

Because of their pride, they asked nothing of the members of the family who were living in the city and well able to give them help. The father lived with a man with whom he was associated in a new business venture. Norma, her mother and Athole visited at the homes of friends. Douglas was working and lived in a cheap room. But they had frequent family conferences to talk over the seriousness of their problem.

It was during one of these family sessions that the aunt and uncle from the stage suggested that Norma and Athole go down to New York to try their luck in the world of the theatre. At first the father and mother refused to consider it. The stage was a colourful place to discuss. It was a different matter to decide to live in its atmosphere. Norma and Athole begged and pleaded, eager to try something new, to step into the excitement which the word "theatre" spelled to them. So finally, it was decided that the two girls and their mother should go to New York.

"Through my aunt, we had met a woman in Montreal who used to be an actress," Norma continued. "She gave us a letter to her sister, who owned an apartment building in New York. 'It's not much of a place,' she told us, 'but my sister's an angel. She'll let you live there for nothing until you get on your feet and can pay her room rent.' And she did. But, with that problem settled, the next question which faced us was getting the money to take us to New York."

From the wreckage of their home, Norma had saved her piano, which had been a gift to her when she began her music lessons. It was battered from the kickings of her little girl feet, which could not quite reach the pedals and it breathed memories of happier days. Norma clung to it, hating to part with it, but that piano was the one thing left to sell. With the money which it brought the three adventurers, Norma, Athole and Edith Shearer set forth for New York.

Their first home there was a broken-down apartment peopled by broken-down actors and actresses. It was old and grimy and depressing, but the woman who owned it was the "Angel" her sister had promised. She made the three newcomers comfortable in one room. She refused to accept any rent until they had found jobs and could better afford to pay it.

They reached New York just before Christmas, but even in that season of the year—which spells home and cheer—the miserable shabbiness of their one crowded room, the strangeness of everything, could not quench Norma's spirits. She was thrilled and excited by everything, with the thrill of a sixteen-year-old starting out to conquer a new world. Athole was more timid, but Norma and her mother were unafraid.

They had one double bed and a cot without a mattress, so they took turns sleeping on the cot, over which they spread a mat. This mat had an uncomfortable habit of slipping off the springs at the least move of the sleeper, so that the cot's occupant usually found herself on the floor at least once during the night.

Their wardrobe trunk served as a table, and a gas jet was the stove on which they cooked their breakfasts of coffee and rolls and marmalade. They went without lunch and ate their dinners at the various inexpensive restaurants in the neighbourhood, but they made fun of it and enjoyed it.

In the First Chapter . . .

Norma Shearer was the daughter of a well-known business man in Montreal, Canada, and for the first ten years of her life in that city she knew not a single trouble or care. She was even permitted, after considerable pleading, not to go to school until she was ten years of age, though her mother insisted that she should be taught music. But when she was little more than ten, Norma discovered that strange things were happening in their home. The beautiful horses which she had loved so much were sold, there were fewer and fewer of the merry parties which she had watched with such delight, and finally they moved from their lovely home to a much smaller one in a different district. Norma didn't mind the change at first; she was happy at school and with her friends, but soon she was attacked by severe bronchitis, which interrupted her schooling, and when she was fourteen she gave up school altogether.

"I really believe that mother liked the adventure," Norma smiled. "I think that at one time in her life she had wanted to go on the stage, and I imagine that she got a sort of vicarious pleasure from the thought that her two daughters were really trying to become actresses. My uncle's health had broken and he was living in Michigan, but my aunt came to town frequently and took us around to the various agents' offices.

"Our clothes were a big problem. It was much colder than we had thought, and I simply had to have a winter coat. We hunted for bargains and found one which we thought would be warm enough. It wasn't, and I froze all that winter, but there was nothing I could do about it except freeze. I'll never forget the outfit I wore when we first arrived in New York—I was so proud of it. The skirt came to my ankles—a hobble skirt—and my hat had a wide brim with a ribbon dangling down my back. I combed my hair in little curls, which I thought were too fetching for words.

"Somehow or other I always managed to get myself rigged up in something which I thought was sensational. My idea was, I guess, to impress the managers with the uniqueness of my appearance. I remember wearing a mannish coat with a regular man's hat. To complete this dashing ensemble, I carried a cane. I thought that the swankiness of the outfit was unequalled by anything which Broadway could offer."

One of the Shearers' first visits was to Florenz Ziegfeld, to whom they had a letter of introduction from a friend in Montreal. Mr. Ziegfeld was very kind to the three Shearers, chatted with them for several minutes and gave them tickets to the Follies for that evening. But when they went back to see him the next day the secretary informed them that he was busy. However, she took their names and addresses and told them that she would remember them when Mr. Ziegfeld was casting for his next show. Six months later they received cards from the Ziegfeld office asking them to come down for rehearsal.

Was this a chance at last? Read in next week's "Radio Record" of the struggles of Norma Shearer and her sister to earn a living as film "extras" and small-part players on the New York stage.