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"The Play's the Thing"

(Mary Catherine Crowley, in Messenger of the Sacred Heart.)

Every one among us loved old Joe Keene, whose roles on the boards were usually "the irate father," the cold-blooded family solicitor, the dishonest skin-flint, the close-fisted or profligate husband, but who in real life was the gentlest, most upright and generous of men.

We were a theatrical company, gathered together after the opening of the season from the ranks of those unfortunately out of an engagement, by a leading man who was determined to "star." And after a short tour on the road. we were actually playing in New York, although not at that paradise of an actor's daydreams, a Broadway theatre.

Not so long ago the player's calling was looked down upon by the people on the other side of the footlights even while they applauded the player's genius.

Now we are judged more justly, and the profession is known to be made up of men and women who, in their virtues or their faults, only "hold the mirror up" to the rest of the world. God's work can be done in the green room as in His sanctuary, and every place is His temple where His glory can be increased.

In our company were several Catholics, including Joe, Richard and myself. Someone had asked us to contribute our mite to the St. Vincent of Paul Society, and at intervals I used to go around collecting the dimes and quarters from my band and any others who chose to give, usually the whole company.

There are no people on earth more generous and charitable than the members of "the profession," unless perhaps, it be the very poor of the tenement house districts in a great city.

"Here comes Mimi with her little green silk bag," Mr. Keene would say as he caught sight of me on these occasions, and down would go his hand into his pocket on the instant.

It was the same whenever he heard the story of any poor fellow, either in our ranks or out of them, who was down on his luck. When any woman was in need, his assistance was always as delicately and chivalrously rendered as though she were a princess.

Hitherto I had played only ingenue parts. But this year, when the leading lady was taken ill and had to give up, I found myself at a bound promoted to the top rung of our particular theatrical ladder.

"It's all right, Mimi, you can do it," Joe exclaimed when I told him.

Very proud I was that he thought so, for our acquaintance had begun only when we were both engaged by the actor-manager.

We were friends from that hour, and he grew so fond of me that Richard became almost jealous. Richard and I are to be married at the close of the season.

But the old man said I looked like someone he had known long ago, and I understood that many of the little acts of kindness he showered upon me were prompted by his enduring affection for that other woman, whoever she was. At least she must now be gray-haired and elderly, unless, indeed, while still in her youth and beauty she had made her exit from life, in the first act of the drama—idyl, comedy or tragedy—whatever it was.

Yes, we all knew he had his romance, and one day, with the heedlessness of youth and an impetuous disposition, I made bold to ask him about it.

"Mr. Keene, you must have often thought me an audacious little minx," I began, "and you know you are a beautiful old hero in my eyes, so don't be angry when I ask you to tell me a story. Why have you never married?"

The question disconcerted him, and was, truly, an impertinence for which I blamed myself as soon as it was uttered.

He tried to smile, but the sad expression of his eyes haunted me for days afterwards and his voice trembled in spite of his attempt to keep it steady.

"Ah, Mimi, my child," he replied. "I am just another who has grasped at happiness and failed to obtain it. When I was a young man I had my ambition. I dreamed of becoming prominent in my calling, a star of the first magnitude. Then, grown rich and famous, I would marry the woman I loved. She was not one of us, and wished me to adopt another profession. It was the one point on which we differed. Circumstances parted us. My dream of fame and fortune has not yet come true, and never will. Long ago, she became the wife of another. For years I have heard nothing of her. I do not even know her 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 lover 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 Mrs. 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 char-woman being required for a role on the stage, a 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 lasure. I've been charwoman at this thayater now goin' on sivin year. I scrubs the stoop 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 m two performances a day, but I'll quit at three."

Bedelia was as good as her word, but 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 tonight 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 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, unmarked 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 take 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.

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 spirited 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 recognized 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 former lover. And now as she leaned forward in her chair and followed his every motion and every note of his voice, I felt, with the understanding that my own love 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.

Hr 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 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 complete surprise to me. That woman who was Joe's old sweetheart, in the long ago, the woman to win whose smiles and tears he had played well, who, unknown to herself, had influenced him for good throughout his life—that sweet-faced, gray-haired woman was—my mother!

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