

With the Leading Ladies

Now if this were a little booklet, instead of a transient newspaper page with an advertisement for somebody's something where the tail piece ought to be and heaven only knows what on the other side—if this were a little booklet done up in deep green covers with a rash of roses broken out all over them, then how coyly might I dedicate it. Dedicate it to you, Clarice, for one; to you, Beatrice, as you say, to the false glitter and monotonous swirl of a social sphere in which your ambition to be a great actress must burn unquenched in a golden vase. Your letter is before me as I write, Clarice, and I am saying vase to myself just as you would have me say it—with a long rich "z" in it and no "s" at all.

And to you, too, Beatrice, young, beautiful (you are modest, Beatrice, to word it that way: "and my friends say beautiful") and of dramatic temperament that you yourself cannot help perceiving; yet, for a beggarly sixty dollars a month, forced to bend this youth, beautiful temperament over an unfeeling type-writing machine from 9 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon, sometimes to half-past 5.

And, above all, to you, Maggie Jane, that performs the housework for a family of four, not to mention washing the handkerchiefs, stockings and damms, and all for twenty-two dollars a month, when you know that it is in you to become an actress of great emotional power, and even pecuniary prosperity, if only you didn't have to work for a living in the meantime.

But the green binding with its rash of red roses and its neat little page of dedication is as far from me, girls, as the footlights are from you; book publishers neglect me just as managers neglect you. Of course they will all be sorry for it one of these days and just a bit ridiculous when you and I become famous. Meanwhile we must do the best we can in the conditions that surround us—Maggie Jane to the washboard, Beatrice to the dictation book, Clarice to her teas and dances, and yours faithfully to the interview.

It took more time and courage to get these interviews than it would have taken to write an off-hand essay on the subject; but I felt surer and safer in writing out of the experience of others. Mrs. Ella Wheeler Wilcox could have told it all with out looking up from her desk. But I had to dig and dare it out.

I went to the four principal leading ladies in San Francisco, and begged them to tell me what hardships, suffering and disappointment they had endured in their "prentice" days before receiving a salary of fifteen dollars a week. Fifteen dollars struck me as about as small a salary as any actress could be expected to live on without help from the dear ones at home.

Miss Marion Converse, leading lady of the stock company at the Alcazar, rather discouraged me at first.

We sat in the dimly-lighted auditorium and talked it out during a wait in the rehearsal.

"I should hate to break up any literary dream," she said, good-naturedly, "but I've never worked for as small a salary as fifteen dollars."

And, without as much as a comma, she continued: "You are surprisingly young, aren't you? And before I could get in the edge of an answer she went on: "Yes, amazingly young. I had always fancied you an elderly sort of person with her two hands brushed her cheeks down to the chin) "with—er—whiskers. Yes, surely whiskers. I had certainly fancied you in whiskers."

It was a delight to have been favored by Miss Converse in anything. I should have brought whiskers, had I known. I said as much.

"Not at all," she protested, "we all prefer ourselves as we are. And whiskers, after all, are optional with all men, except actors. It is not your fault that you are not whiskered. It is mine for fancying you so different from what you really are. You see, I've heard the people of the stage calling you bitter and sarcastic and smart Alec, and all that sort of thing, after you have overlooked their greatness, and I've said to myself that none of it was true; that you were merely a long-loved old party who had his whiskers that way. The whiskers—"

I interrupted Miss Converse to say that there was just one other subject in the world of more importance to me than that one.

"Meaning me," she said cozily.

"How gallant and unexpected. Well, as a leading lady, and I've been on the stage almost three years, and I haven't starved even for a day; haven't done anything, in fact, that ought to have done for a foundation of greatness. I started with a

salary of 5. That's what Charles Frohman did me for playing the French gun-one of his road productions "The Little Minister." Later on played Babbie and got \$45. Myxt raise was to \$100, and then—ill. I mustn't tell you what I know. It wouldn't be business-like. It's been hard work, but plenty of it at good pay. But poverty its romantic aspect is sadly lacking, isn't it?"

I admit that it was; but I banked a little hope on the difficulties of getting that first \$25 engagement.

"But there were no difficulties," said Miss Converse. "I had known * * * 2 Lead Ladies.

Augustine intimately. He invited me to become a member of his company here I thought of going on the stage. When I wanted an engagement just came. There was none to dig for it save Mrs. Grundy."

"Your parts?" I inquired.

"No, they were willing. I mean the set incidental. We lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, and father being a Southern Colonel and mamma being rather nice people herself, and hem!—if you make me out a swag! I'll never forgive you. Well, since I family was—you know—one of the best, some of the good folk in Charlotte stood aghast at Marion going the stage. But my girl friends sod by me, and pretty soon everybody else followed suit; so, after all my social position didn't go down a peg. That was the nearest approach to a battle."

"And you liked into a real part at \$25 per week experience?" I marveled.

"I didn't say anything of the kind. I had lots of experience as an amateur. We had the regulation society of amateurs—Charlotte, and we used to play the new Frohman plays right along as it as they came out in New York. I knew the address of an enterprising firm of stenographers in Chicago that sent us the pirated manuscript of any new play for \$5."

My eyes popped with horror, and I mentioned the law.

"The law," laughed Miss Converse, "what cares the urning amateur for the law? Then she whispered: "And besides, I was a hoir singer."

Miss Lillian Ibertson, leading lady of the stock company at the Grand Opera House, received me in the managerial office. She looked eighteen and was twenty. I could have paraphrased Miss Converse's remarks on youth with considerable patness, but I refrained. This was Miss Albertson's first interview and she was very direct and serious, and she regarded me almost much as one regards a dentist. I pledged myself to painless extraction.

"You missed interviewing me a few months ago under less prosperous circumstances than these," she said quietly, surveying the comfortable appointments of the office and straightening her hat on a halo of Du Barry hair that lacked only the final flourish of Mrs. Carter's.

My whole person became an interrogation point.

"I was one of the \$3.50 girls at the Alcazar, but you didn't round me up with the others."

"What a pity?"

"Yes," she said simply: "if you had, then I suppose we both might now be looking on you as my discoverer. But no one discovered me at the Alcazar. I worked there for four weeks, and then I went out on the road with the John Rutledge company—ten-twenty-thirty, sometimes fifty for box seats. I was playing the dying mother principally, until one day the leading lady fell ill, and then I stepped into her shoes."

"And salary?" I asked eagerly, hoping it was fifteen.

"No, not that," she answered; "my contract gave me only transportation, experience and hotel."

"The best hotels at least?"

"Yes, the best they had. There was never more than one in any of the towns we played. And after that short season was over I came home and painted things. I'm fond of painting and I didn't care about being an extra girl again."

"But how did you become leading woman here?"

"Oh, I wandered down this way one day—it was the day before last New Year's—to ask for the address of a friend of mine, and Mr. Bishop asked me if I wanted a position. I hadn't thought of it, but I said 'Yes' just the same, and he gave me a card to Mr. Butler, the stage manager; and Mr. Butler cast me for Suzanne Durbly in 'Claire' and the Forgemaster. That's how I found out I was better as a bubbling ingenue than as a dying mother."

"But ingenue is not leading woman?"

"Only when the comedies run so that the ingenue gets the leading parts. I've played ingenues here for the first four weeks and leads for the second four. I'll go back to ingenues when Mr. MacDowell comes with Miss Stone for leading woman."

"Shall you mind stepping down?"

"Not a bit. I want to play in the lighter vein for a couple of years, and then—"

She paused and the light from the window went crimsoning through her hair. It was then I spoke of Mrs. Carter.

"I should like to play a part like Mrs. Carter's Zaza," she said deprecatingly, "or Sapho—there's a great chance in Sapho."

We both smiled at this ambition, and I suggested Camille for a starter.

"No," said Miss Albertson firmly, "I shall never play Camille. I have studied the part and there is no truth in it. Camille is a bad woman and it is not in a bad woman to make the sacrifice Camille makes. The play is false."

"More false than Sapho?"

"I have never read the novel, but Sapho in the play is reclaimed by her love for her child, which is logical and womanly. Mind, I have no idea of being wise in the matter; a few months would cover my entire experience on the stage—but that's the way I feel about Camille."

"And out of that experience, from \$3.50 to opulence, you have had—no suffering, no privations?"

"None at all. I lived comfortably at home when I worked for \$3.50."

"But didn't your sudden rise give any tumultuous sensations?"

"I was glad, of course, but I took it practically. Everybody seemed to do likewise, even the press. Why, in reviewing the play in which I made my first appearance here the 'Call' alluded to me as 'that old favorite.' I expect to be called 'that veteran actress any morning now.'"

As we sat at twilight in a corner of the reception room at the Occidental Hotel I did not tell Miss Grace Elliston of the "Arizona" company what the others had said, and perhaps it was just as well. Miss Elliston has fought hard and long for every inch of progress she has made on the stage; she is still fighting. She thought that her story was hardly worth the telling because it must be so like the stories of other women of her profession—except, as she suggested, the stories of the Edna Mays, with their diamond dog collars, and the stories of those women that by some happy trick of personality are just made for advancement.

"I know what it is to struggle along on fifteen dollars a week, and on less than that."

She smiled, as she said it, out of a sensitive, refined face, and the smile was not a particularly happy one.

"It is only within the last year that I have been earning what might be called a fair salary and I have been on the stage five years. I did not go on the stage to become a great actress; I was not stagestruck. When my father died and left mother and me and the others with nothing, I took up acting as I would have taken up any other available employment. That was in my seventeenth year. On my seventeenth birthday I had gone into a theatre for the first time in my life. My parents were rigid Methodists and acting was unappealing to them. But when my father died and some one had to work, I was grateful to get an engagement with a traveling company. I was paid \$20 a week. Out of this I regularly gave my mother \$10, and sometimes—"

Perhaps Miss Elliston was about to say "and sometimes more," but she did not conclude the sentence. She looked at me squarely and said: "You have asked and I will tell you, but it is not a pretty subject. I have known what it means to go hungry, to be without sufficient food. I have worked and worked and worked in insignificant parts, trying, not so much for art, but to make an impression on the management that employed me, thinking that I might get a raise. But have not hundreds and hundreds of young actresses had the same experience?"

I found my answer in silence. Miss Elliston went on: "I played for several seasons with Augustin Daly's company, for nothing but the experience and the hope of advancement, you might say—I got \$25 a week. When I first received \$50 I thought I was rich."

"And now that the bread and butter struggles are all over, and recognition has come, and you are leading woman in a big production with your future as close as your past—now," said I with a thought for the cheerful, "I suppose it is all art for art's sake and money go hand?"

"Yesterday I went to a tea," she answered, "and all the while I was there among girls who have no idea

of work, no idea of the meaning of the word work, I kept saying to myself that it is I, not they, who am free."

"But," she added wistfully, "I should so love a home life."

"If you were rich today, should you abandon the stage?"

"No, not on that account. I shall never do anything but act—"

"If I had batted a single lid she would have stopped there. I remained in a state of petrification while she concluded: "or marry."

"Then your ambitions are—?"

"They are domestic. I do not hope to spend my life on the stage."

"And if you marry?"

"Good-by to acting forever!"

Miss Annette Marshall was rehearsing "The Bowery After Dark" with Mr. Jimmie Britt, the eminent young pugilist, when I called at the Central theatre. We left him to practice the bow acknowledging applause while we went upstairs to talk it over in the manager's office.

"Fifteen a week!" echoed the leading lady, when my quest was known. "Why that's luxury. I started at twelve and supported my mother. Of course I had to live in a shirt waist to do it, but heavy clothes were not my specialty in those days. I was a New York chorus girl at the Casino."

"If that ever gets out," said I, "it will ruin you with the Central audiences. For over a year now they've accepted you without question as the black alpaca heroine with the property me-child."

"It's the truth just the same," said Miss Marshall. "And maybe you think I wasn't scared the day I went after the job. I could hardly speak."

"Can you sing?" says Lederer.

"I don't know," says I.

"Can you act?" says Lederer.

"I don't know," says I.

"You wear tights?" says Lederer.

"I don't know," says I.

"Here," says Lederer to the wardrobe woman, "put this girl in tights."

"They were my first tights and I turned pigeon-toed from fright; but Lederer only said 'You'll do,' and next week I was marking time in the first row."

"I got fifteen," continued Miss Marshall, "when we—Della Fox and I and a few others—went out on the road. And everything was serene until one day Bob Cumming says to me: 'The first thing you know, Nettie, you'll be wearing diamonds like those girls in the chorus who make fun of your shirt waist. You'd better get out of this and marry me.' So I got out and married him."

The leading lady paused for breath, and I asked if it had been a happy marriage.

"Have you seen me play Nancy Sykes this week?" she inquired.

I had not.

"Well, it's one of the best things I do and it ought to be. I had a regular engagement playing Nancy to Bob Bunning's Bill, and not in any theatre either; we played it at home, and he was the greatest Sykes that ever lived."

"You don't mean to say—"

"That's just what I mean to say—he had steady exercise walloping the life out of me. I played in his stock company when we weren't 'appearing' at home."

"You know how David Belasco trained Mrs. Carter," I said comfortingly.

"I'm afraid," replied Miss Marshall, "that Bob Cumming over-trained me. Sure, now, this is no joke. Why sometimes in this performance I get so excited I could tear the clothes off Fagin if I could let me get at him."

"But naturally you are peaceful?"

"Yes, peaceful, but highly nervous. You wouldn't think a woman of my weight would be nervous, but just watch me on the stage some time, watch my hands; I've always got something in them to keep me from tearing my palms with my nails."

"And you never gave battle to the Casino diamonds that poked fun at your shirt waist?"

"I'm glad I didn't. I've had a sweeter revenge since. They are still beating time and I'm the leading lady. Maybe you think it doesn't do me good when any of them drift out here in 'Florodora' or some piece like that, and I take them up to my flat and ask my maid to look after their last year's raglans and finally say: 'Really, girls, you must forgive me if I'm dull today, but I've been studying a seventy-five-page part and it's just worn me out.'—Ashton Stevens in Examiner.

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