



A Struggle For Life, by Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

By Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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One morning as I was passing through Boston Common, which lies between my home and my office, I met a gentleman lounging along The Mall. I am generally preoccupied when walking, and often thread my way through crowded streets without distinctly observing any one. But this man's face forced itself upon me, and a singular face it was. His eyes were faded, and his hair, which he wore long, was flecked with gray. His hair and eyes, if I may say so, were sixty years old, the rest of him not thirty. The youthfulness of his figure, the elasticity of his gait, and the venerable appearance of his head were incongruities that drew more than one pair of curious eyes towards him. He excited in me the painful suspicion that he had got either somebody else's head or somebody else's body. He was evidently an American, at least so far as the upper part of him was concerned--the New England cut of countenance is unmistakable--evidently a man who had seen something of the world, but strangely young and old.

Before reaching the Park Street gate, I had taken up the thread of thought which he had unconsciously broken; yet throughout the day this old young man, with his unwrinkled brow and silvered locks, glided in like a phantom between me and my duties.

The next morning I again encountered him on The Mall. He was resting lazily on the green rails, watching two little sloops in distress, which two ragged ship-owners had consigned to the mimic perils of the Pond. The vessels lay becalmed in the middle of the ocean, displaying a tantalizing lack of sympathy with the frantic helplessness of the owners on shore. As the gentleman observed their dilemma, a light came into his faded eyes, then died out leaving them drearier than before. I wondered if he, too, in his time, had sent out ships that drifted and drifted and never came to port; and if these poor toys were to him types of his own losses.

"That man has a story, and I should like to know it," I said, half aloud, halting in one of those winding paths which branch off from the pastoral quietness of the Pond, and end in the rush and tumult of Tremont Street.

"Would you?" exclaimed a voice at my side. I turned and faced Mr. H-----, a neighbor of mine, who laughed heartily at finding me talking to myself. "Well," he added, reflectingly, "I can tell you this man's story; and if you will match the narrative with anything as curious, I shall be glad to hear it."

"You know him, then?"

"Yes and no. That is to say, I do not know him personally; but I know a singular passage in his life. I happened to be in Paris when he was buried."

"Buried!"

"Well, strictly speaking, not buried; but something quite like it. If you 've a spare half hour," continued my friend H-----, "we 'll sit on this bench, and I will tell you all I know of an affair that made some noise in Paris a couple of years ago. The gentleman himself, standing yonder, will serve as a sort of frontispiece to the romance--a full-page illustration, as it were."

The following pages contain the story Which Mr. H----- related to me. While he was telling it, a gentle wind arose; the miniature sloops drifted feebly about the ocean; the wretched owners flew from point to point, as the deceptive breeze promised to waft the barks to either shore; the early robins trilled now and then from the newly fringed elms; and the old young man leaned on the rail in the sunshine, little dreaming that two gossips were discussing his affairs within twenty yards of him.

Three persons were sitting in a *salon* whose one large window overlooked the Place Vendôme. M. Dorine,

with his back half turned on the other two occupants of the apartment, was reading the *Journal des Débats* in an alcove, pausing from time to time to wipe his glasses, and taking scrupulous pains not to glance towards the lounge at his right, on which were seated Mile. Dorine and a young American gentleman, whose handsome face rather frankly told his position in the family. There was not a happier man in Paris that afternoon than Philip Wentworth. Life had become so delicious to him that he shrunk from looking beyond to-day. What could the future add to his full heart, what might it not take away? The deepest joy has always something of melancholy in it--a presentiment, a fleeting sadness, a feeling without a name. Wentworth was conscious of this subtle shadow that night, when he rose from the lounge and thoughtfully held Julie's hand to his lip for a moment before parting. A careless observer would not have thought him, as he was, the happiest man in Paris.

M. Dorine laid down his paper, and came forward. "If the house," he said, "is such as M. Cherbonneau describes it, I advise you to close with him at once. I would accompany you, Philip, but the truth is, I am too sad at losing this little bird to assist you in selecting a cage for her. Remember, the last train for town leaves at five. Be sure not to miss it; for we have seats for Sardou's new comedy to-morrow night. By to-morrow night," he added laughingly, "little Julie here will be an old lady--it is such an age from now until then."

The next morning the train bore Philip to one of the loveliest spots within thirty miles of Paris. An hour's walk through green lanes brought him to M. Cherbonneau's estate. In a kind of dream the young man wandered from room to room, inspected the conservatory, the stables, the lawns, the strip of woodland through which a merry brook sang to itself continually, and, after dining with M. Cherbonneau, completed the purchase, and turned his steps towards the station just in time to catch the express train.

As Paris stretched out before him, with its lights twinkling in the early dusk, and its spires and domes melting into the evening air, it seemed to Philip as if years had elapsed since he left the city. On reaching Paris he drove to his hôtel, where he found several letters lying on the table. He did not trouble himself even to glance at their superscriptions as he threw aside his travelling surtout for a more appropriate dress.

If, in his impatience to return to Mile. Dorine, the cars had appeared to walk, the fiacre, which he had secured at the station appeared to creep. At last it turned into the Place Vendôme, and drew up before M. Dorine's hôtel. The door opened as Philip's foot touched the first step. The valet silently took his cloak and hat, with a special deference, Philip thought; but was he not now one of the family?

"M. Dorine," said the servant slowly, "is unable to see Monsieur at present. He wishes Monsieur to be shown up to the salon."

"Is Mademoiselle"--

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Alone?"

"Alone, Monsieur," repeated the man, looking curiously at Philip, who could scarcely repress an exclamation of pleasure.

It was the first time that such a privilege had been accorded him. His interviews with Julie had always taken place in the presence of M. Dorine, or some member of the household. A well-bred Parisian girl has but a formal acquaintance with her lover.

Philip did not linger on the staircase; with a light heart, he went up the steps, two at a time, hastened through the softly lighted hall, in which he detected the faint scent of her favorite flowers, and stealthily opened the door of the salon.

The room was darkened. Underneath the chandelier stood a slim black casket on trestles. A lighted candle, a crucifix, and some white flowers were on a table near by. Julie Dorine was dead.

When M. Dorine heard the sudden cry that rang through the silent house, he hurried from the library, and found Philip standing like a ghost in the middle of the chamber.

It was not until long afterwards that Wentworth learned the details of the calamity that had befallen him. On the previous night Mile. Dorine had retired to her room in seemingly perfect health, and had dismissed her maid with a request to be awakened early the next morning. At the appointed hour the girl entered the chamber. Mile. Dorine was sitting in an arm-chair, apparently asleep. The candle in the *bougeoir* had burnt down to the socket; a book lay half open on the carpet at her feet. The girl started when she saw that the bed had not been occupied, and that her mistress still wore an evening dress. She rushed to Mile. Dorine's side. It was not slumber; it was death.

Two messages were at once despatched to Philip, one to the station at G-----, the other to his hôtel. The first missed him on the road, the second he had neglected to open. On his arrival at M. Dorine's house, the valet, under the supposition that Wentworth had been advised of Mile. Dorine's death, broke the intelligence with awkward cruelty, by showing him directly to the salon. Mile. Dorine's wealth, her beauty, the suddenness of her death, and the romance that had in some way attached itself to her love for the young American drew crowds to witness the funeral ceremonies, which took place in the church in the Rue d'Aguesseau. The body was to be laid in M. Dorine's tomb, in the cemetery of Montmartre.

This tomb requires a few words of description. First there was a grating of filigraned iron; through this you looked into a small vestibule or hall, at the end of which was a massive door of oak opening upon a short flight of stone steps descending into the tomb. The vault was fifteen or twenty feet square, ingeniously ventilated from the ceiling, but unlighted. It contained two sarcophagi: the first held the remains of Madame Dorine, long since dead; the other was new, and bore on one side the letters J. D., in monogram, interwoven with fleurs-de-lis.

The funeral train stopped at the gate of the small garden that enclosed the place of burial, only the immediate relatives follow-ing the bearers into the tomb. A slender wax candle, such as is used in Catholic churches, burnt at the foot of the uncovered sarcophagus, casting a dim glow over the centre of the apartment, and deepening the shadows which seemed to huddle together in the corners. By this flickering light the coffin was placed in its granite shell, the heavy slab laid over it reverently, and the oaken door swung on its rusty hinges, shutting out the uncertain ray of sunshine that had ventured to peep in on the darkness.

M. Dorine, muffled in his cloak, threw himself on the back seat of the landau, too abstracted in his grief to observe that he was the only occupant of the vehicle. There was a sound of wheels grating on the gravelled avenue, and then all was silence again in the cemetery of Montmartre. At the main entrance the carriages parted company, dashing off into various streets at a pace that seemed to express a sense of relief.

The rattle of wheels had died out of the air when Philip opened his eyes, bewildered, like a man abruptly roused from slumber. He raised himself on one arm and stared into the surrounding blackness. Where was he? In a second the truth flashed upon him. He had been left in the tomb! While kneeling on the farther side of the stone box, perhaps he had fainted, and during the last solemn rites his absence had been unnoticed.

His first emotion was one of natural terror. But this passed as quickly as it came. Life had ceased to be so very precious to him; and if it were his fate to die at Julie's side, was not that the fulfilment of the desire which he had expressed to himself a hundred times that morning? What did it matter, a few years sooner or later? He must lay down the burden at last. Why not then? A pang of self-reproach followed they thought. Could he so lightly throw aside the love that had bent over his cradle. The sacred name of mother rose involuntarily to his lips. Was it not cowardly to yield up without a struggle the life when he should guard for her sake? Was it not

his duty to the living and the dead to face the difficulties of his position, and overcome them if it were within human power?

With an organization as delicate as a woman's he had that spirit which, however sluggish in repose, leaps with a kind of exultation to measure its strength with disaster.

The vague fear of the supernatural, that would affect most men in a similar situation, found no room in his heart. He was simply shut in a chamber from which it was necessary that he should obtain release within a given period. That this chamber contained the body of the woman he loved, so far from adding to the terror of the case, was a circumstance from which he drew consolation. She was a beautiful white statue now. Her soul was far hence; and if that pure spirit could return, would it not be to shield him with her love? It was impossible that the place should not engender some thought of the kind. He did not put the thought entirely from him as he rose to his feet and stretched out his hands in the darkness; but his mind was too healthy and practical to indulge long in such speculations.

Philip, being a smoker, chanced to have in his pocket a box of *allumettes*. After several ineffectual essays, he succeeded in igniting one against the dank wall, and by its momentary glare perceived that the candle had been left in the tomb. This would serve him in examining the fastenings of the vault. If he could force the inner door by any means, and reach the grating, of which he had an indistinct recollection, he might hope to make himself heard. But the oaken door was immovable, as solid as the wall itself, into which it fitted air-tight. Even if he had had the requisite tools, there were no fastenings to be removed; the hinges were set on the outside.

Having ascertained this, Philip replaced the candle on the floor, and leaned against the wall thoughtfully, watching the blue fan of flame that wavered to and fro, threatening to detach itself from the wick. "At all events," he thought, "the place is ventilated." Suddenly he sprang forward and extinguished the light.

His existence depended on that candle! He had read somewhere, in some account of shipwreck, how the survivors had lived for days upon a few candles which one of the passengers had insanely thrown into the long-boat. And here he had been burning away his very life!

By the transient illumination of one of the tapers, he looked at his watch. It had stopped at eleven--but eleven that day, or the preceding night? The funeral, he knew, had left the church at ten. How many hours had passed since then? Of what duration had been his swoon? Alas! it was no longer possible for him to measure those hours which crawl like snails by the wretched, and fly like swallows over the happy.

He picked up the candle, and seated himself on the stone steps. He was a sanguine man, but, as he weighed the chances of escape, the prospect appalled him. Of course he would be missed. His disappearance under the circumstances would surely alarm his friends; they would institute a search for him; but who would think of searching for a live man in the cemetery of Montmartre? The *préfet* of police would set a hundred intelligences at work to find him; the Seine might be dragged, *les misérables* turned over at the Morgue; a minute description of him would be in every detective's pocket; and he--in M. Dorine's family tomb!

Yet, on the other hand, it was here, he was last seen; from this point a keen detective would naturally work up the case. Then might not the undertaker return for the candlestick, probably not left by design? Or, again, might not M. Dorine send fresh wreaths of flowers, to take the place of those which now diffused a pungent, aromatic odor throughout the chamber? Ah! what unlikely chances! But if one of these things did not happen speedily, it had better never happen. How long could he keep life in himself?

With his pocket-knife Wentworth cut the half-burned candle into four equal parts. "To-night," he meditated, "I will eat the first of these pieces; to-morrow, the second; to-morrow evening, the third; the next day, the fourth; and then--then I 'll wait!"

He had taken no breakfast that morning, unless a cup of coffee can be called a breakfast. He had never been very hungry before. He was ravenously hungry now. But he postponed the meal as long as practicable. It must have been near midnight, according to his calculation, when he determined to try the first of his four singular repasts. The bit of white-wax was tasteless; but it served its purpose.

His appetite for the time appeased, he found a new discomfort. The humidity of the walls, and the wind that crept through the unseen ventilator, chilled him to the bone. To keep walking was his only resource.

A kind of drowsiness, too, occasionally came over him. It took all his will to fight it off. To sleep, he felt, was to die, and he had made up his mind to live.

The strangest fancies flitted through his head as he groped up and down the stone floor of the dungeon, feeling his way along the wall to avoid the sepulchres. Voices that had long been silent spoke words that had long been forgotten; faces he had known in childhood grew palpable against the dark. His whole life in detail was unrolled before him like a panorama; the changes of a year, with its burden of love and death, its sweets and its bitternesses, were epitomized in a single second. The desire to sleep had left him, but the keen hunger came again.

"It must be near morning now," he mused; "perhaps the sun is just gilding the towers of Notre Dame; or, may be, a dull, drizzling rain is beating on Paris, sobbing on these mounds above me. Paris! it seems like a dream. Did I ever walk in its gay boulevards in the golden air? Oh, the delight and pain and passion of that sweet human life!"

Philip became conscious that the gloom, the silence, and the cold were gradually conquering him. The feverish activity of his brain brought on a reaction. He grew lethargic; he sunk down on the steps, and thought of nothing. His hand fell by chance on one of the pieces of candle; he grasped it and devoured it mechanically. This revived him. "How strange," he thought, "that I am not thirsty. Is it possible that the dampness of the walls, which I must inhale with every breath, has supplied the need of water? Not a drop has passed my lips for two days, and still I experience no thirst. That drowsiness, thank Heaven, has gone. I think I was never wide awake until this hour. It would be an anodyne like poison that could weigh down my eyelids. No doubt the dread of sleep has something to do with this."

The minutes were like hours. Now he walked as briskly as he dared up and down the tomb; now he rested against the door. More than once he was tempted to throw himself upon the stone coffin that held Julie, and make no further struggle for his life.

Only one piece of candle remained. He had eaten the third portion, not to satisfy hunger, but from a precautionary motive he had taken it as a man takes some disagreeable drug upon the result of which hangs safety. The time was rapidly approaching when even this poor substitute for nourishment would be exhausted. He delayed that moment. He gave himself a long fast this time. The half-inch of candle which he held in his hand was a sacred thing to him. It was his last defence against death.

Finally, with such a sinking at heart as he had not known before, he raised it to his lips. Then he paused, then he hurled the fragment across the tomb, then the oaken door was flung open, and Philip, with dazzled eyes, saw M. Dorine's form sharply defined against the blue sky.

When they led him out, half blinded, into the broad daylight, M. Dorine noticed that Philip's hair, which a short time since was as black as a crow's wing, had actually turned gray in places. The man's eyes, too, had faded; the darkness had dimmed their lustre.

"And how long was he really confined in the tomb?" I asked, as Mr. H----- concluded the story.

"*Just one hour and twenty minutes!*" replied Mr. H-----, smiling blandly.

As he spoke, the Lilliputian sloops, with their sails all blown out like white roses, came floating bravely into port, and Philip Wentworth lounged by us, wearily, in the pleasant April sunshine.

Mr. H-----'s narrative haunted me. Here was a man who had undergone a strange ordeal. Here was a man whose sufferings were unique. His was no threadbare experience. Eighty minutes had seemed like two days to him! If he had really been immured two days in the tomb, the story, from my point of view, would have lost its tragic value.

After this it was natural that I should regard Mr. Wentworth with stimulated curiosity. As I met him from day to day, passing through the Common with that same introspective air, there was something in his loneliness which touched me. I wondered that I had not read before in his pale, meditative face some such sad history as Mr. H----- had confided to me. I formed the resolution of speaking to him, though with no very lucid purpose. One morning we came face to face at the intersection of two paths. He halted courteously to allow me the precedence.

"Mr. Wentworth," I began, "I"--

He interrupted me.

"My name, sir," he said, in an off-hand manner, "is Jones."

"Jo-Jo-Jones!" I gasped.

"No, not Joseph Jones," he returned, with a glacial air--"Frederick."

A dim light, in which the perfidy of my friend H----- was becoming discernible, began to break upon my mind.

It will probably be a standing wonder to Mr. Frederick Jones why a strange man accosted him one morning on the Common as "Mr. Wentworth," and then dashed madly down the nearest foot-path and disappeared in the crowd.

The fact is, I had been duped by Mr. H-----, who is a gentleman of literary proclivities, and has, it is whispered, become somewhat demented in brooding over the Great American Novel--not yet hatched. He had actually tried the effect of one of his chapters on me!

My hero, as I subsequently learned, is a commonplace young person, who had some connection, I know not what, with the building of that graceful granite bridge which spans the crooked silver lake in the Public Garden.

When I think of the readiness with which Mr. H----- built up his airy fabric on my credulity, I feel half inclined to laugh, though I am deeply mortified at having been the unresisting victim of his Black Art.

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