

married name. Yet the thought of her has kept me straight many a time when I have been tempted, and has helped me to live so that if I ever chance to meet her, I can look in her dear face and not be ashamed of myself, thank God.

He turned away his head.

Embarrassed at having so abruptly intruded into the inner sanctuary of his heart, I murmured:

"Dear friend, whatever of joy life has given to your old sweetheart, at least she has never found a truer love than the homage you laid at her feet."

Then I stole away.

"Do you observe, miss, how poorly Mr. Keene is looking for a while past?" said Miss Bedelia McShane, the latest addition to our forces.

Bedelia, before her footlight debut, had played only the humble part of scrubbing the lobby of the theatre. A charwoman being required for a role on the stage, the position was given to her, and she made a hit by her absolute disregard of everything but the work before her.

"Being set to scrub, I just scrubs," she replied, when asked the secret of her success.

The phrase became a by-word among us.

Her remark to me with reference to old Joe was made several weeks after I had, in a measure, forced myself into his confidence. Although I, too, had noticed that he was failing, I did not care to admit it to anyone.

"Oh, Mr. Keene only needs a rest," I answered with assumed carelessness. "But tell me, Bedelia, what was the trouble between you and the stage manager this morning?"

The ruse succeeded.

"Sure, miss, there is no trouble at all," answered the McShane volubly, "except it be that I've struck for more leisure. I've been charwoman at this theatre now goin' on seven year. I scrubs the stoops in the mornin', I plays me part in the afternoon, and I plays me part in the evenin'. It's too much. I'll play me two performances a day, but I'll quit at three."

Bedelia was as good as her word, and the manager had to yield or we would have lost one of the most popular members of our company. Our actor-manager had been running one play since the beginning of the season, and that Mr. Keene was losing ground soon became only too manifest to all concerned. Latterly his strong scene in the last act had not been given with the necessary force, and each evening he appeared more distressed for breath as the curtain fell.

"Mimi," whispered Richard to me one night as I stood in the wings at the beginning of the play, the manager has resolved to hand old Joe his notice. He has written the letter and will give it to him to-night before he goes home."

"Our dear friend," I sighed. "How I wish we could save him from this trial, that we could spare him the humiliation of this dismissal!"

We were powerless to avert the blow.

"Well, when we have a home of our own, Joe shall be our guest for as long as he will stay with us, shall he not, Mimi?" Richard said.

I never loved him so much as I did at that moment. Joe was on in the scene, and we watched him. At a point where the action is sustained by some of the other characters, I saw his glance sweep over the house. Then, suddenly, he gave a start of surprise. It was imperceptible to the audience, unremarked even by my companion (I presently discovered), but plain enough to me.

The next moment he was putting a fire and vigor into his acting that had been lacking for years.

My cue came, and I went on. Mr. Keene continued to play his part with magnetic power, and the curtain fell amid a round of applause.

"By jove, I believe some one has given Keene a hint about his notice!" exclaimed Richard as I came off. "I had not the heart to tell him, but had I known he would have taken it in this way I would have warned him long ago."

I smiled, yet, said nothing. But I knew it was no hint of the notice that had wrought the change in our friend.

I had seen his eyes turn again and again toward an elderly lady in widow's weeds who sat in the second row of the orchestra chairs with a young man, evidently her son.

Old Joe was playing to only one individual in the audience, only to that beautiful, delicate-looking, silver-haired woman.

At once the truth flashed upon me.

This lady was none other than the woman of whom he had spoken to me, the woman whom he had once loved and loved still. This was the explanation of his sudden spirit and fervid rendering of his lines.

Throughout the second act it was the same. He was clearly eager to show his early sweetheart, and the object of his life-long devotion, that, after all, he was not an absolute failure or unworthy of her respect. She must at least admit that he possessed a spark of the divine fire, that the dream of his youth had not been all a delusion.

To her he bowed as he appeared once more with me before the curtain at the end of the third act.

And she? Ah, yes, she had recognised him almost from the first. Even while I was going through my own part, her face, with its tense, startled, yet tender expression, was ever before me.

Plainly, through all the years which had passed, in spite of a separation of more than half a lifetime, she had not lost interest in the career and well-being of her lover. And now, as she leaned forward in her chair and followed his every motion and every note of his voice, I felt, with an understanding that my own love for Richard gave me, that the old love had rushed back to her heart in a tide of fond recollections. For she must have loved him once, even though later she may have known a deeper love. For the nonce she was a girl again, and he a handsome young man pouring his ardent vows into her willing ears. All the years between seemed to have faded away; even the young man at her side was as if he had never been.

In the last scene Joe fairly eclipsed all his former efforts, the scene in which his poor old voice had been wont to tremble and sometimes even to break.

He played it with the strength of other days, and his voice rang clear and true up to the climax, where, according to the business of the piece, he pitched forward into Richard's outstretched arms.

When this happened, Richard gave a quick, nervous glance at me, and then laid him gently prone upon the stage.

"Dead," faltered one of the company, speaking the line of the play. Still following the scene, I fell upon my knees beside the old actor. But to-night my cry of anguish was not feigned. I was really frightened, terror-stricken.

For of all that throng beyond the footlight, or among the people on the stage, only Richard and I knew it was not a mimic death-scene that had just been enacted.

Poor old Joe! He had gained his one night of triumph. And now, a higher power than the manager had given him his notice.

And the lady in the orchestra circle?

The denouement was certainly a surprise to me. That woman who was old Joe's sweetheart in the long ago, the woman to win those smiles and tears he had played so well, who unknown to herself had influenced him for good throughout his life—that sweet-faced, gray-haired woman was my mother!—Messenger of the Sacred Heart.

THE JEWEL

"Remember, she has been with us five years, Gracia. Why—"

"She is too slow."

"But all of her work is accomplished."

"She is cranky," Gracia went on, without heeding her father's justification. "She won't ever let me fuss in the kitchen. I ought to know something about housekeeping, father, and if she won't allow me to learn with her, I'll have to instruct myself."

"It sounds well."

"I'll do just as you say, of course. Let me try two weeks, then school will open and I'll get another maid." Gracia had yet to discover that maids were becoming almost as rare as well-buffaloes. In the fall I intend to take domestic science, you know."

"Oh, indeed."

"Yes. Just two weeks, father. I know how to cook meat and cake, and I have always done the ordering. Brother Bob won't be any trouble. The house is small, and there are only three of us. Please, father, this having to beg for anything shocked and surprised Gracia. Besides Martha—Martha is such a slow-poke."

"Slow-poke? We used to call her the 'Jewel' Slow-poke!"

They were breakfasting at half-past seven. Mr. Hobbs lovingly contemplated his cream gold coffee and the biscuits, which were so light they might be called frivolous. An idea occurred to him; his face brightened, and he suggested:

"May I dismiss Martha myself, dear? You see, we have had her so long," he apologised.