

A Christmas Fairy Story

By Peggy Webling

THE ladies of the ballet trooped through the dingy swing door, lump a tarnished yellow gas lamp, into the street.

Cosmo Leyton, lounging against the wall, noticed that every girl wore a cheap fur collar, a string of imitation pearls, or a bunch of violets. The ladies of the ballet smiled at Cosmo, for he was not only a handsome young man, but the only son of the proprietor and manager of the small, prosperous, provincial theatre, where a "gorgeous, old-fashioned pantomime" was in active preparation.

Cosmo was an observant young man, and the girls impressed him even less favourably, giggling and chattering in their everyday clothes, than they had done in their spangles and gauze at the dress rehearsal.

"Well, my boy, what do you think of the show?" asked Mr Leyton, the manager, who was hot, worried, and unshaven. His son, a successful touring actor, home for the Christmas holidays, was naturally regarded as a competent judge.

"Oh, it's all right, dad," answered Cosmo. "The girls won't be hanged for their beauty, will they?"

"Oh, I don't know—girls are all pretty much alike to the fellows in front when they're togged out," said Mr Leyton, cheerfully.

Cosmo shrugged his shoulders, and idly watched the little crowd pushing through the stage door. He looked bored and felt melancholy. It was such a pitiful, anxious crowd, he thought, so mean and sordid.

Suddenly his lazy eyes opened wide and the quick blood of youth leapt into his face. He bent forward, surprised and interested, looking after one of the girls. She was following a middle-aged man—crying after him like a dog at his master's heels—fastening a shabby black jacket as she ran. Her pale heavy yellow hair flew across her face, like a misty veil, as the swing door opened. She put up a hand to clear it away, hesitated a second as if she were vaguely conscious of somebody's gaze, looked over her shoulder, and met the eager eyes of the young man. She did not blush, but looked at him with a sweet, questioning expression, unspoilt by confusion or self-consciousness.

"Who is that girl?" exclaimed Cosmo, released from the spell, as the door closed.

"Little Gilmer," answered his father. "A nice, quiet, little body. That's her uncle she was with—Joe Gilmer treats her something shocking, I'm told, but I don't listen to gossip."

"She has the saddest face I've ever seen," said Cosmo, strangely affected by that one swift glance.

"Enough to give you the hump, ain't it?" observed his father.

"What does she play in the pantomime?" asked Cosmo.

"A fairy," answered the manager.

The long first night of the pantomime was over. The noisy laughter had died away; the flashing lights had flickered into a single gas jet at one side of the stage; the marble pillars were changed to flapping strips of canvas, and the magic forest was a wilderness of dry branches and coarsely daubed flowers.

The elves and goblins, the clown and harlequin—all the spirits of pantomime—had vanished; but there was one fairy left.

She was crouching in a dark corner at the back of the stage, hidden by a piece of scenery. The tussled wand had fallen from her cold hand, her tulle skirts were crushed and dusty, she had twisted a bit of torn blue ribbon round her neck, and she rubbed her small weary feet in their thin dancing shoes, one over the other to keep warm. Her straight, yellow hair shadowed her pale

face, and her timid eyes stared helplessly into the empty theatre as she crept out of her hiding place.

It was little Gilmer—Winnie Gilmer—the ill-used, orphan niece of old Joe Gilmer. With a wild, childish longing to escape from the wretched lodgings that were all she knew of home, to be free for a few hours from the ceaseless quarrelling of her uncle and his snarling wife, she had chosen to spend the night in the dreary theatre—cold, hungry, but free from fear.

As she walked, trembling and glancing nervously over her shoulder, towards the row of footlights, there was a sudden sound at the end of the little passage leading from the stage to the door. It was the sound of a key in the lock, and it flashed into Winnie's mind that her brutal uncle had discovered her hiding-place.

She peered into the dark passage, and, as the figure of a man was silhouetted for a second against the grey background of the street, gave a frightened scream.

The man started and dropped his key, a sudden gust of wind slammed the door, and Winnie heard him swear. It was not her uncle's voice. She remained immovable, and after a few seconds the man struck a match and stooped down to hunt for the key. He was not successful in his search. She heard him try the door, but he was unable to open it from the inside. He turned towards the stage. The one gas jet threw a gleam of light on the poor, frightened fairy. He gave a great start of surprise, and stared at her, open-mouthed.

"Oh, Mr Leyton!" she gasped.

Her low, thrilling voice strangely affected Cosmo Leyton—for it was the manager's son. He approached her rapidly, with heightened colour, and laid her hand, tightly and hesitatingly, on her shoulder.

"You poor little girl! You tawny, you faint flower! What are you doing here?"

"I was afraid to go home," said Winnie Gilmer, looking trustfully into his face. "My uncle is so cruel—I'm not a child any longer—I can't bear it—I wish I were dead!"

She did not burst into tears, as Cosmo dreaded, but the tears slowly filled the eyes that were still looking into his, and hung on the lashes, while her parted lips trembled and her forehead was drawn into troubled lines.

Cosmo checked his first impulse to take her in his arms as he realised that it was her frank, innocent nature, even more than her youth, that made her confide in an absolute stranger.

"Your uncle is cruel—to you?" he asked.

"Yes! They call him old Joe Gilmer. We used to play in the halls in his horrid sketches—I hate them—but he can't get many dates now. When a man drinks—oh, if you knew what I've suffered—the fear—the shame—"

"Don't speak of it!" interrupted Cosmo, "don't think of it. When I saw you by chance going out of the theatre I knew that you were unhappy. I've been watching you all the evening. You made me forget the paint and nonsense—all this," he swept his hand round the dreary stage, "for you are so artless, so graceful, so pretty! I don't speak hastily, for I'm a very cold-headed, unsentimental fellow—he was 23—but the minute I saw you I felt that we should be friends, the dearest friends. Forgive me for saying this, but I can't express—"

His earnest, gentle manner had acted like a charm on the girl, as she looked into his flushed face with strange joy and wonder in his own, but at his last words her expression changed, and she interrupted him in a frightened voice, pointing upwards.

"Look at the smoke!" she cried.

"Look! Look!"

Cosmo spun round, and, following the line of her shaking finger, saw that a

grey curl of smoke was winding its way through the flapping pieces of scenery across the top of the stage. He could not distinguish the exact place from whence it came, but he instantly knew

"There's something on fire in the flies," he said, instinctively throwing a steady arm round the girl, "I'll go up and see what I can do. How lucky I came back to the theatre—it was the merest accident—you get away as quickly as you can and give the alarm at the fire station!"

He stripped off his overcoat as he spoke and made Winnie Gilmer put it on, but it was not until she was nearly at the door that he remembered dropping the key.

"You can't get out!" he exclaimed, turning an agitated face up to the flies, where the curl of grey smoke had grown more swift and thick. "Stay where you are and hunt for the key, but I'm afraid it fell outside the door. Don't be frightened. It's all right!"

He gave her his box of matches, touched her hand, and rushed away.

Winnie Gilmer hunted wildly for the key, listening all the time for Cosmo's voice. He had climbed the ladder on the prompt side of the stage, leading to the narrow gallery from which the carpenters lowered the curtain and scene cloths, and discovered at once that a tangle of ropes and bits of old scenery were smouldering and smoking against the wall. He leapt for the half dozen buckets placed in the gallery, but only two of them were filled. Dashing the water into the threatening smoke, he saw that promptitude and a fair supply of water would save the situation.

With the energy of youth and strength he climbed down to the stage again, pushed Winnie Gilmer out of the way, and tried to force the door.

"Can't we do anything? You're wasting time!" cried the girl, for his efforts were useless.

"If there were a man in the flies to take the buckets as I pass 'em up, we could get it under in ten minutes," he answered, kicking the door and shouting.

"Where are the buckets?" asked Winnie.

"Over yonder—they're always filled—the governor sees to it himself. What are you going to do?" he broke off, as she ran towards the front of the stage.

Winnie Gilmer made no answer, but she seized the rungs of the ladder with her strong little hands, and commenced to climb.

"Come down! Come down!" cried Cosmo excitedly.

"Fetch the water!" she answered. Once again her voice thrilled and touched his heart, he was filled with confidence and hope, and—inexplicable as it seemed afterwards—absolute faith in her physical strength and endurance.

Cosmo Leyton had never worked in his life as he worked then, and as quickly as he passed the heavy buckets up the ladder, the girl poured their contents over the fire. She was unconscious of fatigue or fear in the intense excitement of the minute. When her hands touched Cosmo he felt that they were burning hot, her eyes were wide and bright, her pale yellow hair was swept away from her face, and her body bent and swayed like a strong reed in the wind.

Again and again Cosmo raised his voice, shouting "Fire!"

At last there was an answering shout. The door burst open, and half a dozen men rushed on to the stage.

The smouldering fire had not burst into flame, but the puffs of smoke were still wreathing their way through the strips of hanging scenery.

"You're just in time!" cried Cosmo.

In the work and confusion that followed, nobody thought of Winnie Gilmer.

She crept into a dark corner, and watched the men with listless eyes. All her energy had died away, and she felt utterly weary. Big tears fell through the dirty, shaking little hands she pressed over her face. She was thinking of

her uncle, and started to her feet with a cry of fear when a hand was suddenly laid on her drooping head; but it was not Joe Gilmer who was bending over her.

"Brave girl! Little heroine!" said Cosmo Leyton softly, and he laid one end of her torn blue ribbon against his lips.

"I must go home," she said helplessly, clinging to his hand. "Say, good-bye to me—good-bye!"

Cosmo did not say good-bye, for in the light of his sudden love he foresaw a time when that word would never again be spoken between them.

"To-morrow!" he whispered, "To-morrow!"

A Gold Miner's Plain Story.

A VICTIM OF INDIGESTION, AND MOTHER SEIGEL'S SYRUP WAS WORTH MORE THAN GOLD TO HIM.

W. C. Consins, of King-street, Bendigo, Victoria, is a gold miner by occupation, and is widely known in that city, where he was born, perhaps 30 years ago. Some years ago he was a great sufferer from indigestion, and as a result of it became so ill that he was unable to give attention to his business. On the advice of his friend, Mr W. Hunt, the manager of Springvale, a sheep station between Melbourne and Ballarat, Mr Consins used Mother Seigel's Syrup, and was cured, as he tells in a letter, dated August 9, 1905, as follows:—

"For more than three years my health was a constant source of anxiety to me. I was costive, bilious, unable to digest food, and troubled with headaches and racking pains all over the body. My complaints were sufficient to render half-a-dozen men miserable. Such was my state in 1894, when my friend, Mr. W. Hunt, manager of Springvale Station, advised a course of Mother Seigel's Curative Syrup. He spoke of it as his only medicine, which had been of untold benefit to him upon several occasions, and said that he was sure it would do me good if only I would give it a fair trial. I consented, and the truth of my friend's statements soon appeared. The constipation from which I had so long suffered was broken up, and the biliousness, headaches, and other digestive troubles began to abate. By the time I had taken six bottles of the Syrup, all of these symptoms had left me, and I had become quite a different man.

"My health has remained all I could wish it to be, a blessing for which I am wholly indebted to Mother Seigel's Curative Syrup. But for its timely aid, I believe my constitution would have been ruined. It will always be a pleasure to me to make known the sterling merit of Mother Seigel's Syrup, as shown in my own case, and other equally remarkable cases that have since come to my notice."

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