

FICTION

Percival Wilde

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# The Reckoning

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

The Reckoning  
A Play in One Act

By PERCIVAL WILDE

The Reckoning

**CHARACTERS THE BARBER. THE CUSTOMER.**

### **THE RECKONING**

*The scene is a barber shop. At the center is the chair, facing a mirror and washstand at the right. The tiled walls are sprinkled with the usual advertisements. At the rear, a door leads up to the street by a flight of two or three steps. A dock on the left wall indicates three.*

*At the rise of curtain, THE BARBER, a man of fifty, is discovered sharpening a razor, and whistling softly to himself. He finishes with the razor; seats himself in the chair, takes up a paper, and reads.*

*The door opens, and THE CUSTOMER, a flashily-dressed individual of forty-five, enters the shop.*

THE BARBER. *(Rising at once)* Good afternoon, sir.

THE CUSTOMER. *(Pulling out his watch)* That clock right?

THE BARBER. Yes, sir; Western Union time. Corrected every hour.

THE CUSTOMER. My watch has run down. *(He sets it.)* Now, I've got just five minutes to spare. Can you shave me in that time?

THE BARBER. Five minutes, sir? Easy! Easy!

THE CUSTOMER. All right. Go ahead. *(He takes off his hat and coat, and moves towards the chair.)*

THE BARBER. Your collar also, sir.

THE CUSTOMER. *(Smiling)* Fussy, aren't you?

THE BARBER. Well, sir, I try to do my work well.

THE CUSTOMER. *(Takes off tie and collar, putting his expensive scarf-pin in the edge of his vest, which he does not remove)* Satisfied now?

THE BARBER. Yes, sir Thank you, sir. *(He gets out sheet, towels, etc.)* In a hurry, sir?

THE CUSTOMER. Yes. Got to attend a meeting at three-ten.

THE BARBER. Oh! The auction up-stairs?

THE CUSTOMER. Yes. *(He glances at the clock.)* You'll have to cut it pretty fine.

THE BARBER. Don't worry, sir. There's lots of time.... From the country, sir?

THE CUSTOMER. *(Lighting a cigar)* Yes. Southerner.

THE BARBER. *(Fastening the sheet)* I thought so. I'm from the country myself.

THE CUSTOMER. What part?

THE BARBER. Oh, that would be difficult to say. You see, I've moved around so much that I'm neither a Southerner nor a Northerner. I'm just an American. *(He mixes the lather.)* I lived in a little town near Savannah for a year.

THE CUSTOMER. Did you? Why, so did I.

THE BARBER. Yes, indeed. I used to see you--quite frequently-- though you never came into my shop. Then I went to Philadelphia.

THE CUSTOMER. What year?

THE BARBER. Let me think. It was April, twelve years ago.

THE CUSTOMER. April, twelve years ago? *I went to Philadelphia the same month!*

THE BARBER. I saw you there, too, sir. *(He lets down the chair suddenly.)*

THE CUSTOMER. *(Startled)* What are you doing?

THE BARBER. I'm hurrying, sir.

THE CUSTOMER. Well, you needn't break my neck about it.

THE BARBER. No, sir. *(Lathering.)* From Philadelphia I went to Newark.

THE CUSTOMER. To Newark?

THE BARBER. And from Newark to Indianapolis.

THE CUSTOMER. *(Much surprised)* What?

THE BARBER. And then Muscatine--for a few months--and Chicago-- and Louisville.

THE CUSTOMER. Why, one would think you had been following me about! I've lived in every one of those places.

THE BARBER. Have you, sir? It's a little world, isn't it?

THE CUSTOMER. You've been a barber right along?

THE BARBER. I couldn't do anything else, sir. It's my trade.

THE CUSTOMER. *(Smiling)* Well, this is the first time you ever shaved me.

THE BARBER. Curious, isn't it? But it may be the last.

THE CUSTOMER. That's so. I'm going to leave town right after the auction.

THE BARBER. If I may ask, sir, where are you going?

THE CUSTOMER. I don't know yet. *(Jocularly.)* Are you going to follow me?

THE BARBER. Sooner or later, sir. It's going to be a long journey, isn't it?

THE CUSTOMER. What makes you think so?

THE BARBER. There's a long journey we all take--sooner or later. Eh?

THE CUSTOMER. A long journey? But you're wasting time, man!

THE BARBER. Am I, sir? *(He strolls to the clock; looks at it; returns.)* Fine weather we're having.

THE CUSTOMER. *(Impatiently)* Yes.

THE BARBER. Though a little more rain would be good for the crops.

THE CUSTOMER. Um.

THE BARBER. (*Very leisurely*) You know, sir, the young man who keeps the shoe store at the corner was saying as I trimmed his hair this morning--

THE CUSTOMER. (*Interrupting*) I don't care what he said! I want to get shaved!

THE BARBER. Yes, sir! Yes, sir! And--and the young lady who runs the news stand up-stairs--right next to the elevator, sir--she was saying that she had never--

THE CUSTOMER. (*Interrupting more violently*) I told you once I don't care what your friends were saying! I've got to be at that meeting at three-ten.

THE BARBER. Yes, sir.

THE CUSTOMER. My time is almost up. You'll have to hurry.

THE BARBER. (*Slapping on more lather*) Don't worry, sir. I always keep my promises. Why, I remember, sir, back in Savannah, when my poor daughter was alive, I promised--

THE CUSTOMER. (*Interrupting angrily*) I don't give a damn for your daughter!

THE BARBER. (*Mildly*) No, sir. I didn't think you did.

THE CUSTOMER. And your time is up.

THE BARBER. (*Beginning to shave*) Oh, no, sir! It hasn't begun.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Starting*) What do you mean?

THE BARBER. Don't do that again, sir! You don't know how near you came to cutting yourself!

THE CUSTOMER. You promised to finish with me in five minutes!

THE BARBER. No, sir, if you will allow me to contradict you, I did not.

THE CUSTOMER. You said you would shave me in five minutes.

THE BARBER. Yes, sir. *That* is correct.

THE CUSTOMER. And it's--

THE BARBER. Easy, sir, easy! The razor is sharp! (*Shaving.*) When I promised to shave you in five minutes, I didn't say anything about lathering. That takes several minutes by itself.

THE CUSTOMER. What?

THE BARBER. Now you've done it! (*He applies styptic to a cut on THE CUSTOMER's face.*) Smarts, doesn't it?

THE CUSTOMER. (*Furious*) You clumsy, awkward, conceited galoot!

THE BARBER. (*With sudden and overwhelming rage*) Don't talk to a gentleman like that! You cur! (*With a sudden resumption of his obsequious manner.*) I did it on purpose.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Gasping*) Wh-what do you mean?

THE BARBER. (*Respectfully*) You really mustn't accuse me of being clumsy, sir. I'm *not* clumsy. If I cut you, it was quite intentional--like this! (*Cutting him a second time.*)

THE CUSTOMER. Damnation! Are you crazy?

THE BARBER. (*Applying the styptic*) No, sir, I'm quite sane. (*THE CUSTOMER tries to sit up.*) Oh, don't do that, sir! Don't do that! My razor is *frightfully* sharp!

THE CUSTOMER. (*Panic-stricken*) I want to sit up!

THE BARBER. Don't try it while the razor is at your throat, sir.  
It is sure to be fatal.

THE CUSTOMER. Then take it away!

THE BARBER. Oh, no, no, no! When I am through shaving you--not before. Now take it easy, sir. Lie back quietly!  
Quietly! That's it.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Controlling himself with an effort, and putting his cigar in his mouth*) What are you going to do with me? What's this? A hold-up?

THE BARBER. What am I-- (*With a sudden access of rage.*) Take that filthy thing out of your mouth! (*He snatches the cigar, and throws it to the floor; continues obsequiously.*) What am I going to do with you, sir? Why, really, I haven't the slightest idea. Er--can't you suggest something?

THE CUSTOMER. (*Quickly and earnestly*) Listen to me. I must be at that meeting at once! I can't spare another minute. If I am not there before three-fifteen I will be ruined--do you understand me?--ruined!

THE BARBER. You needn't raise your voice, sir. My hearing is excellent. (*He lathers again, keeping the razor near THE CUSTOMER's throat.*)

THE CUSTOMER. (*Piteously*) Can't I convince you? I

THE BARBER. Oh, I believe you. Don't let that trouble you. In fact, I know all about the meeting. There's going to be an auction, and unless you bid, it will be all up with you.

THE CUSTOMER. Then you'll let me go there?

THE BARBER. I'm afraid I won't, sir.

THE CUSTOMER. But--

THE BARBER. If I may use your own words, sir, I don't give a damn about your meeting.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Angrily*) Who the devil do you think

THE BARBER. (*Interrupting him by running the lather brush into his mouth*) Oh, shut up! (*There is a pause.*)

THE CUSTOMER. I'll-I'll give you ten dollars to let me go.

THE BARBER. (*Acting as if he did not hear*) Beg pardon, sir?

THE CUSTOMER. (*Taking the scarf-pin from the edge of his vest.*)  
This scarf-pin--it's worth five hundred dollars--I'll give--

THE BARBER. (*Raises his hand to his ear, knocking the pin out of THE CUSTOMER's hand*) I don't hear well on this side. Try the other.

THE CUSTOMER. A thousand dollars! I'll give you a thousand dollars!

THE BARBER. I'm afraid it won't do, sir. You see, the young lady who runs the news stand up-stairs says--you won't interrupt me *this* time will you?--she says it's important to keep customers in sight. There's nothing so bad for trade as an empty shop.

THE CUSTOMER. Oh, have you no heart? It's almost too late now!  
Every second is worth a dollar to me!

THE BARBER. Well, sir, it will console you to know that my time is worth very little.

THE CUSTOMER. Please let me up! If I wait two minutes longer, I might as well shoot myself.

THE BARBER. I shan't object, sir.

THE CUSTOMER. Oh! Oh! Oh!

THE BARBER. So you are beginning to feel some regrets? I'm glad to see it. I always thought you'd regret sooner or later. (*Shaving.*) By the way, sir, haven't you recognized me yet?

THE CUSTOMER. *Recognized* you?

THE BARBER. Oh, I see. You thought I was just a lunatic. Well, I'm not. Look at me. Look at me closely.

THE CUSTOMER. I don't know you!

THE BARBER. No? Well, just say to yourself, "Twelve years ago this man's hair was not so gray. Twelve years ago this man's face didn't show so many lines of care. Twelve years ago this man lived--well, in a little town near Savannah, and--"

THE CUSTOMER. (*Beginning to recognize him*) You-you can't be--

THE BARBER. Say it.

THE CUSTOMER. Kilburn!

THE BARBER. Yes, Kilburn!

THE CUSTOMER. (*Hoarsely*) And you followed me about!

THE BARBER. For twelve years!

THE CUSTOMER. From town to town!

THE BARBER. I was never more than a week behind you.

THE CUSTOMER. (*With unutterable horror*) Good God!

THE BARBER. Yes, *God*. I used to think of Him a great deal, John. I used to ask Him why He never brought you into my shop.

THE CUSTOMER. Oh! Oh!

THE BARBER. But He brought you here at last, John! He brought you here at last! (*He pauses.*) For twelve mortal years I've been hoping for this day! Once, in Muscatine, you came in, but there was another man in the chair, and you wouldn't wait. Once, in Louisville, you crossed my threshold, looked at your watch, and walked out again. But sooner or later, John, I knew you'd walk into my shop, and sit down in my chair! That day has come! (*He looks into his eyes.*) You and I, John, the two of us, have a long account to settle, haven't we? *I've* been one of your creditors, too! And this is the reckoning, John! You're going to pay me--pay me in full--and you're going to pay me *now!*

THE CUSTOMER. What are you going to do?

THE BARBER. That's a hard question, John. I'd be justified in cutting your throat, wouldn't I?

THE CUSTOMER. It would be murder!

THE BARBER. Ugly word, isn't it?

THE CUSTOMER. Murder in the first degree!

THE BARBER. Oh, of course!

THE CUSTOMER. They'd get you as sure as fate!

THE BARBER. I wouldn't run away.

THE CUSTOMER. But, Kilburn, think what you are doing!

THE BARBER. I've been thinking about it for twelve years, John.

THE CUSTOMER. I'm on my back, helpless!

THE BARBER. You'd *run* if I let you up.

THE CUSTOMER. But give me a chance! Kilburn, give me--

THE BARBER. (*Interrupting*) No, John, you get no chance. You gave Jennie none. (*He pauses.*) She was just eighteen when you came to our town. She was only a child, John, only a child. Her mother was dead. I was all she had--and she was all I had. And I was trying to bring her up right--to make her the same kind of a woman her mother had been, if you know what that means.

THE CUSTOMER. I didn't--

THE BARBER. Don't tell me what you did and what you didn't! She loved you--and--and I trusted you. You were going to get married. You took her away with you--and you *didn't* marry her! Marriage? Why, you never thought of it! You couldn't get her any other way --you wanted her--and you got her! You didn't care about me, and you didn't care about her. She was a toy. She amused you, and when you were through with her, you flung her into the gutter! It makes me sick to think of it! (*He goes on more quietly.*) She came home six months later. How she got back all the way from where you'd taken her, I don't know--and I don't like to guess. And then--then--

THE CUSTOMER. I'll marry *her* now, Kilburn.

THE BARBER. You'll have to ask her about that.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Eagerly*) Well?

THE BARBER. In two minutes you'll be *able* to ask her.

THE CUSTOMER. What do you mean?

THE BARBER. She's dead, John--dead.

(*THE CUSTOMER groans. Then, suddenly, he tries to rise. THE BARBER places his hand over his forehead and eyes, and forces him back into the chair.*)

THE BARBER. Thirty seconds for your prayers, John!

THE CUSTOMER. Don't kill me, man! Don't kill me! I'm not fit to die! I'm not ready! A minute! Two minutes! I'm too young! Don't kill--

(*THE BARBER, still with his hand upon the other man's eyes, suddenly seizes a wet towel and strikes him across the throat with it. THE CUSTOMER faints. THE BARBER looks at him contemptuously; abruptly raises the chair to a sitting position; puts away the razor.*)

THE BARBER. So your nerve gave way, John? Your nerve gave way? (*He spreads the towel over THE CUSTOMER's face and roughly wipes away the lather.*)

THE CUSTOMER. (*Beginning to come to; faintly*) Where am I?

THE BARBER. You ought to be in hell, but I guess you're still on God's good earth.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Putting his hand to his throat*) You--you didn't kill me?

THE BARBER. No. I didn't.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Standing up*) And you could have!

THE BARBER. John, when you're just about to cross the river, when your eyes are beginning to glaze and your heart's about to stop beating, you won't be nearer death than you were a minute ago!

THE CUSTOMER. *Why* didn't you kill me?

THE BARBER. It wouldn't bring back Jennie, would it?

THE CUSTOMER. (*With a sneer*) Were you afraid?

THE BARBER. After I had been looking forward to it for twelve years? No.

THE CUSTOMER. Then why--

THE BARBER. (*Grimly*) You'll remember why! (*He helps him on with his coat.*) John, tell me: are fellows who are so brave with women always so cowardly when they deal with men? Or, (*breaking off, speaking slowly*), or, perhaps, was it on account of that meeting?

THE CUSTOMER. That meeting? Good Lord!

THE BARBER. Yes, the meeting.

THE CUSTOMER. (*Looking at the clock*) Twenty-five minutes past!  
I'm ruined! I'm ruined!

THE BARBER. (*Half to himself*) I didn't kill you, no! I left you your life, but I made it worthless! I broke you! I broke you!

THE CUSTOMER. (*Has crossed stealthily to the door*) Kilburn!

THE BARBER. (*Startled at the sudden change in his voice*) Yes?

THE CUSTOMER. (*Hysterically*) Thought I was a fool, did you?  
Thought I'd tell you the real time of the meeting?

THE BARBER. What do you mean?

THE CUSTOMER. (*Shrieking*) You ass! You idiot! The meeting doesn't begin till *three-thirty*!

THE BARBER. (*Calmly*) Is that all? Well, the clock (*pointing to it*) is half an hour slow.

**CURTAIN**