

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT DIE

A mystery tale from a chapter of unwritten history

by

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I met him somewhere in the plains of the southwest. He owned a small saloon in a godforsaken town whose name escapes me. The year was 1903 and I was at that age when wanderlust fills the soul with a hunger for adventure and new horizons. As my father was a wealthy industrialist back East, I had the financial resources to live the life of a devil-may-care vagabond. So at age twenty-five I set out to discover the North American continent which had, only thirty-four years before, embroiled itself in a bloody nightmare known in the history books as the Civil War.

I headed west since the saying "go west young man" had not yet outlived its meaning. My journey took me through the peaceful cornfields of the Midwest and the wheat oceans of Kansas and Oklahoma. Three months of travel soon wore me out and the lack of real adventure and excitement was beginning to dry up my fantasies of what I would find.

But then it suddenly happened. As I crossed over into Oklahoma, a strange feeling came over me, like a flash of clairvoyance which I took at first to be the result of heat stroke. Whatever it was, I knew that if I kept heading south through the desolate prairies I would discover some great mystery. What I didn't realize was that the mystery would be in the shape of a man, a man who carried a dark and secret burden. When I finally reached the town, I headed straight for the hotel in great need of a bath and a soft bed.

As I approached the saloon, my attention was drawn by the echo of a voice, a magnificent voice reciting Shakespeare like no one I had ever heard. My father had taken me many times to the theater in New York where the very best actors of the day had thrilled us with their portrayal of the bard's immortal characters. Yet here, in this lost, sunbaked no man's land, I was overhearing Macbeth's soliloquy with a passion and flair that I had never heard before on any stage.

I quickly limped into the saloon, and as I was covered from head to foot with dust and sweat, I fit right in with the crowd. For a moment, I found myself completely blind. I stood in the dark saloon, surrounded by this voice which made my spine tingle with chills. I noticed my heartbeat increase with the troubling feeling that I was in some kind of deeply unsettling dream, the kind which, on waking, leaves you with the feeling of being hopelessly lost and confused.

As my eyes adjusted to the low light streaming in from small, dirty windows, I noticed a dozen cowboys sitting at tables playing cards and gulping hard liquor. In the far corner there were several fearsome men, some of them in Mexican clothing, all of them unshaven

and armed to the teeth. At the bar stood three women who were obviously prostitutes and looked as tough and uncouth as the men. In the midst of this motley, unclean, hard drinking crowd -- not one of whom had probably ever heard of England, let alone Shakespeare -- standing on the bar with incredible dramatic presence, was the man with that golden voice.

He was of medium height, no longer young, yet still strikingly handsome. His hair was curly and still jet black despite the deep wrinkles in his face. He sported a gallant mustach which gave him the look of a dandy and his manners were clearly those of a classical actor of the highest caliber. His presence was astonishing: the way he held himself, his graceful gestures, the smallest movement of his head, none of these were artificial or strained in any way. They revealed a certain kind of soul, a suffering soul. But it was his eyes that made the most stunning impression. I will never forget them. They radiated, in a most haunting way, the tortured nature of his spirit. Dark and melancholic, they seemed to shoot flames of fire into space, completely unaware of the grim surroundings.

The words he spoke with such unmatched skill were no longer Macbeth's. They were his own. I knew immediately that his life was somehow as stained as the Nordic king whom he was portraying for no one but himself. I had never before, nor since, witnessed a human being so consumed by the shadows of a dark past. Entranced by this unexpected and mystifying sight, I sat at one of the tables and watched the performance. I alone gave attention to the man standing on the bar. It was as though the two of us were in a different world separated by invisible walls and infinite space from those around us.

This was without question the most bizarre experience of my life and I had made it my ambition to place myself in unusual situations! Nothing compared to this. Outside, the tumbleweed scratched against the door and the wind sent desert sands whirling into the room. The people were motionless, as dry and silent as the oceans of prairie surrounding them. They were like statues placed on a stage to create the most outlandish mismatch conceivable. One of the Mexican banditos let out a loud burp. But the man reciting Shakespeare kept on, paying no attention to his uncouth audience.

Suddenly, a cold shiver shook my body from head to foot. His dark eyes fell upon me and locked into mine. They pierced into my very soul. There was such intensity in them, and such pain. With an old actor's flourish, the man spit out the Bard's poetry as though each word burned his innards.

"O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, A brother's murder. Pray can I not, Though inclination be as sharp as will. My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent, And like a man to double business bound I stand in pause where I shall first begin, And both neglect. What if this cursed hand Were thicker than itself with brother's blood, Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy But to confront the visage of offense? And what's in a prayer but this twofold force, To be forestalled ere we come to fall, Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up. My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer Can serve my turn? Forgive me my foul murder? O wretched state! O bosom black as death! O limed soul, that struggling to be free Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay."

During the soliloquy, the man took several swigs from the bottle and continued on without missing a beat. His eyes were aflame with the theatrics that make actors famous, but there was also something desperate about him. He was a man whose soul has been in agonizing pain for many years. His good looks were gone though a glimmer of his dignified poise remained.

The audience hardly noticed that he had finished his performance. He stared at them with disdain, taking another drink to smother the humiliation. The sound of one pair of hands clapping suddenly broke through the noise of the crowd. The strange actor interrupted his drinking and looked out into the shadows, surprised. Unable to help myself, I stood and continued to applaud, ignoring my neighbor's complaints.

The actor bowed with a sarcastic sneer and stumbled off the bar. He made his way to an empty table and collapsed in a chair. I decided to approach him.

"What are you looking at, boy?"

"Forgive me, sir. I...I didn't mean to..."

"Sit down and join me for a drink."

"Thank you, sir," I muttered nervously.

The man placed the bottle in the center of the table and looked around for a glass. Seeing none, he called to the bartender.

"A glass for my young friend, Smitty!"

"I'm fine, sir. I don't drink."

"You're joking. What kind of man doesn't indulge?"

"I like to keep a clear mind, sir."

The man suddenly became suspicious. I searched my pockets and pulled out a silver dollar. I was saving it for the next stage of my journey. I would have to wire my father from Tucson as San Francisco still lay far off. He poured himself a shot glass and lifted it to his lips. I noticed a slight tremble in his fingers as he threw it back and swallowed the liquor in one gulp. His face reddened as it burned a path to his stomach. The windburned features softened as a wave of release swept over him. It was clear to me that he had been seeking the temporary relief of that secret pain which ate at him relentlessly.

His aquiline nose bore the marks of too many shotglasses across too many years. Purple snake-like vessels marred a once noble nose. The eyes were forever bloodshot, hazy with melancholy and alcohol. This was the face of a broken spirit and though he could still roar his way through the golden verse of the great bard, his life after the performance was a tragic shambles heading in only one direction-- the grave. He turned his dark eyes upon me with a glare of anger.

"You're observing me, boy."

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, faltering beneath his condemning look.

"Observation is a good thing. Every artist must employ it. I've done it for a lifetime. But the observer is often one who does not like to be watched in turn."

"Are you a professional actor, sir?"

The gallant drunkard poured himself another shot and drank it as though he was in urgent need of putting out some hidden fire.

"I'll ask you what you are, son. You're surely no cowpoke."

"I'm wanting to be a writer," I said with pride.

"A writer?" he cried out as his eyes widened with interest. "What kind of a writer?"

"Well, I hope to work for a paper back East and then, someday, I'd like to pen a novel."

"That's good, that's very good. So you're out to see the world, to fetch your material?"

"I guess you could say that?"

"Full of curiosity, eh?" he said with a twinkle. I shook my head, uncertain as to whether this revelation would make him gunshy. He stared at me intently. His tired eyes took on a hawk-like glaze which must have once graced his youthful brow. He took the bottle in his hands with almost loving affection.

"I'll make a bargain with you, young man. You keep me stocked with this devil's brew and I'll give you a story the like of which you've never heard before."

I felt a shiver shoot through my entire body, as though I had discovered some mysterious treasure, some secret cave packed with wonders lost out here on the far side of untamed wilderness.

"Do we have an agreement?"

"You have my word."

"You must also swear on whatever is holy to you that you won't write a word until I'm dead, which can't be too far off now."

I nodded and studied his features more carefully. I could see that his face had the reddish puffiness of the hopeless drinker whose health has long been left behind and whose future is assured. Only the coffin nails would manage to separate him from his poison. But there was still enough of a shred of dignity left in his behavior to make him interesting. And there was still enough life in him to radiate the icy breeze of a desperate melancholy which would never be healed. Something dreadful had wrecked his life and left him a broken hull carried helplessly by the ocean waves of life.

After placing another silver dollar on the table as proof of my commitment to our agreement, he rose and adjusted the rags of a gentleman fallen on hard times.

"Let's take a walk, friend," he stated with a courteous but slurring voice. "This den of iniquity is too oppressive for my soul."

I followed him out into the hot sun, noticing a distinctive limp which had nothing to do with the alcohol he had imbibed. I wondered what story lay behind his crippled leg -- an old war wound perhaps? He was of the generation which had fought in that dreadful nightmare drifting over our country's recent past, the so-called Civil War. We stepped out into the afternoon sun. My head swirled as the brilliant desert light flooded my vision

My companion pulled out a large scarf of exotic design and color from his pocket and swiftly wrapped it around his head. Though I had never seen such a cloth, I recognized it as a creation from far off Asia. His skill in using it to protect himself against the merciless sun further convinced me that he had once lived in some foreign land. I walked alongside him down the dirt path which must have been considered Main Street in this desolate town. I didn't have the vaguest notion where we were headed, but I sensed that something of great import was about to be unveiled.

The mysterious gentleman limped toward the hotel, the only one within two hundred miles. It was named "the Grand Hotel" which was someone's idea of a joke since the building was as ordinary as the barns silhouetted on all corners of the horizon. My companion acknowledged the front desk clerk in a gesture that had long become habit. I followed him up a creaking stairway to his room. He threw open the door and turned to me for the first time since we had left the saloon.

"Welcome to my castle, Mylord!" He bowed theatrically and motioned for me to enter.

The room was barren with only a bed, desk, and chest of drawers to fill the emptiness. The walls were utterly denuded of any decor. A pale, yellowish paper hid the wood from the eye. Water stains spotted the room, along with the outline of frames which had once attempted to beautify this wretched space.

"Sit!" the old gentleman ordered, sending the one chair in the room over to me.

I sat as he pulled off his scarf and threw the window open. He stared out at the cloudless sky with the intensity of a ship captain peering out over a vast horizon.

"Soon..." he whispered. I wanted to ask him what he meant, but the tone of his voice had such an anguish to it that I restrained my curiosity. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly

"I killed a man once..."

A shiver shook me so that my hands involuntarily gripped the arms of the chair.

"Killed him while his back was to me!" His words carried a quiver of unspeakable guilt. I could no longer tell if I was breathing or not. "I never was much of a Bible thumper...But there's one thing I've come to know. I've got the curse of Cain on me!"

"The curse of Cain?" I asked, not being well read in the good book. "*Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground, and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth...*"

I sat in silence, feeling the weight of his great pain.

"I thought they'd call me a hero, boy," he stated slowly as he turned toward me. His eyes glistened with tears. "And look at me...A drunkard lost on the furthest edge of civilization!" He snickered strangely. "I was applauded by hundreds and hundreds of people once. You find that hard to believe, don't you?"

He took a step forward and held up his arms toward the cracks in the ceiling. "I was a prince of the stage! I was hailed as the greatest of my day!"

He turned a glazed look upon me. "I've died more times than I can remember on the stage. And now that I really want to die, I can't seem to be able to do it."

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to ease his pain but it was obviously far too late.

"I've wandered in lands you've never heard of, son. I've lived in places you wouldn't leave your dog in..." Then his voice lowered to a whisper. "I've been lonelier than the loneliest human being ever to walk upon this earth."

He pulled out a medicine vile from the desk drawer and opened it slowly.

"I have longed for this day...for nearly forty years. But I needed a witness...Someone to have pity on me..."

He emptied the vile in one swallow, made a terrible grimace, then looked at me with a strange peace in his melancholic eyes.

"You are that man...I beg of you, do not find me a doctor when the poison takes effect. For know that this is my punishment."

I jumped to my feet, horrified.

"My God, man, what have you done?"

"I have killed a man. A man named Abraham Lincoln...I am John Wilkes Booth!"

He slumped to the floor, grasping his sides as the poison burned his stomach. It would take three days for him to die. If there is a hell, he had found it long before meeting his Maker.