

Maurice Rowdon : Author and Philosopher

www.mauricerowdon.org

Hellebore the Clown

Excerpt 1

It was a hill in Sussex during the early spring of 1907, at dawn. A group of actors stood on the crest with Hellebore, while the others strolled down to a path which crossed the valley. On the right of the hill was the road leading back to London, and waiting there at this moment were the four hackney carriages belonging to the company. The coachmen were gathered round the first carriage polishing wine-glasses and putting them on a large silver tray.

Hellebore was wearing a black overcoat too big for him, and at his side, holding on to his trousers, stood a child of about ten years. They were both looking down into the valley, a few feet from the other actors. Hellebore had thrown part of his overcoat across the boy's shoulders.

The first morning wind was beginning to blow.

Hellebore spoke to the child, glancing down at him: "You were asleep, Edgar. We had to carry you down to the cab."

"Jeanne promised to wake me up, but she didn't, the bitch. Did you see her?" the child asked, pouting.

"No, I only saw the Irish girl. Jeanne was still asleep. How is she?"

"Oh, all right."

"How are things at Monty Brane's?"

The child became instantly excited and gripped Hellebore's trousers harder as he spoke, his eyes wide: "Two of the ponies got something wrong with them," he said. "They both went down together and they had to be shot."

Hellebore nodded, and they watched the valley below in silence. They stood close together, dreaming, while the actors behind them talked and stamped their feet. At the back of the hill was darkness, and before them was light, increasing now.

"Have you been watching Jeanne lately?" Hellebore asked the child.

"Yes, but I don't like trapeze work. She wants me to try, but I don't like the work."

"Well, they can't make you do it if you don't want to."

"Oh, Jeanne told me to tell you that people still talk about the Fins," said Edgar sleepily.

"Do they? I should never have thought so."

"What was the Fins?"

"Your mother and I used to do a turn together. Did you try those stunts I show you?"

"Yes, and I did them on my own."

"I'll come down and see you at it one day. I'll take you by surprise," Hellebore said.

"Are you going to take me away this summer?"

"Well, the show comes off in the first week of June,---I'll write Jeanne about it. Don't sweat on it."

The child was silent for a moment, then added: "I heard Jeanne say to Monty you're a rich man. Is it true?"

"Yes, I'm richer than those two rolled together. What were you doing listening?"

"I was next door. I heard them."

"Don't call Jeanne a bitch, either."

Hellebore put his arm round the child's shoulder and turned to a young actress standing near him.

"Hear what he called Jeanne?" he asked her.

“Oh, I expect he hears worse than that.”

“Down at Monty Brane’s, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Hellebore nodded. “They have to grow up early down there.”

“Has he started properly yet?” the actress asked.

“No, not till he’s turned fourteen. Then he’ll be like his dad.”

An actor came up from behind Hellebore and whispered to him: “Well, you can keep your dawns, Jack.”

Hellebore turned with a look of surprise, and laughed. “You’ll pull through,” he said.

“There’s some brandy coming.”

The coachman brought the silver tray and glasses to a stile at the foot of the hill, and when he saw them Hellebore walked down with the others. When the company was together again he filled the glasses with brandy and took the tray from one person to another.

While the carriages were being turned round they stood drinking in silence, watching the dawn come up. Hellebore bent down and gave Edgar a sip from his glass.

Excerpt 2

“He wrote you a letter I think, at the end of 1915 or in January 1916. It was to tell you he had joined the army and was embarking for France.

“Yes, I remember that one letter,” Hellebore replied.

“He thought you might disapprove of it, and he wrote the letter to find out.”

Hellebore was puzzled by this. “Disapprove of what?” he asked

“Disapprove of his having joined the army and volunteered for the western front.”

“Who was I to disapprove?”

“He had such a deep respect for you,” Sangson said. “He was anxious to have your good will.”

“Oh, he had that.”

“He tried to imagine your face as you read the letter. One minute he thought you’d disapprove and refuse to answer. Another minute he thought you’d be proud of him and that your answer had gone astray. Another minute you were preparing a surprise for him, a father’s surprise.”

“Did I not reply, then?”

“No. I think he put it down to the bad postal arrangements. They were bad at the time. It was a pity. You could have helped him, you see. You could have prevented his death.”

“How?”

“He wrote you many letters, you see, and you answered none of them. He should never have been allowed to go back to France. His nerve was gone. It was quite easy to see that from his letters. He knew it himself. He wrote you two letters from hospital and asked you to do your best for him, in just so many words.”