CLARA MORRIS

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Talks About Players and Play Acting

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CHAPTER I

A WORD OF WARNING

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Every actress of prominence receives letters from young girls and women who wish to go on the stage, and I have my share. These letters are of all kinds. Some are extravagant, some enthusiastic, some foolish, and a few unutterably pathetic; but however their writers may differ otherwise, there is one positive conviction they unconsciously share, and there is one question they each and every one put to me: so it is *that* question that must be first answered, and that conviction that must be shaken.

The question is, "What chance has a girl in private life of getting on the stage?" and to reply at once with brutal truthfulness and straight to the point, I must say, "Almost none."

But to answer her instant "Why?" I must first shake that positive conviction each writer has, that she is the only one that burns with the high ambition to be an actress, who hopes and fears, and secretly studies Juliet. It would be difficult to convince her that her own state, her own city, yes, her own block, could each produce a girl who firmly believes that *her* talent is equally great, and who has just the same strength of hope for the future stage existence.

Every city in the country is freely sprinkled with stage-loving, or, as they are generally termed, "stage-struck" girls.

It is more than probable that at least a half-dozen girls in her own circle secretly cherish a hope for a glorious career on the stage, while her bosom friend most likely knows every line of *Pauline* and has practised the death scene of *Camille* hundreds of times. Surely, then, the would-be actresses can see that their own numbers constitute one of the greatest obstacles in their path.

But that is by no means all. Figures are always hard things to manage, and there is another large body of them, between a girl and her chances, in the number of trained actresses who are out of engagements. There is probably no profession in the world so overcrowded as is the profession of acting. "Why, then," the manager asks, "should I engage a girl who does not even know how to walk across the stage, when there are so many trained girls and women to choose from?"

"But," says or thinks some girl who reads these words, "you were an outsider, poor and without friends, yet you got your chance."

Very true; I did. But conditions then were different. The stage did not hold then the place in public estimation which it now does. Theatrical people were little known and even less understood. Even the people who did not think all actors drunkards and all actresses immoral, did think they were a lot of flighty, silly buffoons, not to be taken seriously for a moment. The profession, by reason of this feeling, was rather a close corporation. The recruits were generally young relatives of the older actors. There was plenty of room, and people began at the bottom quite cheerfully and worked up. When a "ballet" was wanted, the manager

advertised for extra girls, and sometimes received as many as three applicants in one day—when twenty were wanted. Such an advertisement to-day would call out a veritable mob of eager girls and women. *There* was my chance. To-day I should have no chance at all.

The theatrical ranks were already growing crowded when the "Schools of Acting" were started, and after that—goodness gracious! actors and actresses started up as suddenly and numerously as mushrooms in an old pasture. And they, even *they* stand in the way of the beginner.

I know, then, of but three powers that can open the stage door to a girl who comes straight from private life,—a fortune, great influence, or superlative beauty. With a large amount of money a girl can unquestionably tempt a manager whose business is not too good, to give her an engagement. If influence is used, it must indeed be of a high social order to be strong enough favourably to affect the box-office receipts, and thus win an opening for the young débutante. As for beauty, it must be something very remarkable that will on its strength alone secure a girl an engagement. Mere prettiness will not do. Nearly all American girls are pretty. It must be a radiant and compelling beauty, and every one knows that there are not many such beauties, stage-struck or otherwise.

The next question is most often put by the parents or friends of the would-be actress; and when with clasped hands and in-drawn breath they ask about the temptations peculiar to the profession of acting, all my share of the "old Adam" rises within me. For you see I honour the profession in which I have served, girl and woman, so many years, and

it hurts me to have one imply that it is filled with strange and terrible pitfalls for women. I have received the confidences of many working-women,—some in professions, some in trades, and some in service,—and on these confidences I have founded my belief that every woman who works for her living must eat with her bread the bitter salt of insult. Not even the plain girl escapes paying this penalty put upon her unprotected state.

Still, insult does not mean temptation, by any means. But careful inquiry has shown me that temptation assails working-women in any walk of life, and that the profession of acting has nothing weird or novel to offer in the line of danger; to be quite frank, all the possibilities of resisting or yielding lie with the young woman herself. What will tempt one beyond her powers of resistance, will be no temptation at all to another.

However, parents wishing to frighten their daughters away from the stage have naturally enough set up several great bugaboos collectively known as "temptations"—individually known as the "manager," the "public," etc.

There seems to be a general belief that a manager is a sort of dramatic "Moloch," upon whose altar is sacrificed all ambitious femininity. In declaring that to be a mistaken idea, I do not for a moment imply that managers are angels; for such a suggestion would beyond a doubt secure me a quiet summer at some strictly private sanitarium; but I do mean to say that, like the gentleman whom we all know by hearsay, but not by sight, they are not so black as they are painted.

Indeed, the manager is more often the pursued than the pursuer. Women there are, attractive, well-looking, well-dressed, some of whom, alas! in their determination to succeed, cast morality overboard, as an aeronaut casts over ballast, that they may rise more quickly. Now while these women bestow their adulation and delicate flattery upon the manager, he is not likely to disturb the modest and retiring newcomer in his company by unwelcome attentions. And should the young stranger prove earnest and bright, she would be doubly safe; for then she would have for the manager a commercial value, and he would be the last man to hurt or anger her by a too warmly expressed admiration, and so drive her into another theatre, taking all her possible future popularity and drawing power with her.

One other and better word I wish to add. If the unprotected young beginner finds herself the victim of some odious creature's persistent advances, letters, etc., let her not fret and weep and worry, but let her go quietly to her manager and lay her trouble before him, and, my word for it, he will find a way of freeing her from her tormentor. Yes, the manager is, generally speaking, a kindly, cheery, sharp business man, and no Moloch at all.

As for the "public," no self-respecting girl need be in danger from the "public." Admiring young rakes no longer have coaches waiting round the corner, into which they thrust their favourite actress as she leaves the theatre. If a man sends an actress extravagant letters or flowers, anonymously, she can of course do nothing, but equally of course she will not wear his flowers and so encourage him boldly to step up and speak to her some day. If the

gentleman sends her jewellery or valuable gifts of any kind, rest assured his name will accompany the offering; then the actress has but one thing to do, send the object back at once. If the infatuated one is a gentleman and worthy of her notice, he will surely find a perfectly correct and honourable way of making her acquaintance, otherwise she is well rid of him. No, I see no danger threatening a young actress from the "public."

There is danger in drifting at any time, so it may be well to warn young actresses against drifting into a too strong friendship. No matter how handsome or clever a man may be, if he approaches a modest girl with coarse familiarity, with brutalities on his lips, she is shocked, repelled, certainly not tempted. But let us say that the young actress feels rather strange and uncomfortable in her surroundings, that she is only on a smiling "good morning and good evening" footing with the company, and she has been promised a certain small part, and then at the last moment the part is given to some one else. The disappointment is cruel, and the suspicion that people are laughing in their sleeves over the slight put upon her makes her feel sick and faint with shame, and just then a friendly hand places a chair for her and a kind voice says: "I'm awfully sorry you missed that chance, for I'm quite sure you would do the part far and away better than that milliner's block will. But don't distress yourself, your chance will come, and you will know how to make the most of it—I am sure."

And all the time the plain, perhaps the elderly man is speaking, he is shielding her from the eyes of the other

people, and from her very soul she is grateful to him, and she holds up her head and smiles bravely.

Not long after, perhaps, she does get a chance, and with joyous eyes she watches for the coming of the man who comforted her, that she may tell him of her good luck. And his pleasure is plain, and he assures her that she will succeed. And he, an experienced actor, waits in the entrance to see her play her small part, and shakes her hand and congratulates her when she comes off, and even tells her what to do next time at such a point, and her heart warms within her and is filled with gratitude for this "sympathetic friend," who helps her and has faith in her future. The poor child little dreams that temptation may be approaching her, softly, quietly, in the guise of friendship. So, all unconsciously, she grows to rely upon the advice of this quiet, unassuming man. She looks for his praise, for his approval. By and by their companionship reaches beyond the walls of the theatre. She respects him, admires, trusts him. Trusts him—he may be worthy, he may not! But it would be well for the young actresses to be on their guard against the "sympathetic friend."

Since we are speaking about absolute beginners, perhaps a word of warning may be given against *pretended* critics. The young actress trembles at the bare words "newspaper man." She ought to know that a critic on a respectable paper holds a responsible position. When he serves a prominent and a leading journal, he is frequently recognized as an authority, and has a social as well as a professional position to maintain. Further, the professional woman does not strongly attract the critic personally. There is no glamour

about stage people to him; but should he desire to make an actress's acquaintance, he would do so in the perfectly correct manner of a gentleman. But this is not known to the young stranger within the theatrical gates, and through her ignorance, which is far from bliss, she may be subjected to a humiliating and even dangerous experience. I am myself one of several women whom I know to have been victimized in early days.

The beginner, then, fearing above all things the newspaper, receives one evening a note common in appearance, coarse in expression, requesting her acquaintance, and signed "James Flotsam," let us say. Of course she pays no attention, and two nights later a card reaches her—a very doubtful one at that—bearing the name "James Flotsam," and in the corner, *Herald*. She may be about to refuse to see the person, but some one will be sure to exclaim, "For mercy's sake! don't make an enemy on the 'press.'"

And trembling at the idea of being attacked or sneered at in print, without one thought of asking what *Herald* this unknown represents, without remembering that Miller's Pond or Somebody-else's Corners may have a *Herald* she hastens to grant to this probably ignorant young lout the unchaperoned interview she would instantly refuse to a gentleman whose name was even well known to her; and trembling with fear and hope she will listen to his boastings "of the awful roasting he gave Billy This or Dick That," referring thus to the most prominent actors of the day, or to his promises of puffs for herself "when old Brown or Smith are out of the office" (the managing and the city editors

both being jealous of him, and blue pencilling him just for spite); and if Mr. Flotsam does not, without leave, bring up and present his chum, Mr. Jetsam, the young woman will be fortunate.

A little quiet thought will convince her that an editor would not assign such a person to report the burning of a barn or the interruption of a dog fight, and with deep mortification she will discover her mistake. The trick is as old as it is contemptible, and many a great paper has had its name put to the dishonourable use of frightening a young actress into an acquaintance with a self-styled critic.

Does this seem a small matter to you? Then you are mistaken. There are few things more serious for a young woman than an unworthy or undesirable acquaintance. She will be judged, not by her many correct friends, but by her one incorrect one. Again, feeling fear of his power to work her injury, she ceases really to be a free agent, and Heaven knows what unwise concessions she may be flurried into; and of all the dangers visible or invisible in the path of a good girl, the most terrible is "opportunity." If you wish to avoid danger, if you wish to save yourself some face-reddening memory, give no one the "opportunity" to abuse your confidence, to wound you by word or deed. Ought I to point out one other unpleasant possibility? Temptation may approach the somewhat advanced young actress through money and power in the guise of the "patron of Art"—not a common form of temptation by any means. But what *has* been may be again, and it is none the easier to resist because it is unusual. When a young girl, with hot impatience, feels she is not advancing as rapidly as she

should, the wealthy "patron of Art" declares it is folly for her to plod along so slowly, that he will free her from all trammels, he will provide play, wardrobe, company, and show the world that she is already an artist. To her trembling objection that she could only accept such tremendous aid from one of her own family, he would crushingly reply that "Art" (with a very big A) should rise above common conventionalities; that he does not think of *her* personally, but only the advance of professional "Art"; and if she must have it so, why-er, she may pay him back in the immediate future, though if she were the passionate lover of "Art" he had believed her to be, she would accept the freedom he offered and waste no thought on "ways and means" or "hows and whys."

Ah, poor child, the freedom he offers would be a more cruel bondage than slavery itself! The sensitive, proud girl would never place herself under such heavy obligations to any one on earth. She would keep her vanity in check, and patiently or impatiently hold on her way,—free, independent,—owing her final success to her own honest work and God's blessing. Every girl should learn these hard words by heart, *Rien ne se donne, tout se paye ici-bas!* "Everything is paid for in this world!"

A number of young girls have asked me to give them some idea of the duties of a beginner in the profession, or what claims the theatre makes upon her time. Very well. We will first suppose you a young and attractive girl. You have been carefully reared and have been protected by all the conventionalities of refined social life. Now you enter the theatrical profession, depending solely upon your salary for

your support, meaning to become a great actress and to keep a spotless reputation, and you will find your work cut out for you. At the stage door you will have to leave quite a parcel of conventional rules. In the first place, you will have to go about *alone* at night as well as by day. Your salary won't pay for a maid or escort of any kind. That is very dreadful at first, but in time you will learn to walk swiftly, with stony face, unseeing eyes, and ears deaf to those hyenas of the city streets, who make life a misery to the unprotected woman. The rules of a theatre are many and very exacting, and you must scrupulously obey them or you will surely be forfeited a stated sum of money. There is no gallantry in the management of a company, and these forfeits are genuine, be you man or woman.

You have heard that cleanliness is next to godliness, here you will learn that *punctuality* is next to godliness. As you hope for fame here and life hereafter, never be late to rehearsal. That is the theatrical unpardonable sin! You will attend rehearsal at any hour of the day the manager chooses to call you, but that is rarely, if ever, before 10 A.M. Your legitimate means of attracting the attention of the management are extreme punctuality and quick studying of your part. If you can come to the second rehearsal perfect in your lines, you are bound to attract attention. Your fellow-players will not love you for it, because they will seem dull or lazy by comparison; but the stage manager will make a note, and it may lead to better things.

Your gowns at this stage of your existence may cause you great anguish of mind—I do not refer to their cost, but to their selection. You will not be allowed to say, "I will wear

white or I will wear pink," because the etiquette of the theatre gives the leading lady the first choice of colours, and after her the lady next in importance, you wearing what is left.

In some New York theatres actresses have no word in the selection of their gowns: they receive plates from the hand of the management, and dress accordingly. This is enough to whiten the hair of a sensitive woman, who feels dress should be a means of expression, an outward hint of the character of the woman she is trying to present.

Should you not be in a running play, you may be an understudy for one or two of the ladies who are. You will study their parts, be rehearsed in their "business," and will then hold yourself in readiness to take, on an instant's notice, either of their places, in case of sickness, accident, or ill news coming to either of them. If the parts are good ones, you will be astonished at the perfect immunity of actresses from all mishaps; but all the same you may never leave your house without leaving word as to where you are going and how long you expect to stay.

You may never go to another theatre without permission of your own manager; indeed, she is a lucky "understudy" who does not have to report at the theatre at 7 o'clock every night to see if she is needed. And it sometimes happens that the only sickness the poor "understudy" knows of during the whole run of the play is that sickness of deferred hope which has come to her own heart.

Not so very hard a day or night, so far as physical labour goes, is it? But, oh! the sameness, the deadly monotony, of repeating the same words to the same person at the same

moment every night, sick or well, sad or happy—the same, same words!

A "one-play" company offers the worst possible chance to the beginner. The more plays there are, the more you learn from observation, as well as from personal effort, to make the parts you play seem as unlike one another as possible. A day like this admits of no drives, no calls, no "teas"; you see, then, a theatrical life is not one long picnic.

If there is one among my readers to whom the dim and dingy half-light of the theatre is dearer than the God-given radiance of the sunlight; if the burnt-out air with its indescribable odour, seemingly composed of several parts of cellar mould, a great many parts of dry rot or unsunned dust, the whole veined through and through with small streaks of escaped illuminating gas—if this heavy, lifeless air is more welcome to your nostrils than could be the clover-sweetened breath of the greenest pasture; if that great black gulf, yawning beyond the extinguished footlights, makes your heart leap up at your throat; if without noting the quality or length of your part the just plain, bald fact of "acting something" thrills you with nameless joy; if the rattle-to-bang of the ill-treated old overture dances through your blood, and the rolling up of the curtain on the audience at night is to you as the magic blossoming of a mighty flower—if these are the things that you feel, your fate is sealed: Nature is imperious; and through brain, heart, and nerve she cries to you, ACT, ACT, ACT! and act you must! Yes, I know what I have said of the difficulties in your way, but I have faith to believe that, if God has given you a peculiar talent, God will aid you to find