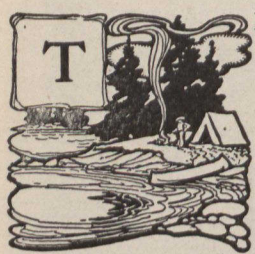


THE GREAT ACTOR'S PART

The Story of a Holiday and Its Unusual Problem.



THE Great Actor stood at the white garden gate with a royal splendour of poppies behind and about him. Mrs. Ford's garden ran to poppies. There were few other flowers, but the poppies, as long as they lasted, made up for all that was lacking. They were selected and sown with judgment and the effect of the white farmhouse with its girdle of brilliant blossom was distinctly good. In stooped, sunburned Martha Ford, harassed by unending housework and the monotonous cares of this world there were artistic instincts that had never come to blossom. They found their only outlet in her famous poppies; perhaps this was why she loved the gorgeous blossoms so.

The Great Actor, looking dreamily over the garden and the lush clover meadow beyond to the blue ribbon of the creek, was not thinking about the poppies—or, indeed, about anything. It was a luxury not to have to think and he indulged in it to the full, basking in the sunshine and summer odours. Already he was better; the strained nerves were relaxing their tension; the quiet and restfulness and brooding ease of this land of sunshine and poppies and clover fields were bringing him to his own again.

The Great Actor was famous in three continents for his impersonation of romantic roles. In spite of his sixty years and his snow-white hair he was young in heart and soul. People who saw him only on the stage thought he was a very young man. He had climbed from obscurity to eminence and he loved his work—loved it too well, perhaps, and put too much of his vitality into it. At all events, the spring of this idle summer had found him in a bad state. His doctor had ordered absolute rest from everything—rest, study, interviewers.

"You must bury yourself in some place where nobody can find you and think and do nothing for at least six months," was the decree. The Great Actor obeyed it to the letter. He came to North Prospect.

In his boyhood he had spent a vacation there on his uncle's farm. The uncle had gone now but a cousin was there, whose wife agreed to board the Great Actor for the summer. She made him comfortable and he rested deliciously and made friends among the country people. As yet he had not wearied of the quiet.

"When you get tired of it and want to get back to your own world you will be just half well," the doctor had told him.

Down the long sunset country road, that curved abruptly from west to south just in front of the garden gate, two figures came loitering—a man and a girl. As they rounded the curve both looked at the Great Actor, with his kindly smiling face and splendid crown of silver hair. The young man was a handsome fellow with a good nose and chin; there was merely curiosity in the glance he cast on the Great Actor—the indifferent curiosity accorded to a celebrity. But in the girl's eyes were wonder and reverence—and a question.

The Great Actor returned her gaze with interest. He had not seen her before and she was very different from the North Prospect young women in general. She was slight and rather tall, very dark, with large, almost too large, grey eyes, and long, very delicate, yet withal pronounced features. She was not pretty but she would have been looked at anywhere. Her very dress was full of individuality. She wore a clinging gown of silver grey stuff and the drooping, floppy hat on her head was wreathed with dark red poppies. Everything—face, eyes, dress, expression—was full of that indefinable, potent thing called, for lack of a better word, "temperament."

The Great Actor wondered who it was of whom the girl reminded him. Then he knew—a great emotional actress whose fame surpassed his own and who was one of his friends.

"I wonder who she is," he reflected idly. "She is very young—and looks as if she were half in love with that fine young fellow. She should be wholly in love with him and thinking of nothing else but him and a wedding dress. What is preventing her?"

Mrs. Ford came through the poppies then, a gaunt figure of a woman in a faded calico. The Great Actor asked her who the man and the girl were. She shaded her eyes from the sunset and looked after the lagging pair.

By L. M. MONTGOMERY

"The man is Frank Stanley from the Valley," she said, "a young doctor, and the girl is Sylvia Lindsay. She and her mother live alone in that house on the south hill—you can see the chimbley between them birches. She's been away for a visit and just got back."

"She doesn't look like the other girls about here," said the Great Actor.

Mrs. Ford shook her head as she stooped to pick a frilled poppy.

"She isn't like them either. She takes after her father—he's dead now; he was an odd sort of a man. Sylvia's kind of discontented, I guess. She's awful clever, though. Dr. Stanley thinks a terrible sight of her. I don't see why they don't get married. I don't believe they're even really engaged. It must be Sylvia's fault. I guess she doesn't know her own mind. Her mother always spoiled her."

A poppy fell to each of Mrs. Ford's jerky sentences and she went back to the house with her bouquet. The Great Actor paced up and down the walks while the sunset light faded out and the twilight came raining down out of the clear, silvery sky. The moonlight grew brighter and the shadows of the lombardies fell clear and sharp across the garden and the fluttering poppies. A woman came up the valley road and fumbled at the latch of the gate. The Great Actor went hastily forward to help her. At first he thought it was the dark girl who had gone past an hour before; but when he came up to her he saw that it was a much older woman with a careworn face that was not at all like Sylvia Lindsay's.

"You are Mr. Ford, the play-acting man?" she said eagerly. "My name is Lindsay. It is you I came up to see. Sylvia—my daughter—coaxed me to. She felt too shy to come herself, although she could have explained everything to you a great deal better than I can. But she didn't like to. I hope you won't think me presuming, sir—I want to ask you about something."

"I am at your service," said the Great Actor courteously. "Will you come in? Or shall we sit on this stone bench behind the lilacs? We shall be less likely to be disturbed."

"Let us stay here, then. I'd rather Martha Ford didn't hear. It's about Sylvia, sir. She's very clever. Everybody says so. And she's set on going on the stage—just crazy about it and always has been. She's talked of it since she was a tiny child."

"I see," said the Great Actor with a smile. So it was the old story—the stage-struck girl who believed she had talent. He had known his hundreds of them.

"I don't know as I care much for her going on the stage," Mrs. Lindsay went on hurriedly. "But her father always said a person shouldn't be balked of doing what they were cut out for and I kind of lean to that myself. She is a great reciter and she knows hundreds of pieces and most all Shakespeare's plays, I think. She's always saying them over and practising them. I used to try to put her off the notion. I hated to think of her going away. And I want her to marry Dr. Stanley and settle close to me. Sometimes I've had hopes she would. She seems fond of him—but she's fonder of the other thing. Excuse me for rambling like this, sir. I told Sylvia she ought to come herself. She could have explained it so much better. But it's this way, sir. Everyone who has ever heard her recite or act in dialogues thinks she has great talent. But there was none of them who could really be a judge, you know. Sylvia is afraid she may be mistaken in thinking she can do anything and she would take it as a great favour if you would kindly hear her recite some of her parts and give her your honest opinion about it. She says she could abide by your judgment, sir."

The Great Actor smiled. He would listen to the girl, of course, and tell her the truth as considerately as might be. It would probably do her good and take her romantic notions out of her.

"If Miss Lindsay will come up to-morrow evening I will gladly see what she can do," he said. "But there are many young women in our land who imagine that they have a natural fitness for the hardest of all professions—and it is hardly one in a thousand who is right in thinking so."

"Oh, Sylvia is real good at it," said the mother quickly, her maternal pride resenting something she divined in his meaning. "I wish she wasn't half

as clever for then I would have more hope of keeping her with me. Well, I must go now, sir, and it's very kind of you to let her come."

Sylvia Lindsay came up the next evening. The Great Actor met her among the poppies and carried her off to the old bench behind the lilacs. He felt rather bored; he had heard so many of them and nearly always with the same result. And now this foolish girl was probably quite eager to leave her happy sheltered life and throw away the love of a good man to chase the will-o'-the-wisp of fame. He felt impatient with her—but he did not show it—he never showed impatience.

"It is very good of you to hear me," she said, looking shyly up into his eyes. He realized that her voice was a very beautiful and unusual one—rich, sympathetic, thrilling.

"It is not at all good of me," he said with his wonderful smile. "It is good of you to come up and recite to a crabbed old fellow who has heard so much of that sort of thing that he has grown terribly critical and hard to please."

"Oh, I want criticism," she cried. "I hope you are hard to please. I may be foolish in thinking I can do anything—if so, I want you to tell me so. Don't spare me—be merciless. I don't want to be just an actress—I don't want any half success. I want to be great—nothing else would compensate for what I must give up. But oh, I have always felt that I could do something worth while."

She flung up her head and her dark, eager face flushed with earnestness; her great eyes glowed; her long, slender hands quivered. The Great Actor realised that this girl might not be beautiful but that she had the power to make people believe she was.

"Many people can do something worth while," he said gravely, "but it is not always what they think they can do at first. It is richly worth while to be simply happy—and make other people happy. It is worth while to take real love when it comes our way and so make earth more beautiful."

Sylvia raised her head a little proudly and her tone was cold as she said:

"That may be very true. But it has nothing to do with my coming here to-day, has it?"

"Yes, much. Now, my dear, I am an old man with a great liking for bright, sweet young girls. I want your confidence. Tell me all about him—this young fellow who likes to loiter along twilight country lanes with you. Isn't he more worth while than a career?"

His smile was irresistible. Sylvia smiled reluctantly and then laughed.

"Mother has been telling tales, I see. I wonder if I can explain how it is—I don't mind your knowing. I think I do love Frank, but not enough—not enough. But I could—if I didn't love my ambition better. It won't let me think about him. This all sounds foolish, perhaps, but it is true. And he knows—he understands. It all depends on your decision. If you tell me I have deceived myself I will abide by your judgment and stay here with mother—and Frank. But if you think I can succeed as I want to succeed I shall go on—on to the life I have always dreamed of—that beautiful, brilliant, wonderful life."

The Great Actor shook his head.

"It is not a beautiful life in the sense that your romantic dreams imagine, my child. No, not even if you were a genius. It is a hard, disillusioning life—how hard, especially for a woman, you have no idea. But let me hear what you can do. What do you know?"

She mentioned a few things she had studied and he selected one he thought a fair test and bade her begin, while he settled comfortably back on the old mossy bench to listen. At first her voice trembled and she was very nervous; presently she forgot that; she forgot her critical hearer; she forgot all save the character she was trying to interpret.

The Great Actor listened in blank amazement. Why, the girl had genius—absolute genius! In spite of all the faults and crudities in her impersonation it was real and original and convincing. She was not half way through her selection before he had made up his mind that she had all the makings of a great emotional actress in her.

Dear, dear, what a pity! He had thought his task easy—to let her down as gently as might be and send her back, disappointed but no longer stung by romantic yearnings, to the wholesome, happy life that awaited her. And now?

CONCLUDED ON PAGE 20.