The Price of a Threat

BY ALEC BRUCE

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"MARIE! You are in trouble, Ma'amselle? Mon Dieu, your face, it is so white!" whispered Pierrot, stepping noiselessly toward her on the little sawdust circle before the performers' entrance.

On her downcast lashes he had noticed a tear-diamond sparkling bright as the spangles on her short, filmy skirt; and on her bosom, for a moment, he watched the twisted sapphire necklace glittering blue as it rose and fell in the blaze of light.

"Marie," he whispered again, "you are in trouble, grave trouble, Ma'amselle?"

"Oui, oui! I—I—am in trouble—grave trouble, Pierrot," she answered, brokenly.

"Ah, Ma'amselle, and you know not what to do; that is it?" he questioned quickly, and inviting confidence with his earnest, searching little eyes. "But, Marie—Ma'amselle," he muttered, stepping closer to her, so close that she felt the warmth of his breath on her cheek, "maybe—maybe Pierrot might know—if—if you would tell him, hey?"

"Ah, Pierrot, non!" she faltered, covering her face with her hands, "you—you could not, non, you—you—!" No other words would come. Her lips quivered; her eyes filled.

"Marie, Marie!" he urged, "maybe, I—I ah, you think not, hey?" and his broad breast swelled with a smothered love—a love that had known no utterance; for he was "Pierrot, the fool," a groom! And she? She was "Ma'amselle Mirabeau, premiere Equestrienne," in Barkalow's big circus ring.

Suddenly, ting-ting, ting-ting-ting!

"Ma'amselle, Ma'amselle," he whispered warmingly, "the first bell! You hear? Thirty minutes, and you go on. Just thirty, Marie!"

But still she did not answer.

"Ah, I am only Pierrot, Pierrot, the fool," he murmured, "and you—you will not tell a fool, Ma'amselle. No, no; why should you?"

"Pierrot!" From her tear-dimmed eyes she dropped two small, pink starfish hands and faced him. "Pierrot, 'a fool?' You said a fool!" she quavered. "Ah, to Ma'amselle you must not say so once again. I know you. A fool? Non, non! You say I will not tell you, I will not trust you, mon ami. Mon Dieu, leesten, leesten! That Hercules, the dead-weight lifter, bah!" and she shuddered violently. "Again, to-day, he say, 'Ma'amselle; you will marry me, oui?' Already, six times he haf said so. Oh, lala, how persistent! Ah, Pierrot, you do not know. And for answer I say, 'M'sieur, no—no. No—no—no!' Six times I say so, and of heem I think no more. But to-day—to-day, it is different, I am afraid. He look so black, so terrible when he say, 'Ma'amselle, you will marry me. No? Ah, no more trifling, I say, none at all. Gif me your answer. You haf till 7 o'clock to-night; that is all!' And Pierrot, number eight on the programme, oui, number eight, to-night's! Look at it, and—and you will understand!"

"Number eight, Ma'amselle, number eight on the programme, to-night's? I have one somewhere," he mumbled, searching doubtfully among the frilled yards of red, white and blue at his pockets. "Ah," at last with trembling fingers he unfolded the crushed, crimson sheet. "Hercules, Hercules, Hercules! The dead-weight lifter! To-night, to-night, to-night!" it read. "Head downward from a swinging trapeze twenty feet above the circus ring this world-wide champion will dangle in his teeth 100 pounds of solid steel. Is that all? No! we tell you, no! But see for yourselves the most marvelous sight ever seen. From a ring beneath the suspended weight he will hold fast the added burden of our premiere equestrienne; and backwards and forwards in mid air she will swing and hang until at length she drops, dancing and pirouetting on her galloping steed below."

"Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu!" muttered Pierrot, when he had read the bill, "I understand, I understand, Ma'amselle. To-night you must answer 'Oui,' or he will drop the dead-weight from his teeth when you hang below!"

"Pierrot, Pierrot!" she cried, "I cannot, I will not perform to-night! See—see—I tremble; I could not stand; I could not ride Comanche Bill. I must beg off. I am sick. I—I will tell the manager!"

"Ma'amselle! No, no, Ma'amselle, one moment, one moment!" cautioned Pierrot, detaining her, and pressing his hand against the crimson diamond on his forehead.

"But Pierrot, Pierrot," she insisted, "I must, I must, I—!"

"Non, non, Ma'amselle, you must not!" he whispered. "I have it, Pierrot has it!" And again he glanced intently at the programme. "Bien, bien, I have it! In number seven you ride Comanche Bill. Ride him, Ma'amsell. Pirouette! Jump! Jump through the drum; I hold it, Ma'amselle. Look, number seven, 'Mirabeau on Comanche.' Bah, beg off? Non, non, trust Pierrot. Have no fear. You will not swing from Hercules' weight!"

"But, Pierrot, how? How? You must tell me!"

Ting-ting—ting-ting-ting!

"Second bell, Ma'amselle," he interrupted, "second bell!" and grasping the curtains he peeped through the faded fringe. "Ah, the tiers, they are black with people, black, Ma'amselle! There is no time, no time to tell. Trust Pierrot, trust, trust!" And in a moment he was gone.

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Fifteen minutes later, with an angry scowl Hercules, the dead-weight lifter, raised the flap of the manager's tent and entered. "Sir," he announced, "my weight—m-my weight! It is stolen. Some prowlers, curse them! T—the last moment, too!"

"Stolen, stolen!" repeated the manager in his highest key. "By heavens, man, and we have 3000 unbelievers in that tent all waiting to see your act. We've posted 1000 bills; we've advertised it for a month. We've—we've—Hercules, what is to be done?"

"Well, sir," growled the champion, darkly, "it ain't my fault, no, sir! But there's one way out of it; one way, I think."

"What way?" snapped the manager.

"It's—it's the papier mache weight, sir; light as a feather. I—I used to practice with it," stammered Hercules. "But they—they wouldn't know it from the real thing, sir; not on your life! Git two of the grooms, Dan'l and Pete, sir; I know 'em well enough. They'll perspire an' purtend a bit when they bring it on. Savez the idee, hey? I reckon you do, sir; ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the manager, heartily. "Splendid, Hercules, splendid. I'll write to Barkalow. You get a bonus for this—he, ha! And we can stave off challenges for one night, eh? To-morrow we'll invite inspection. Very good, sir, v-very good, indeed!"

And so it was arranged.

Came at 8 o'clock dinging and dying amid railway siding sounds; and six items, like snow in a tropical sun, had melted from Barkalow's big wonder list. Comanche Bill, pink-nosed and piebald, with Mirabeau, was prancing around the mammoth ring. "Whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop-lah!" Crack! Through ribbon ring after ribbon ring the ma'amselle jumped, landing always fair, and dancing on her plush platform saddle. Suddenly, "Whoop, whoop." Swish! A tissue drum went into shreds and Pierrot stepped down from his pedestal and looked proudly at the lady. "Hurrah, hurrah!" The audience cheered and clapped their hands. "Well done, well done!" and ma'amselle bowed and dimpled through her mask of rouge.

But now it was number eight on the programme, and all eyes were focused on the performers' entrance.

"Hercules, Hercules!" The excited whisper gathered force and chased along and up and down the tiers. Jauntily the manager advanced and made a brief announcement. Two blue-coated, quick-action grooms spread out a brilliant carpet star; and two others, red-faced and with straining arms and shoulders doubled over, brought on the plaything of the giant.

"Ha!" In a moment he was there before them, smiling and bowing, a spangled vision in scarlet and gold, a miracle of physical strength and bigness. He stretched out his long, right arm; his left, too, and the muscles of them rose up like plaited whipcords. Then he breathed, and every man breathed with him. He broke a poker across his thigh and the cheers rang wild and deafening. He looked at the weight, at the trapeze above, at Ma'amselle with critical eye, and again the audience cheered. If before they had doubted the claims in number eight, it was evident, now, that they believed.

Mirabeau? White as chalk beneath her mask, she held her breath and glared from her steed at Pierrot. And Pierrot? Eyes bulging outward he transfixed the little trapdoor in the belting below the orchestra stand.

Suddenly the giant stepped before the weight and faced the high-priced seats. Above his head he raised his hands. "Once, twice, thrice!" On the third call he would swing and grasp and juggle with the dead weight as with a toy.

Click! Click!

Pierrot, and only Pierrot heard it. The violins and the flutes were murdering sound, and the clown's heart thumped his chest like a drumstick beating the time.

Click! Click!

Up went the trapdoor and a boy, a very little boy, hatless, but with a sun-crisped thatch of curly hair, struggled through the ring. For a moment he hesitated, blinking his big blue eyes in the glare of light. Then, quick as a flash he was over on the big carpet star.

"Pierrot, Pierrot," breathed Ma'amselle, squeezing the cold fingers resting on her saddle.

"Once, twice—once, twice—whoop-lah!" shouted Hercules, bending swiftly and throwing his mighty arms between his legs.

But the boy was first. In his tiny hand he grasped the weight, and hoisting it to his slender shoulder sped with it like a startled hare across the ring and out through the quivering curtains.

"Ah, ha! Ha, ha, ha!" It was one brief trickle of laughter accentuating the intense silence that followed; for, in the thrill of a flute it all happened and no one had attempted to stop him.

Rat, tat-tat!

"Now, all together!" commanded the leader of the orchestra, coming gallantly to the rescue, and a bunch of mandolins and violins ripped the air. But music had no charms for the outraged audience, and at last the storm broke. Loud, long and deep-voiced it raged; ribald laughter, shrill jeers, dark threats and hisses like the angry exhaust of steam.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!"

In vain did the manager attempt to stem the avalanche, but like a sick man's whisper against a battery cannonade his explanations and apologies melted on soundless lips.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, one minute and I will explain, I——!"

"You can't do it, you can't do it!" piped a thin, querulous voice.

"Tricksters! Swindlers! Money back! Money back! Boo for Barkalow!" chorused the galleries.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, I must tell you, I must tell you——!"

"Tell nuthin', nuthin' at all!" volleyed the leaders. "Square the deal at number eight an' screw out yer lights!"

"Gentlemen, order, order——!"

"Hiss, hiss, hiss-s-s! Square the deal at number eight!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen——!"

"Hiss, hiss, hiss-s——!"

And in the ticket office a few minutes later, though he knew it not, the manager was paying back the fabulous price of a threat.

DOCTOR THORNTON'S FAILURE

By Otho B. Senga

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DR. THORNTON, a successful specialist in serious ocular diseases, was puzzling over a most unusual case in which he felt baffled and dismayed. He wrote to the celebrated oculist, Dr. Forrest, describing the case, and asking for advice. The learned doctor approved the younger physician's diagnosis and made many valuable suggestions, urging a month's preliminary treatment to prepare the nervous system for the shock that would inevitably follow.

His letter closed: "But my dear Thornton, don't delude yourself or your patient. After infancy there isn't one chance in a million. Still, the fluid application, though painful, cannot harm—and there may be a miracle. Success would be a miracle, and you must prepare yourself and the patient for failure."

Thornton felt bound to read this to Miss Langdon. She was 23 or 24, and had been blind since early childhood.

Her face paled, but she spoke bravely. "Even the millionth chance is worth trying. Failure brings nothing that I do not already know."

Miss Langdon and her young brother Philip lived alone, except for the servants, in the great, gloomy mansion on the ancient Langdon estate, and during the month of "probation," as Thalia laughingly termed it, Thornton was a frequent caller.

From their first meeting Thornton had felt the charm of Thalia's presence. She had none of the pathetic pensiveness that is so often the accompaniment of blindness. She was winsomely bright and cheery, and her wit was like flashing steel.

After the necessary explanations were made the approaching experiment was not mentioned until the day came for the first trial. The application of the fluid used in the eyes was like pouring hot oil into an open wound, but Thalia made no sound nor uttered a word of protest.

As he bandaged the eyes Dr. Thornton said pityingly, "This must be borne twice more, Miss Langdon. Will your courage hold out?"

"It will be as nothing if I can only see," she whispered.

She was trembling violently, and Thornton was conscious of a sudden tumult of emotions such as he never before had experienced.

Before this he had thought solely of the fame he would win by success in a case so unusual. Now the thought of what the girl must endure was torture to him, and worse than that was the wretched uncertainty of the result. She was no longer a "case." She was the "one woman." He knew it!

"When this is over," he resolved, "I will tell her—if I succeed—"

When the bandages were removed a week later and the eyes submitted to the required test his heart sank, for he saw there was no apparent change. Thalia did not speak, but the unuttered question of her eager face and tense listening attitude struck a sharp pang through his heart.

"You know," he said gently, "that I can give you no assurance until I remove the bandage after the third application."

"It is only two weeks more," she sighed. "I can wait."

* * *

When the day came for the final test it was the man who was unnerved and pale. The girl to whom that day would bring the glorious boon of sight or the doom to hopeless darkness seemed endowed with a high, calm courage, that would have won the respect of a soldier.

When the eyes were free she neither moved nor spoke, nor gave a sign of any consciousness of change. With jaws set close and hard, lest he betray the awful fear that made him weak and faint, Thornton adjusted the testing instrument—a quick second of sickening suspense—then he laid it aside, and for a while neither spoke.

"I have failed, Miss Langdon," he said at last—"failed."

His voice was quite calm, but it was the calmness of despair.

Still Thalia did not speak.

He sank into a chair, and gazed despairingly upon the exquisite face. Was it fancy, a trick of his overwrought nerves—this clear light of love and tenderness that shone in the beautiful eyes and touched the tremulous lips with gladness?

"Thalia," he cried, springing to his feet, "you can see! You see me now. Tell me that you do! I cannot believe that you do not see my face as your eyes meet mine!"

The brave lips quivered, as she answered slowly and sadly, "No, Doctor Thornton, I cannot see. It is all just as it was before—night, black night!"

Thornton groaned aloud.

"There is no hope then, now or ever! I have failed—I have failed!"

The utter hopelessness of his despairing cry bore to Thalia's heart a bitterness deeper than her own sorrow. She rose from her seat as if she would go to him.

"Do not grieve so," the sweet voice said gently, "I do not mind so very much. And no one need know that you have failed—no one need know that you tried—"

"Don't, Thalia," he cried hoarsely, "you make me despise myself."

Then, at the sight of the pathetic figure, and the thought of the brave spirit that strove to forget its own hurt and to comfort him, the love he had meant to offer with success rose above the barrier of failure, and he came quickly to her side.

"Thalia," he whispered, "will you let me take care of you—always? Will you be my wife, Thalia?"

Her slight form trembled under the tender touch of his hand, but she did not speak. Instead, she put her delicate, sensitive fingers up to his face, and touched him gently on the eyes and chin and mouth. Thornton knew that she was reading his face with her fingers, as her eyes might have read it had sight been given her, and he held himself in firm control, fearing he might frighten her with his agony of love and longing.

The sweet flush faded from her face, she pushed him gently from her, and turned away, saying coldly, "You ask impossibilities, Doctor Thornton."

She called softly for Philip, and in obedience to her impassioned gesture her brother led her from the room.

"It is all over, dear Philip," she said in response to his anxious questioning. "I shall never see. Oh, don't, Philip—I don't mind. There are worse things than blindness!"

She sank wearily upon a couch, saying to herself bitterly, "I would rather my eyes were blind than to be so blind in the heart. Did he think a woman would be content with pity?"

Philip turned impetuously to the inner room. He could not believe that success had been withheld, that all hope was gone. How could Dr. Thornton—but the hot reproaches of his heart died upon his lips at the sight of the doctor, sitting with bowed shoulders, his face buried in his hands. Great, noiseless sobs shook his frame, but he raised his head and tried to smile as he said, "Don't mind me, Philip; and go away, please. You cannot understand."

But Philip did understand.

"You've killed him, Thalia," he cried tragically, rushing to his sister's side. "You might have known he couldn't help loving you!"

"No, Philip," said Thalia, sadly, "he only pities me because I am blind and because he cannot help me."

"Go in there now, Thalia," pleaded Philip, passionately, "and you will know. He seems like a man who has been stabbed, and to his death!"

His words and voice carried conviction. Thalia rose.

"Will you take me back to him, Philip?"

Thornton felt a gentle touch on his shoulder, and Thalia stood beside him, her beautiful face transfigured with love and gladness. The eyes of the soul had been opened, even though physical vision were still denied.

"I thought it was because you pitied me," she said softly, "and I did not want pity, I wanted—" She stopped and whispered a word in his ear, and John Thornton took her in his arms, with a heart too full for aught save silence.

A WILL AND A WAY

By Martha McC. Williams

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"I THINK there ought to be a law against making wills," Jean said half tearfully.

"So do I—almost," Aunt Mary answered with a little sigh.

Thereat Jean began to laugh, a whimsical, bubbling peal, good to hear.

"If it was any other time I shouldn't mind—not so very much," Aunt Mary protested. "I'm bound to say it for your father, my brother John, he's as peaceable as can be until he's crowded real hard. I know he wouldn't ever have gone out of his way to quarrel with Major Hymes—but knowing poor, old Uncle Jimmy Jackson as he did, he was bound to stand up for that will—it only said what the old man had told him over and over and over——"

"I know," Jean interrupted, then with a laugh: "I know, too, Aunty darling, you're distressed because I shall be left out of the Hymes party. I do want to go—dreadfully. Not so much on account of Rob Hymes himself, as to see who—all else is there—and what the Claytons will do to get a beau apiece——"

"H-m! I believe you'd like to have a few beaux yourself, miss," Aunt Mary retorted. Jean smiled and nodded.

"But I wouldn't go gunning for them, Clayton fashion—not if I grew to the wall. But they are bound to marry somehow—they have no money to speak of, and can't well do anything else."

"I wish you couldn't do anything else—may be then you wouldn't hold your head so high you never see me," somebody said through the open window. It was Rob Hymes, who had been eavesdropping these last three minutes. He went straight to Aunt Mary, kissed her handsomely, and patted her hand, then turned reproachful eyes on Jean.

"If you think mother and I mean to be drawn into this absurd quarrel, you clearly don't know the sort of folk we are. The case is just this—unless you say you'll come, there won't be any party——"

"Why, Rob, I'd love to—but how can I, with our fathers glaring and breathing out threatenings whenever they think of each other?" Jean wailed.

Rob snapped his fingers. "That for all their rows," he said. "I hate to seem wanting in respect to my elders and betters, neighborhood dignitaries, too—but Squire John Bascom and Henry Hymes are a pair of spoiled children in spite of gray hairs, and need to be disciplined accordingly."

"Who's going to do it?"

Rob dropped his eyes and answered meekly: "I propose to be a humble instrument in the hands of Divine Providence—and the Claytons."

Rob filliped them delicately, then went on: "We all know those old gentlemen have agreed ever since we two were born that we were born on purpose for each other. Indeed, my father thinks my main reason for being is to give him a chance of calling you daughter. To bring them to their senses, we must pretend not only to have taken up their quarrel, but that we are going to marry somebody else."

"You'll have an excellent chance to do it—if you say sweet things to Elsie Clayton," Jean said. "But it's different with me—I don't know a soul I would dare to propose to—"

"I know several who are simply dying for a chance to propose to you though," Rob said gallantly, playing pigs-went-to-market with her fingers. Aunt Mary tried to look scandalized, but ended by laughing heartily. Jean drew down the corners of her mouth, and pretended to sigh, asking: "Where shall I find them, Robby, dear? I am simply pining to say 'Yes!' and 'Thanky' to somebody."

"There's no time like the present—and you have never accepted me outright," Rob retorted. "But at the party you are to smile your sweetest on Ben Lloyd—and Ben only. I know it's pretty tough on him—but he has promised not to mind. Seeing he can't have you himself, he's ready to do a man's part to help you get me."

Then the three fell talking all at once. It was late afternoon when Rob went home, humming a love tune, and smiling as he rode along.

The Hymes party turned out to be far and away the grandest Hopewell neighborhood had ever seen. Notwithstanding, Major Hymes got up the morning after with a sense of aching loss. He sighed all through dressing, and at breakfast swore because there were no waffles, only biscuit, muffins and battercakes. At least he said that was the reason. Rob, with his eyes in his plate and a general air of dreams, smiled, and waited prudently for the storm to gather or blow over. But lightning struck him when he was least prepared for it. Midmeal his father turned square upon him, growling out: "Whereabouts in your travels did you leave your manners and your senses? I think you had better go back and try to find them."

"What's the row, governor?" Rob demanded innocently. The major exploded:

"That's what I'd like to know. There must be a row between you and Jean Bascom—last night you hardly were civil to her, but went tagging around after that Clayton creature."

"There's the Bascom temper—I'm afraid it's hereditary—besides, Elsie Clayton says she would permit the minister to leave obey in the marriage service," Rob began.

His father cut him short. "If matters have gone as far as that," he said, "just you listen to this. Unless you marry to suit me you'll find that my will ties up things as tight as that old simpleton, Jimmy Jackson, tried to tie up all he left——"

"Why, I thought you disbelieved in the will," Rob interrupted.

His father turned redder than ever, but went on, pounding the table hard between words. "Yes, sir, your wife must please me, or you'll have hard sledding. Elsie Clayton, indeed! Look at your mother, sir, and be properly ashamed of your taste."

"I have nothing against Jean Bascom," Rob began judicially. "But she is taken up with Ben Lloyd. Then, too, she evidently takes her father's side—just as I have taken yours——"

"Then you're a tool for your pains, sir," the Major fairly shouted. "Of course, she takes her father's side—that's the natural, the right thing for a woman. But you—if you were half a man, you would have shown her that you two had nothing to do with the case. You must be bewitched with the Clayton fried-egg eyes."

"Not particularly," Rob said, masking a laugh with a fit of coughing. "But I did make up to Jean—far enough to find out she would have nothing to say to me—not unless you apologized to the Squire, which I knew was out of the question."

"Indeed! You had better not know so much," Major Hymes said witheringly. "But if that's the hitch, why it's mighty easy straightened. Come along with me, sir! By George, it makes me think more than ever of Jean. If she sticks up this way for her father, what won't she do for a husband or a son?"

Five minutes afterward they were galloping together toward the Bascom place. As luck would have it, Squire Bascom met them just inside the gate. Major Hymes did not wait for a word of welcome—twenty yards off he roared out: "Say, John Bascom! I've come to beg your pardon, and ask you for your daughter. Give 'em to me—quick, else I'll be making a fool will for other folks to quarrel over."

"I reckon I've a right to ask your pardon, Major," Squire Bascom said, smiling and holding out his hand. "But the daughter—there you've got me where the wool's short—I can't speak for her."

"Oh! All we want is a chance to have her speak for herself," the Major answered.

Rob smiled to hear him. Down in his heart he knew what Jean would say.