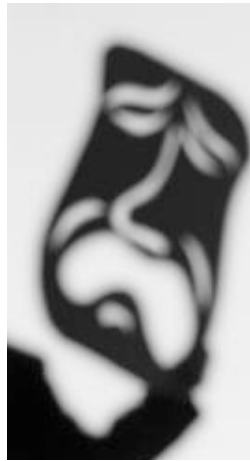


The Actors

by Constance McCutcheon



A dingy man came down the quiet road looking intently at the bordering houses and gardens. He didn't appear to belong: he was crusty looking and showing too much interest in the environs. Michael watched him surreptitiously but attentively from his own garden, wondering what the old guy might want. Michael was the only inhabitant visible in that peaceful loop of neighborhood. Everyone else was at work or shopping, he guessed. He couldn't believe how deserted his own neighborhood got on weekday afternoons. Michael, who was waiting for a contract that still hadn't come in, was not accustomed to spending weekday afternoons there. He couldn't say he liked it. At least it was a luxury he couldn't enjoy while waiting for something rather crucial which never came.

The stranger had the look of a disciple who had been wandering in the urban desert for four seasons with his leathery face and drab clothes; thick gray hair pulled sternly back; large dark eyes; broad, even mouth. A good face altogether. And ears he could have flown away with, if only he had known. On catching sight of Michael he perked up noticeably, clasped his hands involuntarily to his chest in a hopeful gesture, and hurried over to him.

"Excuse me, Sir," he said softly but without hesitation. "Do you have a coin or two you could spare? I'm so hungry ..."

“What would you like to eat?” Michael asked, glancing up into the taller man’s face as he tilted slightly to one side to reach down into his deep pocket.

“Oh! Maybe a piece of cake?” the man responded, taken off guard by the easy conquest.

“If you’re really hungry, don’t you think a beef dinner might be the thing?” Michael asked in mild reproof.

The man stepped back uncertainly.

Michael examined the coins in his hand. “I’ve got three pounds here.” He picked out the compact, hefty ones and handed them to him. Now he really did just have pence to dispense, he thought with ironic mirth as he slid the rest back into his pocket. “There’s a place along the pike opposite the petrol station, three-forty-two Trunk Road, if you know where that is.”

“That’s pretty exact,” the man said smiling. “I think I could find it.”

“They serve a pretty good dinner for three pounds. I know. I’ve had it myself.”

“Thank you,” the man sparkled. “Thank you very much. I ... this is ... well ...” He wanted to contribute, to show his gratitude in some way. “It’s so hard! You can’t imagine.”

“I can, actually,” Michael returned with matter-of-fact alacrity. “I’m out of work myself. That is, I assume you’re out of work.”

“Terrible!” The man clapped his hands to his head. “Things just keep happening! How do you stop it?”

“Things do keep happening,” Michael affirmed staunchly. “And it is hard to stop them. I have to agree with you there. What keeps happening to you?”

The man gave him a look of wide-eyed, profound sorrow. “Nothing.”

The answer elicited a curious, uncomfortable resonance in Michael he couldn’t explain. “That can’t be, can it? You were just saying things keep happening.”

“They do. Without me! It’s all flying around as if I weren’t there. Taking me apart. I can’t stop it.”

“Do you think it might be your perspective?” Michael asked.

“Yes, it’s my perspective!” the man cried vehemently, embarrassing Michael for making such a silly comment. “How can I change it? How? Nothing I’ve tried has worked. Nothing! I can’t connect.” He poked his finger into the air around him. “Everything happens like I wasn’t there. Hundreds of things, thousands of things, all the time, all around me, taking little bits of me away each time. Pretty soon there won’t be anything left of me, but I can’t stop it.”

“What have you tried?” Michael asked. The man was obviously not crazy. Maybe Michael could get a look inside this human catastrophe and find out what went wrong. Surely it had something to do with the man, which, in afterthought, did not console Michael. He was, after all, also a man, making choices about his livelihood each day based on limited knowledge and fallible judgment. And things were not going right for him at the moment. Of course, he had every reason to expect his future to be as productive and lucrative as his past, but the fact of the moment was the contract hadn’t come in, although his house payments continued, he had children to put through school and a wife to support who had very definite ideas about roasts and furnishings, children’s apparel and marble fireplaces. If everything did go wrong for him, Heaven forbid, there very probably stood the result. Except for the ears.

“I’ve made phone calls. I’ve answered ads in the paper. I’ve talked to people in the street. I’ve advertised myself.” The man looked Michael in the face. “And I was on the stage three times. At the Corner Pocket. You’ve heard of it?”

Michael shook his head.

“It’s over by the market.” The man turned and pointed vaguely. “On the corner.”

“I guess I figured that,” Michael said smiling, crossing his arms.

“I appeared on the stage three times but got nothing for it. Oh, a drink and a little something to eat, but the waitress got her hands on the money. I saw nothing of it.”

“So you’ve tried phone calls and answered ads,” Michael said. He had made phone calls and answered ads.

The man clapped his hands against his head. “It’s like talking into a hole in the ground. There’s never any answer. They don’t even bother to refuse me.”

Michael stared up at him, then down at the lawn. He had had that experience these past two months for the first time. Most unpleasant. Wait a minute. He was forgetting. He had gotten one answer, a curt one: No demand, the note had said, adding that they would keep his portfolio on file and ... had enclosed his portfolio. Getting that had been strangely unsavory. How can a person be in great demand for years, earning brilliantly, turning down jobs to fulfill other commitments, and then all of a sudden, *no demand*, with businesses, agencies, colleagues cutting him off as if his need for them were as arbitrary as theirs for him. “The fact that you exist doesn’t seem to matter, does it?” Michael commiserated. “I mean you could feel that way, couldn’t you?”

“Kick me, shove me, let me know you want me out of the way. But I can’t stand nothing!”

“Sounds like something Ma Rainey would sing.”

“Pardon me?”

“Never mind. Do you have a roof?” Michael asked intently.

“The rent has gone up three times since January.” It was early September.

“You have a place to stay, then,” Michael affirmed.

“Everything’s falling to bits. The towel rack’s come down. The doorknob wiggles.” The man grasped at the air with thumb and bent forefinger as if he were inserting a key and turning it back and forth.

“I don’t know how anyone manages who really is out on the street,” Michael mused darkly, “and aging. Unimaginable.”

“Sir, you’ve been so very kind to me. May I just ask you: What is it you do? That goes round and round and round in my head! I can’t figure it out! There are successful people all around here. Just look at these houses! Look at these gardens! Miles of them. A successful person in each one. What do you do that I’m not doing? I’m out every day. I talk to people. I’m ready. I’m willing. I’m available. Nobody wants me. Why not? No one has any use for me. How can that be? Is it me?” He clasped his hands to his chest. “Or am I just one too many?”

“What’s your profession, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I was a construction worker, but I appeared on the stage three times. At the—”

“Corner Pocket. By the market. You told me.”

“Sir, how much did your house cost? Three million? I’m sorry to ask, but I’d like to know. I really would. I’ve asked myself over and over and over! What do people do to be so successful? To have such a house! How much does it take? What do they do to get it? What?”

“Not quite so much.”

“What was that?” the man asked, hunching and staring down at Michael, a little disoriented.

“The house,” Michael said, turning a quarter turn towards it. “You asked how much it cost. It did not cost three million. It was less than a sixth of that if you’d be satisfied with that general answer. I really don’t like to say exactly. After all,” he added with a droll smile. “We are hoping it’s going up all the time, aren’t we?”

“What did you do to get a house like that?”

“Paid for it, most of it, a good portion of it, that is.”

“What do you do to be able to buy a house like that?” the man persisted.

“I’m a consultant for manufacturers.”

“What do you tell them?”

“It’s simple really,” Michael explained with a smile. “I just—”

“You wouldn’t ... you wouldn’t ...” the man interrupted him, almost trembling. For the first time Michael felt a chill and wanted to withdraw.

“You wouldn’t let me look inside, would you?” the man asked softly. “To see the inside of a house like that!”

Michael stood with legs firmly straddled, arms crossed over his chest, facing the man directly. He had a woman and children to protect. He couldn’t let two useless eyes sift through it all. Who could say what they would take with them? Michael could. Nothing at all. “I wouldn’t feel right about that, I’m afraid.”

“No, no. Of course not. Of course not. I didn’t mean to ask. I really didn’t. It’s just ... you’ve been so very kind to me. Talked to me. Looked at me!”

“I do wish you the best of luck, though, and success,” Michael emphasized, indicating it was time the man was on his way.

“Success,” the man whined musically with a humble, sad smile. “My fate is not success. It’s this.” He held up the three coins Michael had given him in a gesture of appreciation, but the timing made Michael feel sick. “I do thank you very much for your kindness.” He retreated back up the road, turned into the anonymous pike, and was gone.

“I said I didn’t feel quite right about it,” Michael told his wife at dinner that evening after relating the incident.

“Quite right.”

When Michael stared broodingly down at his napkin, she tried to console him: “You can’t have perfect strangers coming into the house. Who’s to say what he really wanted.”

“I can,” Michael said, looking up quickly. “To be on stage a fourth time.” He smiled ruefully. “Wouldn’t we all?”

The End