

FICTION

Percival Wilde

The Noble Lord

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE NOBLE LORD
A Comedy In One Act

By
PERCIVAL WILDE

The Noble Lord

CHARACTERS HE. SHE. PETERS.

THE NOBLE LORD

A secluded spot in the Maine woods in the neighborhood of a summer hotel. It is the middle of July. The trees are covered with foliage, a hot sun casts dancing shadows upon the mossy ground, and the air is full of the twittering of birds and the rustle of leaves. A winding path crosses from one side to the other, and near the center is a little clearing: the stump of a felled tree, with the lichen-covered trunk itself near it, and a patch of grassy turf. The eye cannot penetrate far through the riotously growing underbrush, but as one looks upwards, to the left, a thinning of foliage, allowing a glimpse of the sky, gives evidence of the near proximity of some small body of water.

As the curtain rises the scene is empty. There is only the song of birds, and the whisper of a gentle breeze. For a few seconds nothing else is heard. Then, suddenly, not far away, there is the sound of a splash, followed by the scream of a drowning woman, "Help! Help! Help!" There is a tremendous crashing through the underbrush, and another voice, very masculine, very English, shouts, "Where are you? Where are you?" Rather indefinitely the first speaker answers, "Here! Help! Help!" Another crashing through the underbrush, followed by a second splash, and presently, after a short pause, there enters upon the stage a tall, much bedraggled Englishman, bearing in his arms the motionless body of an extremely good-looking girl. Both of them are very wet, and a trail of water marks their progress across the scene. Reaching the clearing, the Englishman methodically deposits the girl on the ground, backs away a foot or so, and notices that his hands are wet. He reaches into a hip pocket and draws forth a handkerchief: the handkerchief is wetter than his hands. With a gesture of vexation he throws it away, and gives his attention to the girl. He looks at her quizzically; then, rather timidly, he kneels at her side, and lays his ear over her heart. He rises promptly with a satisfied nod, carefully removes his dripping coat, folds it neatly, and places it on the log. Again he kneels, this time with his knees on either side of the girl's head, and laboriously begins to apply the Sylvester method, counting audibly as he does so. At "ten" he stops wearily, pauses, and again applies his ear to her heart. The result is evidently pleasing, and after a few more Sylvester movements, he begins to vary the procedure by removing her shoes and alternately chafing her hands and feet. Presently she sighs deeply. For the third time he pauses to listen to her heart. Slowly and deliberately her left arm rises, to encircle his neck in a confiding clasp. He sits back on his haunches, politely surprised.

SHE. *(Faintly)* Mother! Mother, dear!

HE. Eh?

SHE. Mother, dear, I'm so glad----

HE. *(Interrupting energetically)* Really, I beg your pardon.

SHE. *(Continuing without a break)* I'm so glad you've come.

HE. Ah, yes. . . . Quite so.

SHE. Kiss me, mother.

HE. *(Trying to rise)* Eh?

(She does not release him.)

SHE. Kiss me, mother.

HE. But I'm not your mother.

SHE. *(Plaintively)* Won't you kiss me, mother?

HE. (*Looks around furtively. Then he obliges her.*)

SHE. Ah! That's so nice. (*She pauses. Shudders.*) Hold me close, mother, hold me close. I've had such a terrible dream!

HE. Good Heavens! You're not dreaming now. . . .

SHE. I dreamt--I dreamt-- (*He has raised her to a sitting position. She stops abruptly. Looks about.*) Where--where am I?

HE. (*Surprised*) Don't you know?

SHE. No.

HE. (*In a matter-of-fact tone*) We are about half a mile away from the Poland Springs Hotel, Poland Springs, Maine.

SHE. (*Vaguely*) Oh! (*She pauses.*) And you, how do you come here?

HE. Strolling.

SHE. Strolling?

HE. I reached the hotel this morning. It was hot--beastly hot. I went for a walk in the woods.

SHE. And then?

HE. I beg your pardon?

SHE. What happened then? How did we meet?

HE. Don't *you* know?

SHE. I remember nothing--I'm confused. (*She tries to get up, but sits on the log with a little exclamation.*) My shoes--where are my shoes?

HE. (*Fetching them*) Here they are.

SHE. Thank you. . . . (*She looks at them.*) Those aren't my shoes!

HE. (*Politely*) No?

SHE. They're wet.

HE. (*Nodding*) They would be.

SHE. But they're not mine.

HE. (*Shrugging his shoulders*) I found them on your feet.

SHE. (*Confused*) On my feet?

HE. Yes. . . . (*An afterthought*) One on each.

SHE. Oh! . . . (*She tries to put them on.*) I can't get them on.

HE. No?

SHE. Will you help me? (*He assists her; she feels her clothes and exclaims*): Oh!

HE. Did I hurt you?

SHE. (*Astonished*) My clothes are wet!

HE. (*Thoughtfully*) Yes.

SHE. How funny! (*Noticing him.*) And you--you're wet also!

HE. (*Nodding*) Soaked.

SHE. What a coincidence! How curious! How did it happen? (*She pauses.*) Oh, if I could only think! Think! (*He rises, and waits politely.*) Tell me: you must know.

HE. Well, I was strolling through the woods. I heard a splash

SHE. (*Interrupting*) A splash! Oh, don't say any more: I remember! That horrible lake! Horrible! It was so warm at the hotel: I had gone off to the woods. I was sitting at the edge of the lake--on a rock--reading. I must have been sleepy. I fell in.

HE. Then you screamed.

SHE. Yes: I was drowning! Drowning! I called for help!

HE. I heard you.

SHE. I sank--I sank, oh, miles and miles! It felt as if hands were trying to pull me down to the bottom! I screamed again--and then--then--I felt a strong arm around my waist--I was dizzy-- there was a roaring in my ears--I knew no more.

HE. (*Sympathetically*) Too bad, too bad.

SHE. And you--(*rising to her feet enthusiastically*)--you were the man who jumped in!

HE. (*Apologetically*) I was passing by.

SHE. You saved my life! Oh, how can I ever thank you? My hero! (*She throws her arms about his neck.*)

HE. That's all right. . . .

SHE. But it's not all right. I can never repay you! Never! Never! Not if I live to be a thousand years old! (*She kisses him.*)

HE. (*Calmly*) That's the second time.

SHE. The second time?

HE. (*Nodding*) I kissed you before.

SHE. Oh! (*Releasing him quickly.*) You didn't!

HE. Yes, I did.

SHE. While I was unconscious?

HE. Precisely.

SHE. Oh, how *could* you do such a thing? How could you?

HE. (*Taking up his coat*) It was by request. (*Takes cigarette case from pocket.*)

SHE. (*Incredulously*) I asked you?

HE. You said, "Mother! Mother! Kiss me!" (*Takes cigarette from case. Pleased to see that it is dry. Puts it between his lips.*)

SHE. I said *that*?

HE. They were your first words. (*Produces match-safe from trouser pocket.*)

SHE. But you didn't have to kiss me.

HE. No? (*Trying to strike a match. It is wet. So are the others.*)

SHE. You didn't have to!

HE. I tried to explain that I was not your mother, but you seemed to know better. *(He throws the cigarette away.)* You insisted. I couldn't help it.

SHE. *(After a pause, coquettishly)* What do you mean: you couldn't "help it"?

HE. *(Perfectly willing to flirt)* You know--*(He hesitates.)*

SHE. *(Encouragingly)* Yes?

HE. You're a pretty girl--a deucedly pretty girl.

SHE. Oh, no!

HE. But you are; honor bright!

SHE. You really think so?

HE. *(Nods)* There was no one around. It was the kind of an opportunity which does not present itself every day: life is so-- monotonous. And you didn't seem to object.

SHE. *(Coily)* I couldn't very well--not while I was unconscious.

HE. That's so. I am a man, with a man's tastes. And you begged me so hard--it was so inviting--well, I kissed you.

SHE. *(After a pause)* On the lips?

HE. Yes. On the lips.

SHE. *(After a pause)* How often?

HE. Eh?

SHE. How often did you kiss me?

HE. Only once.

SHE. Was that all?

HE. *(With a smile)* Why, it's hardly worth mentioning.

SHE. *(Going to him and taking his hands magnanimously)* Well, I forgive you.

HE. Thank you.

SHE. *(Invitingly)* Two kisses is not a great deal for saving my life.

HE. No?

SHE. I owe you much more than that!

HE. *(Standing motionless)* Really?

SHE. *(With her lips half an inch from his)* Really! *(A pause.)* Really! *(He does not kiss her. She gives it up. Sits on the log, drawing him to her side.)* You must tell me all about yourself. Just think: if it hadn't been for you, I would be at the bottom of the lake now. What a horrible tragedy that would have been: to die in such a way! . . . *(She pauses.)* It's natural that I should want to know something about the man who saved me from that. . . .

HE. *(With embarrassment)* I don't like to talk about myself----

SHE. *(Interrupting encouragingly)* You're still a young man, aren't you?

HE. Thirty-one.

SHE. (*Laying her hand on his*) Are you?

HE. (*Nodding*) Last November.

SHE. (*Lying with the insouciance of expertness*) I'm just twenty. (*He nods his head, without showing the least sign of disbelief.*) Eleven years between us.

HE. Just the right ages, aren't we?

SHE. (*Leaving her hand where it is*) Do you think so?

HE. Eleven years difference--ideal!

SHE. Ten and a half.

HE. Eh?

SHE. I was born in June.

HE. Oh, were you? (*Sagely.*) That's better yet.

SHE. Do you think so--Lord Brookfield?

HE. (*Surprised--or simulating it effectively.*) Eh?

SHE. Lord Brookfield?

HE. How on earth did you know it?

SHE. (*With a laugh*) Oh, I am not so stupid as all that!

HE. You recognized me?

SHE. No. I have never seen you.

HE. A photo?

SHE. No.

HE. Then how did you know? . . .

SHE. (*Interrupting*) Lord Brookfield is a well-known man. The papers said he was coming to the hotel. I knew every other guest----

HE. But three or four others arrived this morning.

SHE. Americans.

HE. Oh!

SHE. You are English. I could see that right away.

HE. (*After a pause*) How clever of you!

SHE. Oh, Lord Brookfield!

HE. And how curious that I should meet you in this way--informal, so to speak.

SHE. (*Laughing*) Odd, wasn't it? (*She rises.*) Ugh!--how my clothes are sticking to me!

HE. That's so. You had better change.

SHE. And you?

HE. I'm rather wet myself.

SHE. Will you take me back to the hotel?

HE. The sun is very hot here.

SHE. (*Instantly changing*) Oh, would you rather stay?

HE. (*Does not answer for a few seconds. Then, a little abruptly*) Tell me: can you swim?

SHE. (*Startled*) Eh?

HE. Can you swim?

SHE. Lord Brookfield! Of course I can't!

HE. That's curious.

SHE. Curious?

HE. Neither can I.

SHE. (*Staggered, but returning to the attack with magnificent self-possession*) Oh, but you swam splendidly! Clothes and all! All the way from the other side of the lake!

HE. Did I?

SHE. Of course you did! One plunge, and a few magnificent overhand strokes. . . . (*She notices his peculiar expression, and hesitates.*)

HE. (*Thoughtfully*) Plunge?

SHE. Why, certainly.

HE. (*Shaking his head*) I would have sworn I waded.

SHE. (*Laughing uneasily*) You are really too modest, Lord Brookfield.

HE. Let's see. (*He picks up his coat, and shakes it out.*) Of course, I might have swum, but--Ah! the water line comes only as far as the waist!

SHE. That means nothing.

HE. No? (*Feeling his head.*) If I had plunged, my hair would have been wet.

SHE. It dried in the sun.

HE. Ah, yes! But my cigarettes! (*Taking one from the case.*)

SHE. The case is waterproof.

HE. Still, the matches are wet. (*Producing the box from his trouser pocket, and trying to strike one.*) You see?

SHE. (*With a forced laugh*) Lord Brookfield, don't deny that you saved my life!

HE. That is what I am trying to do.

SHE. (*Frigidly*) I beg your pardon?

HE. I jumped in without thinking. It was the natural thing to do: I heard you scream for help. But the moment the water came to my waist I knew that if it went any deeper I should have to call for help also.

SHE. Well?

HE. I was spared that humiliation: the pond isn't over three feet deep in any place. And I waded the whole twenty feet

from one end to the other. . . . And I *can't* swim.

SHE. But I was drowning! Drowning!

HE. (*Politely*) Are you in the habit of drowning often?

SHE. (*Rising indignantly*) Lord Brookfield!

HE. I nearly forgot to mention----

SHE. What?

HE. That I saw you jump in.

SHE. Oh!

HE. It was pleasant while it lasted, wasn't it? And romantic!

Why, romantic doesn't begin to describe it! (*Imitating*)

"Mother, kiss me!"

SHE. Oh, how can you?

HE. Unconscious--helpless--and you didn't remember! Not even the shoes. That was clever--very clever! And the hands trying to pull you down to the bottom: that was the touch of genius! (*He pauses with a smile.*) Ah, well, I was willing to have a little fun. (*A man is heard whistling a popular song in the distance. He listens attentively.*)

SHE. (*After a pause*) You played with me--played with me. Oh, you're disgusting! Revolting! What a thing for a *man* to do! I thought---- (*She breaks off.*)

HE. (*Encouraging her to continue*) Yes?

SHE. Nothing. . . . (*Then, seeing no reason to restrain herself.*) I thought Lord Brookfield was a gentleman!

HE. Oh, but *I'm* not.

SHE. Not a gentleman?

HE. No. . . . I'm not Lord Brookfield.

SHE. *Not* Lord Brookfield?

HE. No.

SHE. Then who on earth are you?

HE. (*Sweetly*) I? I'm a friend of his.

SHE. A friend?

HE. A close friend--very close.

SHE. Who? Who?

HE. (*Leisurely*) I'm not related, you know, but I see a lot of him. We're thick--very thick.

SHE. (*un patiently*) Who are you?

HE. (*Simply*) I'm his valet.

SHE. (*Horried*) Oh! . . . And you kissed me! A valet! You dared kiss me!

HE. At your request.

SHE. (*Almost choking with rage*) But a valet! A valet!

HE. I'm a good valet. One of the best there is.

SHE. Your insolence! Oh! (*She seizes the handkerchief which he has left on the log, and wipes her mouth furiously.*)

HE. My handkerchief.

SHE. (*Throwing it to the ground*) Oh, you coward! You. . . . You (*She sits on the log, inarticulate with rage. The whistle is heard again.*)

HE. Listen to me.

SHE. I won't.

HE. (*Earnestly*) Listen to me.

SHE. I don't want to talk to you!

HE. I'll help you.

SHE. (*Rising*) I don't want your help.

HE. (*Bluntly*) Then you're silly.

SHE. (*Wheeling furiously*) How dare you---

HE. (*Interrupting*) I'll make a bargain with you.

SHE. (*Scornfully*) What dealings can there be between us?

HE. Did you hear the whistling a minute ago?

SHE. Well?

HE. (*With meaning*) That's Brookfield.

SHE. (*After a pause*) Well?

HE. The path leads here. He is following the path---

SHE. (*After still another pause*) Well?

HE. You and I might be very good friends----

SHE. (*Thoughtfully*) Oh, you mean---

HE. A valet is not paid very well---

SHE. No. . . . Still----

SHE. If anything comes of it----

SHE. (*Slowly*) Comes of what?

HE. You understand me. (*He pauses; smiles. Then, in a Mephistophelian manner*): Your clothes are still wet, aren't they?

SHE. (*With full comprehension*) Yes----

HE. Enough said! (*The whistle is heard, close at hand.*) Quick!

SHE. (*Going off*) You won't tell? (*He shakes his head.*) I'll remember you. (*She runs into the woods.*)

HE. (*Sits on the log, laughs heartily. He produces another cigarette, and tries in vain to light it. Then, as an atrocious little cockney enters whistling gaily, he addresses him sharply*) Peters!

PETERS. (*Surprised*) M'lord?

HE. Give me a light, Peters.

PETERS. Yes, m'lord. (*Produces match, etc.*)

HE. Thanks. (*He blows a few whiffs into the air. Then stops, and surveys PETERS thoughtfully.*) Peters, you're a brave man, aren't you?

PETERS. (*Modestly*) I am 'andy with me fists, m'lord.

HE. That's not quite what I mean, Peters. . . . (*He pauses.*) Peters, you have the making of a hero in you. Something tells me that you're going to have your chance.

(*There is a loud splash from the same direction as before, followed by screams of "Help! Help!"*)

PETERS. (*With excitement*) M'lord!

HE. (*Quietly*) Yes, Peters?

PETERS. Somebody's calling for 'elp, m'lord!

HE. Yes, Peters.

PETERS. Shall I go, m'lord?

HE. Yes, Peters. . . . Gallop!

And as

PETERS. (*Charges wildly into the shrubbery, shouting*): H'I'm coming! H'I'm coming!

THE CURTAIN FALLS