

## "Author! Author!"

By E. W. HORNUNG.



HIS story has to do with two men and a play, instead of a woman, and it is none of mine. I had it from an old gentleman I love: only he ought to have written it himself. This, however, he will never do; having known intimately in his young days one of the two men concerned. But I have his leave to repeat the story more or less as he told it—if I can. And I am going to him for my rebuke—when I dare.

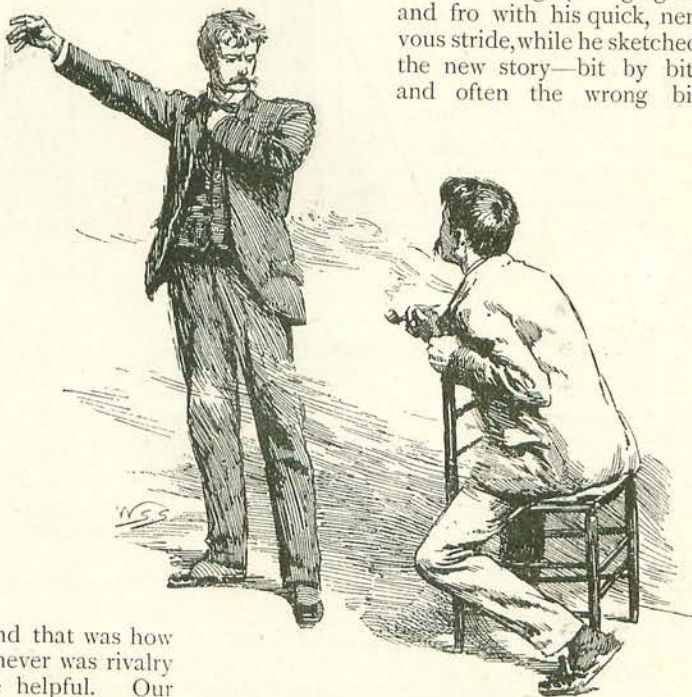
"You want to hear the story of poor old Pharazyn and his play? I'm now going to tell it you.

"Ah, well! My recollection of the matter dates from one summer's night at my old rooms in the Adelphi, when he spoilt my night's work by coming in flushed with an idea of his own. I remember banging the drawer into which I threw my papers to lock them away for the night; but in a few minutes I had forgotten my unfinished article, and was glad that Pharazyn had come. We were young writers, both of us; and, let me tell you, my good fellow, young writing wasn't in those days what it is now. I am thinking less of merit than of high prices, and less of high prices than of cheap notoriety. Neither of us had ever had our names before the public—not even in the advertised contents of an unread and unreadable magazine. No one cared about names in my day, save for the half-dozen great ones that were then among us; so Pharazyn's and mine never used to appear in the newspapers, though some of them used our stuff.

"In a manner we were rivals, for we were writing the same sort of thing for the same sort of publications, and that was how we had come together; but never was rivalry friendlier, or mutually more helpful. Our parts were strangely complementary; if I

could understand for the life of me the secret of collaboration, which has always been a mystery to me, I should say that I might have collaborated with Pharazyn almost ideally. I had the better of him in point of education, and would have turned single sentences against him for all he was worth; and I don't mind saying so, for there my superiority ended. When he had a story to tell, he told it with a swing and impetus which I coveted him, as well I might to this day; and if he was oftener without anything to write about, his ideas would pay twenty shillings in the pound, in strength and originality, where mine made some contemptible composition in pence. That is why I have been a failure at fiction—oh, yes, I have! That is why Pharazyn would have succeeded, if only he had stuck to plain ordinary narrative prose.

"The idea he was unable to keep within his own breast, on the evening of which I am telling you, was as new, and simple, and dramatic as any that ever intoxicated the soul of story-teller or made a brother author green with envy. I can see him now, as I watched him that night, flinging to and fro with his quick, nervous stride, while he sketched the new story—bit by bit, and often the wrong bit



"HE SKETCHED THE NEW STORY."  
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foremost; but all with his own flashing vividness, which makes me so sorry—so sorry whenever I think of it. At moments he would stand still before the chair on which I sat intent, and beat one hand upon the other, and look down at me with a grand, wondering smile, as though he himself could hardly believe what the gods had put into his head, or that the gift was real gold, it glittered so at first sight. On that point I could reassure him. My open jealousy made me admire soberly. But when he told me, quite suddenly, as though on an afterthought, that he meant to make a play of it and not a story, I had the solid satisfaction at that moment of calling him a fool.

“The ordinary author of my day, you see, had a certain timorous respect for the technique of the stage. It never occurred to us to make light of those literary conventions which it was not our business to understand. We were behind you fellows in every way. But Pharazyn was a sort of fore-runner: he said that any intelligent person could write a play, if he wanted to, and provided he could write at all. He said his story was a born play; and it was, in a way; but I told him I doubted whether he could train it up with his own hand to be a good acting one. I knew I was right. He had neither the experience nor the innate constructive faculty, one or other of which is absolutely necessary for the writing of possible plays. I implored him to turn the thing into a good dramatic novel, and so make his mark at one blow. But no; the fatal fit was on him, and I saw that it must run its course. Already he could see and hear his audience laughing and crying, so he said, and I daresay he could also feel the crinkle of crisp weekly receipts. I only know that we sat up all night over it, arguing and smoking and drinking

whisky until my windows overlooking the river caught the rising sun at an angle. Then I gave in. For poor old Pharazyn was more obstinate than ever, though he thanked me with the greatest good temper for my well-meant advice.

“‘And look here, my boy,’ says he, as he puts on his hat, ‘you shan’t hear another word about this till the play’s written; and you are to ask no questions. Is that a bargain? Very well, then. When I’ve finished it—down to the very last touches—you shall come and sit up all night with me, and I’ll read you every word. And by gad, old chap, if they give me a call the first night, and want a speech—and I see you sitting in your stall, like a blessed old fool as you are—by gad, sir, I’ll hold up you and your judgment to the ridicule of the house, so help me never!’

“Well, I am coming to that first night presently. Meanwhile, for the next six months, I saw very little of Pharazyn, and less still in the new year. He seldom came to my rooms now; when he did I could never get him to stay and sit up with me; and once when I climbed up to his garret (it was literally that), he would not answer me, though I could smell his pipe through the key-hole, in which he had turned the key. Yet he was perfectly friendly whenever we did meet.

He said he was working very hard, and indeed I could imagine it; his personal appearance, which he had never cherished, being even untidier, and I am obliged to add seedier, than of old. He continued to send me odd magazines in which his stuff happened to appear, or occasionally a proof for one’s opinion and suggestions; we had done this to each other

all along; but either I did not think about it, or somehow he led me to suppose that his things were more or less hot from the pen, whereas many of mine had been written a twelvemonth before one saw them in type. One way or another, I gathered that he was at



“I COULD SMELL HIS PIPE THROUGH THE KEYHOLE.”

work in our common groove, and had shelved, for the present at all events, his proposed play, about which you will remember I had undertaken to ask no questions.

"I was quite mistaken. One night in the following March he came to me with a haggard face, a beaming eye, and a stout, clean manuscript, which he brought down with a thud on my desk. It was the play he had sketched out to me eight or nine months before. I was horrified to hear he had been at work upon it alone from that night to this. He had written, so he said, during all this time, not another line, only each line of his play some ten times over.

"I recollect looking curiously at his shabby clothes, and then reminding him that it was at his place, not mine, I was to have heard him read the play: and how he confessed that he had no chair for me there—that his room was, in fact, three parts dismantled—that he had sacrificed everything to the play, which was worth it. I was extremely angry. I could have helped him so easily, independent as I was of the calling I loved to follow. But there was about him always an accursed, unnecessary independence, which has since struck me—and I think I may say so after all these years—as the mark of a rather humble, very honest origin.

"He read me the play, and I cried over the third act, and so did he. I thought then, and still think, that there was genius in that third act—it took you off your feet. And to me, certainly, it seemed as if the piece must act as well as it read, though indeed, as I took care to say and to repeat, my opinion was well-nigh valueless on that point. I only knew that I could see the thing playing itself, as I walked about the room (for this time I was the person who was too excited to sit still), and that was enough to make one sanguine. I became as enthusiastic about it as though the work were mine (which it never, never would or could have been), yet I was unable to suggest a single improvement, or to have so much as a finger-tip in the pie. Nor could I afterwards account for its invariable reception at the hands of managers, whose ways were then unknown to me. That night we talked only of one kind of reception. We were still talking when the sun came slanting up the river to my

windows; you could hardly see them for tobacco-smoke, and we had emptied a bottle of whisky to the success of Pharazyn's immortal play.

"Oh, those nights—those nights once in a way! God forgive me, but I'd sacrifice many things to be young again and feel clever, and to know the man who would sit up all night with me to rule the world over a bottle of honest grog. In the pale light of subsequent revelations I ought, perhaps, to recall such a night, with that particular companion, silently and in spiritual ashes. But it is ridiculous, in my opinion, to fit some sort of consequence to every little insulated act; nor will I ever admit that poor Pharazyn's ultimate failing was in any appreciable degree promoted or prepared for by those our youthful full-souled orgies. I know very well that afterwards, when his life was spent in waylaying those aforesaid managers, in cold passages, on stage doorsteps, or, in desperation, under the public portico on the street; and when a hundred snubs and subterfuges would culminate in the return of his manuscript, ragged but unread: I know, and I knew then, that the wreck who would dodge me in Fleet Street,



"HIS MANUSCRIPT RAGGED BUT UNREAD."

or cut me in the Strand, had taken to his glass more seriously and more steadily than a man should. But I am not sure that it matters much—*much*, you understand me—when that man's heart is broken.

"The last words I was ever to exchange with my poor old friend keep ringing in my head to this day, whenever I think of him; and I can repeat them every one. It was some few years after our intimacy had ceased, and when I only knew that he had degenerated into a Fleet Street loafer of the most dilapidated type, that I caught sight of him one day outside a theatre. It was the theatre which was for some years a goldmine to one Morton Morrison, of whom you may never have heard; but he was a public pet in his day, I can tell you, and his day was just then at its high noon. Well, there stood Phrazyn, with his hands in his pockets and a cutty-pipe sticking out between his ragged beard and moustache, and his shoulders against the pit door, so that for once he could not escape me. But he wouldn't take a hand out of his pocket to shake mine; and when I asked him how he was, without thinking, he laughed in my face, and it made me feel cruel. He was dreadfully emaciated, and almost in rags. And as I wondered what I ought to do, and what to say next, he gave a cough, and spat upon the pavement, and I could see the blood.

"I don't know what you would have done for him—but for all I knew what had brought him to this, I could think of nothing but a drink. It was mid-winter, and I tell you the man was in rags. I felt that if I could get him to a bar he might eat something, too, and that I should get a hold of him this time which I would never again let go. Judge of my surprise when he flatly refused to come with me even for a drink.

"Can't you see?' he said in his hollow voice. 'There'll be a crowd here directly, and I want the best seat in the pit—the best in the house. I've been going dry for it these two days, and I'm going dry till I've seen the piece. No, I've been here an hour already, and there's three hours more, I know; but I'm not going to risk it, thanks all the same.'

"By this I had remembered that Morton Morrison was to re-open that night with a new piece. Indeed, I ought not to have forgotten that, seeing that I had my order about me somewhere, and it meant a column from my pen between twelve and one that night. But this sudden, sorry meeting had put all other thoughts out of my head.

"My dear fellow,' I said, with a sort of laugh, 'are you a first-nighter, too?'

"Only at this theatre.'

"He looked me queerly in the face.

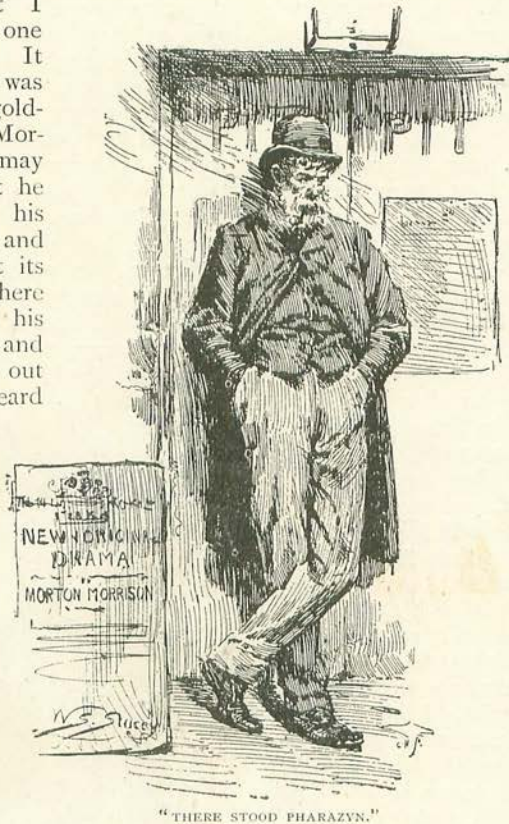
"You admire Morrison very much?'

"I love him!'

"I suppose my eyes thawed him, though God knows how hard I was trying not to hurt him with pitying looks. At all events he began to explain himself of his own accord, very impetuously; indeed I rather think the outburst was purely involuntary.

"Look here,' he said, with his hoarse voice lowered: 'I hoped never to see your face again. I hoped you'd never see mine. But now you are here, don't go this minute, and I'll tell you why I think so much of Morton Morrison. I don't know him, mind you—he doesn't know me from Adam—but once long ago I had something to do with him. And God bless him, but damn every other manager in London, for he was the only one of the lot that gave me a civil hearing and a kind word!'

"I knew what he was talking about, and



"THERE STOOD PHRAZYN."

he knew that I knew, for we had understood one another in the old days.

"I took it to him last of all," he went on, wiping his damp lips with his hand. "When I began hawking it about he was an unknown man; when his turn came he was here. He let me read it to him. Then he asked me to leave it with him for a week; and when I went back to him, he said what they had all said—that it would never act! But Morton Morrison said it nicely. And when he saw how it cut me up, into little bits, he got me to tell him all about everything; and then he persuaded me to burn the play, instead of ruining my life for it; and I burnt it in his dressing-room fire, but the ruin was too far gone to mend. I wrote that thing with my heart's blood—old man, you know I did! And none of them would think of it! My God! But Morrison was good about it—he's a good soul—and that's why you'll see me at every first night of his until the drink finishes its work."

"I had not followed him quite to the end. One thing had amazed me too much.

"You burnt your play," I could only murmur, "when it would have turned into such a novel! Surely you have some draft of it still?"

"I burnt the lot when I got home," Pharazyn replied; "and by-and-by I shall join 'em and burn too!"

"I had nothing to answer to that, and was, besides, tenacious of my point. 'I don't think much of the kindness that makes one man persuade another to burn his work and throw up the sponge,' said I, with a good deal of indignation, for I did feel wroth with that fellow Morrison—a bread-and-butter drawing-room actor, whose very vogue used to irritate me.

"Then what do you think of this?" asked Pharazyn, as he dipped a hand within his shabby coat, and cautiously unclenched it under my nose.

"Why, it's a five-pound note!"

"I know; but wasn't *that* kind, then?"

"So Morrison gave you this!" I exclaimed.

"Two or three persons had stopped to join us at the pit door, and Pharazyn hastily put the note back in his pocket. As he did so, his dreadfully shabby condition gave my heart a fresh cut.

"Are you never going to spend that?" I asked in a whisper; and in a whisper he answered:—

"Never! It is all my play has brought me—all. It was given me as a charity, but I took it as my earnings—my earnings for all the work and waiting, and blood and tears, that one thing cost me. Spend it? Not I! It will bury me as decently as I deserve."

"We could converse no more. And the presence of other people prevented me from giving him my overcoat, though I spoke of it into his ear, begging and imploring him to come away and take it while there was still time for him to slip back and get a seat in the front row. But he would not hear of it, and the way he refused reminded me of his old stubborn independence; all I got was a promise that he would have a bite with me after the performance. And so I left him in the frosty dusk, ill-clad and unkempt, with the new-lit lamp over the pit door shining down upon the haggard mask that had once been the eager, memorable face of my cleverest friend.



"WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS?"

"I saw him next the moment I entered the theatre that evening, and I nodded my head to him, which he rebuked with the

slightest shake of his own. So I looked no more at him before the play began, comprehending that he desired me not to do so. The temptation, however, was too strong to go on resisting, for while Pharazyn was in the very centre of the front row in the pit, I was at one end of the last row of the stalls; and I was very anxious about him, wanting to make sure that he was there and not going to escape me again, and nervous of having him out of my sight for five minutes together.

"Thus I know more about the gradual change which came over Pharazyn's poor face, as scene followed scene, than of the developments and merits of those scenes themselves. My mind was in any case running more on my lost friend than on the piece; but it was not till near the end of the first act that the growing oddity of his look first struck me.

"His eyebrows were raised; it was a look of incredulity chiefly; yet I could see nothing to impale for improbability in the play as far as it had gone. I was but lightly attending, for my own purposes, as you youngsters skim your betters for review; but thus far the situation struck me as at once feasible and promising. Also it seemed not a little familiar to me; I could not say why, for watching Pharazyn's face. And it was his face that told me at last, in the second act. By God, it was his own play!

"It was Pharazyn's play, superficially altered all through, nowhere substantially; but the only play for me, when I knew that, was being acted in the front row of the pit, and not on the stage, to which I had turned the side of my head. I watched my old friend's face writhe and work until it stiffened in a savage calm; and watching, I thought of the 'first night' he had pictured jovially in the old days, when the bare idea of the piece was bursting his soul; and thinking, I wondered whether it could add a drop to his bitterness to remember that too.

"Yet, through all my thoughts, I was listening, intently enough, now. And in the third act I heard the very words my friend had written: they had not meddled with his lines in the great scene which had moved us both to tears long ago in my rooms. And this I swear to, whether you believe it or no—that at the crisis of that scene, which was just as Pharazyn made it, the calm ferocity transfiguring his face died away all at once, and I saw it shining with the sweetest tears our eyes can

shed—the tears of an artist over his own work.

"And when the act was over he sat with his head on his hand for some minutes, drinking in the applause, as I well knew; then he left his seat and squeezed out on my side of the house, and I made sure he was coming to speak to me over the barrier; and I got up to speak to him; but he would not see me, but stood against the barrier with a mien as white and set as chiselled marble.

"What followed on the first fall of the curtain I shall relate as rapidly as it happened. Louder call for an author I never heard, and I turned my eyes to the stage in my intense curiosity to see who would come forward; for the piece had been brought out anonymously; and I divined that Morrison himself was about to father it. And so he did; but as the lie passed his lips, and in the interval before the applause—the tiny interval between flash and peal—the lie was given him in a roar of fury from my left; there fell a thud of feet at my side, and Pharazyn was over the barrier and bolting down the gangway towards the stage. I think he was near making a leap for the footlights and confronting Morrison on his own boards; but the orchestra came between, and the fiddlers rose in their places. Then he turned wildly to us pressmen, and I will say he had our ear, if not that of the whole house besides, for the few words he was allowed to utter.

"'Gentlemen!' he cried at the top of his voice—'Gentlemen, I'm one of you! I'm a writing man like yourselves, and I wrote this play that you've seen. That man never wrote it at all—I wrote it myself! That man has only altered it. I read it to him two years ago—two years ago, gentlemen! He kept it for a week, and then got me to burn it as rubbish—when he had made a copy of it! And he gave me this, gentlemen—he gave me this that I give him back!'

"It was a matter of only a few seconds, but not till my own last hour shall I forget Morrison's painted face on the stage, or that sweating white one beneath the boxes; or the fluttering from Pharazyn's poor fingers of the five-pound note he had treasured for two years; or the hush all over the house until the first hand was laid upon his dirty collar.

"'What!' he screamed, 'do none of you believe me? Will none of you stand by me—isn't there a man—not one man among you—?'

"And they threw him out with my name on his lips. And I followed, and floored a brute who was handling him roughly. And nothing happened to me—because of what happened to Pharazyn!"

The dear old boy sat silent, his grey head

stand him, Morrison kept his good name at least. And that play was his great success!"

I ventured gently to inquire what had happened to Pharazyn.

"He died in my arms," my old friend cried, throwing up his head with an oath



"HE GAVE ME THIS."

on his hand. Presently he went on, more to himself than to me: "What could I do? What proof had I? He had burnt them every one. And as long as the public would

and a tear. "He died in a few minutes, outside the theatre. I could hear them clapping after he was dead—clapping his piece."