

Be Yourself

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Chapter 1

Be Yourself

A Doctor Who Short Story

Be Yourself; everyone else is already taken

Oscar Wilde

It was cold, even for Valentine's Day. Flakes of snow drifted down from an overcast sky. There would be a snow storm later Oscar Wilde thought glumly and hoped it would hold off until the curtain rose.

As he approached the theatre he made out the form of a man standing in front of the doors. In spite of the cold the man appeared to be wearing a velvet frock coat and his hair hung in untidy curls to his shoulders.

"Doctor!"

The man looked up in surprise. "Sorry?"

"Doctor!"

Wilde clasped him by the shoulders and stared intently into his face. "Doctor?"

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

The brown eyes that stared back were familiar but the expression of loss and confusion was different. "Doctor?" he repeated, again, uncertainly.

The man continued to look at him blankly for a moment and then said. "I'm afraid I would appear to have lost my memory."

"There are many I know who would consider that a blessing. How did you get here?" asked Wilde.

The man frowned and then shook his head. "I'm not sure."

"You had better come with me," Wilde decided. "I'm sure you are in the middle of a scrape. I do hope it is not a vulgar one. That would be terribly tiresome."

“Is it likely that I’m in a vulgar scrape?”

“Extremely, I’m afraid. I am given to understand you live a life of high excitement and need the tedium of scrapes, adventures and other contrivances to slow the pace.”

The man smiled, a little nervously.

“Really Doctor,” said Wilde. “I can not leave you in this state, you appear positively dull. I am opening a play tonight in this very theatre and I am needed. Society arrives in order to see each other and for some obscure reason they feel they need to see me too. You had best join me in my box. You will be a great mystery and there will be much talk to amuse the readers of the better sort of newspaper tomorrow.”

The Doctor stood at the back of the foyer of St. James’ Theatre. The walls were covered in embossed green and gold wallpaper while the floor was covered with rich looking rugs out of which rose an ornate marble stair case. Everywhere was luxurious and tactile. He felt a little overwhelmed. Wilde was being frustratingly elusive. He had insisted he call himself the Doctor and continued to hint at strange adventures and mysterious talents but every time the Doctor thought he might pin him down to something specific the man was called upon by some society matron or harassed member of the theatre staff and the moment was lost.

“It’s the Marquess!” said Wilde, suddenly, in a low voice.

“Who?”

“The Marquess of Queensberry.” A look of amusement crossed Wilde’s face. “I’ll explain later.”

The Doctor watched with curiosity as a heavy-set man was politely, but firmly, intercepted by some of the theatre staff. Oscar Wilde hovered in the background next to a tall dark haired man who the Doctor vaguely recalled as a manager.

The Marquess, it appeared, had support in the form of several equally burly men but, at a gesture from the manager, a number of policemen appeared from where they had been stationed outside the theatre. In disgust the Marquess threw a large bouquet, which appeared to consist primarily of fruit and vegetables to the floor, before he was escorted from the theatre.

The thought crossed the Doctor’s mind that the whole fracas was rather shocking for the time and place, and that he should find this a little amusing.

As he thought this, a flicker of movement among the bouquet caught the Doctor's attention. He had the impression of a swift movement that ran up the balustrade of the staircase and through into the crush room beyond. Intrigued, the Doctor took a step towards the stair case and then, with sudden eagerness he tripped lightly up the marble stairs. He found himself in a confection of tapestry and glass, full of excited theatre goers.

Over the buzz of conversation the Doctor could hear a kind of echo as if the words were bouncing back. He frowned and gazed upwards. The gas lamps cast a warm soft light and long shadows. He had the distinct impression that the strange echo emanated from one part of the ceiling and he stared intently at the spot, watching how the shadows seemed to distort and curl. Then with a flicker he saw movement again heading through one of the curtained doorways and into the Dress Circle.

The Doctor followed.

The Dress Circle was low and the Doctor weaved his way down the aisles to the front, gazing upwards towards the ceiling the whole time. His ears rang with that faint echo as the people swirled around him. As his gaze roamed out over the auditorium he saw the smallest flicker of movement at the Proscenium arch.

There was a hand on his arm. It was Wilde.

"We are finally ready to start," he said. "A mere ten minutes late but George is acting as if any further delay will be a catastrophe worse than dining with vegetarians."

"I thought I saw something," said the Doctor.

"You may well have done, my friend. Your eyes are sharp. I hope you do not also feel any foreboding."

"I can't say that I do. Should I?"

"Let us say that I sincerely hope not. Come the play is almost begun."

"You know," said the Doctor thoughtfully in the interval. "I have the strangest feeling I have seen this play before somewhere."

Wilde laughed. "It would not greatly surprise me Doctor, for you are full of paradoxes, but I hope you will not let on to Society or my reputation will be ruined."

"Oscar!" They both turned. George Alexander had entered the box, his face was plastered with the heavy stage make-up he needed to play Jack.

“Goodness, George, you appear positively flustered.”

“It’s Miss Leclercq. She’s lost her voice!”

At that moment the words, “A Handbag!” rang out clearly from behind the curtain.

“She would have appeared to have recovered it,” observed Wilde

“That’s just it. She hasn’t! She’s entirely lost her voice and someone is imitating her.”

“Well, Doctor!” said Wilde. “Shall we investigate. It must be said I suspected events of this kind as soon as I saw your face. I do hope it will prove more diverting than entertaining over-eager young heiresses.”

The Doctor looked alarmed. “Do you think I am in some way responsible?”

“Of course not, dear Doctor. But I nevertheless confidently expect you to resolve the matter. Lead the way, George!”

The Doctor stared bemused at the woman in front of him. She had long, greying brown hair, worked into an elaborate style. She smiled cautiously at him as he entered.

“An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise,” intoned a voice, sounding just like Rose Leclercq’s but clearly not issuing from her mouth. “Pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be.”

“Fascinating!” said Wilde. “Doctor! Your opinion?”

Cautiously, the Doctor approached the woman.

“There was this lizard-like creature,” said a maid, from behind her. “It sort of darted across Miss Leclercq’s face and after that she couldn’t speak.”

“Your uncle will have to dine upstairs,” came the voice. “Fortunately he is accustomed to that.”

“Could you open your mouth, please?” asked the Doctor.

Obediently, Rose Leclercq opened her mouth.

He raised a paraffin lamp from the table and peered vaguely down her throat in the half-light. “Well there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with the back of the mouth?” he said, surprising even himself with his certainty. “Could you try saying something?”

Her lips moved. The Doctor saw the faintest sign of a movement in the air, as if his gaze zoomed in on strange particles and then out again to the room. He looked around, startled.

“Again please.” This time he concentrated on the effect. It was as if he saw the air molecules minutely compressed by the sound and then a counter-wave came against it, cancelling it out. He frowned.

“Mr Alexander, would you be so kind as to slam the door of this room as Miss Leclercq is speaking.”

George Alexander looked surprised.

“Do as he says,” demanded Wilde.

“Miss Leclercq, again please,” said the Doctor.

Miss Leclercq began to speak. As she did so George Alexander slammed the door. “Hello? Hello?”

Miss Leclercq’s voice sounded briefly and then faded away.

“Amazing!” The Doctor was enchanted. “Something is dampening out the sound. But when we over-ride it with a louder sound then the damping effect is defeated.”

“That’s all very well, Doctor,” muttered Wilde. “But we can hardly perform Act 3 accompanied by the sound of banging doors.”

“Speaking of which,” said Alexander, “Act 2 is about to begin and you have yet to meet his Highness.”

“I’m sure the Prince can wait until the second interval,” said Wilde. He patted the Doctor on the shoulder. “Fortunately Lady Bracknell does not appear in Act 2. I must return to my box, Doctor, but I have every confidence that you can resolve this conundrum for me in time for her dramatic entrance in the final act.”

“Miss Leclercq, would you be so kind as to turn the other way and attempt to speak.”

Obediently Miss Leclercq turned away. There was no sound. The Doctor’s felt a sense of disappointment.

“Of course!” he said. “It can still perceive the movement of the air once it is beyond the shadow of her head. Young lady!” he waved at the maid. “Could you place your ear close Miss Leclercq’s mouth and she will whisper to you.”

Obediently the maid knelt down beside Miss Leclercq, who bent her head to whisper in her ear. The maid gasped. “I heard her voice!”

The Doctor found his mind was racing. He lifted his lamp up close to the ceiling, recalling the strange glimpses of movement he had seen earlier in the foyer and the strange echo of conversation he had associated with it.

“Whatever is causing this must be able to perceive the movement of the air caused by the vibrations as Miss Leclercq speaks. Ergo, it is still in this room somewhere. Miss Leclercq, could you perhaps remove to another room. I will stand guard at the door.”

The Doctor carefully placed himself at the doorway, while Miss Leclercq exited the room. A patch of ceiling flickered and he briefly saw a form that did, indeed, appear something like a small lizard. It was exactly the colour of the ceiling, he realised, but as it moved its colour changed, but not quite in time with the lizard itself. It caused a slight ripple effect as if the outline of the lizard glided over the surface of the plaster.

It darted towards the door and the Doctor made a grab for it with his hands. He felt a silky smoothness and then it slipped through his fingers. He darted out into the corridor, lamp held high.

“Which way did it go?”

The others looked at him blankly.

“I still can’t speak,” said a surprisingly Irish voice.

They all turned to gaze at Miss Leclercq. “Well, that’s a mercy anyhow,” she added, looking surprised.

The Doctor sought out George Alexander, waiting nervously in the wings. “You have some kind of creature loose in your theatre, Mr. Alexander. That, it would appear, both mimics and steals voices.”

“There was a problem with someone chattering in the wings during the last act,” murmured back Alexander quietly. “Could that have been it?”

“Possibly, possibly,” the Doctor bounced lightly on his feet. “If you don’t mind, I’ll have a quick poke around.”

The wings were shrouded in darkness compared to the bright lights on the stage. The Doctor doubted he would be able to spot the small, camouflaged creature. Instead he closed his eyes to the bustle and listened for sound of chattering.

Gradually, at the periphery of his hearing he began to detect the murmur of voices and then, very clearly, “I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.”

Two actors walked off the stage, just as two more entered from the far side. There was a flicker of movement. The girl gave a small gasp and clutched her face.

“Into the corridor,” whispered the Doctor.

Once properly back stage, the Doctor looked curiously at the woman who was opening and closing her mouth rapidly and silently.

“What the devil has happened?” demanded the man.

“Doctor,” said Alexander. “This is Mr Aynesworth and Miss Millard. This is the Doctor. We have a small problem he’s helping with.”

“Hmmm.... Everyone keep calm. We’ll have you sorted out in no time, Miss Millard.” He held up his lamp once more. “It must be around here somewhere.”

“The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.”

“What a minute!” said the Doctor. He glared at the actress. “That wasn’t one of your lines, was it?”

Miss Millard shook her head.

“It’s one of Miss Prism’s,” said Alexander. “She is on stage at the moment. I will check.”

He returned moments later and shook his head. “She can be heard fine, Doctor.”

The Doctor nodded. “So it clearly can mimic anything it hears. I wonder why it only suppresses some voices?”

He continued searching the ceiling. “Miss Millard, let me suggest you proceed to your dressing room. We may lure the creature into following us and catch it that way. Mr Aynesworth, could you hold the lamp?”

Carefully they moved back down the corridor, Mr. Aynesworth holding the lamp high to the ceiling while the Doctor watched closely.

“There it is!” he called and leaped up towards the small shape which once again darted away down the corridor.

“Don’t lose it!” called the Doctor, running along.

The glimmer of movement and the sound of chattering vanished through a dark doorway.

“Where does this lead?” asked the Doctor, plunging through and heading down the stairs.

“Prop storage and its the route through to the other side of the stage.”

“Jolly good!”

The Doctor paused in the prop store, listening carefully for the faint sound of chittering. His eyes fell on a butterfly net, resting against one of the walls.

“Aha! Just the thing!”

He grasped the net and then stalked through to the far side of the stage.

Once again there was a faint sound of chittering in the wings, but it was difficult to track it down to a single location. The Doctor was muttering in frustration as the act came to an end.

“How goes it, Doctor?” called Wilde.

“Frustratingly, to be honest. It’s some kind of creature with extraordinary powers of mimicry.”

“The lizard that Miss Leclercq’s maid claimed to have seen?” said a new voice.

The Doctor’s gaze slid beyond Wilde to see a large man with an impressive beard and moustache. “Your Highness!” he exclaimed in surprise, frantically wondering how he had known this was the correct form of address.

“Do not fear, Doctor,” the man said, “I bear none of my mother’s antipathy towards you.”

“That’s a relief, sir,” said the Doctor, hiding his confusion.

“But, why? Doctor. Why is it stealing voices?” asked Wilde.

“That’s an extraordinarily good question.” The Doctor paused to consider. “Of course elaborate calls are an entirely standard mechanism for attracting a mate. I wonder?”

“This creature attracts the opposite sex by reciting the words of my play? I may be an egotist Doctor, but even I find that far fetched.”

“Not just words, Oscar, don’t you see it’s sounds. It mimics sounds. It must gather unusual sounds which is what it is doing here!”

“And the silences? Can you account for them?” asked the Prince of Wales.

“Silencing a rival perhaps? If you can mimic your rival’s collection of sounds and silence them, then you can steal their mate! So it steals sounds and then silences the creature that makes them.”

“So the creature is merely acting according to its nature?” said Wilde. “I confess to being somewhat relieved, though it makes it no less troublesome.”

“But that means we can attract it, with sounds. Would this theatre happen to have a gramophone?”

On the far side of the stage curtain, the Doctor could hear the murmur of the audience. Around him stage hands struggled to transform Jack Worthing’s garden into his living room. Meanwhile, in the centre of the stage George Alexander had set up a gramophone and they were busy playing the national anthem. The Doctor was uncomfortably aware of both the Prince of Wales and Oscar Wilde standing at his shoulders.

“Again,” said the Doctor as the cylinder came to its end.

Alexander rewound the gramophone and set the stylus back to the beginning. Once again the mixture of sounds echoed across the stage. The Doctor thought he heard the faintest of chittering noises.

“Again,” whispered the Doctor.

The chittering noise drew closer. The Doctor allowed himself to zone out a little. He felt as if he was consciously pulling out and away from the irrelevant details and focusing on searching for that tell-tale flicker of movement. As his attention pulled out he saw it: the form of a lizard moving across the stage. He whipped out with the net.

“I’m glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.” The voice sounded distinctly angry.

“It can obviously pick up hints from tone as well,” murmured the Doctor, holding on to the lizard. “Fascinating.”

“Right,” said the Prince of Wales. “Mr Alexander, do you have a good club? Have someone take the thing outside and get rid of it.”

“No!” said the Doctor, outraged.

“I may not share my mother’s dislike of you, Doctor. But this creature has come dangerously close to ruining a night’s entertainment.”

“Ruining a night’s entertainment!” the Doctor bridled. “You would kill it for that!”

“Can you control it, Doctor?” intervened Wilde.

The Doctor looked down at the creature in his arms. It was still hard to see since it had blended with the velvet of his coat but he knew where it was and stroked its head. It trembled in his hands. “It’s not a danger to anyone,” he said. “Especially if it can’t see the air in front of people. If you have a box or a basket I could carry it in?”

“There’s one in the props room,” said Alexander.

The Prince of Wales glowered. “Very well, but if the damn thing escapes I shall hold you responsible.”

The Doctor sat through the final act with the basket on his knee. Occasionally lines from the play emanated quietly from within.

“I wonder if the Marquess knew he was carrying it?” mused Wilde.

“Oh, I’m sure he did. I’m more curious to know how he came by it.”

“Some explorer I should think. He’s not a pleasant man, but he has contacts. Someone might have approached him. I must see about him somehow. Bosie keeps urging me to sue him.”

The Doctor frowned, a vague premonition troubling his mind.

“How about you, Doctor?” asked Wilde. “What you will do now?”

“I’m not sure,” admitted the Doctor. “I still remember nothing at all before yesterday.”

“I shall find you some good lodgings for a few weeks or so,” said Wilde. “That should keep you going.”

“Do you think you could find something for our lizard friend as well?” asked the Doctor.

“I’m sure I can. I confess to a sense of relief, Doctor. You seem more yourself than you appeared this morning. I was almost tempted to be serious.”

The Doctor smiled. “I may not have much memory, Mr. Wilde, but I do at least know one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“The vital importance of Being the Doctor.”