

First Row—Orchestra

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

ILLUSTRATED BY R. M. BRINKERHÖFF

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“Three, please, miss. First row, orchestra, if you have them.”

The girl in the box office paused for the fraction of a minute to glance quizzically at the personable young man on the other side of the plate-glass wicket.

“Say,” she inquired amiably, “what’s the big idea? You’re about the umpteenth that’s asked for first row. This isn’t a musical comedy or a revue, you know.”

The red that mantled the young man’s cheeks and brow was quite obvious under healthy tan that spoke of the out-of-doors.

“They’re folks from out home,” he explained, ingenuously; the approval in his glance contained no element of rudeness. “You see to-day’s Myra’s—Miss Titherington’s birthday—so we thought we’d sort of celebrate by coming up and taking in the show. We—I mean the folks of Dewville—are kind of proud that one of our girls has made such a success.”

“Oh—I see. Well, I’m sorry, but it’ll have to be second row. You’ll find it better even further back. No?—well, there you are, three, second row centre, to-night. Six dollars, please.”

He counted out the money, putting the tickets he received carefully away in his wallet.



**"It'll be a surprise for Myra, won't it, to see all us there in front?
That's why we want the first rows, of course."**

"You see," he explained, warming under the obvious interest of this piquant little ticket-seller, "I'm bringing her mother and dad along. It'll be a surprise for Myra, won't it, to see us all there in front? That's why we want the first rows, of course." He glanced around. With the exception of an overalled attendant doing some polishing on the brasswork of the doors, the lobby was empty. "I suppose," he said, "the rush comes later—I mean it's kind of early yet, isn't it?"

“The rush? Oh, I get you. Sure, they’ll be coming in pretty good in an hour or so; then we do quite a lot of business just before the show of course. But you mustn’t expect a full house—not for this kind of thing. Folks like musical comedy and revues and that kind of stuff better. You have to have lots of jazz and pep to get across big nowadays. Yep, it starts at eight-thirty.”

Her glance followed his well-knit figure as he swung through the double doors to the street.

“I like that kid,” she told herself aloud. “Sometimes you get a bit fed up with the smart alecks that yap at you through the hole in the glass. Well—I only hope the famous Myra is on her best behavior to-night, that’s all. What’s that you said, Dave?”

Old Dave Pendleton rested a green-and-gold coat sleeve on the sill. He had just come from the body of the house. Dave was the axis upon which the institution revolved, if you could believe his own estimate. This was a deep-rooted tradition rather than sheer egotism. Dave had been doorkeeper at the “New Century Theatre” longer than most would care to remember, long indeed before it held its present name.

“I thought you mentioned this Titherington person,” said Dave. He gave a little chuckle that seemed to spring from somewhere in his bushy grey moustache. “There’s the devil to pay in there this mornin’ an’ no pitch hot. She’s got hers all right. Well, I told you it was comin’, didn’t I?”

Betsy Jordan attempted no contradiction, she simply asked:

“Dave—she isn’t through?”

“Well, it’s next door neighbor to it, or I’m no judge. Treadwell’s givin’ her understudy, the Atherton girl, a try-out to-night.”

“Dolly Atherton?” There was a little blaze in the girl’s eyes. “It’s a darn shame, that’s what it is. You know very well, Dave, if it weren’t for her introducing Phil Morley and that bunch the little Titherington girl wouldn’t have got off the track. You ask Bob Coates. Anyway Myra Titherington’s straight—but I’d hate to vouch for the other. They’ll all tell you so.”

Old Dave chuckled again.

“I hain’t seen Morley foolin’ round you so much lately,” he said. “I guess maybe there’s no love lost between youse two.”

“I hate him, Dave, and you know it.” Her eyes wandered to the framed poster of Myra Titherington in the rôle of “Sheila Madrigal”; she was thinking how quickly Morley’s influence was beginning to tell on *her*.

Comprehension of this was easy for her; the catholicity of his tastes had included Betsy in his circle of admiration, and the memory even now of his suave, good-humored approaches burnt like a flame.

“Maybe,” said Dave, returning to Betsy’s summing up of the leading lady’s character, regardless of the interpolation of more personal affairs. “But just the same she’s queerin’ the whole show this last few weeks. I’ll give it two more weeks at this rate, and then—good-night.”

“Do you know why, Dave? I’ll tell you. It’s just that no one can play a part like that who isn’t living it—not for long anyhow. I saw it when she played it first, before she got running with this fast crowd. . . and I’ve seen it since. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the first—it meant a lot to me—just then. . . but the second time it didn’t hit home at all. I’m not a goody-goody, Dave, and you know it, but I hate to see a good thing spoiled.”

Dave nodded. “Maybe you’re right.” He stooped to pick up a folded newspaper from the floor. The girl spoke before he could carry out his intention of dropping it in the waste receptacle.

“Oh, I guess he dropped that, Dave. A chap, I mean, who was here for tickets. Here—let me have it.”

A thin trickling of bookings began to demand attention then, so it was not until lunch time that Betsy remembered the paper, and took it along to read at lunch. There is a peculiar interest attaches to small town papers, like the *Dewville Banner*, that is missing in places where the news is flavored more with notoriety than pleasant familiarity. Over an indigestible looking salad, followed by a nut sundae, and accompanied by a cup of coffee and a roll, Betsy became interested in a long article featuring the success of the girl, Myra Titherington. The briefly sketched biography merged into an eulogistic account of the actual stage career, with a conclusion that brought a queer little twist to the reader’s mouth:

“Mrs. Titherington, when interviewed by the writer, declined to make a statement, further than to say: ‘There was some criticism of Myra’s going on the stage, and still more of my granting permission. I knew, though, what they perhaps did not, that my daughter would give up her career rather than play in other than worth-while things.’ We quote this in summing up a career still in its early days of promise—a career that has fully

justified the faith of the mother and of the townspeople who knew Myra Titherington best.”

There were other references to the meteoric nature of the success, but the girl folded up the paper, and sat for so long in thought she had to run at the last moment, and came near forgetting to pay in cash for what later she would probably have to pay for in impairment of digestion!

From Betsy Jordan in her humble capacity to Myra Titherington as “star” was, in a sense, a far cry, yet when Betsy sought an interview she found herself face to face with her great undertaking almost before she realized it. Perhaps that “meteoric career” had been something less in actual fact, and at least not too great a flight to carry Myra beyond the ordinary interests of commonplace humanity.

Betsy found her alone in her dressing room, busy with matters that suggested “house-cleaning” of a personal nature.

“Well?” said Miss Titherington, looking up from some papers that were engaging her attention. “I hope *you’re* not wanting to go on the stage now.” It is one happy feature of mediocrity that this task of advising embryonic seekers after fame does not fall to its lot.

“Good land, no, Miss Titherington.”

A little smile wreathed the actress’ face.

“Is it so bad as all that? One would think to hear you it was a bit beyond the pale of respectability.”

Betsy said quickly: “Honest, Miss Titherington, I’d give anything to be able to play the part you do—and play it right. I didn’t mean—”

“I shall have to tell Treadwell—he might like to try *you* out too. There, I didn’t mean to be snippy, only I’m not quite myself to-day.”

“That—that’s just what I wanted to speak to you about, Miss Titherington. Only I—I don’t know how to say it. You see, I heard—and I was so sorry—”

She stopped, noting the danger signals in the fine eyes opposite. Myra’s quick irritation was partly cloaked in the languid air she sometimes affected.

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss my affairs with *you*.” The gulf opened between them on that last word. “If you have nothing else to say—”

Still very conscious of that gulf between them, Betsy unfolded the newspaper clipping wisped up in her hands, thrusting it forward impulsively.



"Please, Miss Titherington. I know I've got no right—it's awful neryv of me coming this way—but won't you read that, please."

"Please, Miss Titherington, I know I've got no right—it's awful neryv of me coming this way—but won't you read that, please."

Silence held the tiny room for a space. The girl by the door shifted feet once or twice nervously, but her eyes were steadily, hopefully on the trim figure by the dressing table. Myra laid down the clipping at length without speaking. The question of why the paper should be in Betsy's possession was never raised. Her eyes wandered to a small oval picture in a silver frame that stood on the table—the picture of a woman with eyes and mouth and chin very like Myra's own, but with the mellowing of the years upon them.

"Is that—your mother?"

Myra nodded, still not speaking. There came to Betsy's mind a vision of the little woman and the father coming to-night to triumph in the success of their girl in the great rôle of "Sheila Madrigal," which had made "Crossroads" an immediate success. The choke in Betsy's throat demanded

action, sent her forward impulsively to put a hand, entreatingly, on the actress' sleeve.

“Miss Titherington—couldn't you arrange, somehow, to play after all to-night—even if just for once—with her in mind—just as if you were playing to *her*?”

“Why, to-night, child?” Was it because she was facing a crossroads in her own experience that she felt a superiority of age that the tale of years would fail to support?

Betsy's lips started to frame a reply, but perplexity sealed them. Should she spoil the “surprise,” or could it be arranged without speaking of the thing that she had learned?

The door swung open so suddenly, with just one sharp preliminary knock, that Betsy was forced to retreat before it into a corner. A man's voice spoke—a voice that brought instant recognition.

“Myra, dear girl. Sorry to intrude this way, but they told me you were here, and I'm so huffed about this business I could hardly wait to tell you. What a boulder that fellow Treadwell is. As if you—— Look, I've got influence enough with Dolly to——”

“Don't rant, Phil. Treadwell's right enough, I guess. I used to be able to play that part; I—I can't now—not the same way—not with conviction in it, and my heart—not when something inside keeps telling me I'm a four-flusher. I think that's what you'd call it?” After a space she added: “Teddie Biglow's been to see me. *He* heard.”

Morley enthused at once.

“Myra—then you're going to take up his offer at last. Jolly fine, I say. That revue of his is a winner—booked ahead weeks on end, so I hear—and he'll push you ahead fast. With that voice of yours and your——”

“Phil, please. Besides don't you see I'm engaged?”

“Why, look who's here! The superior Miss Betsy Jordan, no less.” He laughed a little at the quick blaze in her eyes. “Are you busy now, Myra, because my car's here and——”

“Miss Titherington,”—Betsy saw her chances vanishing, and ventured a last appeal, ignoring the intruder—“you will try that to-night—what I was speaking about—before you do anything, won't you?”

“What’s all this?” Phil Morley glanced from one girl to the other—from the trim figure of Myra Titherington, in evident admiration of the mobile beauty of her face, the aureole of red-gold hair, to the darker beauty of the little ticket-seller in her attitude of earnest appeal. Comprehension began to come to him. “You don’t mean to say she’s butting into your affairs, Myra? Jove—what’s the world coming to?”

Footsteps sounded in the passage, footsteps and the sound of talk and laughter. Betsy recognized the voice of Miss Atherton and something told her even before she saw the hard little line come back to the mouth of the girl opposite, that she had lost.

“You better run along,” said Myra, nodding dismissal. “Look, Phil, if you have your car I think I’ll get you to drop me over at Teddie’s.”

Later Betsy found she had dropped her handbag, and traced it back to the dressing room. The door was unlocked, but Myra had gone. Betsy secured the missing property, and backed hastily out, but the remembrance of two things went with her.

The oval picture of the little woman was no longer on the dressing table, and the clipping from the Dewville *Banner* lay, a crumpled wisp, upon the floor.

Outside, in the growing dusk, the electric announcement challenged public attention with its usual message:

“TO-NIGHT AT 8.30—MYRA TITHERINGTON IN
‘CROSSROADS’.”

Inside, the piles of programs laid ready against the coming of the evening crowd still bore the same cast. No echo of the morning’s flare-up would be heard beyond the footlights. Only, in Myra Titherington’s place the Atherton girl would have her chance to prove whether the rôle of “Sheila Madrigal” would in future be interpreted by her. Tomorrow, perhaps, the press would hail the gleaming of a new star on the theatrical horizon with the fine hand of Treadwell behind it all, dismissing the falling meteor into the darkness of kindly camouflaged oblivion!—later, perhaps, to rise again in a more tawdry glittering amid the galaxy of beauty appearing nightly further up the street, under the alluring title of “SIRENS FROM GIRLIELAND.”

etsy Jordan was on duty again to-night. She wished it might have been otherwise, that a free night would have enabled her to temporarily forget the

B“New Century” and its attendant problems. Susceptibilities, rarely stirred like this, were being roused by an imagination that would not heed the cry of “Curtain.” Betsy’s life was a thing of reasonable averages—no better and no worse—which surely held a measure of credit for one forced at too early an age to face things from which a home should still have sheltered her. Illusions blighted at a tender age are apt to die, instead of developing normally into ideals, into standards, against which life may be measured and kept true. So it happened that Betsy’s philosophy was imbued with more than a touch of cynicism—due, like the somewhat careless manner of her speech, not to her early training but to the vicissitudes of her life. That was the price paid for too premature an experience of life, but it was, after all, a small price in comparison with what many would have paid. There had been no real compromise yet—Betsy had her own ideas of right and wrong, and managed somehow to stand by them. It worried her now that a troublesome sentimentality—to accept her own conception of it—should be causing an uncomfortable pulling at her heart-strings. That this “birthday surprise” should end in so great a disillusionment—this was the thing that hurt—hurt most of all because the faith of a mother was to suffer shipwreck.

She was glad when the evening’s work began—glad that the comings and goings of the people distracted her attention, preventing her from scrutinizing the faces in the lobby too closely. In the end, though, she saw them, coming while it was still very early, an eager trio: the young man with the frank eyes and the likeable face, the old man with something of pride in his bearing, as surely befitted one entering to view the triumph of his own flesh and blood, the woman with the slightly flushed face and the silvery hair, who seemed, somehow, quite out of place in the hurry and glare of a great theatrical district, and could be better envisioned as the presiding genius of some old-fashioned home out in the quiet of the countryside. The young man’s glance sought Betsy’s for a moment, bringing to him a smile and flush of recognition, but Betsy forgot all else when, for a moment, the woman’s eyes met hers and held them. Perhaps because they carried the girl back. . . so far. . .

It chanced there was a lull just at the time, so Betsy’s thoughts had time to work. A voice broke in, recalling her from the nimbus of poignant memory.

“A nickel for your thoughts, girlie. If my friend Johnnie Todd was here he’d be grabbin’ that pose for his next masterpiece of sculpture. A seraph I

fancy might hit it, only I have a feeling that seraphs don't, as a general thing at least, powder their noses. Probably get enough dust on 'em as it is, stuck away in some mouldy corner or other, eh?"

Betsy descended to earth with a mental thud. But the smile that still lingered was appropriated in error by the man outside the wicket. It was not meant for him.

"There," declared Mr. Philip Morley, tilting his opera hat back at an angle that expressed carefree assurance, "that's a deal better—much more human. I'd rather have that smile than the thoughts, so we'll cancel the offered nickel if you like."

Betsy welcomed the needs of a patron as a momentary distraction. Phil Morley stood aside, waiting until three or four more following behind had hesitated over the respective merits of front row balcony and orchestra seats, and finally gathered up their purchases and left. Then he said:

"Look here, I'm up a tree and I want you to help me down."

Betsy faced him squarely, challenge in her eyes.

"Don't point your eyes at me like that," he advised her, "they might go off. Now, see here, you've given me the cold and frosty every time I've tried to be friendly, but here we are again. Fact is, Miss Titherington was to have joined me in a little affair after the show to-night at the Regent Roof, and she's not feeling just like it as things are. That lets me down hard—lots of fun sitting around watching the other johnnies dance, eh? Look, be a sport, Betsy, and fill in for her, and I'll see you don't lose anything by it. They're a jolly crowd—you'll like 'em fine and vice versa—and democratic as you please. No questions asked—or names for all that. How about it?"

Betsy waved him aside again, serving a quickly formed line-up. The service was mechanical; her mind was busy with other considerations.

"I'm not dressed for it," she objected when duty no longer pressed. This was in the nature of "stalling;" she really wanted more time to think. He misread her hesitation.

"That's a good sport, of course you will. Don't weaken now. Hang the dress—you look good to me in that affair. I'd like to catch anyone criticizing."

She interrupted, speaking quickly lest her courage desert her again.

"I'll come," she said curtly, "on one condition, Mr. Morley."

“Sure—anything you like.” This was easier than past experience could have led him to hope. He brightened visibly; perhaps the evening would be redeemed after all. Betsy had style and a vivid type of beauty—enough of both to cause the average male to give a second look at least! Betsy, reading his thoughts, went on: “You—you told Miss Titherington to-day that you had influence with Miss Atherton. I want you to arrange for her to be unable to play to-night, somehow—anyhow—so they’ll have to put Miss Titherington on again. And then you’ve got to see that she does it—Myra Titherington, I mean.”

He passed a hand across his forehead, in sportive good-humor. “Ye Gods! Anything else you’d like? What’re you giving us, kid? What do you mean?”

“What I say. It’s the condition on which I go.”

“But I say—you know—I mean its a fearful contract.”

She stimulated quick sarcasm.

“So it was as I thought—just a bluff to impress Miss Titherington, and you couldn’t have done it if she’d called your bluff—like I am.”

“What’s that?” She knew then she had piqued him. “Look, girlie, tell me quickly, there’s not much time. There’s something back of all this. Spring it.”

She seized the chance, then, telling him in a word or two between interruptions—the story of the surprise. The interruptions that came made her impatient. Time was growing short, even though the star did not appear until well on in the first act. When Betsy had finished the telling he stood staring at her curiously.

“Well?” The question was hers.

He twirled his hat in his hand, shaking his head with an attempt at humor.

“You’re a rummy kid, for sure,” he told her. “Be ready right after the show. I’m off. If I say Dolly Atherton’s going to take sick—sick she is. Anyway Treadwell’s clean crazy, she can’t hold a candle to Myra—on or off stage.”

Betsy made no attempt to see any of the show. She was busy checking up the day’s returns, setting things in order so that, when the time came, she

could get away promptly. Somehow the cash would not come out right; her fingers forgot the dexterity of long practice and became the clumsy digits of the nervous tyro.

“It isn’t that I’m so afraid of—to-night,” she told herself in explanation. “I guess I can look after number one pretty well for once, only it won’t make it easier to—fight.”

The past months unrolled themselves in retrospect before her, months that grew into years. She remembered how the girls at the boarding house came to her sometimes about their troubles—telling the same old story of monotony, and economic necessity, and the allurements of the easy road.

“You fight it off so easily it’s a help to talk with you about it, Betsy,”—that was the way they’d put it to her, and she’d just smile and send them away, usually with a firmer foothold on the difficult path, and after they had gone she’d sit and stare at her reflection in the mirror and wonder what it was that gave them the impression that it was easy for her to win out—and wonder still more why victory should have been hers.

An impulsive soul can go to great heights or depths—and Betsy was impulsive. Betsy somehow knew that it wasn’t the carefully cultivated veneer of cynicism that saved the situation—that could be too easily pierced. Sometimes the picture of a stout, motherly woman that hung above her bed seemed responsible; at other times a vague sense of a higher power came to her. In her wiser moments she linked the two together. The memory now was not so much of these compelling influences; it was the thought of how close the flames had swept, carrying an uncomfortable sense of insecurity right to the present moment.

It did not occur to her, somehow, that Phil Morley might fail. He had a herculean task to accomplish within narrow time limits. With the flash of inspiration that had led to her decision, and his acceptance of her condition, there had come a feeling that the thing was as good as accomplished. Otherwise her unpleasant self-analysis would have had an antidote in exciting speculation. Perhaps the knowledge, assimilated almost subconsciously, that the orchestra was covering a quarter-hour delay with musical offerings helped sustain the conviction of success.

When, towards the end of the first act, old Dave whispered in her ear: “What d’ye know—she’s playin’ herself after all”—Betsy just paused in her work long enough to nod her satisfaction; but when, after the second act, he came to enthuse over the performance, she forgot her financial perplexities

to listen. Dave did not ordinarily enthuse. His customary attitude towards things theatrical was that of one who had seen the art in its heyday, and was merely tolerant towards its decadent modern manifestations!

“Say,” he told her now, “it beats me what’s come over that Titherington girl. She reminds me of the time—”

Betsy made a hurried interposition in the interests of brevity and news. Dave’s reminiscences were more easily evoked than checked.

“Well, miss, I don’t mind sayin’ it’s a miracle—that’s what it is an’ no less. I missed the first, but they do say she was that nervous they thought she’d break down. Stood there in front once starin’ down at the front rows as though she could recognize the folks there.” Betsy nodded comprehension; of course Morley would have told her about *that* to influence her to help Treadwell out in the emergency. “But when she got goin’—well, miss, I’ve seen ’em a-plenty an’ she’d rate up high with the best. There’s more there than meets the eye to-night I’ll tell you. I wouldn’t miss the last act for nothin’.”

“Maybe,” suggested Betsy with a smile, “it’s because it’s her birthday. It is to-day, you know.”

Dave shook his head gravely.

“Ladies,” he declared sagely, “aint so strong on their birthdays as that.” And he went on into the darkened theatre where the throbbing music of the orchestra was preparing the audience for the dramatic and emotional heights of the last act. A great desire to follow and see this thing possessed the girl, but the financial problem still lay unsolved. She must be ready for Phil Morley when he came—he had played his part, she would not fail him now. She forced a concentration that at last brought results.

Old Dave hurried out before the final curtain, ready for the coming rush. He found time to deliver his verdict.

“Tremenjous!” he told her. “Simply tremenjous! You watch—the house’ll go wild when it’s over. It takes somethin’ to get me nowadays, I’m tellin’ ye, but when she come to that part where the two roads lie ahead, she had ’em settin’ forward in their seats as though they felt the lure of the one an’ the glory of the other themselves; an’ when she chose the way of sacrifice an’ found in it the triumph of love an’ right an’ all the clean, sweet things of life—I tell you, miss, it fair got me an’ no mistake. After all the times I’ve seen it too. Maybe, miss, you’ve come out of a hot, stuffy place—out into the clear, cool air, an’ maybe got a whiff of the pinewoods in the air,

an' felt strong an' clean—well that's somethin' like what she done for us in there to-night. Well, I must hurry. There—listen—what'd I tell you?"

Inside they were clapping, cheering; Betsy visualized the scene, her appreciation of the whole situation giving an insight into what that moment must have meant—meant to the girl Myra herself—meant to the young man with the frank eyes—meant to these good folks from the country—meant to the proud old father—meant most of all, perhaps, to the woman with the silvering hair and the look that carried one back. For Betsy, in that moment, all personal considerations were swallowed up in a luxury of happiness—the happiness that comes on that same road of sacrifice of which old Dave had spoken.

Remembrance of the price to be paid came later, and with it Mr. Philip Morley. She felt stronger now, though, more able to play the game, and so managed to summon up a smile of comparative friendliness.

"Congratulations," she said, "you put it across fine."

"Some job you gave me, young lady. Ready? I've a taxi waiting out here."

She went with him. It hurt for the moment to run the gauntlet of old Dave's eyes. The expression on his face was a study. Clearly, though, he did not approve of her escort, but his wide-eyed surprise was almost ludicrous.

She was glad, once they were in the taxi, to have the conversation turn on the events of the evening. She felt she could not stand Morley's customary persiflage just then.

"A heck of a job it was," he grumbled amiably. "Atherton kicked up her heels in great shape, but I know too much about her so she simply had to capitulate and dig up some convincing symptoms. Myra Titherington was worse; I had to nearly carry her to the taxi to have her on hand when needed. I had to spill the beans in the end—about the bunch in the audience you know. Old Treadwell will be falling all over himself apologizing to her now, and offering her a steady contract, or I miss my guess."

"She did—well?" The conversation must be kept within limits.

"Well?—wonderful!" He stared out of the window at the gay crowds on the brilliantly lighted thoroughfare. "She's a lot to thank you for, girlie." He linked his arm in hers, and she made no resistance. Somehow her old antipathy for him was passing. Perhaps the comfortable depths of the taxi

conducted to a sense of companionship. Betsy's life had been a lonely enough one of late in all conscience. The passing throngs, the emptying theatre, the swirl of traffic, the glare of electric signs outside fashionable places of amusement springing into new life under the influence of after-theatre patronage—these things began to work on her. Weariness dropped from her, leaving instead a sense of exuberance. After all was it not coming to her—a night of relaxation, of gaiety and fun?

She felt his eyes were on her in the semi-gloom; sensed something about him that was new to her. It came to her that previous estimates might bear revision. Suddenly he leaned forward, directing the driver in a low voice through the speaking tube.

Lighted thoroughfares gave place to streets where the darkness was broken only by street lamps at the corners, and an occasional lighted storefront. The car turned up a side street.

Betsy put a hand on his sleeve, gripping it.

“Mr. Morley—I thought you said the Regent Roof. This doesn't seem —”

He interrupted with a little laugh that was not altogether a success.

“I don't know if you'll ever forgive me,” he said, “but I'm afraid that little party's off—for you and me. Perhaps some other time you'll let me take you somewhere—somewhere else, maybe. I'll have to run down and put in an appearance for a few minutes, I fancy, or we could go somewhere to-night. As it is—don't you recognize your own street? What's the number?—I only remembered the name.”

She gave it mechanically, remaining silent until the car stopped by the curb. He attempted an explanation.

“I hope you won't mind—but I really don't think I could take you there—to-night. You see I—I was in at the show—and—” He broke off, flushing; his awkwardness in marked contrast to his usual assurance. “Perhaps,” he added helplessly, “you'll understand.”

In the light of a street lamp she saw how boyish he looked standing there in his evening clothes, as he helped her out; how the little traces of dissipation had slunk into the background as though ashamed to show themselves to-night.

“I think I—understand.” Speech was difficult. “I—I understand perfectly.”

She ran up the steps, waving a friendly farewell to him, and so into the house.



In the quiet of her own room she tried to think it through. It seemed that the cross-currents of emotion were inextricably merged. But presently, before the picture of her mother, and later, in an unusual moment on her knees beside the bed, she sought expression of feelings for which mere speech was denied.

It was less than a week later that Betsy stood before Myra Titherington in the little dressing room at the theatre. This was the third time in the week. The memory of the previous visit still left a mixed glow of happiness and

embarrassment in the girl's heart. Myra had thanked her—thanked her fully, without reserve—with the gulf between them shrunk to nothingness at last.

To-day she offered Betsy a newspaper, smilingly.
“Read that,” she said.

The Dewville *Banner* had a column and a half in its weekly issue, but the summing up was brief:

“In ‘Crossroads’, the rôle of ‘Sheila Madrigal’ played by an actress with no heart to feel its sublimity, no soul to sense the inner meaning of it, would be a failure. Perhaps it is because she has fought a winning battle herself that Myra Titherington interprets the part so wonderfully. At least this is the construction we put on her own words.”

Myra put in gently: “I didn’t say just that. You see, dear, I would have lost the battle fighting alone, or perhaps not caring to fight. If it hadn’t been for my friends, for you most of all, dear.”

She paused, then: “I’m arranging for this week-end at home, Betsy—I wonder if you’d care to come with me. They’ll all be so glad to see you, I know”—a little glint of mischief made its appearance in the speaker’s expressive eyes—“especially Jimmy—my brother, you know. He’s done nothing but talk about a little girl up in the city who sold him the tickets, so they tell me. Jimmy isn’t often taken that way, so maybe you’re taking a chance on going.”

“I think,” retorted Betsy Jordan, coloring ridiculously, “maybe I’ll take a chance.”

Later, when she hurried back to take up her duties, the color in her cheeks was still proving most becoming.

She opened for business, humming a happy little air.

“Two for to-night, orchestra.” The old gentleman outside the wicket had been waiting at the head of the line-up long enough to feel a trifle cross.

Betsy consulted her available supply.

“Sorry,” she said, “but I’ve nothing left except first row. The house is just about sold out.”

“Well, you needn’t look so tickled about it,” snapped the old gentleman, taking a disgruntled departure with front row tickets.

But Betsy’s smile had its source in other things. Perhaps the cue to it lay in the sudden mental translation that had taken place, changing the old gentleman into a young man with frank grey eyes, asking in his pleasant voice:

“Three, please, miss. First row, orchestra, if you have them.”

Of course the thing was perfectly ridiculous—under the circumstances—but something told Betsy that she was glad just the same that Jimmy was only Myra’s brother, and that the week-end was but forty-eight hours away.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *First Row--Orchestra* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]