

The children had not yet been brought in, as they were being costumed in one of the other rooms. The right bower of Sister Trinita, Mrs. Frank Gable, known to all by her maiden name, Mame Brennan, was seated at the out-of-tune piano, playing Rubinstein's 'Melody in F.' That tune always made Irene pleasantly sad. To-day it made her thoughtful. What a fool she was! Why couldn't she be like other women? Had she chosen the better part in clinging to the stage, and letting her husband drift from her? And her baby girl, little Camilla! The hands in the muff clenched. Dear God, how many nights she had cried herself to sleep, only to dream of that little dark-haired angel, with the retousse nose! She felt that she had never been honest with herself, and that she had cheated her husband. Poor Jack Doyle, what had his wife ever given him? Not home, surely. True, her mother had flung open her hospitable doors to him and his old maid sister, Anna, and was almost as much to them now as the old mother on the hillside had been; but that was not in any way due to Irene.

That bitter quarrel when Irene insisted on going back to the stage. No wife of his should parade herself before a mob of men. The mother of his baby paint her face, and fling herself into the arms of another man, and pretend to feel love studied out of a book! Irene took Jack to task about his simplicity, but he was obdurate. Then those bitter words that she said, bringing out bitter words from him. Then her threat that she would fling herself from the second-storey window to the street, compelling Jack to catch her wrists and hold her close to him; her hysterics, his quiet, yet deep concern, while all the time she was playing a part about which she laughed sadly afterwards. Then her stealthy flight by night.

How many evenings after the matinee, she stole into St. John's Church, away from the bustle and whirl of the city, and prayed to our Lady of Lourdes to make Jack come a-hunting after his homesick and lovesick wife. Once or twice Anna brought the baby, Camilla, down to Irene in the city, but the child grew lonesome, and cried herself sick for her father. But Jack himself didn't come after Irene. And why? Was it because she realised that she was losing her grip on her admirers, most of whom were women? She, the imperious stock star, had her little world and her manager at her feet for three years and now— He was a bear with all the other performers, but he had never dared to cross her till lately. He saw that she was losing ground with her admirers, and then he got up from his knees. She wondered what was wrong with her. Her voice was still as rich and full. Her face still youthful; her figure not bad. She was always letter-perfect in her lines.

Now she confessed it was her sprightliness, her youthful spirits that had flown away, and she couldn't play any longer at what she didn't feel. She had ruined 'Arizona' by her languid interpretation of 'Bonita,' when she'd have been a far better emotional 'Estrella,' feeling much of that sad character's misery herself. The manager bluntly told her she needed a vacation, that she must come back with her old mannerisms and that girlish charm which made her female admirers clap and cry about her; that she must cut out her recent Blanche Walsh stuff, and put on Billie Burke. Irene told herself the truth; she was done. She couldn't play spring time again; her days were fallen in the sear and yellow leaf.

Her bitter thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of the children, and the 'holy show' started. Irene pushed up her veil, and her muff fell off her lap, but she did not notice it. How children moved her blood! There was a Bethlehem hymn song, and Irene pulled down her veil again, for she had to weep, and she didn't care to have cold feminine eyes watching. She was glad her veil was so thick.

While the hymn was going on, many belated members of the audience filed in and grouped back in a corner. There was one man with them, and as he glanced at Anna Doyle, she did a curious gymnastic turn with her eyes and brows to attract his attention to Irene. A wonderful expression lighted up his

strong features, as he caught sight of the veiled form, an expression, alas! the poor little wife did not see.

A wee maid sallied in, with all the unconscious grace of childhood, and gave her pedigree. She was the old woman who lived in a shoe, and had so many children she didn't know what to do, and here they were, those very troublesome babies, one and all. Irene pushed up her veil, and looked like a child herself, as her eager gaze followed the youngsters. Jack and Jill, with their bucket, came upon the scene, each blaming the other for the fall. Jill had lost a front tooth, and spoke with a lisp, which made her adorable, thought Irene. Another diminutive colleen added too many years to her calendar, and said she was the old woman who swept cobwebs from the moon. Her bow was so funny that Irene laughed heartily. Then came a robust lad in white and yellow, who got such a terrible fall that all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't fix Humpty Dumpty right again. Irene laughed at him almost hysterically till the tears were in her eyes.

When she looked again, a little girl, with a shining wreath of silver tinsel on her head, was standing in the middle of the floor, staring straight at Irene. Sister Trinita was frowning through her moon-lensed glasses at the small performer to start off, and Mame Brennan Gable was striking the opening notes of the song, but the little girl only stared. Irene raised her eyes, and her heart almost stopped. The little girl, with the utmost naturalness, perhaps inherited from her actress-mother, forgot her audience, and began to walk to Irene, the idol of her dreams, the little woman whose picture her daddy showed her every night at bedtime.

Irene, with a quick movement, was on her feet. In her haste, she kicked her muff aside. She forgot that eyes of strangers and critics were watching. Actress though she was, she didn't get the dramatic side of her action. She was just a mother, whose heart cried out for her baby. Then she had little Camilla against her breast, and the actress sobbed as she had never done in 'East Lynn' or 'Madame X.' Better, oh! a thousand time better, the crush of those plump little arms about her neck than the hand-clappings of her frivolous admirers. Better that soft little mouth against her cheek than all the triumphs of her stage career.

Anna, blinded with tears herself, whispered to Irene:

'Come out into the hallway.'

Then the sister flashed a meaning look at Jack Doyle, which he heeded, but didn't need, as he had already started for the door. Anna did not follow Irene into the hallway. The actress felt two big arms crowd her and her little girl against a man's heart, then she looked into her husband's face.

Inside the children began to sing:

'Hail, thou ever-blessed morn,
Hail, Redemption's happy dawn!'

and to Irene the words had a meaning she never found in them before.

At home that night, surrounded by husband, child, mother, and Jack's sister, who had always filled that office for Irene, too, the actress registered a vow that her stage days of hard work were over—of her anxiety over numerous new roles, with eighty or ninety 'sides' to memorise, of dread at picking up the morning paper on Tuesday after her first performance of a difficult heroine.

A week later Irene got a night letter from the manager. Jack Doyle, when he inquired if the news was bad, was handed the telegram by his wife.

'The new lead is not making good,' he read. 'Your admirers demand your return. Try to be on the job again next week. We shall do "Camille," which will be child's play for you, and will be a good box office attraction, as it hasn't been done here in an age. Brush up "Camille," your own Mathilde Heron version, and come back. Be what you were a year ago—youth in the concrete.'

'WILLIAM A. PAIGE.'

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