



Library podcast

Virtual Thrilling Tales: Master of the Fallen Years by Vincent O'Sullivan

Hello, and welcome to Thrilling Tales: Seattle Public Library's Storytime for Grownups. I'm your librarian reader, David Wright.

Have you ever dreamed of a long ago time, and a faraway place, where ancient kings and queens walked the earth, or perhaps even gods? What if it wasn't a dream?

And now, Master of the Fallen Years, by Vincent O'Sullivan.

Several years ago, I was intimately acquainted with a young man named Augustus Barber. He was employed in a paper-box manufacturer's business in the city of London. I never heard what his father was. His mother was a widow and lived, I think, at Godalming; but of this I am not sure. It is odd enough that I should have forgotten where she lived, for my friend was always talking about her. Sometimes he seemed immensely fond of her; at other times almost to hate her; but whichever it was, he never left her long out of his conversation. I believe the reason I forget is that he talked so much about her that I failed at last to pay attention to what he said.

He was a stocky young man, with light-coloured hair and a pale, rather blotchy complexion. There was nothing at all extraordinary about him on either the material or spiritual side. He had rather a weakness for gaudy ties and socks and jewelry. His manners were a little boisterous; his conversation, altogether personal. He had received some training at a commercial school. He read little else than the newspapers. The only book I ever knew him to read was a novel of Stevenson's, which he said was "too hot for blisters."

Where, then, in this very commonplace young man, were hidden the elements of the extraordinary actions and happenings I am about to relate? Various theories offer; it is hard to decide. Doctors, psychologists whom I have consulted, have given different opinions; but upon one point they have all agreed--that I am not able to supply enough information about his ancestry. And, in fact, I know hardly anything about that.

This is not, either, because he was uncommunicative. As I say, he used to talk a lot about his mother. But he did not really inspire enough interest for anybody to take an interest in his affairs. He was there; he was a pleasant enough fellow; but when he had gone you were finished with him till the next

time. If he did not look you up, it would never occur to you to go and see him. And as to what became of him when he was out of sight, or how he lived--all that, somehow, never troubled our heads. What illustrates this is that when he had a severe illness a few years after I came to know him, so little impression did it make on anyone that I cannot now say, and nobody else seems able to remember, what the nature of the illness was. But I remember that he was very ill indeed; and one day, meeting one of his fellow clerks in Cheapside, he told me that Barber's death was only a question of hours. But he recovered, after being, as I heard, for a long time in a state of lethargy which looked mortal.

It was when he was out again that I--and not only myself but others--noticed for the first time that his character was changing. He had always been a laughing, undecided sort of person; he had a facile laugh for everything; he would meet you and begin laughing before there was anything to laugh at. This was certainly harmless, and he had a deserved reputation for good humor.

But his manners now became subject to strange fluctuations, which were very objectionable while they lasted. He would be overtaken with fits of sullenness in company; at times he was violent. He took to rambling in strange places at night, and more than once he appeared at his office in a very battered condition. It is difficult not to think that he provoked the rows he got himself into. One good thing was that the impulses which drove him to do such actions were violent rather than enduring; in fact, I often thought that if the force and emotion of these bouts ever came to last longer, he would be a very dangerous character. This was not only my opinion; it was the opinion of a number of respectable people who knew him as well as I did.

I recollect that one evening, as three or four of us were coming out of a music hall, Barber offered some freedom to a lady which the gentleman with her--a member of Parliament, I was told--thought fit to resent. He turned fiercely on Barber with his hand raised--and then suddenly grew troubled, stepped back, lost countenance. This could not have been physical fear, for he was a strongly built, handsome man--a giant compared to the insignificant Barber. But Barber was looking at him, and there was something not only in his face, but, so to speak, encompassing him--I can't well describe it--a sort of abstract right--an uncontrolled power--a command of the issues of life and death, which made one quail.

Everybody standing near felt it; I could see that from their looks. Only for a moment it lasted, and then the spell was broken--really as if some formidable spectacle had been swept away from before our eyes; and there was Barber, a most ordinary looking young man, quiet and respectable, and so dazed that he scarcely heeded the cuff which the gentleman managed to get in before we could drag our friend off--

It was about this time that he began to show occasionally the strangest interest in questions of art--I mean, strange in him whom we had never known interested in anything of the kind. I am told, however, that this is not so very remarkable, since not a few cases have been observed of men and women, after some shock or illness, developing hitherto unsuspected aptitude for painting or poetry

or music. But in such cases the impulse lasts continuously for a year or two, and now and then for life.

With Barber the crisis was just momentary, never lasting more than half an hour, often much less. In the midst of his emphatic and pretentious talk, he would break off suddenly, remain for a minute lost and dreaming, and then, after spying at us suspiciously to see if we had noticed anything strange, he would give an undecided laugh and repeat a joke he had read in some comic paper.

His talk on these art subjects was without sense or connection, so far as I could discover. Sometimes he spoke of painting, but when we put to him the names of famous painters, he had never heard of them, and I don't believe he had ever been in an art gallery in his life. More often he spoke of theatrical matters. Coming back from a theatre, he would sometimes fall to abusing the actors, and show the strongest jealousy, pointing out how the parts should have been played, and claiming roundly that he could have played them better. Of course, there were other times--most times--when he was alike indifferent to plays and players, or summed them up like the rest of us, as just "ripping" or "rotten." It was only when the play had much excited him that he became critical, and at such times none of us seemed willing to dispute with him, though we hardly ever agreed with what he was saying.

Sometimes, too, he would talk of his travels, telling obvious lies, for we all knew well enough that he had never been outside the home counties, except once on a week-end trip to Boulogne-sur-mer. On one occasion he put me to some confusion and annoyed me considerably before a gentleman whom I had thoughtlessly brought him with me to visit. This gentleman had long resided in Rome as agent for an English hosiery firm, and he and his wife were kindly showing us some photographs, picture post-cards, and the like, when, at the sight of a certain view, Barber bent over the picture and became absorbed.

"I have been there," he said.

The others looked at him with polite curiosity and a little wonder. To pass it off I began to mock.

"No," he persisted, "I have seen it."

"Yes, at the moving-pictures."

But he began to talk rapidly and explain. I could see that the gentleman and his wife were interested and quite puzzled. It would seem that the place he described--Naples, I think it was--resembled broadly the place they knew, but with so many differences of detail as to be almost unrecognizable. It was, as Mrs. W. said afterward, "like a city perceived in a dream--all the topsy-turvydom, all the mingling of fantasy and reality."

After outbursts of this kind, he was generally ill--at least he kept his bed and slept much. As a consequence, he was often away from the office; and whenever I thought of him in those days, I used to wonder how he managed to keep his employment.

One foggy evening in January, about eight o'clock, I happened to be walking with Barber in the West End. We passed before a concert hall, brilliantly lighted, with a great crowd of people gathered about the doors, and I read on a poster that a concert of classical music was forward at which certain renowned artists were to appear. I really cannot give any sort of reason why I took it into my head to go in. I am rather fond of music, even of the kind which requires a distinct intellectual effort; but I was not anxious to hear music that night, and in any case, Barber was about the last man in the world I should have chosen to hear it with. When I proposed that we should take tickets, he strongly objected.

"Just look me over," he said. "I ain't done anything to you that you want to take my life, have I? I know the kind of merry-go-round that goes on in there, and I'm not having any."

I suppose it was his opposition which made me stick to the project, for I could not genuinely have cared very much, and there was nothing to be gained by dragging Barber to a concert against his will. Finally, seeing I was determined, he yielded, though most ungraciously.

"It'll be the chance of a lifetime for an hour's nap," he said as we took our seats, "if they only keep the trombone quiet."

I repeat his trivial sayings to show how little there was about him in manner or speech to prepare me for what followed.

I remember that the first number on the programme was Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. This work, as is well known, is rather long, and so, at the end of the third movement, I turned and looked at Barber to see if he was asleep. But his eyes were wide open, feverish, almost glaring; he was twining and untwining his fingers and muttering excitedly. Throughout the fourth movement he continued to talk incoherently.

"Shut up!" I whispered fiercely. "Just see if you can't keep quiet, or we shall be put out." I was indeed very much annoyed, and some people near by were turning in their chairs and frowning.--

I do not know whether he heard what I said: I had no chance to talk to him. The applause had hardly died away at the end of the symphony when a singer appeared on the stage. Who he was, or what music he sang, I am utterly unable to say; but if he is still alive it is impossible that he should have forgotten what I relate. If I do not remember him, it is because all else is swallowed up for me in that extraordinary event.

Scarcely had the orchestra ceased preluding and the singer brought out the first notes of his song, than Barber slowly rose from his seat.

"That man is not an artist," he said in a loud and perfectly final voice, "I will sing myself."

"Sit down, for God's sake!--The management--the police"--

Some words like these I gasped, foreseeing the terrible scandal which would ensue, and I caught him by the arm. But he shook himself free without any difficulty, without even a glance at me, and walked up the aisle and across the front of the house toward the little stairs at the side which led up to the platform. By this time the entire audience was aware that something untoward was happening. There were a few cries of "Sit down! Put him out!" An usher hastened up as Barber was about to mount the steps.

Then a strange thing happened.

As the usher drew near, crying out angrily, I saw Barber turn and look at him. It was not, as I remember, a fixed look or a determined look; it was the kind of untroubled careless glance a man might cast over his shoulder who heard a dog bark. I saw the usher pause, grow pale and shamefaced feel like a servant who has made a mistake; he made a profound bow and then--yes, he actually dropped on his knees. All the people saw that. They saw Barber mount the platform, the musicians cease, the singer and the conductor give way before him. But never a word was said--there was a perfect hush. And yet, so far as my stunned senses would allow me to perceive, the people were not wrathful or even curious; they were just silent and collected as people generally are at some solemn ceremonial. Nobody but me seemed to realize the outrageousness and monstrosity of the vulgar-looking, insignificant Barber there on the platform, holding up the show, stopping the excellent music we had all paid to hear.

And in truth I myself was rapidly falling into the strangest confusion. For a certain time--I cannot quite say how long--I lost my hold on realities. The London concert hall, with its staid, rather sad-looking audience, vanished, and I was in a great white place inundated with sun--some vast luminous scene. Under a wide caressing blue sky, in the dry and limpid atmosphere, the white marble of the buildings and the white-clad people appeared as against a background of an immense blue veil shot with silver. It was the hour just before twilight, that rapid hour when the colors of the air have a supreme brilliance and serenity, and a whole people, impelled by some indisputable social obligation, seemed to be reverently witnessing the performance of one magnificent man of uncontrollable power, of high and solitary grandeur.--

Barber began to sing.

Of what he sang I can give no account. The words seemed to me here and there to be Greek, but I do not know Greek well, and in such words as I thought I recognized, his pronunciation was so different from what I had been taught that I may well have been mistaken.

I was so muddled, and, as it were, transported, that I cannot say even if he sang well. Criticism did not occur to me; he was there singing and we were bound to listen. As I try to hear it, now, it was a carefully trained voice. A sound of harps seemed to accompany the singing; perhaps the harpists in the orchestra touched their instruments.--

How long did it last? I have no idea. But it did not appear long before all began to waver. The spell began to break; the power by which he was compelling us to listen to him was giving out. It was exactly as if something, a mantle or the like, was falling from Barber.

The absurdity of the whole thing began to dawn on me. There was Barber, an obscure little Londoner, daring to interrupt a great musical performance so that the audience might listen to him instead! Probably because I was the only one on the spot personally acquainted with Barber, I was perceiving the trick put upon us sooner than the rest of the audience; but they, too, were becoming a little restless, and it would not be long ere they fully awoke. One thing I saw with perfect clearness and some terror, and that was that Barber himself realized that his power was dying within him. He appeared to be dwindling, shrinking down; in his eyes were suffering and a terrible panic--the distress of a beaten man appealing for mercy. The catastrophe must fall in a minute--

With some difficulty I rose from my place and made for the nearest exit. My difficulty came, not from the crowd or anything like that, but from an inexplicable sensation that I was committing some crime by stirring while Barber was on the stage, and even risking my life.

Outside it was raining.

I walked away rapidly, for although I was, to a certain extent, under the influence of the impression I have just described, some remains of common sense urged me to put a long distance between myself and the concert hall as soon as possible. I knew that the hoots and yells of fury and derision had already broken loose back there. Perhaps Barber would be taken to the police station. I did not want to be mixed up in the affair--

But suddenly I heard the steps of one running behind me. As I say, it was a wet night, and at that hour the street was pretty empty. Barber ran up against me and caught my arm. He was panting and trembling violently.

"You fool!" I cried furiously. "Oh, you fool!" I shook myself free of his hold. "How did you get out?"

"I don't know," he panted. "They let me go--that is, as soon as I saw that I was standing up there before them all, I jumped off the stage and bolted. Whatever made me do it? My God, what made me do it? I heard a shout. I think they are after me."

I hailed a passing cab and shoved Barber inside, and then got in myself. I gave the cabman a fictitious address in Kensington.

"Yes," I said fiercely. "What made you do it?"

He was bunched in a corner of the cab, shuddering like a man who has just had some great shock, or who has been acting under the influence of a drug which has evaporated and left him helpless. His words came in gasps.

"If you can tell me that!--God, I'm frightened! I'm frightened! I must be crazy. Whatever made me do it? If they hear of it at the office I'll lose my job."

"They'll hear of it right enough, my boy," I sneered, "and a good many other people too. You can't do these little games with impunity."

I caught sight of the clock at Hyde Park corner. It was near a quarter to ten.

"Why," I said, "you must have been up there over twenty minutes. Think of that!"

"Don't be so hard on me," said Barber miserably. "I couldn't help it."

And he added in a low voice: "It was the Other."

I paid off the cab, and we took a 'bus which passed by the street where Barber lived. All the way I continued to reproach him. It was not enough for him to play the fool on his own account, but he must get me into a mess, too. I might lose my work through him.

I walked with him to his door. He looked extremely ill. His hand trembled so badly that he could not fit his latchkey. I opened the door for him.

"Come up and sit with a fellow," he ventured.

"Why?"

"I'm frightened.--"

"I believe," I said roughly, "that you've been drinking--or drugging."

I shoved him inside the house, pulled the door closed, and walked away down the street. I was very angry and disturbed, but I felt also the need to treat Barber with contempt so as to keep myself alive to the fact that he was really a mere nothing, a little scum on the surface of London, of no more importance than a piece of paper on the pavement. For--shall I confess it?--I was even yet so much under the emotion of the scene back there in the concert hall that I could not help regarding him still with some mixture of respect and--yes, absurd as it may sound, of fear.

It was nearly a year before I saw Barber again. I heard that he had lost his place at his office. The cashier there, who told me this, said that although the young man was generally docile and a fair worker, he had in the last year become very irregular, and was often quarrelsome and impudent. He added that Barber could now and then influence the management--"when he was not himself," as the cashier put it--or they would not have tolerated him so long.

"But this was only momentary," said the cashier. "He was more often weak and feeble, and they took a good opportunity to get rid of him. He was uncanny," ended the cashier significantly.

I cannot imagine how Barber existed after he lost his place. Perhaps his mother was able to help a little. On the day I met him, by mere chance in the street, he looked sick and miserable; his sallow face was more blotchy than ever. Whether he saw me or not I don't know, but he was certainly making as if to go by when I stopped him. I told him he looked weak and unwell.

"Trust you to pass a cheery remark!" And he continued irritably:

"How can you expect a chap to look well if he has something inside him stronger than himself forcing him to do the silliest things? It must wear him out. I never know when it will take me next. I'm here in London looking for a job today, but even if I find one, I'm sure to do some tom-fool thing that will get me the sack."

He passed his hand across his face. "I'd rather not think about it."

I took pity on him, he looked so harassed, and I asked him to come on to a Lyons restaurant with me and have a bit of lunch. As we walked through the streets, we fell in with a great crowd, and then I remembered that some royal visitors were to proceed in great state to the Mansion House. I proposed to Barber that we should go and look at the procession, and he agreed more readily than I expected. In fact, after a while, the crowd, and the rumor, and stirring of troops as they fell into position, evidently wrought on him to a remarkable degree. He began to talk loud and rather haughtily, to study his gestures; there was infinite superiority and disdain in the looks he cast on the people. He attracted the attention and, I thought, the derision of those close to us, and I became rather ashamed and impatient of those ridiculous airs. Yet I could not help feeling sorry for him. The poor creature evidently suffered from megalomania--that was the only way to account for his pretentious notions of his own importance, seeing that he was just a needy little clerk out of work.--

The place from which we were watching the procession was a corner of Piccadilly Circus. The street lay before our eyes bleached in the sun, wide and empty, looking about three times as large as usual, bordered with a line of soldiers and mounted police, and the black crowd massed behind. In a few minutes the procession of princes would sweep by. There was a hush over all the people. What followed happened so quickly that I can hardly separate the progressive steps. Barber continued to talk excitedly, but all my attention being on the scene before me, I took no heed of what he said. Neither could I hear him very plainly. But it must have been the ceasing of his voice which made me look around, when I saw he was no longer by my side.

How he managed, at that moment, to get out there I never knew, but suddenly in the broad vacant space, fringed by police and soldiery, I saw Barber walking alone in the sight of all the people. I was thunderstruck. What a madman! I expected to hear the crowd roar at him, to see the police ride up and drag him away.

But nobody moved; there was a great stillness; and before I knew it my own feelings blended with the crowd's. It seemed to me that Barber was in his right place there: this mean shabby man, walking solitary, was what we had all come to see. For his passage the street had been cleared, the guards deployed, the houses decked.

It all sounds wild, I know, but the whole scene made so deep an impression on my mind that I am perfectly certain as to what I felt while Barber was walking there. He walked slowly, with no trace of his usual shuffling uncertain gait, but with a balanced cadenced step, and as he turned his head calmly from side to side his face seemed transfigured. It was the face of a genius, an evil genius, unjust and ruthless--a brutal god. I felt, and no doubt everyone in the crowd felt, that between us and that lonely man there was some immense difference and distance of outlook and will and desire.

I could follow his progress for several yards. Then I lost sight of him. Almost immediately afterward I heard a tumult--shouts and uproar--

Then the royal procession swept by.

I said to Mr. G.M., "Whether he was arrested that day, or knocked down by the cavalry and taken to a hospital, I don't know. I have not seen or heard of him till I got that letter on Wednesday."

Mr. G.M., who is now one of the managers of a well-known tobacconist firm, had been in the same office as Barber, and notwithstanding the disparity of age and position, had always shown a kindly interest in him and befriended him when he could. Accordingly, when I received a letter from Barber begging in very lamentable terms to visit him at an address in Kent, I thought it prudent to consult this gentleman before sending any reply. He proposed very amiably that we should meet at Charing Cross Station on the following Saturday afternoon and travel in to Kent together. In the train we discussed Barber's case. I related all I knew of the young man and we compared our observations. "Certainly," said Mr. G.M., "what you tell me is rather astonishing. But the explanation is simple as far as poor Barber is concerned. You say he has been often ill lately? Naturally, this has affected his brain and spirits. What is a little more difficult to explain is the impression left by his acts on you and other spectators. But the anger you always experienced may have clouded your faculties for the time being. Have you inquired of anybody else who was present on these occasions?"

I replied that I had not. I had shrunk from being identified in any way with Barber. I had to think of my wife and children. I could not afford to lose my post.

"No," rejoined Mr. G.M., "I can quite understand that. I should probably have acted myself as you did. Still, the effect his performances have had on you, and apparently on others, is the strangest element

in Barber's case. Otherwise, I don't see that it offers anything inexplicable. You say that Barber acts against his will--against his better judgment. We all do that. All men and women who look back over their lives must perceive the number of things they have done which they had no intention of doing. We obey some secret command; we sail under sealed orders. We pass by without noticing it some tiny fact which, years later, perhaps, influences the rest of our lives. And for all our thinking, we seldom can trace this tiny fact. I myself cannot tell to this day why I did not become a Baptist minister. It seems to me I always intended to do this, but one fine afternoon I found I had ended my first day's work in a house of business.

"Much of our life is unconscious; even the most wide-awake of us pass much of our lives in dreams. Several hours out of every twenty-four we pass in a dream state we cannot help carrying some of those happy or sinister adventures into our waking hours. It is really as much our habit to dream as to be awake. Perhaps we are always dreaming. Haven't you ever for a moment, under some powerful exterior shock, become half conscious that you should be doing something else from what you are actually doing? But with us this does not last; and as life goes on such intimations become dimmer and dimmer. With subjects like Barber, on the other hand, the intimations become stronger and stronger, till at last they attempt to carry their dreams into action. That is the way I explain this case."

"Perhaps you are right."

The house where Barber was lodging stood high up on the side of a hill. We reached it after a rather breathless climb in the rain. It was a shepherd's cottage, standing quite lonely. Far down below the village could be seen with the smoke above the red roofs.

The woman told us that Barber was in, but she thought he might be asleep. He slept a lot.

"I don't know how he lives," she said. "He pays us scarce anything. We can't keep him much longer." He was fast asleep, lying back in a chair with his mouth half open, wrapped in a shabby overcoat. He looked very mean; and when he awoke it was only one long wail on his hard luck. He couldn't get any work. People had a prejudice against him; they looked at him askance. He had a great desire for sleep--couldn't somehow keep awake.

"If I could tell you the dreams I have!" he cried fretfully. "Silliest rotten stuff. I try to tell 'em to the woman here or her husband sometimes, but they won't listen. Shouldn't be surprised if they think I'm a bit off. They say I'm always talking to myself. I'm sure I'm not.--I wish I could get out of here. Can't you get me a job?" he asked, turning to Mr. G.M.

"Well, Gus, I'll see. I'll do my best."

"Lummy!" exclaimed Barber excitedly, "you ought to see the things I dream. I can't think where the bloomin' pictures come from. And yet I've seen it all before. I know all those faces. They are not all white. Some are brown like Egyptians, and some are quite black. I've seen them somewhere. Those long terraces and statues and fountains and marble courts, and the blue sky and the sun, and those

dancing girls with the nails of their hands and feet stained red, and the boy in whose hair I wipe my fingers, and the slave I struck dead last night--"

His eyes were delirious, terrible to see.

"Ah," he cried hoarsely, "I am stifling here. Let us go into the air."

And indeed he was changing so much--not essentially in his person, though his face had become broader, intolerant, domineering and cruel--but there was pouring from him so great an emanation of power that it seemed to crack and break down the poor little room. Mr. G.M. and myself had no desire to thwart him, and it never occurred to us to do so. We should as soon have thought of stopping a thunderstorm. We followed him outside on to the space of level ground before the house and listened humbly while he spoke.

As well as I can recollect, he was lamenting some hindrance to his impulses, some flaw in his power. "To have the instincts of the ruler and no slaves to carry out my will. To wish to reward and punish and to be deprived of the means. To be the master of the world, but only in my own breast--Oh, fury! The ploughboy there is happy, for he has no longings outside of his simple round life. While I--if I had the earth in my hand, I should want a star. Misery! Misery!"

He leaned upon a low stonewall and looked down on the town, over the pastures blurred with rain.

"And those wretches down there," he pronounced slowly, "who jeer at me when I pass and insult me with impunity, whose heads should be struck off, and I cannot strike them off! I loathe that town. How ugly it is! It offends my eyes."

He turned and looked us full in the face and our hearts became as water.

"Burn it," he said.

Then he turned away again and bowed his head in his arms on the wall.

I don't remember anything clearly till a long time afterward, when I found myself walking with Mr. G.M. in the wet night on a deserted road on the outskirts of the town. We were carrying some inflammable things, flax, tar, matches, etc., which we must have purchased.

Mr. G.M. stopped and looked at me. It was exactly like coming out of a fainting fit.

"What are we doing with this gear?" he said in a low voice.

"I don't know."

"Better chuck it over a hedge.--"



We made our way to the station in silence. I was thinking of that desolate figure up there on the hill, leaning over the wall in the dark and the rain.

We caught the last train to London. In the carriage Mr. G.M. began to shiver as though he were cold.

"Brrr! that fellow got on my nerves," he said; and we made no further allusion to the matter.

But as the train, moving slowly, passed a gap which brought us again in sight of the town, we saw a tongue of flame stream into the sky.

The end. Thank you for listening to Thrilling Tales. Join us again in a couple of weeks for our next thrilling tale.

