

# The Storyteller

## THE MASK OF ILLUSION

The rain pattered shot-like against the cracked window panes, making the dressing-room more desolate—if that were possible. Water oozed under the loose casement, and dripped dangerously near the Old Woman's trunk. I slid the travel-worn box to a dry place; she thanked me, and I resumed my chair on the other side of the mirror, which divided our proprietary rights to the shelf where the make-up was spread out.

Theatre dressing-rooms had been the first disillusion of the world of enchantment to which I had strayed, but the worst was not revealed until the company began a tour of Southern one-night stands.

This night in August was the climax.

On occasions of greatest discomfort, accommodation for the star and the leading lady were, at least, endurable, and the stage manager made personal note that the ingenue's quarters had been swept and provided with a possible looking-glass and wash basin. But my lot in the laying out of the dressing-rooms was whatever happened to be left, a remnant I shared with Miss Briar, the old woman of the company.

Years of hardship had drilled her into making the best of things, and often, as this night when we dressed in the damp cellar, by the flare of one spluttering gas-jet, and climbed a rickety stair to the stage to be asked by the leading woman, 'Are you comfortable, dear?' the brave old veteran answered, 'Thank you!' and rolled her eyes drolly at me. The solicitation was mere habit with the favored one; she asked the question each time they met, and each time forgot she had graciously inquired before.

I puzzled whether Miss Briar ever had any beauty—the first requisite for the stage—her face seemed so hard, so lifeless, and the 'fiddle strings' under her chin had the repulsiveness of age; but her arms had retained their roundness and might have served a sculptor as models to restore Venus. Her wheezy cough was more annoying than usual, and she had thrown a towel over her thin shoulders, yet she shivered as she sat before the cracked mirror trying to conceal with cosmetics the tracks Time had made across her leathery face.

I stared into my half of the glass. Outside the rain pelted as I had heard it so often at home. Tears blurred my eyes—bubbled over and gullied the rouge down my cheeks—a sob betrayed me.

'Got the blues?' asked the old woman, never glancing towards me. 'Yes,' and all the homesickness pent up during the excitement of first experiences, burst forth in one great boo-hoo.

'You'll spoil your make-up,' was the only comfort offered.

From the time the call-boy shouted 'Half-hour!' until his voice jarred again with 'Fifteen minutes!' no word was spoken between us; then my companion began as if we had but paused in a conversation laying bare my homesick confession.

'Letters made me lonesome, too, when I first went on the stage,' she said.

I snatched up two envelopes and thrust them in my bosom, lest this woman who had read my heart could also divine the annoyances in these closely-written letters.

'Miss Wray!' the call-boy tapped at the door. 'Mr. Kildare wants to know whether you are comfortable down here?'

'That's kind of him—' I began.

'Tell him yes!' said the old woman brusquely.

'I was sent to ask Miss Wray,' retorted the call-boy.

The old woman ignored the rebuff, but whispered to me, 'Say yes.' And I said so, adding 'Thank you.'

'How thoughtful of Mr. Kildare to take such notice of us!' I said, the star's favor quite dispelling the blue devils. Miss Briar did not reply, but I blamed her indifference to a hard cough from which she recovered with difficulty.

The long tragedy dragged to the final curtain, and Hamlet slept with his forefathers.

I was late getting to the dressing-room. The fairy, Fortune, had waved her wand and all was changed. The stairway was transformed into a starry path, and I walked on air. With a cry of joy I burst into the room which had once seemed so gloomy. 'Oh, Miss Briar! Miss Briar! Think of it; think of it! I am

to study Ophelia and to play the part at a matinee in New Orleans. Mr. Kildare says I will play it well—it suits my temperament.'

Miss Briar was standing before her trunk with a package of letters in her hand. She did not turn or look at me, but enthusiasm needs no eager listener, any ear will do. I went on:

'He says Miss Torrance has never got at the soul of her part, and he is to explain the business and all at supper to-night.'

The trunk lid slammed as Miss Briar turned.

'When?' she gasped, and the horrid, wheezy cough cut short any further inquiry.

'When? what? Oh, supper? Now—after the play,' and I took a dab from the cold cream jar. She sank down on her trunk, panting for breath. I flew to her. 'Miss Briar! What is it? Are you ill?'

'The damp cellar, I suppose. I'll hurry home. I've caught cold—my heart—' she gasped, and held her hands to her side to quiet the palpitation, as I left her to answer a knock at the door. It was the star's valet.

'Mr. Kildare's compliments to Miss Wray. E'll be pleased to have you share his carriage.' And without waiting for my answer (since request was command from his Grace, the star), he hastened along the passage, and I could hear his whispered gossip with the call-boy.

'The devil's to pay. The old man and the starlette quarrellin' again. 'Pullin' air this time.' The matinee idol was never a hero to that iconoclast—his valet.

The rain beat against the window as if it must shatter the remaining glass. I shivered with cold and hurried to overcome a return of the blue devils to spoil my impression at supper. I bundled my costume into the trunk and reached for my hat as old Miss Briar also tiptoed for hers. She tottered and I caught her in my arms.

Instantly the picture flashed before me of the poor soul facing the storm alone, while I rode along in a carriage, and, never daring let impulse halt before ambition, I fled to the star's room and begged to be excused—'my room-mate is ill, I must take her home.'

'Whifflins can do that,' he said.

'Oh, Mr. Kildare! your valet! But she is weak—I must put her to bed.'

'Unfortunate!' he said, with an impatient shrug, and after a curt 'Good-night,' hastened out of the stage door.

My eyes filled with tears as Miss Briar and I saw his cab disappear in the storm while we struggled home under one umbrella.

Her room was only a degree less cheerless than the one at the theatre, but the ash-smothered fire was soon poked into a blaze, the economical gas-jet turned to the height of extravagance, and then I went to work with the tea-things.

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The weary creature huddled before the fire like a 'Macbeth' witch. She untied the soiled string which bound the letters I had seen her take from the theatre trunk, assorted, read each one slowly, then re-tied them; all the while unmindful of my presence and the sacrifice I had made for her.

'That toddy smells good,' she said at last, roused by the odor from the drink I had prepared for her. She had been staring at pictures in the spluttering coke blaze.

'It is good,' I answered, 'and you must drink it and get to bed.'

'Not yet; I can't breathe lying down, and it is nice and warm here. Sit down.'

I sat on the floor beside her, and we both became more cheerful as we sipped the hot drinks.

'You're a good girl,' she said, placing her small wrinkled hand on my knee; 'a good girl to care for an old woman, and now you will allow the old woman to talk to you?'

'Why, of course, Miss Briar! But if it's advice I may not take it, for you know I am my own mistress now. I am annoyed to distraction with advice. My mother and a friend—a man—even in these letters to-night—I took them from my bosom—and they have made me blue—and angry.'

'I know! I know! I have the same things here,' and she held up her faded yellow batch. 'I always carry them—they're nearly done for, though, jostled about in a theatre trunk.'

She began to wheeze again and I gave the fire a poke.

'How long have you carried the letters?'

'Over thirty years.'

'Oh, Miss Briar! that's a lifetime.'