

AMBITION AND LOVE.

I was once, as the phrase goes, on the stage, and part of my experience in the theatrical profession was gained as leading lady of a traveling company. During the nine months spent on the road with this organization it was my good fortune to form a friendship with one of the other members (thanks to her great kindness to me from the start), and at the end of the season—but first let me give some account of matters that preceded that blessed date.

In the play my friend took the part of the "unfortunate" young woman, and though it may appear to be neither here nor there as to my story I have an interest in recording that she acted remarkably well, on the whole, giving her part in a manner most unlike her own personality, though she gave it the same childlike quality that inhered in all her aspects. Her personality was, in truth, as little suited to the demands of this particular part as could be, for it told, speaking loudly, too, of a sunny, sweet common sense that is apt to forbid self-made misfortunes.

The company was made up chiefly of actors of long standing, genuine stage people, as they would have said, people who had been born and bred to the "show business." I, as a comparative novice (an outsider, they called me), met in the beginning a ready-made unpopularity. On that first day I furnished occasion for a little display of the ill feeling that awaited me by unwittingly giving offense to my stage husband in the rehearsal of a very tender scene. After it was over I turned to this gentleman with some idle but civil remark and was met by a stony stare as he turned silently away. I next saw the old woman talking to the old comedian and tossing her head toward me with a malevolent countenance, and presently the stage manager, in accents of bitterness, requested me to move out of the way—this when I was not in the way. The whole business of the stage was still desperately strange and in some ways painful to me at best. This sudden accession of hatred made me feel as if I were cast away upon some distant and worse than unpeopled planet.

While I sat apart upon some property rocks in all the blackness of youthful desolation, a desolation that the strange gloom of the great place, heightened by the orange gaslight and wan gleams of the white day outside, seemed to deepen more and more, I raised my eyes to find Maggie Linton standing looking down at me from her seat five feet, both hands in her jacket pockets, and—in the teeth of public sentiment—a friendly smile in her merry, dark eyes.

"Just saw a cross-eyed messenger boy come in," she began, by way of making conversation. "Bet he quays the show; bet we change some people before we start out. They better get rid of that Leroy anyhow. He's a Jonah. He was in a company I was season before last, and we bust up in Oshkosh. Who were you with last season?" Maggie queried, seating herself beside me. I made room for her on the stuffed rocks.

This was a tactful if insincere assumption that I was in good and regular theatrical standing. I replied that I was still at the beginning of professional life and told her of the engagements that constituted my whole theatrical experience. They had been, by the way, played under unusual and unusually pleasant circumstances.

"You're green," said Maggie, nodding her head conclusively and lapsing into candor. "Guess you don't know much about sure enough show folks. Bet you don't know what made 'em all mad at you this morning. Well, you see, you kept crawling up stage a little, even after Payson told you about it once. I knew you just weren't thinking, but Leroy got on his ear because he said you were trying to make him turn his back to the house; that that was your style. Naw," she went on, in response to a mild suggestion of my own, "that's so! First rehearsal I don't matter a pin, but you see they were all ready and waiting to jump on you, because they thought you were an outsider. Besides leading men are always awful touchy."

I mildly proposed that I should apologize.

"Don't you go and do anything of the sort. You just let 'em think you did it a-purpose if they want to. They'll think you're smarter than you are and think more of you too. Just you take care you don't get put down stage yourself when the first night comes. They'll try to put on you for awhile, but they're all right when you get to know 'em—least, most of 'em are. Old Payson'll be nice to you right along. You've got one of your big scenes with him, and he's more of an actor than anybody else in this company. He and my father played together with Forrest—hello, Jim!" She interrupted herself to throw this salutation pleasantly and laconically to a small, clean shaven, ugly young man. "That's Jim Bowman," she explained. "He plays the low comedy. It's a pretty good little part, and I guess he'll do it pretty good. He's an old timer—was with Jefferson once—but I think," Maggie hastened politely to add, "that some outsiders do awful well. If they're any account, they don't let down salaries any more than real professionals. If they're duffers, they won't stand much in anybody's way anyhow. That's how I look at it. I think it's mean to come down on you because you're an amateur. Bet me, though, why you want to go on the stage. I hate it. Stagecrack?" Maggie asked this as simply as if she were saying "Ee-ee-ee?" and with a kindred inflection of commiseration.

I wanted to find out why she hated the stage—the whole subject was fraught with interest for me—but Maggie was not analytical. She would only say that she wanted to live like other folks. She liked outsiders. She remarked that she'd like to live on a farm, only she'd want to go to the theater. It appeared that her hatred of the stage did not include any dislike of the histrionic art. On the contrary, as I subsequently had plenty of opportunity to observe, her notion of pleasure was typical of her class. She asked nothing better than to see any kind of a theatrical performance from "the front of the house."

Maggie's friendship and patronage (for she, too, you see, in her way felt with the rest that I was an object for patronage) were invaluable to me. She taught me various things, from the packing of a trunk to the best ways of managing the manager, and her helpful friendliness and miraculously fresh, honest good nature were to me in those days a boon like water to the parched. As she was very popular in the company, she soon helped to soften my unpopularity. Altogether she made that year's experience endurable.

In the course of time I learned a good deal of her family history from herself and from other people. It seemed that kinspeople of hers had frequently acquit-

ted themselves creditably, and more than creditably, in the rank and file of their profession and had added a little to the world's good art without burdening it with the fame of another artist—a most respect provoking record so far. Yet the family biography was in other ways of a highly commonplace, theatrical complexion and included many more marriages to the individual than happily ordinary history furnishes.

It was not, however, from the gossip of the company that I learned the interesting fact that Maggie had, in one of the company's members, a suitor for her hand in marriage.

One day on the cars Maggie herself told me that Jim Bowman wished to marry her, and she added: "He ain't ever been married at all, not to anybody. I've been in companies with him off and on four or five years, and I know people that have known him ever since he went on the stage—when he wasn't much more than a kid."

I saw that Maggie regarded Mr. Bowman's singular regard with satisfaction, yet she announced that she would not listen to him. Our talk was interrupted, but when next I saw her alone I asked how she could be so cruel to such a lover. Maggie was sitting before a coal fire in my room in a hotel in Memphis. I remember the afternoon well for many reasons than one. It was the last time I was comfortable, decently housed and fed and warmed, all at once, for many a weary day. Maggie was in a rocking chair and rocking steadily. Now she took the poker, and still rocking made thrusts as she swung forward at a big, blazing lump of soft coal. When it split and blazed again, she set the poker in its place, put one foot under her and said:

"Well, I'll tell you. I'm not going over to marry an actor, and Jim don't know any other way to get a living. You see, I'm not going to get married but once. I've made up my mind 'bout that. I'm not saying anything 'gainst stage people. My father played with Forrest in his whole repertoire, and my sister Kate is the best heavy lead in the legitimate on the road. The whole profession says so. She's got a backer now that'll likely star her next year, but"—Maggie paused, took her foot from under her, nursed her knee and stared into the fire—"I don't care about being on the stage myself. I know I'd like it better off. I don't like to act much, though I've got good notices every time I had a show, too. They said I was the best Marianne they'd had in the 'Two Orphans' in a long time. They all did. But I don't care much about it. Kate says she thinks it's awful strange. She loves to act. Then look at the people you see that are perfectly stage drunk, spout Hamlet and Juliet and things all the time, but they can hardly ever act a little bit. I don't see why any one likes it so—staring themselves all up about things that never happened. I like seeing it, but stirring yourself up's different somehow. I don't know why, but seeing other people act don't make me feel the same sort of sick way after. It's different. I like comedy parts best, but I hardly ever got 'em. I hate feeling a lot of queer ways. I never would myself. I'd never get myself into such fool boxes."

Maggie, with a sidewise glance at me, looked her contempt for the weak-minded heroine she habitually embodied. Before she left me she warned me to keep the secret of Jim's suit.

"Does no one in the company guess?"

I asked.

"Naw!" said Maggie, practicing a piece of Lottalike gymnastics across the back of a chair. "Jim knows I'd never speak to him again if he went and gave himself away and got them all cackling about me. I couldn't stand it. I've never been talked about in any company I've been in yet, though, of course, they may start up any time, just for nothing at all, but I've been lucky. I don't think myself any better than anybody else. It's not that." Maggie succeeded now in balancing herself steadily in a horizontal position on her chair back, after which, bringing her feet down to the floor, she stood an instant with downcast eyes and her head thrown reflectively to one side. Then she shook it slowly and repeated: "No-p. I'm only going to get married once, and I ain't going to put my pile on an actor. Jim's real name's Flannigan," she added over her shoulder, with her hand on the door. With this statement she departed.

So far as I know, there was no change in the position of affairs thus outlined until we came to Helena, Ark. It is far from my wish to wound the civic pride that any of its inhabitants may take in Helena, but I must now disclose the fact that it once presented to travelers an uninviting aspect. We were by this time schooled in adversity, but we found ourselves at closer quarters with starvation in Helena than ever before, and it was all so much the blacker because, of all times, we arrived on Christmas eve. Everything as we saw it was dismal, dreary, ugly—ugly to the verge of unreality, ugly as a nightmare, but we were hardened to ugliness. Christmas eve it was, all we cared about was that we were so hungry, and we did feel that the date made our hunger more than commonly pathetic.

After a meal in which we found only one flavor—that of rancid cottonseed oil—some of us declared that the inhabitants of the land must sustain life on other terms than those offered to the wayfarer and the stranger. We set forth in a desperate search for food. Maggie and I went together, and we came home with some poor biscuit and a cake of chocolate. We were to play in Helena two nights.

It was on Christmas day that there crept about a vague rumor to the effect that some of the men had found a place where things to eat were obtainable—good things—but with this news came the intolerable information that this place was not one where ladies could go.

We, the ladies just now most afflicted by the prohibition, were gathered in the hotel parlor in excited conclave when the whole story, good news and bad, was confirmed by the company child, the property child, as her detractors called her. She had been sent forth to gather information, and her information came from the manager himself, the despot of our world, the arbiter of our fate.

"We can have something sent over from there anyhow, can't we?" wailed the sourette. At this the leading old woman hastily waddled to the door without a word. It flashed on all in an instant what that meant. Ten chances to one this ancient traveler would get it all, all the food that was eatable in Helena—would have it brought to her room before any of the rest of us contrived to discover where it came from. Her resources for making herself comfortable were something we had measured to our cost a thousand times. There was a hurried rush after her, Maggie and I—we always fought our battles together now—rushing too.

"I'll find Jim," Maggie whispered. She

was usually chary of calling upon Jim for services, but this was an occasion of magnitude. Jim, however, was not easily found, and—but why go into painful details? We got nothing to eat that afternoon. Jim returned from an exploring expedition full of information, but empty handed.

"The place," he told us, "is cleaned out." The place, it appeared, was a drinking and gambling saloon, with, as he said, a "restaurant attachment." Jim had persuaded the proprietor to promise to send us something—he would not bind himself further—but something to the theater that night.

"I don't want to eat at the theater," cried Maggie. "I want to sit down at a table and have a square meal. I want to go there and eat it." "Tisn't a place where ladies!"—Jim began as if he were a parrot. Jim, by the way, had habitually a parrotlike manner and a wooden expression. They were his stock in trade as a comedian. I regret to say that Maggie interrupted him by telling him to "shut up." She grasped her curls in an instant in scowling meditation; then, snapping her fingers, executed three steps of an original dance and cried: "I've got it. I tell you what we'll do. We'll invite Perkins himself for Christmas supper, invite him free, gratis, for nothing. He'll be bound to go, and so he'll have to let us fill up for once. We'll share the price of him between us. He'll be cheap at the money. Come along, Jim, and help us find Perkins."

The two departed down a long ill smelling hump carpeted hall.

Perkins was the manager. He was thought stingy, but was believed to greatly enjoy luxuries that cost him nothing. Maggie's plan was calculated to kill two birds with one stone, for attention to Perkins were apt to smooth the path of those who offered them. Her confidence that we should get our Christmas supper was justified, for Perkins, as soon as he was invited to share it, threw over the scruples he had entertained regarding the fitness of this den of iniquity for feminine patronage. He said, as Maggie mimickedly reported, that if all the ladies of his company had the sense we had he'd have been perfectly willing from the start for them all to go and get a square meal, but that he knew as well as he that theatrical ladies were likely to be thoughtless, and that it might queer the show if the natives knew they had indulged in such a festivity.

"There is no telling what these here yokels might say about you," said the sensitive manager, "or what might get in the papers, and though that might be an 'ad.' for the time being it ain't the dodge that pays in the long run with a show that appeals to the heart and the purse feelings the way we do. No, I've got my instructions to keep this company strict, but I know you ladies, and I know you're hungry, and it's Christmas, and I'm with you at 6 sharp."

The arrangements for our appearance at White's saloon were made, and at 6 o'clock, in the twilight, we four took our way through a muddy alley to the back entrance. In the yet more muddy yard, studded with old tin cans, that formed the last stage of our journey, we came upon the chief who was to minister to our delight. There is no irony in this statement. There he was, a genuine, grizzled, gray old French cook, in white cap and apron, with the very look of Paris upon him. By the light of a pitch torch we beheld him standing over a dilapidated stove under an open shed in Helena, Arkansas! He did not even look up as we passed him, and guided by a softly opening door filed into the oddest dining room that even strolling players ever saw.

It was small, but it achieved that look of solid comfort common—even in Arkansas, it seems—to rooms furnished exclusively for and by men, and it possessed in some insurmountable way a quite unrivaled air of seclusion, remoteness. It contained a table, not a dining table, but something quite different. The men chuckled at the sight of it, with that curiously innocent glee in naughtiness so frequently seen where any innocence would be least expected. They explained—indeed I wish I could tell what they did explain, but I fear to blunder among unfamiliar technicalities. It was a real poker table, or faro table, or roulette table, or all three together. It was, in short, a piece of professional furniture, and a handsome one, too, I remember. It was covered with curious designs in inlaid woods.

Whoever opened the door for us had disappeared at once without my realizing his existence, but now a man in shirt sleeves opened another, an inner door, glanced, with the glance of authority, upon us and also disappeared.

Presently—it all seemed like the "Arabian Nights"—a negro loaded with dishes and napery came in and began to set the poker table.

Memory dwells on that meal, that little Christmas meal, beginning with soup, including a salad and ending with coffee. I never expect to find another as magically delightful. It was not only the senses that it appealed, but to our player souls. Its quaintness, order and perfect behoof a far-off civilization, for which, in our various ways, we all yearned. The conjunction of the supper and the date so softened, so deeply moved us all that there is no measuring how far the general mood had to do with calling forth and guiding the events that followed. While we were eating our salad the costliest gentleman who had before looked upon us came in. I had learned that this was White himself, the wizard to whose magic we were indebted.

White looked the man of power. He nodded slightly, accepting our greetings with Napoleonic calm and silence, and stood watching us with sphinxlike impassivity, no trace of Arkansas or any other place but a gambling house to be seen in his compact person and clean shaven face.

Without having spoken a word White left us, and presently another, a younger man, with the air of subordination instead of authority (also in his shirt sleeves), came in bringing a box of cigars. He passed it in silence to Perkins. After Perkins had taken one the newcomer turned to Jim Bowman.

The men's eyes met. The gaze of each became fixed, strained; then one gasped "Jim," the box clattered to the floor between them, and the two were shaking hands hard and patting each other silently, while tears brimmed in their eyes.

This pantomime seemed amazingly prolonged, as if we were all in a stupor, but at last Jim turned to Maggie and said chokingly:

"It's me brother!"—he relapsed for the moment into the brogue of his childhood.

"It's me brother Mike!" he repeated.

Maggie nodded with shining eyes. Then she made a comical little protesting movement with her small fist above her averted head, and a second later dropped it on the table, with a big sob. Jim, unconscious

of this sympathetic demonstration, was at that moment being pushed through the inner doorway by his brother, who was muttering something about a drink.

Maggie, delivered of her sob, lifted her head again, and looking after them as the door closed wiped her eyes.

"Broke me all up," she commented as she comfortably turned to her coffee. "You better look after Jim Bowman now," she said to Perkins, "or he'll be keeping the stage waiting."

Perkins, eager enough to follow the brothers, started after them at once. "We're going on to the theater," Maggie called after him. "Tell Jim."

Perhaps I should state that there was nothing peculiar in our doing so unescorted. All the party were following, so far as general principles could be followed in this particular case, the stage's traditions of strictest propriety, surely the funniest traditions that were ever brought forth on even that difficult subject.

For a time Maggie was silent, but at last she said: "Awful funny 'bout Jim's brother, ain't it? Just like a play, Christmas and all. Broke me all up. Jim's got a good heart, hasn't he? I knew he had a brother once. He's told me some things about when he was little. They were newsboys and bootblacks and things, but he says that was after they began to get up in the world. They had it awful when they can first remember. I think the more of 'em both for having made something of themselves."

"Jim says his mother was a good woman, but she was sick a lot, and then she died. Those two kids just skinned around for themselves. Mike's the oldest. He got himself sent up to a reformatory somewhere. Jim, he'd been supping already, and then he got a chance to go on the road, with a couple of words to speak and to help the property man, and he ain't seen his brother since. He says he hadn't learnt to write much then—he can now as good as anybody. He didn't seem to think Mike was alive much. I didn't know he cared so much about him. Jim's got a big heart, I guess."

I thought it probable that Jim had discovered the depths of his fraternal affection only within the last hour, the capacity for a sudden emotional revelation of that sort at the sight of one before forgotten being highly human, or—it is the same thing—especially Irish, but I saw that Maggie was minded to regard the agitation of the meeting as evidencing rare depths in the heart that was hers, as perhaps it did.

That night, after the performance was over, Maggie came to my dressing room on some trumped up excuse, really for the pleasure of conversation, or, rather, for that most widely appreciated phase of it consisting in hearing oneself talk. She removed her makeup in my room, and as she vigorously rubbed her face with a towel, from time to time minutely peering at it in the looking glass, she entered upon her subject—Jim.

"No, sir," she at last concluded, breaking her sentences by moments of exclusive attention to her toilet. "I tell you I ain't going to marry but once, and I can't risk that on an actor, though Lord knows Jim ain't much like one, on the stage or off. There's your hat behind the trunk. I'll be ready in a minute," and Maggie flew back to her own room.

I naturally inferred from these fresh declarations to the contrary that her resolution not to trust herself upon the troubled sea of what we may fitly call histrionic matrimony was weakening, probably had been weakening for some time past. It is the way of such resolutions, under fire, so to speak. And I made the mistake of supposing that I should soon find her publicly recanting, which only shows how precarious a profession is prophecy in such a world as this.

The next day we left Helena, and I am happy to say I have forgotten where we went, but I remember well that Jim's brother went with us, "to finish his visit," he said. His visit was a fateful matter to Maggie and Jim. The first news I had of it was that they were on the stage, comprehensive. It came from Maggie herself.

We were all at a railway station, and Jim's brother had just taken the train that was to carry him back to Helena. I was walking up and down the platform looking through the chilly air at the flat, dreary winter landscape that stretched beyond the bare, squalid little houses and the seas of mud of the foreground. Most of the company were in the stove heated, dirty waiting room. Maggie was opening trunks on the platform, tossing about, looking very tart and pretty and unmistakably the "actress" in her ulster and cap, with her handbag strapped over her shoulder. She kept staring at me with remarkably bright eyes as I passed her.

At last, having completed the transfer of something from her hotel trunk to her theater trunk, or vice versa, she came up to me, fell into step, ran her hands into her hip pockets and said:

"The train's half an hour late. I guess I'll tell you now." Then she stopped and faced me. "I'm going to marry Jim, and I haven't had to give in either. He's going to leave the stage. Yes, sir, he is," resuming her march. "Ain't it a good thing I didn't give in before? Hurrah for cottonseed oil and the Christmas supper it drove us to, I say. I'll tell you all how it is. He and his brother are going to buy a nice little liquor business in New York on Sixth avenue. They're going to buy it together. You see, Mike understands all about it. And we won't be on the stage any more. Isn't it good?" Maggie's voice was expressive of childlike gratitude, serious and tender. "New York all the time. No more Arkansas," she went on. "And Jim and me living together all the time, real sure enough married people!"

Before the train came Maggie told me the whole history of the transaction that gave her such satisfaction, but the most interesting part of her story was rather in the nature of a hope than of an accomplished fact.

"Mike," she was saying, "says he wants to get away from Helena. He says that's an awful tough hole he's in. He and Jim are going to keep their new place as respectable as can be. Then"—here she lowered her voice a little and spoke with a charming, modest pride—"then he says he knows a man that's got a pull in that ward, and he says he and Jim may get into politics some. There's no telling but they may be a good deal. Oh, wouldn't I be proud!"

At the end of the season I danced at her wedding, and so it came about that I have friends in New York among the governing class, for, I am happy to record, things being as they are, that Maggie's ambition is approaching realization. The pull still pulls. Jim is getting into politics, and life for Maggie is moving to the deep satisfaction of her inborn, indestructible and touching taste of respectability.

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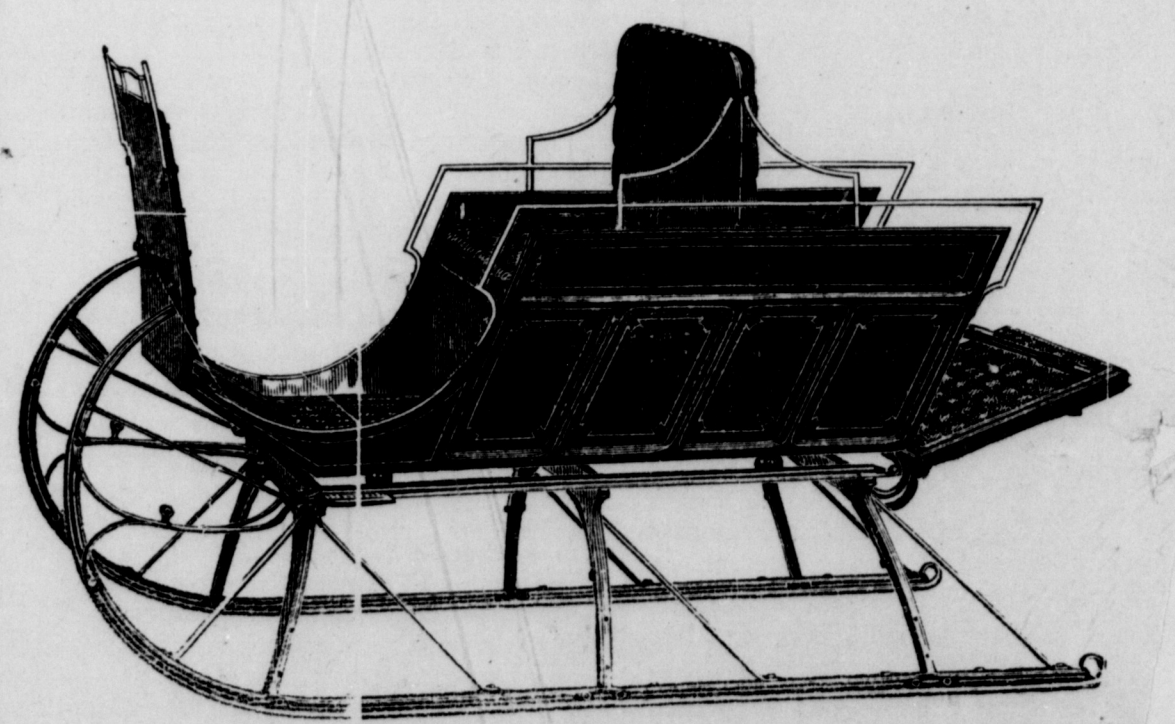
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