

BETH NORVELL



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Beth Norvell

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A TALE OF THE WEST

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CHAPTER I

A CHANCE MEETING

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There were nine altogether in the party registering. This number included the manager, who, both on and off the stage, quite successfully impersonated the villain—a rather heavy-jawed, middle-aged fellow, of foreign appearance, with coarse, gruff voice; three representatives of the gentler sex; a child of eight, exact species unknown, wrapped up like a mummy; and four males. Beyond doubt the most notable member of the troupe was the comedian "star," Mr. T. Macready Lane, whose well-known cognomen must even now awaken happy histrionic memories throughout the western circuit. The long night's ride from their previous stand, involving as it did two changes of trains, had proven exceedingly wearisome; and the young woman in the rather natty blue toque, the collar of her long gray coat turned up in partial concealment of her face, was so utterly fatigued that she refused to wait for a belated breakfast, and insisted upon being at once directed to her room. There was a substantial bolt decorating the inside of the door, but, rendered careless by sheer exhaustion of both mind and

body, she forgot everything except her desire for immediate rest, dropped her wraps upon the only chair visible, and flung herself, fully dressed, upon the bed. Her cheek had barely pressed the hard pillow before she was sleeping like a tired child.

It must have been an hour later when Winston drove in from Flat Rock, shook the powdery snow from off his long fur overcoat, his cheeks still tingling from the sharp wind, and, with fingers yet stiffened by cold, wrote his name carelessly across the lower line of the dilapidated hotel register.

"Can you let me have the same room, Tom?" he questioned familiarly of the man ornamenting the high stool behind the desk.

The latter, busy with some figures, nodded carelessly, and the last arrival promptly picked up his valise from the floor and began climbing the stairs, whistling softly. He was a long-limbed, broad-chested young fellow, with clean-shaven face, and a pair of dark-gray eyes that looked straight ahead of him; and he ran up the somewhat steep steps as though finding such exercise a pleasure. Rounding the upper railing, he stopped abruptly before Number Twenty-seven, flung open the door, took a single step within, and came to a sudden pause, his careless whistling suspended in breathless surprise. With that single glance the complete picture became indelibly photographed upon his memory—the narrow, sparsely furnished room with roughly plastered walls; the small, cheap mirror; the faded-green window curtain, torn half in two; the sheet-iron wash-stand; the wooden chair, across which rested the gray coat

with the blue toque on top; and the single cot bed bearing its unconscious occupant.

Somehow as he gazed, his earliest conscious emotion was that of sympathy—it all appeared so unspeakably pathetic, so homesick, so dismally forlorn and barren. Then that half-upturned face riveted his attention and seemed to awaken a vague, dreamy memory he found himself unable to localize; it reminded him of some other face he had known, tantalizing from its dim indistinctness. Then this earlier impression slightly faded away, and he merely beheld her alone, a perfect stranger appropriating little by little her few claims to womanly beauty. There was no certain guessing at her age as she lay thus, one hand pressed beneath her cheek, her eyes closed, the long, dark lashes clearly outlined against the white flesh, her bosom rising and falling with the steady breathing of absolute exhaustion. She appeared so extremely tired, discouraged, unhappy, that the young man involuntarily closed his teeth tightly, as though some wrong had been personally done to himself. He marked the dense blackness of her heavy mass of hair; the perfect clearness of her skin; the shapeliness of the slender, outstretched figure; the narrow boot, with its high-arched instep, peeping shyly beneath the blue skirt; the something rarely interesting, yet which scarcely made for beauty, revealed unconsciously in the upturned face with its rounded chin and parted lips.

There was no distinct regularity of features, but there was unquestionably character, such character as we recognize vaguely in a sculptured face, lacking that life-like expression which the opened eyes alone are capable of

rendering. All this swept across his mind in that instant during which he remained irresolute from surprise. Yet Winston was by nature a gentleman; almost before he had grasped the full significance of it all he stepped silently backward, and gently closed the door. For an uncertain moment he remained there staring blankly at the wood, that haunting memory once again mocking every vain attempt to associate this girl-face with some other he had known before. Finally, leaving valise and overcoat lying in the hall, he retraced his way slowly down the stairs.

"Tom," and the young man leaned against the rough counter, his voice grown graver, "there chances to be a woman at present occupying that room you just assigned me."

"No! Is that so?" and the clerk swung easily down from his high stool, drawing the register toward him. "Must be one of the troupe, then. Let's see—Number Twenty-seven, was n't it? Twenty-seven—oh, yes, here it is. That's a fact," and his finger slowly traced the line as he spelled out the name, "'Miss Beth Norvell.' Oh, I remember her now—black hair, and a long gray coat; best looker among 'em. Manager said she 'd have to be given a room all to herself; but I clean forgot I assigned her to Twenty-seven. Make much of a row?"

The other shook his head, bending down so as to read the name with his own eyes. There was nothing in the least familiar about the sound of it, and he became faintly conscious of an undefined feeling of disappointment. Still, if she was upon the stage, the name quite probably was an assumed one; the very utterance of it left that impression. He walked over toward the cigar stand and picked out a

weed, thinking gravely while he held a flaming match to the tip. Somehow he was not altogether greatly pleased with this information; he should have preferred to discover her to be some one else. He glanced at the clerk through the slight haze of blue smoke, his increasing curiosity finding reluctant utterance.

"What troupe is it?" he questioned with seeming carelessness.

"'Heart of the World,'" answered Tom with some considerable increase of enthusiasm. "A dandy play, and a blamed good company, they tell me. Got some fine press notices anyhow, an' a carload o' scenery. Played in Denver a whole month; and it costs a dollar and a half to buy a decent seat even in this measly town, so you can bet it ain't no slouch of a show. House two-thirds sold out in advance, but I know where I can get you some good seats for just a little extra. Lane is the star. You 've heard of Lane, have n't you? Funniest fellow you ever saw; makes you laugh just to look at him. And this—this Miss Norvell, why she's the leadin' lady, and the travellin' men tell me she's simply immense. There's one of their show bills hanging over there back of the stove."

Winston sauntered across to the indicated red and yellow abomination, and dumbly stood staring at it through the blue rings of his cigar. It represented a most thrilling stage picture, while underneath, and in type scarcely a shade less pronounced than that devoted to the eminent comedian T. Macready Lane, appeared the announcement of the great emotional actress, Miss Beth Norvell, together with several quite flattering Western press notices. The young man read

these slowly, wondering why they should particularly interest him, and on a sudden his rather grave face brightened into a smile, a whimsical thought flashing into his mind.

"By Jove, why not?" he muttered, as if arguing the matter out with himself. "The report has gone East, and there is nothing more to be accomplished in Flat Rock for at least a month. This snow will have to melt away before they can hope to put any miners to work, and in the meanwhile I might just as well be laying up experiences on the road as wasting my substance in riotous living at Denver. It ought to prove a great lark, and I 've always had ambition to have a try at something of the kind. Well, here 's my chance; and besides, I can't help believing that that girl might prove interesting; her face is, anyhow."

He walked back to where Tom still hung idly over the cigar case.

"Who is running this show outfit?"

"That big fellow writing at the table. His name 's Albrecht," suspiciously. "But see here, I tell you there ain't any use of your hittin' him for 'comps'; he 's tighter than a drum."

"'Comps'? Oh, ye of little faith!" exclaimed Winston genially. "It is n't 'comps' I 'm after, Tommy, it's a job."

Albrecht looked up from his writing, scowling somewhat under his heavily thatched brows, and revealing a coarse face, with little glinting eyes filled with low cunning. At that first glance Winston instinctively disliked the fellow; yet he put his case in a few brief sentences of explanation, and, as the other listened, the managerial frown slightly relaxed.

"Actor?" he questioned laconically, when the younger man paused, his glance wandering appreciatively over the sturdy, erect figure.

"Well, hardly that; at least, merely in an amateur way," and the applicant laughed lightly. "You see, I imagined you might possibly make use of me in some minor capacity until I learn more about the business. I don't care very much regarding pay, but I desire to get a taste of the life."

"Oxactly, mein frient." And the worthy Albrecht became almost briskly cordial in manner. Perhaps here was an "angel" waiting to be plucked in the holy name of art; at least, he appeared well dressed, looked intellectually promising, and expressed himself as totally indifferent regarding salary. Such visitors were indeed few and far between, and the astute manager sufficiently understood his business to permit his heavy features to relax into a hearty, welcoming smile. "Oxactly, young man. Sit down, und I vill see yoost vat vos pest for us both. You would be an actor; you haf the ambition. Ah! I see it in your eyes, and it gif me great bleasure. But, young man, it vos unfortunate dot I haf not mooch just now to gif you, yet the vay vill open if you only stays mit me. Sure; yaw, I, Samuel Albrecht, vill make of you a great actor. I can see dot in your face, und for dot reason I vill now gif you the chance. You begin at the pottom, but not for long; all I vants now vos a utility man—some one to take small barts, understudy, und be ready to help out mit der scenery und der trunks. I could not bay moch monies for dot," and he spread his beringed hands deprecatingly, "but it vos only der first step on der ladder of

fame. Every day I teach you de great art of de actor. You come with me dot way, mein frient?"

"Certainly; that will be perfectly satisfactory."

"Ah," delightedly, "you vos a goot poy, villin' to learn, I see. Next season, who knows, you might be leading man if you vork hardt. I bay you now after one veek's trial, when I know petter vot you are vort, hey?"

Winston carelessly nodded his acceptance of these rather indefinite terms, his hands thrust into his pockets, his gray eyes smiling their appreciation of the situation. Albrecht was deliberately looking him over, as he might a horse he had just purchased.

"You are kinder slim to look at," he confessed at last, thoughtfully. "Are you bretty strong?"

The younger man silently held forth his right arm to the inspection of the other, who fingered the iron rigidity of muscle under the cloth with evident respect.

"God of Yacob!" the manager muttered in unconcealed surprise, "it is vonderful, and you such a slender young man to look at. I vos most afraidt you could not do mein vork, but it is all right. You vill eat mit us at the long table," he waved his hand indefinitely toward the dining-room, "at 12:30, and then I valk mit you over py der Obera House, und show you vat der is to be done mit dot scenery und dem trunks. Mein Gott! it vos vonderful dot muscles vot you haf got—you vould make a great Davy Crockett ven I learns you de business, mein frient."

The manager's appreciation of his new acquisition was so clearly evident that Winston felt compelled to notice it.

"I am rejoiced you appear so well satisfied," he said, rising to his feet.

"Satisfied! Mein Gott," and the overjoyed Albrecht cordially clasped the hand of his new recruit. "It vos a great season of luck for me, mein frient. Dot Meess Norvell, she makes me mooch monies vile I shows her how to be an actress—oh, it vos yoost beautiful to see her act—und now you comes mit me also, und cares nottings for vot I bay you, und I can see you haf der actor genius. Mein Gott! it vos too goot to be true."

Winston broke away gladly, and drifted back toward the cigar stand, where the mystified Tommy yet stood staring at him.

"Well, did you get it?" the latter questioned, grinning.

"Thomas," returned the other loftily. "You can hand me out another cigar, and I will thank you not to be quite so familiar in the future. I am now general utility man with the 'Heart of the World' company, and consequently entitled to greater respect."

CHAPTER II

OUT WITH A ROAD COMPANY

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Miss Norvell failed to appear at the noon meal, though Winston met the other members of the company. He found them genial enough, even somewhat boisterous, with the single exception of Mr. Lane, who maintained a dignified and rather gloomy silence, such as became one of his recognized professional standing, after having favored the newcomer with a long, impertinent stare, apparently expressing disapproval. The manager was outwardly in most excellent humor, narrating several stories, at which all, excepting the reserved comedian, laughed quite heartily. At the conclusion of the repast, Albrecht condescended to purchase his new recruit a cigar, and then walked beside him toward the Opera House, where the necessary instructions in new duties promptly began. If Winston had previously imagined his earlier steps toward histrionic honors were destined to be easy ones, he was very soon undeceived under the guidance of the enthusiastic manager. It proved a strenuous afternoon, yet the young fellow had the right stuff in him to make good, that stubborn pride which never surrenders before difficulties; he shut his teeth, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and went earnestly to work.

It was a small, cheaply built theatre, having restricted stage space, while a perfect riff-raff of trunks and detached

pieces of canvas scenery littered the wings. At first sight it appeared a confused medley of odds and ends, utterly impossible to bring into any conformity to order, but Albrecht recognized each separate piece of luggage, every detached section of canvas, recalling exactly where it properly belonged during the coming performance. For more than an hour he pranced about the dirty stage, shouting minute directions, and giving due emphasis to them by growling German oaths; while Winston, aided by two local assistants, bore trunks into the various dressing-rooms, hung drop curtains in designated positions, placed set pieces conveniently at hand, and arranged the various required properties where they could not possibly be overlooked during the rush of the evening's performance. Thus, little by little, order was evolved from chaos, and the astute manager chuckled happily to himself in quick appreciation of the unusual rapidity with which the newly engaged utility man grasped the situation and mastered the confusing details. Assuredly he had discovered a veritable jewel in this fresh recruit. At last, the affairs of principal importance having been attended to, Albrecht left some final instructions, and departed for the hotel, feeling serenely confident that this young man would carry out his orders to the letter.

And Winston did. He was of that determined nature which performs thoroughly any work once deliberately undertaken; and, although the merest idle whim had originally brought him to this position of utility man in the "Heart of the World" company, he was already beginning to experience a slight degree of interest in the success of the coming show, and to

feel a faint *esprit de corps*, which commanded his best efforts. Indeed, his temporary devotion to the preparation of the stage proved sufficiently strong to obscure partially for the time being all recollection of that first incentive which had suggested his taking such a step—the young lady discovered asleep in Number Twenty-seven. The remembrance of her scarcely recurred to him all through the afternoon, yet it finally returned in overwhelming rush when, in the course of his arduous labors, he raised up a small leather trunk and discovered her name painted plainly upon the end of it. The chalk mark designating where it belonged read "Dressing-room No. 2," and, instead of rolling it roughly in that direction, as he had rolled numerous others, the new utility man lifted it carefully upon his shoulder and deposited it gently against the farther wall. He glanced with curiosity about the restricted apartment to which Miss Beth Norvell had been assigned. It appeared the merest hole of a place, narrow and ill-ventilated, the side walls and ceiling composed of rough lumber, and it was evidently designed to be lit at night by a single gas jet, inclosed within a wire netting. This apartment contained merely a single rude chair, of the kitchen variety, and an exceedingly small mirror cracked across one corner and badly fly-specked. Numerous rusty spikes, intended to hold articles of discarded clothing, decorated both side walls and the back of the door. It was dismally bare, and above all, it was abominably dirty, the dust lying thick everywhere, the floor apparently unswept for weeks. With an exclamation of disgust Winston hunted up broom and dust-rag, and gave the gloomy place such a cleansing as it probably had not

enjoyed since the house was originally erected. At the end of these arduous labors he looked the scene over critically, the honest perspiration streaming down his face, glancing, with some newly awakened curiosity, into the surrounding dressing-rooms. They were equally filthy and unfit for occupancy, yet he did not feel called upon to invade them with his cleansing broom. By four o'clock everything was in proper position, the stage set in perfect order for the opening act, and Winston returned with his report to the hotel, and to the glowing Albrecht.

Miss Norvell joined the company at the supper table, sitting between the manager and Mr. T. Macready Lane, although Winston was quick to observe that she gave slight attention to either, except when addressed directly. She met the others present with all necessary cordiality and good-fellowship, yet there appeared a certain undefined reserve about her manner which led to an immediate hush in the rather free conversation of what Albrecht was pleased to term the "training table," and when the murmur of voices was resumed after her entrance, a somewhat better choice of subjects became immediately noticeable. Without so much as either word or look, the silent influence of the actress was plainly for refinement, while her mere presence at the table gave a new tone to Bohemianism. Winston, swiftly realizing this, began observing the lady with a curiosity which rapidly developed into deeper interest. He became more and more attracted by her unique personality, which persistently appealed to his aroused imagination, even while there continued to haunt him a dim tantalizing remembrance he was unable wholly to master. He assuredly

had never either seen or heard of this young woman before, yet she constantly reminded him of the past. Her eyes, the peculiar contour of her face, the rather odd trick she had of shaking back the straying tresses of her dark, glossy hair, and, above all, that quick smile with which she greeted any flash of humor, and which produced a fascinating dimple in her cheek, all served to puzzle and stimulate him; while admiration of her so apparent womanliness began as instantly to replace the vague curiosity he had felt toward her as an actress. She was different from what he had imagined, with absolutely nothing to suggest the glare and glitter of the footlights. Until this time he had scarcely been conscious that she possessed any special claim to beauty; yet now, her face, illumined by those dark eyes filled with quick intelligence, became most decidedly attractive, peculiarly lovable and womanly. Besides, she evidently possessed a rare taste in dress, which met with his masculine approval. Much of this, it is true, he reasoned out later and slowly, for during that first meal only two circumstances impressed him clearly—the depth of feeling glowing within those wonderfully revealing eyes, and her complete ignoring of his presence. If she recognized any addition to their number, there was not the slightest sign given. Once their eyes met by merest accident; but hers apparently saw nothing, and Winston returned to his disagreeable labors at the Opera House, nursing a feeling akin to disappointment.

Concealed within the gloomy shadows of the wings, he stood entranced that night watching her depict the character of a wife whose previous happy life had been

irretrievably ruined by deceit; and the force, the quiet originality of her depiction, together with its marvellous clearness of detail and its intense realism, held him captive. The plot of the play was ugly, melodramatic, and entirely untrue to nature; against it Winston's cultivated taste instantly revolted; yet this woman interpreted her own part with the rare instinct of a true artist, picturing to the very life the particular character intrusted to her, and holding the house to a breathless realization of what real artistic portrayal meant. In voice, manner, action, in each minute detail of face and figure, she was truly the very woman she represented. It was an art so fine as to make the auditors forget the artist, forget even themselves. Her perfect workmanship, clear-cut, rounded, complete, stood forth like a delicate cameo beside the rude buffoonery of T. Macready Lane, the coarse villany of Albrecht, and the stiff mannerisms of the remainder of the cast. They were automatons as compared with a figure instinct with life animated by intelligence. She seemed to redeem the common clay of the coarse, unnatural story, and give to it some vital excuse for existence, the howls of laughter greeting the cheap wit of the comedian changed to a sudden hush of expectancy at her mere entrance upon the stage, while her slightest word, or action, riveted the attention. It was a triumph beyond applause, beyond any mere outward demonstration of approval. Winston felt the spell deeply, his entire body thrilling to her marvellous delineation of this common thing, her uplifting of it out of the vile ruck of its surroundings and giving unto it the abundant life of her own interpretation. Never once did he

question the real although untrained genius back of those glowing eyes, that expressive face, those sincere, quiet tones which so touched and swayed the heart. In other days he had seen the stage at its best, and now he recognized in this woman that subtle power which must conquer all things, and eventually "arrive."

Early the following morning, tossing uneasily upon a hard cot-bed in the next town listed in their itinerary, he discovered himself totally unable to divorce this memory from his thoughts. She even mingled with his dreams—a rounded, girlish figure, her young face glowing with the emotions dominating her, her dark eyes grave with thoughtfulness—and he awoke, at last, facing another day of servile toil, actually rejoicing to remember that he was part of the "Heart of the World." That which he had first assumed from a mere spirit of play, the veriest freak of boyish adventure, had suddenly developed into a real impulse to which his heart gave complete surrender.

To all outward appearances Miss Beth Norvell remained serenely unconscious regarding either his admiration or his presence. It was impossible to imagine that in so small a company he could continually pass and repass without attracting notice, yet neither word nor look passed between them; no introduction had been accorded, and she merely ignored him, under the natural impression, without doubt, that he was simply an ignorant roustabout of the stage, a wielder of trunks, a manipulator of scenery, in whom she could feel no possible interest. A week passed thus, the troupe displaying their talents to fair business, and constantly penetrating into more remote regions, stopping

at all manner of hotels, travelling in every species of conveyance, and exhibiting their ability, or lack of it, upon every makeshift of a stage. Sometimes this was a bare hall; again it was an armory, with an occasional opera house—like an oasis in the vast desert—to yield them fresh professional courage. Small cities, straggling towns, boisterous mining camps welcomed and speeded them on, until sameness became routine, and names grew meaningless. It was the sort of life to test character thoroughly, and the "Heart of the World" troupe of strollers began very promptly to exhibit its kind. Albrecht, who was making money, retained his coarse good-nature unruffled by the hardships of travel; but the majority of the stage people grew morose and fretful—the eminent comedian, glum and unapproachable as a bear; the leading gentleman swearing savagely over every unusual worry, and acting the boor generally; the *ingénue*, snappy and cat-like. Miss Norvell alone among them all appeared as at first, reserved, quiet, uncomplaining, forming no intimate friendships, yet performing her nightly work with constantly augmenting power. Winston, ever observing her with increasing interest, imagined that the strain of such a life was telling upon her health, exhibiting its baleful effect in the whitening of her cheeks, in those darker shadows forming beneath her eyes, as well as in a shade less of animation in her manner. Yet he saw comparatively little of her, his own work proving sufficiently onerous; the quick jumps from town to town leaving small opportunity for either rest or reflection. He had been advanced to a small speaking part, but the remainder of his waking hours, while he was attired in

working-clothes, was diligently devoted to the strenuous labor of his muscles. The novelty of the life had long since vanished, the so eagerly expected experience had already become amply sufficient; again and again, flinging his wearied body upon a cot in some strange room, he had called himself an unmitigated ass, and sworn loudly that he would certainly quit in the morning. Yet the girl held him. He did not completely realize how or why, yet some peculiar, indefinite fascination appeared to bind his destinies to her; he ever desired to see her once again, to be near her, to feel the charm of her work, to listen to the sound of her voice, to experience the thrill of her presence. So strong and compelling became this influence over him that day after day he held on, actually afraid to sever that slight bond of professional companionship.

This was most assuredly through no fault of hers. It was at Shelbyville that she first spoke to him, first gave him the earliest intimation that she even so much as recognized his presence in the company. The house that particular night was crowded to the doors, and she, completing a piece of work which left her cheeks flushed, her slender form trembling from intense emotion, while the prolonged applause thundered after her from the front, stepped quickly into the gloomy shadows of the wings, and thus came face to face with Winston. His eyes were glowing with unconcealed appreciation of her art. Perhaps the quick reaction had partially unstrung her nerves, for she spoke with feverish haste at sight of his uprolled sleeves and coarse woollen shirt.

"How does it occur that you are always standing directly in my passage whenever I step from the stage?" she questioned impetuously. "Is there no other place where you can wait to do your work except in my exit?"

For a brief moment the surprised man stood hesitating, hat in hand.

"I certainly regret having thus unintentionally offended you, Miss Norvell," he explained at last, slowly. "Yet, surely, the occasion should bring you pleasure rather than annoyance."

"Indeed! Why, pray?"

"Because I so greatly enjoy your work. I stood here merely that I might observe the details more carefully."

She glanced directly at him with suddenly aroused interest.

"You enjoy my work?" she exclaimed, slightly smiling. "How extremely droll! Yet without doubt you do, precisely as those others, out yonder, without the slightest conception of what it all means. Probably you are equally interested in the delicate art of Mr. T. Macready Lane?"

Winston permitted his cool gray eyes to brighten, his firmly set lips slightly to relax.

"Lane is the merest buffoon," he replied quietly. "You are an artist. There is no comparison possible, Miss Norvell. The play itself is utterly unworthy of your talent, yet you succeed in dignifying it in a way I can never cease to admire."

She stood staring straight at him, her lips parted, apparently so thoroughly startled by these unexpected words as to be left speechless.

"Why," she managed to articulate at last, her cheeks flushing, "I supposed you like the others we have had with us—just—just a common stage hand. You speak with refinement, with meaning."

"Have you not lived sufficiently long in the West to discover that men of education are occasionally to be found in rough clothing?"

"Oh, yes," doubtfully, her eyes still on his face, "miners, stockmen, engineers, but scarcely in your present employment."

"Miss Norvell," and Winston straightened up, "possibly I may be employed here for a reason similar to that which has induced you to travel with a troupe of barn-stormers."

She shrugged her shoulders, her lips smiling, the seductive dimple showing in her cheeks.

"And what was that?"

"The ambition of an amateur to attain a foothold upon the professional stage."

"Who told you so?"

"Mr. Samuel Albrecht was guilty of the suggestion."

"It was extremely nice of him to discuss my motives thus freely with a stranger. But he told you only a very small portion of the truth. In my case it was rather the imperative necessity of an amateur to earn her own living—a deliberate choice between the professional stage and starvation."

"Without ambition?"

She hesitated slightly, yet there was a depth of respect slumbering within those gray eyes gazing so directly into her darker ones, together with a strength she felt.

"Without very much at first, I fear," she confessed, as though admitting it rather to herself alone, "yet I acknowledge it has since grown upon me, until I have determined to succeed."

His eyes brightened, the admiration in them unconcealed, his lips speaking impulsively.

"And what is more, Miss Norvell, you 'll make it."

"Do you truly believe so?" She had already forgotten that the man before her was a mere stage hand, and her cheeks burned eagerly to the undoubted sincerity of his utterance. "No one else has ever said that to me—only the audiences have appeared to care and appreciate. Albrecht and all those others have scarcely offered me a word of encouragement."

"Albrecht and the others are asses," ejaculated Winston, with sudden indignation. "They imagine they are actors because they prance and bellow on a stage, and they sneer at any one who is not in their class. But I can tell you this, Miss Norvell, the manager considers you a treasure; he said as much to me."

She stood before him, the glare of the stage glinting in her hair, her hands clasped, her dark eyes eagerly reading his face as though these unexpected words of appreciation had yielded her renewed courage, like a glass of wine.

"Really, is that true? Oh, I am so glad. I thought, perhaps, they were only making fun of me out in front, although I have always tried so hard to do my very best. You have given me a new hope that I may indeed master the art. Was that my cue?"

She stepped quickly backward, listening to the voices droning on the stage, but there remained still a moment of liberty, and she glanced uncertainly about at Winston.

"Am I to thank you for giving me such immaculate dressing-rooms of late?" she questioned, just a little archly.

"I certainly wielded the broom."

"It was thoughtful of you," and her clear voice hesitated an instant. "Was—was it you, also, who placed those flowers upon my trunk last evening?"

He bowed, feeling slightly embarrassed by the swift returning restraint in her manner.

"They were most beautiful. Where did you get them?"

"From Denver; they were forwarded by express, and I am only too glad if they brought you pleasure."

"Miracle of miracles! A stage-hand ordering roses from Denver! It must have cost you a week's salary."

He smiled:

"And, alas, the salary has not even been paid."

Her eyes were uplifted to his face, yet fell as suddenly, shadowed behind the long lashes.

"I thank you very much," she said, her voice trembling, "only please don't do it again; I would rather not have you."

Before he could frame a satisfactory answer to so unexpected a prohibition she had stepped forth upon the stage.

This brief interview did not prove as prolific of results as Winston confidently expected. Miss Norvell evidently considered such casual conversation no foundation for future friendship, and although she greeted him when they again met, much as she acknowledged acquaintanceship

with the others of the troupe, there remained a quiet reserve about her manner, which effectually barred all thought of possible familiarity. Indeed, that she ever again considered him as in any way differing from the others about her did not once occur to Winston until one evening at Bluffton, when by chance he stood resting behind a piece of set scenery and thus overheard the manager as he halted the young lady on the way to her dressing room.

"Meess Norvell," and Albrecht stood rubbing his hands and smiling genially, "at Gilchrist we are pilled to blay for dwo nights, und der second blay vill be der 'Man from der Vest'—you know dot bart, Ida Somers?"

"Yes," she acknowledged, "I am perfectly acquainted with the lines, but who is to play Ralph Wilde?"

"Mister Mooney, of course. You tink dot I import some actors venever I change der pill?"

She lifted her dark, expressive eyes to his mottled face, slowly gathering up her skirts in one hand.

"As you please," she said quietly, "but I shall not play Ida Somers to Mr. Mooney's Ralph Wilde. I told you as much plainly before we left Denver, and it was for that special reason the 'Heart of the World' was substituted. The more I have seen of Mr. Mooney since we took the road, the less I am inclined to yield in this matter."

Albrecht laughed coarsely, his face reddening.

"Oh, bah!" he exclaimed, gruffly derisive. "Ven you begome star then you can have dem tantrums, but not now, not mit me. You blay vat I say, or I send back after some von else. You bedder not get too gay, or you lose your job damn

quick. You don't want Mooney to make love to you? You don't want him to kiss you?—hey, you do it?"

"Yes, that was exactly it."

"Ach!—you too nice to be professional; you like to choose your lover, hey? You forget you earn a living so. What you got against Mooney?"

Miss Norvell, her cheeks burning indignantly, her eyes already ablaze, did not mince words.

"Nothing personally just so long as he keeps away from me," she retorted clearly. "He is coarse, vulgar, boorish, and I have far too much respect for myself to permit such a man to touch me, either upon the stage or off; to have him kiss me would be an unbearable insult."

Albrecht, totally unable to comprehend the feelings of the girl, shifted uneasily beneath the sharp sting of her words, yet continued to smile idiotically.

"Dot is very nice, quite melodramatic, but it is not professional, Meess," he stammered, striving to get hold of some satisfactory argument. "Vy, Mooney you not so good. Meess Lyle she act dot part with him all the last season, and make no kick. Dunder! what you want—an angel? You don't have to take dot part with me, or Meister Lane either, don't you, hey?"

Miss Norvell turned contemptuously away from him, her face white with determination.

"If you really want to know, there is only one man in all your troupe I would consent to play it with," she declared calmly.

"And who is?"

"I do not even know his name," and she turned her head just sufficiently to look directly into Albrecht's surprised face; "but I refer to your new utility man; he, at least, possesses some of the ordinary attributes of a gentleman."

The door of her dressing-room opened and closed, leaving the startled manager standing alone without, gasping for breath, his thick lips gurgling impotent curses, while Winston discreetly drew farther back amid the intricacy of scenery.

CHAPTER III

A BREAKING OF ICE

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The troupe in its wandering arrived at Bolton Junction early on a Saturday afternoon, and Winston, lingering a moment in the hotel office, overheard Miss Norvell ask the manager if they would probably spend Sunday there; and later question the hotel clerk regarding any Episcopalian services in the town. Their rather late arrival, however, kept him so exceedingly busy with stage preparation for the evening's performance that this conversation scarcely recurred to mind until his night's labor had been completed. Then, in the silence of his room, he resolved upon an immediate change in conditions, or else the deliberate giving up of further experiment altogether. He was long since tired enough of it, yet a strange, almost unaccountable attraction for this young woman continued binding him to disagreeable servitude.

He came down stairs the following morning, his plans completely determined upon. He was carefully dressed in the neat business suit which had been packed away ever since his first reckless plunge into theatrical life, and thus attired he felt more like his old self than at any moment since his surrender to the dictation of Albrecht. In some degree self-confidence, audacity, hope, came promptly trooping back with the mere donning of clean linen and semi-fashionable attire, so that Winston "utility" became

Winston gentleman, in the twinkling of an eye. The other members of the troupe slept late, leaving him to breakfast alone after vainly loitering about the office in the hope that Miss Norvell might by some chance appear and keep him company. It was almost mortifying to behold that young woman enter the deserted dining-room soon after he had returned to the lonely office, but she gave no sign of recognition in passing, and his returned audacity scarcely proved sufficient to permit his encroachment upon her privacy. He could only linger a moment at the desk in an effort to catch a better view of her through the partially open door.

Nervously gripping a freshly lighted cigar, Winston finally strolled forth upon the wide porch to await, with all possible patience, the opportunity he felt assured was fast approaching. It was a bright spring morning, sufficiently warm to be comfortable without in the sunshine, although the mountains overshadowing the town were yet white with snow. The one long, straggling business street appeared sufficiently lonely, being almost deserted, the shops closed. The notable contrast between its present rather dreary desolation and the wild revelry of the previous night seemed really painful, while the solemn prevailing stillness served to weaken Winston's bold resolutions and brought him a strange timidity. He slowly strolled a block or more, peering in at the shop windows, yet never venturing beyond easy view of the hotel steps. Then he sauntered as deliberately back again. Lane and Mooney were now stationed upon the porch, tipping far back in their chairs, their feet deposited on the convenient railing, smoking and conversing noisily