

A TRAGICALLY TRAGIC TRAGEDY

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IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT. The wind howled through the treetops, the rain fell in unceasing sheets, and lightning flashed menacingly, illuminating the stark landscape below. Thunder also usually came in on cue when it remembered.

A carriage made its way slowly through the night, rocking dangerously in the violent winds. The horse plodded through the thick mud, lifting its heavy hoofs wearily. (Incidentally, the horse, whose name was Fred, was born with a special talent for mathematics, and had come up with a single unifying equation for the universe's laws. Unfortunately, this genius went undiscovered by non-horses, but more importantly to his owner, he made a fine manual laborer and didn't eat too much.)

Inside the carriage was a hawk-faced middle-aged man, immediately recognizable as a cultured and educated noble by the way his nose constantly hovered above the usual level. His damp clothes were of the finest black silk, obviously meant for purposes far more important than practical travel. Lord Snob, who was well-known for his bad moods, was in a *particularly* bad mood just then, tired and wet as he was – though he quite typically thought nothing of the horse and driver *outside* the carriage.

Sitting across from him was a pale, thin girl of no more than eighteen, who would have been pretty if not quite so emaciated. Her eyelids drooped pitifully as she struggled to stay awake, and she winced slightly at every sharp jolt. Her clothing was plain but respectable, otherwise known as “ugly” – the type dearly beloved by so many young girls throughout the world.

The carriage stopped suddenly, swaying slightly in the mud. Lord Snob made an irritated noise in his throat, and leaned forward to twitch aside the drawn curtains impatiently.

“Touch my stuff and I’ll put a knife through ya,” warned a shawl next to the girl.

Lord Snob raised an eyebrow archly, as only the truly rich can. “I assure you,” he addressed the shawl, “I had no intent of disturbing your belongings. I was merely attempting to discern the cause of our delay.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then,” said the shawl agreeably. It unfolded to reveal a wizened old woman, wrinkles criss-crossing her face like an interstate highway. “You won’t see anything out there, though. Pitch-black, it is.” She picked up a cane lying on top of a suitcase and gave the ceiling a few good thumps.

The face of the wet, startled driver appeared through the trap door. “Yes’m?”

“This gentleman wishes to discern the cause of our delay,” she informed him. She leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, “I dunno what that means either but I *thinks* it means he wants to know what’s going on.”

“I would like to be made aware,” said Lord Snob haughtily, “of why it is that we have stopped. As I recall this was an *express* carriage.”

“Yessir, it is, sir, express carriage, sir, you got it, sir.” The driver swallowed. “There’s just a little... er... problem out here...”

“I have paid you *not* to have problems, boy,”

“Yessir,” said the driver nervously, who had recently celebrated his sixty-third birthday.

“Good,” Lord Snob growled. “Now please return this carriage to a mobile state immediately!”

The driver's frightened eyes sought out the old woman's beseechingly.

"He means he wants to gets movin'," she said helpfully.

"Yessir," sighed the driver. His face disappeared.

Lord Snob leaned back in his seat, irritated. Uneducated philistines!

FIVE MINUTES LATER, the carriage was still unmoving. "Driver!" Lord Snob roared angrily over the storm. There was no response.

The nobleman had reached his limit. "This is intolerable!" he exclaimed, and opened the carriage door. Bracing himself against the wind and rain, he climbed up stiffly to the driver's seat, ready to dish out one heck of a tongue-lashing. He was *not* in a good mood.

But there was no one there. The horse's reins had been cut, and it too was gone.

Lord Snob returned to the inside of the carriage, fuming, and sat down. He glanced at the girl. She had fallen asleep at last.

The old woman was eating a mustard sandwich. "Weffl?" she asked, swallowing. "What's happening?"

"The driver seems to have deserted us," replied Lord Snob stiffly. "With the horse. And no doubt our fares," he added sourly.

"No, he ain't got those," she assured him cheerily. "I nicked 'em from him a few stops back."

Lord Snob was appalled. Thievery was sinful! Of course, he regularly avoided paying his taxes, but that was *legal* thievery. He simply informed certain people that there would be unpleasant consequences for them if the issue of tax-paying actually became an issue. It was really marvelous, how it all worked out so splendidly.

This was not working out so splendidly, however. Lord Snob was at a loss when he couldn't find someone to intimidate into taking care of the situation for him.

"I shall be *sure* to take this matter up with the carriage company. Drivers making off with their horses – unacceptable! He didn't even have the decency to leave us in a *populated* area." He glowered.

"Ah, well," said the old woman. "No use in complaining 'bout that now. We'd best get some sleep." She finished her sentence, closed her eyes, and immediately started snoring. Despite himself, Lord Snob was impressed. Even his dog's snoring wasn't that loud.

It was going to be a long night.

LORD SNOB AWOKE from an unpleasant dream of being chased by fearsome boarding-school headmasters and snoring mustard sandwiches to an unpleasant reality. He stretched his legs and fell off his seat.

"Hallo there!" a cheerful voice called from outside. "I sees you're up. Or hears you're up, anyway. Come on out an' join us!"

Lord Snob staggered out of the carriage, in a most undignified manner, into a burst of sunshine. He took in the blue sky, green fields, gentle breeze, and sweetly chirping birds. He glared at the old woman, who was sitting a few feet away on the grass on a red-and-white checkered cloth with the skeletal girl. "What's this?" he demanded.

"A picnic," she told him happily. "Wanna sandwich? It's mustard."

"No, I mean the weather," he said impatiently. "What happened to it?"

"Why, did ya like it better last night? We couldn't have had the picnic then. Nasty wet."

Lord Snob decided not to pursue it further. “Very well then,” he said irritably. “What shall be our next course of action?”

“Eat!” exclaimed the old woman cheerfully. “I’ve got plenty of sandwiches to go ’round.”

Lord Snob was feeling slightly ridiculous, and thus unpleasant. “No, thank you, Madam,” he said coldly. “I have provisions of my own.” *And they don’t have mustard in them, either*, he added silently. He returned to the carriage and unpacked some of the food he had brought along.

“Wanna sandwich?” he heard the old woman ask the girl. “No? Not even one? Oh, you young girls today. Always dieting, you are. When *I* was a girl I ate fifteen mustard sandwiches a day.”

I’ll bet you did, thought Lord Snob.

Half an hour later, the old woman poked her head back into the carriage. “Wanna come with us?” she asked. “We’re going for a walk, to explore and to be dashing adventurers!” She raised her hand dramatically, then winced. “Darn arthritis,” she muttered.

Lord Snob glanced over her head to where the girl was standing outside. She didn’t look like she was planning on being much of a dashing adventurer. He sighed. He supposed he’d have to go. Maybe someplace nearby there’d be a decent cup of coffee.

AFTER AN HOUR or two’s trekking through endless fields, falling into holes hidden by the long grass and getting bitten by approximately five thousand nine hundred twenty-seven mosquitoes, the three reached a stream. Lord Snob, who was far removed from his normal state of frozen formality, collapsed on the riverbank and lapped up the cool water.

“I shouldn’t do that if I was you,” commented the old woman, who was as energetic as ever. “You never knows what’s in the water you drinks. Could be lots of nasty industrial pollutants. Or at least a lot of dead fish parts.”

“Madam,” replied Lord Snob angrily, “I have had quite enough of—”

They were interrupted by a piercing shriek. The two spun around, their quarrel forgotten. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

SHE LAY SILENT amongst the reeds by the river, arms flung out helplessly, flowing hair forming a soft halo around her motionless head. (How *do* overwhelmed heroines collapse with such good hair arrangements? Do they practice?)

The old woman and Lord Snob stood over her, one sorrowful and the other a little embarrassed. After all, what *was* one supposed to do in such situations? There was no prescribed etiquette.

“Er... is she all right?” he asked. That sounded like something he ought to say.

The old woman bent over and touched the girl’s thin cheek gently, then straightened up and sighed. “No, she’s not,” she said quietly. “But don’t you worry, now, she won’t die,” she assured him comfortably. “Leastaways not for another couple of minutes, so’s we can have a meaningful moment here.” She gave him a thoughtful look. “Aren’t you supposed to do something now? Cry outs in agony, bury your face in your hands, sob uncontrollably, tear outs your hair, kiss her passionately as she breathes her last breaths... that sort of thing?”

Lord Snob straightened up indignantly. “Madam! That would hardly be proper!” He sniffed. “Besides, I don’t even *know* her. I don’t think she’s said a single word this story!”

“Oh, but that doesn’t make a difference. You men are supposed to like those passive female types.” She shrugged. “Okey-dokey. Do you want a sandwich? I’ve still got some mustard left.”

Before Lord Snob could respond, a thunderous voice rang out. “WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING STILL ALIVE?”

Lord Snob felt rather at a loss for words. “Er...”

“WELL, I SUPPOSE IT DOESN’T MATTER NOW. WE’LL CORRECT THE MISTAKE PRESENTLY, JUST HOLD ON.”

“Who... who *are* you?” he asked fearfully, looking around at the empty riverbank and fields.

“THAT’S NOT IMPORTANT,” said the Mysterious Voice. “THE POINT IS, YOU TWO SHOULD BE DEAD BY NOW.”

“What!” exclaimed Lord Snob. “Why?”

“YOU,” it said, “ARE ENTIRELY TOO STUCK-UP TO LAST LONG. AND SHE’S OLD. WE WOULD HAVE GOTTEN YOU TWO EARLIER BUT THE COMPUTERS CRASHED... AND WE MISPLACED THE RECORDS.... WELL, YOU KNOW HOW IT IS.”

“Wait!” cried the old woman. “You can’t kill us yet! We still haven’t had the plot-explanation scene.”

“THE WHAT?”

“That’s where we make up something to fill in all the holes in the story-line,” explained the old woman helpfully.

“ER... WOULDN’T THAT TAKE TOO MUCH TIME? AFTER ALL, WE’VE GOT TO FINISH UP HERE ALREADY. THIS HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR EIGHT PAGES NOW.”

“Oh, no,” she assured the Mysterious Voice. “See, we only do the major ones. Like, why did the driver disappear? Is Lord Snob’s name *really* Lord Snob? Why did the girl shriek and die? Who is this Mysterious Voice? Why does the old woman eat so many mustard sandwiches? ...Want one, by the way?”

“A MUSTARD SANDWICH? NO, THANK YOU. THEY TEND TO GIVE ME INDIGESTION.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind.” She bit into one thoughtfully. “Why *did* the driver disappear, by the way? He left the carriage.”

“LOOK, LADY, I’M NOT HERE TO ANSWER MORTALS’ QUESTIONS.”

“Well, okays then, I guess an unsolved mystery will add to the plot. Plus, then there’s a great opportunity for a sequel – hows about *A Tragically Tragic Tragedy II: The Driver’s Revenge.*”

“Er... excuse me,” said Lord Snob, trying to regain some control of the situation. “I do hate to interrupt and change the subject, but... does this mean we die now?”

“WELL, TECHNICALLY, I’M SUPPOSED TO FIND FIRST A BAD CHARACTER TRAIT THAT I CAN USE AS AN EXCUSE FOR KILLING YOU OFF.”

Fear seized him. “I’ll pay my taxes!” he cried. “I promise! Every penny! And I’ll give all my money to charities, just like a repenting character is supposed to! I’ll devote my life to saving starving orphans!”

“I’ve got some mustard sandwiches I could donate,” offered the old woman.

“GREED, WHILE A BIT UNORIGINAL, WILL DO,” said the Mysterious Voice, and Lord Snob fell over dead.

“Wow,” the old woman commented. “Good thing I’m practically a saint. That means you can’t kill me, doesn’t it?”

“IT IS A PROBLEM THAT YOU HAVE LED A MOSTLY BLAMELESS LIFE,” the Mysterious Voice admitted. “THOUGH SOME MIGHT CONSIDER YOUR MUSTARD SANDWICHES ENOUGH FOR YOU TO GO TO THE FIERY DEPTHS OF HECK. BUT YOU’RE RIGHT, WE CAN’T KILL YOU JUST YET, FOR ALTHOUGH AN INNOCENT CHARACTER DYING IS RATHER TRAGIC THEY USUALLY HAVE TO GO MAD FIRST. HOWEVER, YOUR TIME WILL COME, DON’T WORRY.”

“Oh, I won’t. This makes the story ever so much more suspenseful, anyways. But iffen you ask me, I’d much ruther die of some lingerin’ illness than be struck down by some mysterious voice.” She shook her head briskly, and reached into the depths of her raggedy shawl to retrieve her cell phone. “No offense intended of course,” she added politely, as she dialed her lawyer and checked the instant lottery numbers. “It’s just that then people bring you mustard sandwiches.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: While the story you’ve just read is not perhaps the most traditional of tragedies, the author hastens to point out that it did indeed incorporate all of the elements of a proper tragedy, namely: scary settings, mysterious disappearances, ill-fated love (?), bad character traits resulting in unfortunate events, and of course lots and lots of death.