

The Balancer of The Universe

A Drama of the Race Conflict in Four Acts by B. Harrison Peyton

CHARACTERS

Mauricio Crispin, a dancer from the Argentine, age 25 years.

La Corusca, Senora Crispin, his Argentine mother, age 42.

Agnes, their American guest and dancing pupil, age 22.

Mrs. Vincent Widener, a woman journalist, age 35.

Period: Present. Place: Providencia, a city on the Pacific coast.

ACT I.

SCENE II.

The Dancing Lovers of Malaga.

Enter La Corusca, presently from the dancing room.

Corusca: (To Agnes) Buena, senorita! Daintily—ever so daintily—that's the way. Yes—yet—no, querida mia. Learn to be disdainful and inviting by turns—yet always charming. Never forget you're a proud beauty; el torador, gallant, devoted, entreating, is constantly pursuing you, endeavoring to mel your heart little by little in the warmth of his passion. Yes, yes, be more gracious, senorita, more gracious. Now, now! Bewitch him not alone with artful glances, but with your hands—your fan—your neck—your shoulders—your whole body. No, querida senorita, no! Oh! you don't put into your actions enough of piquancy, fire, languor, the native spirit of Spain! I'll show you senorita—I will show you again! Don Manuel! Don Manuel, kindly wait an instant.

Crispin: Madre querida, why not allow me the privilege of correcting the senorita?

Corusca: Because, Mauricio, your criticisms of whatever relates to Senorita Agnes are never entirely unbiased. Now, maestro, be so good as to begin la Malaguena over again. (To Agnes): Nina mia, Mauricio and I will yet again endeavor to convey to you somewhat of the proper spirit of the dance.

Agnes: And I'll still endeavor to acquire that spirit, senora.

Agnes: Senora, oh-h-h! that is so exquisite! If I could only hope to ever attain such perfect facility! Dancing's so hard, and it seems I progress so slowly.

Corusca: You do very well, duende-cilla mia, for only a few weeks' training in that particular dance. Bear in mind practice—incessant and arduous practice—comprises the life of every highly accomplished dancer. En verdad, dancing's nothing but constant training illuminated by an unflagging spirit—senorita, an indomitable spirit.

Agnes: Oh, that, Senora Crispin, is at least one thing I've learned most thoroughly.

Corusca: Por consiguiente, por consiguiente, nina querida. But I must leave you to Mauricio's instructions and go to look after my own practice, or, I fear, I shall discover myself betraying to my audiences how painfully hard 'tis to accomplish what art demands should be done with an appearance of absolute, effortless ease. Remember, Mauricio, to indulge bad habits is ruinous; you must not be too gallant—too tolerant of Senorita Agnes' faults. Insist on the nearest possible approach to perfection—and nothing less, Mauricio—nothing less.

Crispin: My goodness, madre! how's a poor servitor like me to detect the darkling fault in any act of the senorita? She possesses such a brilliant galaxy of personal superiorities one perforce is dazzled and one's own paltry pretensions cast completely into the shade.

Corusca: Really, Mauricio, you're a conscienceless scamp!

Agnes: Your pardon, senora; but only one moment, please. Will you kindly tell me whether there's a letter come for me this afternoon?

Corusca: You haven't yet received the daily letter from your father, hija querida; and you're very anxious to learn whether there has been change for better or worse in the condition of your little brother? How extremely sorry I am! but the day's last post arrived some while ago—and—there was no letter for you.

Agnes: Thank you, senora; but I shall most surely get one by special delivery. You will please sign for it for me—won't you, dear senora?

Corusca: Si, ciertamente, ciertamente. Pobre querida! And when the letter comes, I'll bring it to you without an instant's delay.

Agnes: I am greatly obliged to you, senora.

Corusca: But heed my warning, Mauricio; don't permit Senorita Agnes to prevail upon your heart to do most of the dancing.

SCENE III

The Holocaust Unto the Moloch, Hatred.

Crispin: Madre! Now, what do you make of that, senorita? Madre expects us to practice la Malaguena, yet she's plainly determined to take

a selfish and exclusive advantage of Don Manuel's music.

Agnes: Oh, I can very well let the extra lesson wait, senor.

Crispin: That's most handsome of you, I must say. But isn't it after all your turn to be considerably patient? Yesterday brought you the usual letter from home, but you've kept me waiting this long while all in vain for the latest intelligence concerning poor, dear, little Godfrey.

Agnes: According to father's most recent letter, written approximately four days ago, senor, Godfrey was about the same. Ah! he suffers such killing internal agonies, and yet the special physicians attending him, despite all my fears and presentiments, continue to believe he will ultimately recover. Even kind Mrs. Widener, who who certainly should possess a woman's intuition, has not hesitated to practice on me every artifice likely to inspire faith in her, precisely as though faith on my part be an absolute essential to successful treatment of Godfrey's case.

Crispin: Mrs. Widener? 'Tis my impression, senorita, I once made in Shadow City the acquaintance of a lady of that name; but the circumstances of our meeting and—her personality—are at present elusive—playing a game of hide-and-seek with my memory.

Agnes: But I'm positive, senor, you can't have forgotten Mrs. Widener. She's the journalist who writes Sunday features for The Verity, the leading daily newspaper of Shadow City. Dr. Vincent Widener is her husband, and head of the group of doctors who are striving to restore my darling, stricken brother. She has told me she once interviewed you and the senora in Shadow City, when the pair of you were appearing nightly with your troupe of dancers at the Liberty theater.

Crispin: Oh, yes! Oh! I remember! 'Twas one forenoon at the Hotel Goldsbrough—wasn't it? And Senorita Cynthia Lilburn from Providencia was present; for her stay at the Goldsbrough with her grandfather was coincident with our own—Senorita Gorland, it always thrilled to see Cynthia Lilburn dance, with er effervescent grace—enraving abandon of form and movement! Oh, she was a favored descendant of terpsichore—and at the moment Mrs. Widener entered, relaxing with us from strenuous exercise in the sprightly seguidilla.

Agnes: Was Mr. Rogelio Nohrega there, too, senor, with his violin? or singing to a tinkling mandolin? The senora has described to me his impressive barytone voice that always seemed to envelop the listener in the tropical voluptuousness of his native Brazil.

Crispin: No, senorita; and you may imagine Cynthia Lilburn's regret. Undoubtedly, Nohrega's presence would have inspired her to yet great wonders in the art that juggled John the Baptist's head from his shoulders. However, while we were giving Mrs. Widener an account of our devoted Anthony Bell—why, into the room Anthony came, singing and jubilant, because to the most wonderful of his paintings he had put the finishing touches that morning just at sunrise. Ah! how it surges back upon me—but painfully, senorita, the memory of my fruitless endeavor to interest Mrs. Widener in him and his unsurpassable picture—and of the occurrence of the panic at the Liberty theater on the evening of that same day!

Agnes: My goodness! Why should our every conversation, senor, invariably lead to—that frightful subject—the panic?

Crispin: But, senorita, do we ever concern ourselves with aught really foreign to the panic? In the beginning, we were deploring by Godfrey's serious condition. Well, if my friend Anthony only had been even as fortunate as was your little brother, senorita, he'd now be able at least to protest against the malicious reports that it was he who wantonly began the mortal affray which preceded the panic.

Agnes: That fatal encounter was to me, senor, the most horrible incident of the enormous disaster. I sincerely condole with you. I know that Anthony eBl was colored, a young poet and painter of rising repute among members of his race; and your mother has told me there subsisted a very intimate and devoted friendship among the three of you. However, won't you pardon, senor, my natural curiosity—to know—how that friendship came about?

Crispin: Certainly. You've probably heard, Senorita Gorland of an organization comprised of several thousand public-spirited white and Colored citizens and known as the American Association for the Abolition of Race Oppression?

Agnes: Oh, yes, senor; I've read of the A. A. A. R. O. a number of times.

Crispin: Then, perhaps, you also

know that, besides its headquarters in New York, the Association has active branches in nearly all the leading cities and a steadily enlarging membership fired by that fearless zeal which freedom's cause inspires.

Agnes: Are you a member, senor? Crispin: I became a member, senorita, the very day I first met Anthony. A famous novelist acquainted with us both introduced him to me in Shadow City, at an annual conference of the local branch of the Association; and discovering that he was a poet and painter of remarkable talent, I in turn later presented him to madre, whose interest in his hitherto unappreciated artistic efforts was immediate and enthusiastic.

Agnes: Ah! that was the happy beginning! So he painted the large portrait of the senora that hangs in her study—didn't he, Senor Crispin?

Crispin: Yes. Buena madre mia, as a sort of patroness of genius, you see, rescued him from poverty and obscurity—enlisted him as the saying goes, under her banner, and was the making of him. I suppose you've never read any of his poems? Anyhow, the A. A. A. R. O. publishes a detailed account of its operations in its official organ, a little monthly magazine called The Advance; and to this dear Anthony was one of the best known contributors.

Agnes: But after all, I've heard, senor, it was as an agent of the Association Anthony Bell figured most prominently.

Crispin: Beyond question, senorita. You no doubt recall the civil rights suits not long since prosecuted with so much resolution against the Liberty theater in Shadow City, by the legal department of the Association, were based on evidence procured under my friend's direction.

Agnes: I've been informed also, senor, that you provided your friend with the ticket which obtained him a seat in the parquet at the Liberty on the evening of the panic.

Crispin: That's true, senorita; and only that blustering Representative Whiteside should discover Anthony there and raise high and mighty objection to his presence.

Agnes: Senor Crispin, I heard any number of others make direct complaint to the house-manager of the Liberty that evening.

Crispin: Yes, senorita.

Agnes: But despite the general intolerance—the persistent protest against your Colored friend, senor, the theatrical staff merely declared its polite regrets—and wouldn't venture to molest him.

Crispin: Ah! let me remind you, senorita, how surprisingly contrary that was to the theater's former policy of rigorously restricting Negro partons to the gallery.

Agnes: They wouldn't eject your friend Bell, as you well know, senor, simply because he was your friend and guest.

Crispin: You put too great an estimate on my influence, senorita. Isn't it quite possible good Anthony had taught the proprietors of the Liberty to appreciate the danger of violating the civil rights law—and becoming involved in costly legal actions?

Agnes: Did you know beforehand, Senor Crispin, Congressman Whiteside had engaged the orchestra stall immediately in front of the one Anthony Bell occupied that evening?

Crispin: Why, certainly not, senorita. Even then I was not at all ignorant as to how notoriously over-hasty and violent in quarrel the representative was. Had I only apprehended that behind the curtain of the future, chance was so imminently preparing—right at my heels—to bring Anthony and Terry Whiteside that evening so close together, I'd—but I suspect, senorita, you've again succumbed to a mood of repining?

Agnes: God have mercy on my suffering father, senor, and miserable me! God alone knows how much father and I would've preferred to have perished at the theater that evening rather than our baby Godfrey should have been swept astray—and ruthlessly beaten down—in that terrific hurricane of panic and havoc!

Crispin: Ah; one can only regard it as verily a miracle, senorita, your six-year-old brother came out of it at all, although I know his fragile, small body when found was crushed and shattered, and but the faintest show of the breath of life lingered within him. Yes, it's certainly sad enough, on my soul, Senorita Gorland; and you take it so hard! Oh! indeed one would think you bear Godfrey—heaven save him!—even more than a sister's love. Why, give me leave to say, in sober truth, your love appears to have all the strength of a mother's.

Agnes: I—I am sixteen years the elder, senor. Our mother resigned this life shortly after baby Godfrey's birth, and ever since, I've taken upon myself the maternal care of him. Very naturally, I've come to regard him much as though he be a son to me in fact. Never shall I forget with what earnest persistence, day after day, he entreated father and me to take him to see you and La Corusca in your repertoire of famous Spanish dances.

Crispin: And even so, senorita, whenever I dance la Malaguena with

made, there comes to me the disquieting remembrance that she and I gnes: That incessantly haunts me, too, senor—the glowing lithesome picture with you and La Corusca formed together there on the stage that instant before the outbreak of the panic. And that panic, senor—oh! the eruption that broke forth then—was so swift—so violent—so unutterably terrible!

Crispin: 'Tis indeed an occasion, senorita, for constant thanks to our all-glorious Preserver that you and your father escaped alive.

Agnes: My father! Yes, by some unexplainable freak of fortune, we—he—my father and I—except for a few scratches and bruises, and—but the memory! senor, how it encumbers the mind, weighs like lead within the heart, oppresses the prostrate spirit, crushes down upon the whole being like some overwhelming affliction! Shall we not change the subject to one less distressing, senor?

Crispin: By all means, senorita; but before we do so, I beg you'll graciously allow me a question I've long had in mind to ask you.

Agnes: What is it, senor?

Crispin: Didn't you, senorita, on the evening of the panic, witness the entire affair between my friend eBl and Terry Whiteside?

Agnes: But, but consider, senor! Senor Crispin! I've just protested I can hardly any longer, believe me, hardly bear to discuss the awful—oh! why would you, senor force be back along the ways of remembrance into that purgatory of writhing, agonized souls—to face the mighty catastrophe over again through all its cataclysmal progress—from its frightful beginning to its ruinous end! After the havoc, what is there left to rake up but the wreckage? Remember, I beseech you, my poor, dear brother Godfrey's misfortune—and don't ask me to recount the full one hundred thick-coming, indescribable horrors that my eyes have looked upon!

Crispin: Senorita Gorland, if you'd only reflect a moment! Think how much your statement may mean not only to me, but to madre, who held Anthony in unbounded esteem! Who can tell but your affirmation may vindicate my loved friend in the eyes of the world wherefrom he's departed, and bring rightful condemnation upon that bloody-minded demon in human shape who is now endeavoring by re- crimination to acquit himself before humanity at large of the crime of wilful and promiscuous murder?

Agnes: But don't you forget that a number of witnesses, senor . . .

Crispin: Witnesses! Yes, Terry Whiteside's perjuries are supported by witnesses; but they're witnesses whose teeth, were they false, couldn't be as much so as are their tongues, and whose hearts are as prejudiced as is darkness against the light! Don't tell me, of all persons in creation, you, too, Senorita Gorland, are going to defend the guilty? Among the few survivors of the panic who might truthfully have averred it, only one—a Colored witness who was an occupant of the gallery at the Liberty at the time of the affray—has been willing to testify to my friend's innocence—to maintain Anthony didn't attack the congressman with a dangerous weapon—that the whole guilt of the atrocity belongs to Whiteside himself! But won't you, also, have the courage to assert the truth—senorita, now, won't you—for God's sake?

Agnes: But—but—on my honor, senor, your friend Bell positively wouldn't be persuaded to retire to the rear of the orchestra or to the gallery! Assuredly, I would not now dispute he had a perfect right, guaranteed him by the law, to retain his place in utter defiance of all the prejudiced clamor against him; but still, senor, if you only realized, only comprehended how much you're demanding of me, you—wouldn't ask me to—to—oh! don't you realize—you—you don't comprehend my situation!

Crispin: If I but realized how much I'm demanding of you? What can it signify to you as compared with madre and me? Why, Senorita Gorland, I merely ask if Terry Whiteside wasn't the aggressor; my friend his blameless victim? Isn't it true Whiteside, the madeep, the southern firebrand, bursting with rage, bounded from his chair—while madre and I were on the stage preoccupied with the dance la Malaguena—and seizing Anthony by the collar, struggled madly to drag him bodily out of his seat into the nearby aisle? Isn't it true, thus set upon, barbarously outraged, my friend was forced to strike the madman in self-defense a blow with the fist, which sent him reeling backward and smote him to the rankling quick? And then—the pistol, which the representative himself has confessed he nearly always carried about with him for the purpose to compel submission from any Negroes who might venture to contest his assumption of superiority of race gave him a right to rule them— isn't it true, senorita, Whiteside, his desperate hate aggravated by the blow, drew his heavy revolver and shot Anthony dead on the spot, while a score of rabid men—roaring: "The nigger! the nigger!" leaped from their

orchestra chairs and scrambled over each other in a furious effort to get at my friend—lone, martyred Anthony, who was still the object of their hatred though toppling over in his own blood? That's how it happened, senorita—according to the testimony of the Colored witness from the gallery. I simply ask, isn't it true?

Agnes: Oh, pity! for pity's sake, senor! It's all true—true—too true! I can't deny it—daren't deny it! If I attempt to, how my conscience overmelms me! how poor Godfrey's heart-melting sufferings cast doubt-founding reproaches at me—forbid me the falsehood!

Crispin: Ah! so you were a witness of that harrowing tragedy in its every hideous detail?

Agnes: Yes, senor; and while I stood appalled, stunned, my little brother was carried away before I was aware of it in the turmoil of destruction that ensued! Oh! the mad, resistless terror! certainly there was no need, senor, for anyone to describe that to you!

Crispin: No; for at the first scream of a woman, madre and I cut short our performance of la Malaguena. We stood there on the stage for a moment, agnostic, breathless, awe-struck, as the rest of that audience sprang to its feet at one and the same time, and panic-stricken, went plunging and pressing helter-skelter to the exits. How God must've screened it from the eyes of blessed spirits on high—the compact pandemonium of those twenty-five hundred human bodies as they struggled to fly the visible, palpable terror that had descended upon them—like some devastating thunderbolt from sene heavens—and whirled more than two hundred to death in an avalanche stampede! Lord God of hosts! how the insensible and the squirming wounded were heaped with the inert and mangled dead in accumulative mounds of gruesome mortality!

Agnes: Senor, I do but think of it!—a shaking horror takes hold of me and chills me through like a wintry blast! It's nearly seven weeks since it happened, ah! yet I imagine I still hear the rush and the rumble, the shrieks of distress, the savage shouts and frenzied commotion, the wailings half stifled—and—

Crispin: And the awful, heart-rending gasps and groans that came at the last! Oh! not one from good friend Anthony, who evidently had died instantly! Six hours later, senorita, I found him at the morgue with three bullet wounds in his breast and his body trampled almost beyond the possibility of recognition!

Agnes: Senor Crispin, father came upon our sweet lambkin in a hospital ward among a dozen other children, of whom some were dying. Ah me, senor! in fancy I can see my dear brother as he lies in his small brass bed in the darkened, flower-scented room at home—unspeakable misery!—looking but the ghost of himself, a haggard figure, his beamless eyes wanly haunted by a thousand pains! How piteously he cries out, as he is tormented by hallucinations of the tremendous human maelstrom in which he was so nearly killed! Now he imagines he is called by his former playmates, who caper in gleesome thoughtlessness about the yard next door! Oh! how futile are his exertions to rise! It's positively insupportable—the burden, senor!

Crispin: Does not my heart sink beneath it too, senorita? Our noble Anthony was as blameless as little Godfrey. But let us not forget Whiteside's small son, also, was nigh fatally injured in the panic, notwithstanding the perpetrator of the enormity, the representative himself, somehow escaped unscathed—along with his little daughter.

Agnes: Senor, his—little—daughter! Are you sure that—that he—that his daughter—?

Crispin: Why, yes, senorita, Whiteside has another child besides the little boy pet—named Baby Sunbeam—hasn't he? I've only the most hazy recollection, but I think I once read in some of the newspapers the congressman has a daughter. She's herself a mere small child, I believe, but takes a whole-souled interest in her younger brother. I only wish I could recall her name—hang it!—for then, perhaps, you—

Corusca: Mauricio, el caballero joven, Bland—he's here and requests a word with you.

Crispin: With me, madre?

Agnes: With Senor Crispin?

Corusca: Yes, Mauricio, with you—so the servant announces.

Crispin: It must needs be to you, Senorita Gorland, the cavalier Bland desires to pay his addresses. I'll go and invite him here to prove it. Shall I?

Agnes: Will you dare? But—no—yes, do haste and bring gay Senor Bland to me—against my will. Since you fling the gauntlet, senor, I'll take it up—and in the meanwhile, go change my dress.

Corusca: Ah! then for once, senorita, you and Bland aren't going to dance la Malaguena?

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