

# His Second Self

**Real Dramas, #1**

**by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935**

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Illustration:

„Would you kindly tell me what this means, sir?”

THE hard-faced man with the thin, straggling beard and shaven upper lip glanced about him with a certain sour contempt. He had no approval for this frivolity. He lived by time and rule himself—he was partially shaven because his father and grandfather had been so before him; he wore an old-fashioned pepper-

and-salt suit for the same reason. So long as he could remember, he had dined every Sunday at one o'clock on cold beef and a cold suet-pudding. He had lived in the same house for sixty years with the same polished mahogany, the same hard, strong horsehair chairs, waited on practically by the same sour, hard servants. Year in and year out, he had travelled the same round to the same dingy office where he made the same money almost to a penny, keeping to the same faiths and prejudices. The dreary monotony of it had killed his wife, and with her the one touch of romance in his grey existence; it had driven his only daughter away (to his great anger and indignation), for he regarded his house off Keppel Street as the acme of luxury and refinement.

In his way, Samuel Burton was a type. It is a type happily getting rare now, but he was an individuality all the same. The man was rigidly just and fair according to his lights, cold and unfeeling and ready always to justify some hard deed with appropriate extracts from Holy Writ. That he was lonely and unhappy and miserable he did not dream. The knowledge would have astonished him. That there was a deep humanity under his hard grey exterior would have astonished him still more.

He had not gone deliberately to the charitable entertainment given by the Bloomsbury Thespian Society—he had been more or less drawn there by false pretences. By mistake he had found himself in the lesser hall instead of the greater one, and, having paid his half-crown, decided, in his characteristic way, to get the full benefit of it. A pretty girl dressed as a theatre attendant thrust a programme into his hand. He smiled sourly as he read it.

He had not been to a frivolous gathering like this for five-and-twenty years. For one brief month in the long ago he had tasted of these insidious joys. There were many reasons why he did not care to think of that period now. Had he kept clear of that, he would never have married, he would never have had a daughter to leave him in his old age. There was another side to the medal, but Samuel Burton never glanced at that. To do so was to doubt his own judgment.

The first item on the programme was a three-part comedy. It was a light and amusing little piece, and it pleased the audience immensely. Burton sat it out without the moving of a muscle. It seemed odd that people should laugh at that kind of thing. It wasn't a bit like life either. No woman would be such a fool as to cry because her young husband had pretended to forget her birthday. Everything in the little comedy depended on that. It seemed silly to Burton; it seemed absurd that a pleasant-looking girl by him should wipe her eyes as the curtain came down. Burton had no idea that he was watching a dainty little masterpiece of French comedy, written by a master of his craft, skilled in the art of blending laughter and tears. He could not recognise the human document. It was impossible for him to know that the people round him were feeling all the better for it. It was all a silly waste of time and money.

A few songs and sketches followed. Then the stage-manager came forward and made an announcement. He much regretted the impossibility of producing *A Novel Engagement*, as promised by the programme. Miss Vavasour, of the Comus Theatre, who had engaged to play the leading part, was too ill to appear. She had very kindly arranged for the void to be filled by sending at her own expense Mr. Vincent Brook and Miss Elsie Montgomery (his wife) and their child, in a sketch of

their own, called *We Two*. The performers were new to London audiences, but they had played with considerable success in the provinces, and Miss Vavasour hoped that the audience would feel that she had done rather better for them than would have been the case had she been in a condition to appear personally. The audience applauded charitably.

Samuel Burton had half a mind to get up and go out. He was rather inclined to be angry with himself for staying so long. He would have scornfully rejected the suggestion that he was interested—that, on the whole, he had enjoyed the last sketch. He was just a little startled on glancing down his programme to see that the name of the lady in *We Two* was Elsie Montgomery. That had been the name of his wife before her marriage. He recollected how his father used to scoff at her. The old man had always regarded her as a poor, frivolous creature. But the frivolity had not lasted long. A sensitive plant of that kind does not flourish in the atmosphere of horsehair chairs.

It was no more than a coincidence, of course. Burton had noticed that the theatrical people were fond of names full-flavoured and high-sounding. Still, he would just stay and see what this „Elsie Montgomery“ was like. The curtain went up presently on a dismal-looking low sitting-room in a lodging-house. A pale, slender, pretty woman in rusty black was arranging a few faded flowers in a jug. She hummed a gay air to herself as she stood back and contemplated her handiwork. The air ended on a jarring note, the tears came into her eyes. She dropped into a broken chair by the side of a deal table and covered her face with her hands. A burst of sobbing came from her heart. A thrill ran through the audience. Here was the real thing, the striking of the true pathetic note. Burton was stirred, in spite of himself. What was the matter with the woman?

She looked up again and dashed the tears from her eyes. The white face was full of defiance. Burton leant forward and grasped the arm of his chair tightly. He was looking into the face of the dead and gone Elsie Montgomery. He had seen his wife look just like that more than once. It had been her way when he had denied her some little harmless pleasure, some break in the monotony of her drab existence. Surely, imagination was playing tricks with him. It was no more than a chance likeness.

„If I felt certain,“ the woman said, „I would leave him to-night. But how do I know?“

Elsie’s voice! Elsie’s voice, beyond the shadow of a doubt. What was the meaning of it? Then gradually it all became plain to Samuel Burton. He was watching his own daughter. It was unkind of fate to play this shabby trick upon him. For five-and-twenty years he had not been in a place like this, and yet the very first time after so long an interval...

Somebody was asking him to sit down. He realised suddenly that he had risen to his feet. As he dropped into his seat again his face flushed. He took a grip of himself. Really, it was nothing more than a coincidence. His daughter had deliberately chosen her own way, and she must take the consequences of her act. She had married a shabby vagabond with her eyes open. She had foolishly supposed that the man she married had had the making of a great painter in him. There was money in art, of course, but not for Vincent Brook. He was still in the depths or obscurity.

Burton did not call this acting at all. It was probably the real thing. Doubtless this was the kind of house that Elsie had grown accustomed to. She looked as if she was frequently hard-pressed to get a meal. A little child of theirs, a tiny tot of a girl, came into the room. She was dressed in white, daintily and elegantly dressed, in painful contrast to the mother. Burton stirred again uneasily. This was his grandchild, he could remember Elsie something like that when she was a child, and she had stood at his knees and played with his watch-chain... What was the matter with his spectacles?

„Real good stuff, isn't it?“ a man by Burton's side murmured to his neighbour. „Really kind of Kitty Vavasour to stand down and give 'em a chance. Pity to see talent starving.“

„Is it as bad as that?“ the other man asked. „But what's the matter with Brook's painting?“

„Didn't you hear? Why, you haven't been to the Savage much lately. Poor beggar had trouble with his eyes. Just as he was getting on nicely, too. Doctor absolutely forbade him to touch a pencil for three years. Said he'd be all right at the end of that time. They had to do something, so they put up this sketch between them. Yes, the child is their own. They tell me she has a cold-hearted old brute of a father somewhere—sort of chap who lives for money. He turned her out when she married Brook, and as I told you before, they have been starving ever since. Kitty Vavasour got them this chance. Pretended that she was ill and couldn't turn up tonight.“

In an odd kind of way, Burton found himself echoing the speaker's sentiment. It seemed to him that he was somebody else seated in judgment on Samuel Burton's conduct. No doubt the man was a hard, cold, close-fisted individual. He had behaved exceedingly badly to his only child, whose one sin was that she married for love. He could see quite plainly now why Brook had not been successful. He was following the little play with careful attention. He even saw the drift of it before it was entirely plain to the rest of the audience, The half-blind Brooks was still deeply in love with his wife. He blamed himself deeply for bringing her to her present state of poverty and suffering. He did not say as much, but he showed by a score of little acts. At the same time he was cold and almost brutal in his manner, as if he were trying to force a quarrel on his wife. His idea was to make her leave him and go back to her own people. If he could kill her love for him, then his path in the future would be so much easier. Surely the audience were very stupid not to see this. Burton began to have quite a contempt for them. If folks had not a nice appreciation of these fine points, why then did they come to the theatre at all?

In a dim kind of way the heroine grasped what was passing in her husband's mind. The little child held them together by a silken thread; it was on the babyish things prattled by her at the moment of crisis that the situation became plain. Burton followed it all with an interest that was alert and painful. He sat there learning a lesson. Nothing of the kind had come into his life before. Of the nobility of sacrifice he had known nil. He seemed to see himself stripped of his garb of sham humanity, to be wandering through a crowd of angry eyes, naked and ashamed. He saw himself upon the stage—the figure of the stern father made up more or less in his own likeness coming there to take his daughter back again.

The audience hissed vigorously. And Burton found himself hissing there with a zest that was all his own. Something was the matter with his spectacles again. He saw the stage through a mist.

„A fine bit of realistic acting, Sir,“ his neighbour said.

Burton had nothing by way of reply. It was no acting so far as he was concerned. In a few brief moments he was learning the lesson of a lifetime. It was such love as this that Elsie Montgomery had brought to him. And he had coldly and deliberately turned his back upon it. And he had expected Elsie Montgomery's daughter to sit down to the drab atmosphere of Keppel Street and eventually marry a grey counterpart of himself, who only differed from him in the measure of his years! He thought of the horsehair chairs and the polished mahogany table and hated them with a whole-hearted intensity.

The fall of the curtain disturbed him. There was no tragedy. A timely bit of luck gave to the husband the independence that he craved for. It inclined him to throw off the mask and confess what he had done and why—it enabled him to refuse the suggestion of the father and show him the door with a passion that was slightly in the nature of an anticlimax, but apparently human enough to move the audience to a burst of enthusiastic applause...

Burton stumbled into the street. The touch of cold air on his face, the passing of feet brought him to his senses again. In that brief half-hour he had learned his lesson. But the facts remained. The time might come when Elsie and her child would be independent of him, but that was not yet. In the meantime they were starving. He would follow them.

„Would you kindly tell me what this means, Sir?“ Brook asked coldly. Burton put up his hand as if to ward off a blow.

„I have come to make peace,“ he said. „I have come to ask you to forgive me. I as a hard, practical business machine—now I am a lonely old man who realises that he has ruined his life by his own want of charity.

He did. He came at length to a narrow street where they lodged. He saw the sleeping child carried up the stairs in her father's arms, he saw the dry loaf and heel of cheese that represented a supper for the actor and his wife. As he looked in through the open doorway, he saw that Brook depended on his wife's eyes more than his own. He saw the child undressed and put to bed; he heard the old weary discussion as to the future. At the mention of his own name, he came forward.

„Would you kindly tell me what this means, Sir?“ Brook asked coldly.

Burton put his hands as if to ward off a blow.

„I have come to make peace,“ he said. „I have come to ask you to forgive me. An hour ago I was a hard, practical business machine; now I am a lonely old man who realises that he has ruined his life by his own want of charity. By accident I saw your little play to-night. By accident there came to me the lesson that I needed. I poisoned existence for my wife; I did my best for my daughter in the same direction. And, honestly, I thought that I was doing the right thing. I sat in that hall to-night and joined the audience in hissing and hooting at myself. This is a hard confession for a man of my age to make, but it has to be done.“

Elsie Brook rose to her feet and glanced timidly at her husband. He made no sign. Burton could read what was passing through his mind.

„I can understand,“ he said. „I dare say that I should feel as you do. But I want to help you if I can. I want to prove to you that your drawing of the father’s character is all wrong. And I want the child to stand at my knees as Elsie used to do. I’ll promise you that she shall find me a different man to the father Elsie remembers. Let us make the story complete, Brook—let us give it a happy ending. And you shall go away and nurse your eyesight, you shall have the best advice that money can buy, you shall make a name and fame for yourself, my boy. And if anybody tells me again that there is no moral lesson to be gained in the theatre, why—“

„Sit down and have some supper,“ Brook said drily.

„Let’s go out and buy it,“ Burton said unsteadily. „And after to-night—well, well, I won’t make any boast, but you shall see for yourselves that the world is worth living in, after all!“

