

HER LAST SUPREME EFFORT

Enabled Her to Appear in Old Drury Lane.

Her Tragic Acting Was so Real That Her Life Ended With the Last Scene—A Love Story.

When Barton Booth was slowly dying and Mrs. Oldfield often too ill to act and Kitty Clive had yet emerged into the sunlit path of prosperity, the town was anxiously awaiting the coming of some new favorite.

Were there to be no successors of Anne Oldfield and Mrs. Bracegirdle? Were the Booths and the Bettertons, then, extinct? In the tavern and coffee houses, at the street corners, in the greenroom of Drury Lane and within the charmed circle of the court itself the selfsame questions were asked and despairingly answered and asked again.

Lying in her sickbed in a small house near Clare market, Susan Ford one night overheard the subject discussed beneath her open window. The unaccustomed voices awoke her from a fitful slumber, and, raising her wasted form on one elbow, she rubbed her eyes and gazed languidly.

"Zounds! 'Tis a pity Anne Oldfield were not young again," quoth one speaker, with some slight elegance of diction.

"I faith we'll ne'er see another like her," came the reply.

The pale face in the dimly lighted room vivified with a keen interest as the possessor caught the purport of the conversation.

"What actress have we now worthy of the name?" another voice exclaimed. "Who can rouse us to fever heat?"

"There is none, nor actor either," chimed in a cantankerous bass. "A plague on 'em all. There's not an ounce of fire in the whole fell tribe of 'em."

"Yes, but you make a mistake, Master Rayner. If ye'd have traveled as I, ye would have known of one who'd set all London agog an' it—she—she—a little provincial hussy, mark ye, as fiery as the devil—and sweeter than the angels. I saw her near by Doncaster now close upon two years ago. Her name was Susan—Susan—aye, Susan!"

The sick woman had leaped from her bed and rushed to the window, but the rest of the colloquy escaped her ears.

The gossipers, already moving away ere she had discerned the personal interest attaching to their remarks, had passed along out of sight and out of hearing.

For a moment she stood transfixed, with one hand clutching the curtain.

"Susan!" she muttered. "Susan who? Oh, can it be? Can it be? Yes, yes, Susan Ford in certainty. God has sent him to cheer me in my illness—to encourage me to be well. Ah, I must be strong! I will! I will be the queen of Drury yet, and Rupert—Rupert will love me the more to see me glorified by all the high and great, by all the big, the mighty public!"

In the buoyancy springing from this newly aroused ambition she strode up and down the room, her disheveled hair clinging round her frail figure, her hands tightly clasped, a keen excitement in her eyes.

She thought of all her appearances since away in country booths, of her little successes in provincial towns, of the honey of applause even from gaping yokels, of her longings to do something great—to hold an audience entranced, to make them weep or laugh, just as she willed. How often had she glowed with intense delight as she pictured her triumph in London. From every

corner in Drury Lane curls and beaus would cheer her; the pit would rise to applaud and shout its approbation. And onward court potentates would crowd round her in the greenroom and shower prizes upon her. But there would always come the antithesis to this bright dream—the renewed contemplation of the dull gray of stern reality, with all its attendant poverty, insignificance, monotony.

Then Drury Lane would seem to tower above her like a gigantic frowning rock, and could she, weak and helpless, scale the precipice and gain footing on those dizzy heights? Nay, she viewed the prospect her heart would quake, and hot tears, half with anger, half from despair, would flood her eyes.

Yet one day after a long period of despondency her hopes had been revived to some good purpose. While playing at Lathlow she met Rupert Vendover, the eldest son of Sir Reginald Vendover, a brave old cavalier, who enjoyed the leisure earned by an active life in the cause of Charles II.

The young Rupert, romantically though, fell in love with her, and for many days followed her with the company of strolling players from one place to another. He urged her on in the pursuit of fame and, showing ardent love of her beauty, respect for her station, and every sympathy with her aspirations, very soon gained her unqualified affection. Ultimately he had

brought her to London, to this very house, promising to use what influence he had in her behalf.

But suddenly those ambitious schemes of hers were shattered again. Sickness struck her down. For months she had lain in this room, weak and spiritless. Only Rupert's daily visits had kept her enamored of life. To ever act again seemed an impossibility.

But now, through a few chance words, all the old restless eagerness took hold of her afresh. The path of fame stood disclosed anew, and she longed to tread it with an all consuming desire.

Suddenly amid her reverie a gust of wind slammed the open lattice against the wall. She turned, startled, and with a hysterical cry fell prone upon the bed.

A minute later footsteps were heard upon the stairs. The room door was opened and the good wife who tended her entered. A tall figure peered in at her heels and whispered, "May I come in?"

Then, seeing, "Heavens!" he exclaimed. "What's this?" and rushing to the bedside took the senseless woman in his arms.

"Susan, Susan, speak to me, dearest! 'Tis I, Rupert. Speak, speak!"

He chafed her hands and bathed her forehead from a bottle snatched from an adjacent table.

Her eyelids slowly unclosed, and she smiled wanly.

"What is the matter, dear heart? You tax your strength too much in rising. Why?"

"Oh, Rupert! I am but a little weak. I am recovered now. I know I am. A few more quiet days and I shall move in the world again. This confinement is killing me. I must breathe the fresh air, see the faces of the crowd—and hear the clamor of the audience again."

"Nav, nay, Susan, you are too weak, and you know there is no need to play again so long as you grant me the honor of accepting my help. Become my wife, dearest, and we will go away into the country and see if the meadows and the woods will give you strength."

"I leave not London," she answered, "till I tread old Drury's boards. I would play, Rupert. Oh, grant me this! Get me leave to act Ophelia there, and I will marry you on the morrow of that day—aye, whether it be that London derides—or takes me to its arms. Do this, Rupert, dear! Do this, I pray!"

"But, Susan, you are so weak."

"I will succor my strength then. Besides, I am better. Ah, yes, I feel so much better! You know not how very much better, Rupert, dear."

"Well, well, be it so then. But as yet, mark me, you are too ill by far."

"God bless thee, Rupert! Thy goodness makes me well completely."

He told her in his strong arms, and as she told him all over again of her dreams he soothed her into gentle slumber.

And by and by, when the regular sigh of her breathing fell upon his ears, he crept from the room and went his way.

Not many days intervened before a rumor spread abroad through all the town. A new actress was to appear at Drury Lane in the character of Ophelia, and it was whispered that at last Anne Oldfield would have a worthy successor on those famous boards.

Susan Ford was her name, and wild tales went from mouth to mouth of where she came from and who she was.

The old publican who had spoken to such great, though unassuming, purpose beneath Susan's window became in his particular circle a man of recognized wisdom. His previous assertions concerning "the little provincial hussy" were looked upon as inspired, and every foolish thing he now uttered was barked to with open mouthed attention and wonderment.

Susan, though still troubled with occasional fits of faintness, studied her part with astonishing application. Often she awoke in the middle of the night and arose and rehearsed her scenes, until carried away beyond remembrance of surrounding she forgot to subdue her voice any longer and spoke the lines—with all the feeling they really demanded.

But as the night of her debut drew nearer she became quieter and appeared less high strung. Only to Rupert, during the long hours they had together, would she keep saying, with deep and soulful enthusiasm: "I shall be a great success, Rupert. I know it! I feel it!"

At last the eventful night arrived, and Drury Lane was packed in every available corner. The beaus had taken an hour longer over their toilets, the devisions of the pit sported ribbons in their hats and the whole atmosphere bespoke anxious expectancy. The only regret was that the part of Ophelia had been chosen for the debut, and not a character of more prominence and passion.

The earlier parts of "Hamlet" were hardly listened to, and ever and anon cries of "Hasten," "Ophelia, Ophelia," issued from the crowd.

But from the first entrance of Ophelia every one was mute, enrapt. On the instant the house felt that a new genius had indeed found admittance to old Drury's stage.

Her grace and charm won every heart, her mellifluous diction sounded

like music and her expressive, beautiful face impressed one and all with grave and pure admiration.

Rupert sat in a box, his heart full to overflowing with a keen joy that had never before been his, gazing intently at the woman he loved so ardently. He had waited patiently all the long, long months since he had known her without decrease of love.

And now at last he was within sight of supreme happiness. On the morrow she was to be his wife.

As the mad scene drew near, the audience exhibited a still more lively interest in the debutante, and when at last she came on the stage as the demented Ophelia the whole house burst forth into applause.

But she seemed to note it not. Her whole soul was pent up in her role. She looked as though she saw no one, heard nothing. She was the hapless Ophelia, none other. She instilled a strange and melancholy wildness into the part. Tears stood in every eye, and not a disturbing sound was heard throughout the house. Gradually she seemed to become more distraught, until in one last terrible climax she gave vent to a frenzied shriek and fell upon the stage.

The audience sat breathless, a pallor on every cheek, and none dared applaud.

Rupert had left the box and gone to her 'tiring-room before the conclusion of the scene. A feeling of uneasiness which he could not throw off—disturbed him. He had never known such acting. Yet was that not cause for joy? A noise was heard at the door of the room as she smilingly reassured himself.

He jumped up and flung it open. Susan was struggling violently in the grasp of two men, the words of the mad Ophelia still upon her lips:

"There's tennel for you and columbine!—There's rue for you, and some for me!"

Suddenly her eyes alighted upon her lover.

With a supreme effort she dragged herself free from them.

Then her voice rang out: No, no; he is dead. So to thy deathbed!

She sank to the floor, and her life passed away in one short sigh.—Penny Pictorial Magazine.

Vote of Thanks.
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