

Augustus Does His Bit

by

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I wish to express my gratitude for certain good offices which Augustus secured for me in January, 1917. I had been invited to visit the theatre of war in Flanders by the Commander-in-Chief: an invitation which was, under the circumstances, a summons to duty. Thus I had occasion to spend some days in procuring the necessary passport and other official facilities for my journey. It happened just then that the Stage Society gave a performance of this little play. It opened the heart of every official to me. I have always been treated with distinguished consideration in my contracts with bureaucracy during the war; but on this occasion I found myself persona grata in the highest degree. There was only one word when the formalities were disposed of; and that was "We are up against Augustus all day." The showing-up of Augustus scandalized one or two innocent and patriotic critics who regarded the prowess of the British army as inextricably bound up with Highcastle prestige. But our Government departments knew better: their problem was how to win the war with Augustus on their backs, well-meaning, brave, patriotic, but obstructively fussy, self-important, imbecile, and disastrous.

Save for the satisfaction of being able to laugh at Augustus in the theatre, nothing, as far as I know, came of my dramatic reduction of him to absurdity. Generals, admirals, Prime Ministers and Controllers, not to mention Emperors, Kaisers and Tsars, were scrapped remorselessly at home and abroad, for their sins or services, as the case might be. But Augustus stood like the Eddystone in a storm, and stands so to this day. He gave us his word that he was indispensable and we took it.

Augustus Does His Bit was performed for the first time at the Court Theatre in London by the Stage Society on the 21st January, 1917, with Lalla Vandervelde as The Lady, F. B.J. Sharp as Lord Augustus Highcastle, and Charles Rock as Horatio Floyd Beamish.

AUGUSTUS DOES HIS BIT

The Mayor's parlor in the Town Hall of Little Pifflington. Lord Augustus Highcastle, a distinguished member of the governing class, in the uniform of a colonel, and very well preserved at forty-five, is comfortably seated at a writing-table with his heels on it, reading The Morning Post. The door faces him, a little to his left, at the other side of the room. The window is behind him. In the fireplace, a gas stove. On the table a bell button and a telephone. Portraits of past Mayors, in robes and gold chains, adorn the walls. An elderly clerk with a short white beard and whiskers, and a very red nose, shuffles in.

AUGUSTUS [hastily putting aside his paper and replacing his feet on the floor].
Hullo! Who are you?

THE CLERK. The staff [a slight impediment in his speech adds to the impression of incompetence produced by his age and appearance].

AUGUSTUS. You the staff! What do you mean, man?

THE CLERK. What I say. There ain't anybody else.

AUGUSTUS. Tush! Where are the others?

THE CLERK. At the front.

AUGUSTUS. Quite right. Most proper. Why aren't you at the front?

THE CLERK. Over age. Fifty-seven.

AUGUSTUS. But you can still do your bit. Many an older man is in the G.R.'s, or volunteering for home defence.

THE CLERK. I have volunteered.

AUGUSTUS. Then why are you not in uniform?

THE CLERK. They said they wouldn't have me if I was given away with a pound of tea. Told me to go home and not be an old silly. [A sense of unbearable wrong, till now only smouldering in him, bursts into flame.] Young Bill Knight, that I took with me, got two and sevenpence. I got nothing. Is it justice? This country is going to the dogs, if you ask me.

AUGUSTUS [rising indignantly]. I do not ask you, sir; and I will not allow you to say such things in my presence. Our statesmen are the greatest known to history. Our generals are invincible. Our army is the admiration of the world. [Furiously.] How dare you tell me that the country is going to the dogs!

THE CLERK. Why did they give young Bill Knight two and sevenpence, and not give me even my tram fare? Do you call that being great statesmen? As good as robbing me, I call it.

AUGUSTUS. That's enough. Leave the room. [He sits down and takes up his pen, settling himself to work. The clerk shuffles to the door. Augustus adds, with cold politeness] Send me the Secretary.

THE CLERK. I'M the Secretary. I can't leave the room and send myself to you at the same time, can I?

AUGUSTUS. Don't be insolent. Where is the gentleman I have been corresponding with: Mr Horatio Floyd Beamish?

THE CLERK [returning and bowing]. Here. Me.

AUGUSTUS. You! Ridiculous. What right have you to call yourself by a pretentious name of that sort?

THE CLERK. You may drop the Horatio Floyd. Beamish is good enough for me.

AUGUSTUS. Is there nobody else to take my instructions?

THE CLERK. It's me or nobody. And for two pins I'd chuck it. Don't you drive me too far. Old uns like me is up in the world now.

AUGUSTUS. If we were not at war, I should discharge you on the spot for disrespectful behavior. But England is in danger; and I cannot think of my personal dignity at such a moment. [Shouting at him.] Don't you think of yours, either, worm that you are; or I'll have you arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act, double quick.

THE CLERK. What do I care about the realm? They done me out of two and seven--

AUGUSTUS. Oh, damn your two and seven! Did you receive my letters?

THE CLERK. Yes.

AUGUSTUS. I addressed a meeting here last night--went straight to the platform from the train. I wrote to you that I should expect you to be present and report yourself. Why did you not do so?

THE CLERK. The police wouldn't let me on the platform.

AUGUSTUS. Did you tell them who you were?

THE CLERK. They knew who I was. That's why they wouldn't let me up.

AUGUSTUS. This is too silly for anything. This town wants waking up. I made the best recruiting speech I ever made in my life; and not a man joined.

THE CLERK. What did you expect? You told them our gallant fellows is falling at the rate of a thousand a day in the big push. Dying for Little Pifflington, you says. Come and take their places, you says. That ain't the way to recruit.

AUGUSTUS. But I expressly told them their widows would have pensions.

THE CLERK. I heard you. Would have been all right if it had been the widows you wanted to get round.

AUGUSTUS [rising angrily]. This town is inhabited by dastards. I say it with a full sense of responsibility, DASTARDS! They call themselves Englishmen; and they are afraid to fight.

THE CLERK. Afraid to fight! You should see them on a Saturday night.

AUGUSTUS. Yes, they fight one another; but they won't fight the Germans.

THE CLERK. They got grudges again one another: how can they have grudges against the Huns that they never saw? They've no imagination: that's what it is. Bring the Huns here; and they'll quarrel with them fast enough.

AUGUSTUS [returning to his seat with a grunt of disgust]. Mf! They'll have them here if they're not careful. [Seated.] Have you carried out my orders about the war saving?

THE CLERK. Yes.

AUGUSTUS. The allowance of petrol has been reduced by three quarters?

THE CLERK. It has.

AUGUSTUS. And you have told the motor-car people to come here and arrange to start munition work now that their motor business is stopped?

THE CLERK. It ain't stopped. They're busier than ever.

AUGUSTUS. Busy at what?

THE CLERK. Making small cars.

AUGUSTUS. NEW cars!

THE CLERK. The old cars only do twelve miles to the gallon. Everybody has to have a car that will do thirty-five now.

AUGUSTUS. Can't they take the train?

THE CLERK. There ain't no trains now. They've tore up the rails and sent them to the front.

AUGUSTUS. Psha!

THE CLERK. Well, we have to get about somehow.

AUGUSTUS. This is perfectly monstrous. Not in the least what I intended.

THE CLERK. Hell--

AUGUSTUS. Sir!

THE CLERK [explaining]. Hell, they says, is paved with good intentions.

AUGUSTUS [springing to his feet]. Do you mean to insinuate that hell is paved with MY good intentions--with the good intentions of His Majesty's Government?

THE CLERK. I don't mean to insinuate anything until the Defence of the Realm Act is repealed. It ain't safe.

AUGUSTUS. They told me that this town had set an example to all England in the matter of economy. I came down here to promise the Mayor a knighthood for his exertions.

THE CLERK. The Mayor! Where do I come in?

AUGUSTUS. You don't come in. You go out. This is a fool of a place. I'm greatly disappointed. Deeply disappointed. [Flinging himself back into his chair.] Disgusted.

THE CLERK. What more can we do? We've shut up everything. The picture gallery is shut. The museum is shut. The theatres and picture shows is shut: I haven't seen a movie picture for six months.

AUGUSTUS. Man, man: do you want to see picture shows when the Hun is at the gate?

THE CLERK [mournfully]. I don't now, though it drove me melancholy mad at first. I was on the point of taking a pennorth of rat poison--

AUGUSTUS. Why didn't you?

THE CLERK. Because a friend advised me to take to drink instead. That saved my life, though it makes me very poor company in the mornings, as [hiccuping] perhaps you've noticed.

AUGUSTUS. Well, upon my soul! You are not ashamed to stand there and confess yourself a disgusting drunkard.

THE CLERK. Well, what of it? We're at war now; and everything's changed. Besides, I should lose my job here if I stood drinking at the bar. I'm a respectable man and must buy my drink and take it home with me. And they won't serve me with less than a quart. If you'd told me before the war that I could get through a quart of whisky in a day, I shouldn't have believed you. That's the good of war: it brings out powers in a man that he never suspected himself capable of. You said so yourself in your speech last night.

AUGUSTUS. I did not know that I was talking to an imbecile. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. There must be an end of this drunken slacking. I'm going to establish a new order of things here. I shall come down every morning before breakfast until things are properly in train. Have a cup of coffee and two rolls for me here every morning at half-past ten.

THE CLERK. You can't have no rolls. The only baker that baked rolls was a Hun; and he's been interned.

AUGUSTUS. Quite right, too. And was there no Englishman to take his place?

THE CLERK. There was. But he was caught spying; and they took him up to London and shot him.

AUGUSTUS. Shot an Englishman!

THE CLERK. Well, it stands to reason if the Germans wanted to spy they wouldn't employ a German that everybody would suspect, don't it?

AUGUSTUS [rising again]. Do you mean to say, you scoundrel, that an Englishman is capable of selling his country to the enemy for gold?

THE CLERK. Not as a general thing I wouldn't say it; but there's men here would sell their own mothers for two coppers if they got the chance.

AUGUSTUS. Beamish, it's an ill bird that fouls its own nest.

THE CLERK. It wasn't me that let Little Pifflington get foul. I don't belong to the governing classes. I only tell you why you can't have no rolls.

AUGUSTUS [intensely irritated]. Can you tell me where I can find an intelligent being to take my orders?

THE CLERK. One of the street sweepers used to teach in the school until it was shut up for the sake of economy. Will he do?

AUGUSTUS. What! You mean to tell me that when the lives of the gallant fellows in our trenches, and the fate of the British Empire, depend on our keeping up the supply of shells, you are wasting money on sweeping the streets?

THE CLERK. We have to. We dropped it for a while; but the infant death rate went up something frightful.

AUGUSTUS. What matters the death rate of Little Pifflington in a moment like this? Think of our gallant soldiers, not of your squalling infants.

THE CLERK. If you want soldiers you must have children. You can't buy em in boxes, like toy soldiers.

AUGUSTUS. Beamish, the long and the short of it is, you are no patriot. Go downstairs to your office; and have that gas stove taken away and replaced by an ordinary grate. The Board of Trade has urged on me the necessity for economizing gas.

THE CLERK. Our orders from the Minister of Munitions is to use gas instead of coal, because it saves material. Which is it to be?

AUGUSTUS [bawling furiously at him]. Both! Don't criticize your orders: obey them. Yours not to reason why: yours but to do and die. That's war. [Cooling down.] Have you anything else to say?

THE CLERK. Yes: I want a rise.

AUGUSTUS [reeling against the table in his horror]. A rise! Horatio Floyd Beamish, do you know that we are at war?

THE CLERK [feebly ironical]. I have noticed something about it in the papers. Heard you mention it once or twice, now I come to think of it.

AUGUSTUS. Our gallant fellows are dying in the trenches; and you want a rise!

THE CLERK. What are they dying for? To keep me alive, ain't it? Well, what's the good of that if I'm dead of hunger by the time they come back?

AUGUSTUS. Everybody else is making sacrifices without a thought of self; and you--

THE CLERK. Not half, they ain't. Where's the baker's sacrifice? Where's the coal merchant's? Where's the butcher's? Charging me double: that's how they sacrifice themselves. Well, I want to sacrifice myself that way too. Just double next Saturday: double and not a penny less; or no secretary for you [he stiffens himself shakily, and makes resolutely for the door.]

AUGUSTUS [looking after him contemptuously]. Go, miserable pro-German.

THE CLERK [rushing back and facing him]. Who are you calling a pro-German?

AUGUSTUS. Another word, and I charge you under the Act with discouraging me. Go.

The clerk blanches and goes out, cowed.

The telephone rings.

AUGUSTUS [taking up the telephone receiver. Hallo. Yes: who are you?...oh, Blueloo, is it?...Yes: there's nobody in the room: fire away. What?...A spy!...A woman!...Yes: brought it down with me. Do you suppose I'm such a fool as to let it out of my hands? Why, it gives a list of all our anti-aircraft emplacements from Ramsgate to Skegness. The Germans would give a million for it-- what?... But how could she possibly know about it? I haven't mentioned it to a soul, except, of course, dear Lucy...Oh, Toto and Lady Popham and that lot: they don't count: they're all right. I mean that I haven't mentioned it to any Germans.... Pooh! Don't you be nervous, old chap. I know you think me a fool; but I'm not such a fool as all that. If she tries to get it out of me I'll have her in the Tower before you ring up again. [The clerk returns.] Sh-sh! Somebody's just come in: ring off. Goodbye. [He hangs up the receiver.]

THE CLERK. Are you engaged? [His manner is strangely softened.]

AUGUSTUS. What business is that of yours? However, if you will take the trouble to read the society papers for this week, you will see that I am engaged to the Honorable Lucy Popham, youngest daughter of--

THE CLERK. That ain't what I mean. Can you see a female?

AUGUSTUS. Of course I can see a female as easily as a male. Do you suppose I'm blind?

THE CLERK. You don't seem to follow me, somehow. There's a female downstairs: what you might call a lady. She wants to know can you see her if I let her up.

AUGUSTUS. Oh, you mean am I disengaged. Tell the lady I have just received news of the greatest importance which will occupy my entire attention for the rest of the day, and that she must write for an appointment.

THE CLERK. I'll ask her to explain her business to me. I ain't above talking to a handsome young female when I get the chance [going].

AUGUSTUS. Stop. Does she seem to be a person of consequence?

THE CLERK. A regular marchioness, if you ask me.

AUGUSTUS. Hm! Beautiful, did you say?

THE CLERK. A human chrysanthemum, sir, believe me.

AUGUSTUS. It will be extremely inconvenient for me to see her; but the country is in danger; and we must not consider our own comfort. Think how our gallant fellows are suffering in the trenches! Show her up. [The clerk makes for the door, whistling the latest popular ballad]. Stop whistling instantly, sir. This is not a casino.

CLERK. Ain't it? You just wait till you see her. [He goes out.]

Augustus produces a mirror, a comb, and a pot of moustache pomade from the drawer of the writing-table, and sits down before the mirror to put some touches to his toilet.

The clerk returns, devotedly ushering a very attractive lady, brilliantly dressed. She has a dainty wallet hanging from her wrist. Augustus hastily covers up his toilet apparatus with *The Morning Post*, and rises in an attitude of pompous condescension.

THE CLERK [to Augustus]. Here she is. [To the lady.] May I offer you a chair, lady? [He places a chair at the writing-table opposite Augustus, and steals out on tiptoe.]

AUGUSTUS. Be seated, madam.

THE LADY [sitting down]. Are you Lord Augustus Highcastle?

AUGUSTUS [sitting also]. Madam, I am.

THE LADY [with awe]. The great Lord Augustus?

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