two of the panes are broken and stuffed with paper.*

On the mattress a child is sleeping, covered with a tattered old mantle; MARY is bending over her, crooning a song. The woman is still quite young, and must have been very pretty; but her cheeks are hollow and there are great circles round her eyes; her face is very pale and bloodless. Her dress is painfully worn and shabby, but displays pathetic attempts at neatness. The only light in the room comes from the street lamp on the pavement above.

JOE comes down the area steps, and enters. His clothes are of the familiar colourless, shapeless kind one sees at street corners; he would be a pleasant-looking young fellow enough were it not that his

face is abnormally lined, and pinched, and weather-beaten. He shambles in, with the intense weariness of a man who has for hours been forcing benumbed limbs to move; he shakes himself, on the threshold, dog-fashion, to get rid of the rain. MARY first makes sure that the child is asleep, then rises eagerly and goes to him. Her face falls as she notes his air of dejection.

MARY. [*Wistfully.*] Nothing, Joe?

JOE. Nothing. Not a farthing. Nothing.

[*MARY turns away and checks a moan.*]

JOE. Nothing at all. Same as yesterday--worse than yesterday--I *did* bring home a few coppers--And you?

MARY. A lady gave Minnie some food--

JOE. [*Heartily.*] Bless her for that!

MARY. Took her into the pastrycook's, Joe--

JOE. And the kiddie had a tuck-out? Thank God! And you?

MARY. Minnie managed to hide a great big bun for me.

JOE. The lady didn't give you anything?

MARY. Only a lecture, Joe, for bringing the child out on so bitter a day.

JOE. [*With a sour laugh, as he sits on a chair.*] Ho, ho! Always so ready with their lectures, aren't they? "Shouldn't beg, my man! Never give to beggars in the street!"--Look at me, I said to one of them. Feel my arm. Tap my chest. I tell you I'm starving, and they're starving at home.--"Never give to beggars in the street."

MARY. [*Laying a hand on his arm.*] Oh, Joe, you're wet!

JOE. It's been raining hard the last three hours--pouring. My stars, it's cold. Couldn't we raise a bit of fire, Mary?

MARY. With what, Joe?

JOE. [*After a look round, suddenly getting up, seizing a rickety chair by the wall, breaking off the legs.*] With this! Wonderful fine furniture they give you on the Hire System--so solid and substantial--as advertised. [*He breaks the flimsy thing up, as he speaks.*] And to think we paid for this muck, in the days we were human beings--paid about three times its value! And to think of the poor devils, poor devils like us, who sweated their life-blood out to make it--and of the blood-sucking devils who sold it and got fat on it--and now back it goes to the devil it came from, and we can at least get warm for a minute. [*He crams the wood into the grate.*] Got any paper, Mary?

MARY. [*Taking an old newspaper from the trunk.*] Here, Joe.

JOE. That will help to build up a fire. [*He glances at it, then lays it carefully underneath the wood. MARY gets lamp from table.*] The Daily Something or other--that tells the world what a happy people we are--how proud of belonging to an Empire on which the sun never sets. And I'd sell Gibraltar to-night for a sausage with mashed potatoes; and let Russia take India if some one would give me a clerkship at a pound a week.--There, in you go! A match, Mary?

MARY. [*Standing above JOE, handing him one.*] Ok Joe, be careful--we've only two left!

JOE. I'll be careful. Wait, though--I'll see whether there's a bit of tobacco still in my pipe. [*He fishes the pipe out of his pocket.*] A policeman who warned me away from the kerb gave me some tobacco. "Mustn't beg," he said. "Got a pipe? Well, here's some tobacco." I believe he'd have given me money. But it was the first kind word I had heard all day, and it choked me.--There's just a bit left at the bottom. [*He bustles.*] Now, first the fire. [*He puts the match to the paper--it kindles.*] And then my pipe. [*The fire burns up; he throws himself in front of it.*] Boo-o-oh, I'm sizzling.... I got so wet that I felt the water running into my lungs--my feet didn't seem to belong to me--and as for my head and nose! [*Yawns.*] Well, smoke's

good--by the powers, I'm getting warm--come closer to it, Mary. It's a little after midnight now--and I left home, this fine, luxurious British home, just as soon as it was light. And I've tramped the streets all day. Net result, a policeman gave me a pipeful of tobacco, I lunched off a bit of bread that I saw floating down the gutter--and I dined off the kitchen smell of the Café Royal. That's my day.

MARY. [*Stroking his hand.*] Poor boy, poor boy!

JOE. I stood for an hour in Leicester Square when the theatres emptied, thinking I might earn a copper, calling a cab, or something. There they were, all streaming out, happy and clean and warm--broughams and motor-cars--supper at the Savoy and the Carlton--and a hundred or two of us others in the gutter, hungry--looking at them. They went off to their supper--it was pouring, and I got soaked--and there I stood, dodging the policemen, dodging the horses' heads and the motors--and it was always--get away, you loafer, get away--get away--get away--

MARY. We've done nothing to deserve it, Joe--

JOE. [*With sudden fury.*] Deserve it! What have I ever done wrong! Wasn't *my* fault the firm went bankrupt and I couldn't get another job. I've a first-rate character--I'm respectable--what's the use? I want to work--they won't let me!

MARY. That illness of mine ate up all our savings. O Joe, I wish I had died!

JOE. And left me alone? That's not kind of you, Mary. How about Mrs. Willis? Is she worrying about the rent?

MARY. Well, she'd like to have it, of course--they're so dreadfully poor themselves--but she says she won't turn us out. And I'm going to-morrow to her daughter's upstairs--she makes matchboxes, you know--and I don't see why I shouldn't try--I could earn nearly a shilling a day.

JOE. A shilling a day! Princely! [*His pipe goes out. He takes a last puff at it, squints into it to make sure all the tobacco is gone, then lays*

it down with a sigh.] I reckon *I'll* try making 'em too. I went to the Vestry again, this morning, to see whether they'd take me as sweeper--but they've thirty names down, ahead of me. I've tried chopping wood, but I can't--I begin to cough the third stroke--there's something wrong with me inside, somewhere. I've tried every Institution on God's earth--and there are others before me, and there is no vacancy, and I mustn't beg, and I mustn't worry the gentlemen. A shilling a day--can one earn as much as that! Why, Mary, that will be fourteen shillings a week--an income! We'll do it!

MARY. It's not quite a shilling, Joe--you have to find your own paste and odds and ends. And of course it takes a few weeks to learn, before you begin to make any money.

JOE. [*Crestfallen.*] Does it though? And what are we going to do, those few weeks? I thought there was a catch in it, somewhere. [*He gets up and stretches himself.*] Well, here's a free-born Englishman, able to conduct correspondence in three languages, bookkeeping by double entry, twelve years' experience--and all he's allowed to do is to starve. [*He stretches himself again.*]

But in spite of all temptations To belong to other nations--

[*With sudden passion.*] God! I wish I were a Zulu!

MARY. [*Edging to him.*] Joe--

JOE. [*Turning.*] Well?

MARY. Joe, Joe, we've tried very hard, haven't we?

JOE. Tried! Is there a job in this world we'd refuse? Is there anything we'd turn up our nose at? Is there any chance we've neglected?

MARY. [*Stealing nervously to him and laying a hand on his arm.*] Joe--

JOE. [*Raising his head and looking at her.*] Yes--what is it? [*She stands timidly with downcast eyes.*] Well? Out with it, Mary!

MARY. [*Suddenly.*] It's this, Joe.

[*She goes feverishly to the mattress, and from underneath it she pulls out a big, fat purse which she hands him.*]

JOE. [*Staring.*] A purse!

MARY. [*Nodding.*] Yes.

JOE. You--

MARY. Found it.

JOE. [*Looking at her.*] Found?

MARY. [*Awkwardly.*] In a way I did--yes.

JOE. How?

MARY. It came on to rain, Joe--and I went into a Tube Station--and was standing by a bookstall, showing Minnie the illustrated papers--and an old lady bought one--and she took out her purse--this purse--and paid for it--and laid the purse on the board while she fumbled to pick up her skirts--and then some one spoke to her--a friend, I suppose--and--there were lots of people standing about--I don't know how it was--I was out in the street, with Minnie--

JOE. You had the purse?

MARY. Yes--

JOE. No one followed you?

MARY. No one. I couldn't run, as I had to carry Minnie.

JOE. What made you do it?

MARY. I don't know--something in me did it--She put the purse down just by the side of my hand--my fingers clutched it before I knew--and I was out in the street.

JOE. How much is there in it?

MARY. I haven't looked, Joe.

JOE. [*Wondering.*] You haven't looked?

MARY. No; I didn't dare.

JOE. [*Sorrowfully.*] I didn't think we'd come to this, Mary.

MARY. [*Desperately.*] We've got to do something. Before we can earn any money at making matchboxes we'll have to spend some weeks learning. And you've not had a decent meal for a month--nor have I. If there's money inside this purse you can get some clothes--and for me too--I need them! It's not as though the old lady would miss it--she's rich enough--her cloak was real sable--and no one can find us out--they can't tell one piece of money from the other. It's heavy, Joe--I think there's a lot inside.

JOE. [*Weighing it mechanically.*] Yes--it's heavy--

MARY. [*Eagerly.*] Open it, Joe.

JOE. [*Turning to her again.*] Why didn't you?

MARY. I just thought I'd wait--I'd an idea something might have happened; that some one might have stopped you in the street, some one with a heart--and that he'd have come in with you to-night--and seen us--seen Minnie--and said--"Well, here's money--I'll put you on your legs again"--And then we'd have given the purse back, Joe.

JOE. [*As he still mechanically balances it in his hand.*] Yes.

MARY. Can't go on like this, can we? You'll cough all night again, as you did yesterday--and the stuff they gave you at the Dispensary's no good. If you had clothes, you might get some sort of a job perhaps--you know you had to give up trying because you were so shabby.

JOE. They laugh at me.

MARY. [*With a glance at herself.*] And I'm really ashamed to walk through the streets--

JOE. I know--though I'm getting used to it. Besides, there's the kiddie. Let's have a look at her.

MARY. Be careful you don't wake her, Joe!

JOE. There's a fire.

MARY. She'll be hungry.

JOE. You said that she had some food?

MARY. That was at three o'clock. And little things aren't like us--they want their regular meals. Night after night she has been hungry, and I've had nothing to give her. That's why I took the purse.

JOE. [*Still holding it mechanically and staring at it.*] Yes. And, after all, why not?

MARY. We can get the poor little thing some warm clothes, some good food--

JOE. [*Under his breath.*] A thief's daughter.

[*Covers his face with his hands.*]

MARY. Joe!

JOE. Not nice, is it? Can't be helped, of course. And who cares? For three months this game has gone on--we getting shabbier, wretcheder, hungrier--no one bothers--all *they* say is "keep off the pavement." Let's see what's in the purse.

MARY. [*Eagerly.*] Yes, yes!

JOE. [*Lifting his head as he is on the point of opening the purse.*] That's the policeman passing.

MARY. [*Impatiently.*] Never mind that--

JOE. [*Turning to the purse again.*] First time in my life I've been afraid when I heard the policeman.

[*He has his finger on the catch of the purse when he pauses for a moment--then acting on a sudden impulse, makes a dart for the door, opens it, and is out, and up the area steps.*

MARY. [*With a despairing cry.*] Joe!

[*She flings herself on the mattress, and sobs silently, so as not to awaken, the child. JOE returns, hanging his head, dragging one foot before the other.*

MARY. [*Still sobbing, but trying to control herself.*] Why did you do that?

JOE. [*Humbly.*] I don't know--

MARY. You gave it to the policeman?

JOE. Yes.

MARY. What did you tell him?

JOE. That you had found it.

MARY. Where?

JOE. In a Tube Station. Picked it up because we were starving. That we hadn't opened it. And that we lived here, in this cellar.

MARY. [*With a little shake.*] I expect he'll keep it himself!

JOE. [*Miserably.*] Perhaps.

[*There is silence for a moment; she has ceased to cry; suddenly she raises herself violently on her elbow.*

MARY. You fool! You fool!

JOE. [*Pleading.*] Mary!

MARY. With your stupid ideas of honesty! What have they done for you, or me?

JOE. [*Dropping his head again.*] It's the kiddie, you know--her being a thief's daughter--

MARY. Is that worse than being the daughter of a pair of miserable beggars?

JOE. [*Under his breath.*] I suppose it is, somehow--

MARY. You'd rather she went hungry?

JOE. [*Despairingly.*] I don't know how it was--hearing his tramp up there--

MARY. You were afraid?

JOE. I don't want you taken to prison.

MARY. [*With a wail.*] I'll be taken to the graveyard soon, in a pauper's coffin!

JOE. [*Starts suddenly.*] Suppose we did that?

MARY. [*Staring.*] The workhouse?

JOE. Why not, after all? That's what it will come to, sooner or later.

MARY. They'd separate us.

JOE. At least you and the kiddie'd have food.

MARY. They'd separate us. And I love you, Joe. My poor, poor Joe! I love you.

[*She nestles up to him and takes his hand.*]

JOE. [*Holding her hand in his, and bending over her.*] You forgive me for returning the purse?

MARY. [*Dropping her head on his shoulder.*] Forgive you! You were right. It was the cold and the hunger maddened me. You were right!

JOE. [*Springing to his feet, with sudden passion. MARY staggers back.*] I wasn't right--I was a coward, a criminal--a vile and wicked fool.

MARY. [*Startled.*] Joe!

JOE. I had money there--money in my hand--money that you need so badly, you, the woman I love with all my ragged soul--money that would have put food into the body of my little girl--money that was mine, that belonged to me--and I've given it back, because of my rotten honesty! What right have I to be honest? They've made a dog of me--what business had I to remember I was a man?

MARY. [*Following him and laying a hand on his arm.*] Hush, Joe--you'll wake Minnie.

JOE. [*Turning and staring haggardly at her.*] I could have got clothes--a job, perhaps--we might have left this cellar. We could have gone out to-morrow and bought things--gone into shops--we might have had food, coal--

MARY. Don't, Joe--what's the use? And who knows--it may prove a blessing to us. You told the policeman where we lived?

JOE. A blessing! I'll get up to-morrow, after having coughed out my lungs all night--and I'll go into the streets and walk there from left to right and from right to left, standing at this corner and at that, peering into men's faces, watching people go to their shops and their offices, people who are warm and comfortable--and so it will go on, till the end comes.

MARY. [*Standing very close to him, almost in a whisper.*] Why not now, Joe?

JOE. [*With a startled glance at her.*] The end?

MARY. There's no room for us in this world--

JOE. If I'd taken that money--

MARY. It's too late for that now. And I'm glad you didn't--yes, I am--I'm glad. We'll go before God clean-handed. And we'll say to Him we didn't steal, or do anything He didn't want us too. And we'll tell Him we've died because people wouldn't allow us to live.

JOE. [*With a shudder.*] No. Not that--we'll wait, Mary. Don't speak of that.

MARY. [*Wistfully.*] You've thought of it too?

JOE. Thought of it! Don't, Mary, don't! It's bad enough, in the night, when I lie there and think of to-morrow! Something will happen--it must.

MARY. What? We haven't a friend in the world.

JOE. I may meet some one I used to know.

MARY. You've met them before--they always refuse--

JOE. [*Passionately.*] I've done nothing wrong--I haven't drunk or gambled--I can't help being only a clerk, and unable to do heavy work! I can't help my lungs being weak! I've a wife and a child, like other people--and all we ask is to be allowed to live!

MARY. [*Pleading.*] Let's give it up, Joe. Go away together, you'd sleep without coughing. Sleep, that's all. And God will be kinder than men.

JOE. [*Groaning.*] Don't, Mary--don't!

MARY. Joe, I can't stand it any longer--I can't. Not only myself--but Minnie--Joe, it's too much for me! I can't stand Minnie crying, and asking me for her breakfast, as she will in the morning. Joe, dear Joe, let there be no morning!

JOE. [*Completely overcome.*] Oh, Mary, Mary!

MARY. It's not *your* fault, dear--you've done what you could. Not *your* fault they won't let you work--you've tried hard enough. And no woman ever had a better husband than you've been to me. I love you, dear Joe. And let's do it--let's make an end. And take Minnie with us.

JOE. [*Springing up.*] Mary, I'll steal something to-morrow.

MARY. And they'd send you to prison. Besides, then God would be angry. Now we can go to Him and need not be ashamed. Let us, dear Joe--oh, do let us! I'm so tired!

JOE. No.

MARY. [*Sorrowfully.*] You won't?

JOE. [*Doggedly.*] No. We'll go to the workhouse.

MARY. You've seen them in there, haven't you?

JOE. Yes.

MARY. You've seen them standing at the window, staring at the world? And they'd take you away from me.

JOE. That's better than--

MARY. [*Firmly.*] I won't do it, Joe. I've been a good wife to you--I've been a good mother: and I love you, though I'm ragged and have pawned all my clothes; and I'll strangle myself rather than go to the workhouse and be shut away from you.

JOE. [*With a loud cry.*] No! I'll *make* them give me something; and if I *have* to kill, it shan't be my wife and child! To-morrow I'll come home with food and money--to-morrow--

[*There is a sudden wail from the child; JOE stops and stares at her; MARY goes quickly to the mattress and soothes the little girl.*]

MARY. Hush, dear, hush--no it's not morning yet, not time for breakfast. Go to sleep again, dear. Yes, daddy's come back, and things are going to be all right now--No, dear, you can't be hungry, really--remember those beautiful cakes. Go to sleep, Minnie, dear. You're cold? [*She takes off her ragged shawl and wraps it round the child.*] There, dear, you won't be cold now. Go to sleep, Minnie--

[*The child's wail dies away, as MARY soothes her back to sleep.*]

JOE. [*Staggering forward with a sudden cry.*] God, O God, give us bread!

THE CURTAIN SLOWLY FALLS