

THE MOTH AND THE STAR

By GILBERT FRANKAU

ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH PALLER COLEMAN

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The principal curse of all artistic endeavor to secure financial success is that the successful artist requires not only an artistic but a business sense. More especially does this principle apply to the least of all the arts—acting. Because, from that welter of thwarted ambition, diseased vanities, and personal jealousy which is the British stage, only the hardest-headed, hardest-hearted ever emerge to London prominence. And, once emerged, your prominent actor or actress must needs devote at least two-thirds of his or her time to the suppression of other hard-headed, hard-hearted mummers—all eager for West-end applause and West-end money.

The law of our stage, therefore, is the law of the primeval jungle, the law of “big business,” the law of all competitive communities: death (otherwise an ill-paid provincial engagement) to the weak, the poor, and such-as-have-no-influence. Which may or may not be the reason for the decay of British acting in the West-end of London.

This fight-to-a-finish struggle, however, is not carried on in the open. Openly, the fighters compliment one another, stroke one another, purr over one another. An illusion of good manners, peculiar to the profession, an illusion of hearty good-will, peculiar to the professional, cloaks the snarling, backbiting tussle from all save the astutest eye.

Nevertheless, even in this dark jungle of hatred and jealousy, Love—as a white flower in black swamp-lands—comes occasionally to bloom. Hear now the love-story of Sheila Tremayne: and if the flower be a little less white than your own imaginings, a little stained of petal and calyx, be lenient in your appraisal, remembering the soil wherefrom it grew.

* * * * *

Marcia Meredith was a good wife, a mediocre actress, a magnificent business-woman, and—above all things—a West-end “star.” The gaining of that stardom had cost her forty-five years of struggle and most of her soul. To the public she remained a ripe thirty, soulful and temperamental, the shimmering, passionate Marcia Meredith of “Love’s Victim,” “Mrs. Deerson’s Marriage,” and other dramatic entertainments too trivial for the chronicling; to the sophisticated eyes of “the profession” she stood for the ultimate jungle-product—a tigress ready with tongue and tooth

and claw to defend her theatrical lair against any who might seek to invade it.

Vague hints of this tigerishness, which lurked, always ready to pounce, behind the dark-lashed, dark-green eyes of the leading lady, had reached Sheila Tremayne before she accepted the small part of Doris Gray in Marcia's new production. But Sheila had only laughed at her informant. The part was a good one, well within her powers; it gave her access for the first time to the "West-end." Nothing else—not even tigresses—mattered.

And yet, even at the first reading of the play to the company, Sheila had sensed a vague antagonism. Whenever the producer read out a line of Doris Gray's it seemed to Sheila, watching the actor-manageress, as though a frown creased Miss Meredith's broad, over-whitened forehead, as though the ugly hands twitched, the black hair under the gaudy and over-feathered hat tossed impatiently.

In after years Sheila Tremayne would have *known* the thoughts behind that over-whitened forehead; would have almost heard the thin lips mutter to themselves, "I oughtn't to have engaged this girl. She's too attractive. She'll make the part too prominent. *I shall suffer.*"

For Sheila Tremayne, by instinct, was also of the jungle! She, also, had it in her to become the star. A psychologist—and Marcia Meredith had needed psychology in *her* fight for stardom—would have told this from Sheila's face, from her hands, from the very artificiality with which she spoke.

A girl's face was Sheila's. Almost ideal for the footlights. A face essentially virgin, and one that would preserve its illusion of virginity. Stage-virginity, be it understood: dark-blue eyed, high foreheaded under a nimbus of real gold hair, straight-nosed, round-cheeked, small-eared. A face almost devoid of character, except for the full lips and the prominent, resolute chin. It was that chin which first affrighted Marcia Meredith; that, and the long-fingered, broad-palmed hands which betokened the needful minimum of art backed by the needful maximum of business drive.

So for a full week Miss Meredith called Miss Tremayne "her dear child"—and instructed author and producer (meek men both, their self-determination rotted by many years of the footlights) to cut as many of Doris Gray's lines as might be possible. And at the end of that week, Chance (who plays his part behind the wings) decreed that Lucien Winthrop, the leading boy, should break an arm while mumming for the movies, and brought Basil Harrington in his stead.

Everything that was best in Sheila Tremayne, all the tenderness which could just redeem her acting of “girl” parts from the mediocre, fell crazily to loving Basil Harrington, from the first moment her dark-blue eyes visioned him shaking hands with Marcia Meredith. He was the ideal stage-lover, well over six foot, with light-brown crinkly hair, nice eyes, the hands and feet of a gentleman, and that rarity among stage-folk—a voice. Immediately she adored him, and he—in so far as modern young men are capable of adoration—reciprocated. That is to say, he was sufficiently aware of her to turn his head, ever so slightly, from the shake-hands with Marcia towards the slim, tall girl in the russet tailor-made who had just repeated her line:

“But I love him, Mrs. Masterson, I love him. Won’t you let him come to me?”

* * * * *

That line of Doris Gray’s is spoken in the third act of Paul Derrick’s “great romantic comedy, ‘Devotion’ ”; of which comedy it is necessary for your understanding to give at least an outline.

Understand, then, that the play, having been written specially to the order of Marcia Meredith, contains only one real part—Mrs. Masterson. The entire comedy is a vehicle for the exploitation, re-exploitation, and super-exploitation of Mrs. Masterson’s (Marcia Meredith’s) moods, clothes, figure, voice, gestures, arms, eyebrows, jewellery, and “temperament.” Around these, and not around any specific dramatic idea, revolve—as pale moonlets around a star—the minor characters.

But in the third and last act of “Devotion” there occurs (doubtless by an oversight of the author’s) one real dramatic moment. The scene is Mrs. Masterson’s boudoir. She, by a super-effort of clothes, voice, gestures, eyebrows and temperament, has succeeded in luring Cyprian Olphert (Basil Harrington) from his *fiancée*, Doris Gray. Doris Gray, therefore—who, by a stage coincidence, is staying with her rival—arraying herself in her most becoming garment, follows Cyprian to the boudoir, pleads with Mrs. Masterson and finally triumphs over the entanglement. Thereafter Mrs. Masterson makes things up with her own legitimate husband; and the curtain falls and is raised many times to display Marcia Meredith bowing her thanks to a delighted audience.

By the twelfth day of rehearsals, when the last act had begun to shape itself, it became apparent to Marcia Meredith—as it is doubtless apparent to the reader—that a really fine performance of Doris Gray by Sheila Tremayne might conceivably involve a considerable amount of publicity, to say nothing of insistent curtain-calls, for that young actress. By the

fourteenth day, when it became necessary to consider the dresses for the minor characters (Marcia's clothes needless to say, had been designed weeks since by Monsieur Lepine of Paris, London, and New York), the leading lady's cooed "My dear child," had been replaced by "Miss Tremayne," a "Miss Tremayne" so perfectly, so frigidly polite as to be absolutely tigrine.

* * * * *

And how is the frock for the last act, Miss Tremayne?" asked Basil Harrington.

"Oh, not bad," smiled the girl.

They were lunching together, not for the first time, at Gustave's in Soho—a dark little, intimate little restaurant of cheap prices and flamboyant omelettes, not two hundred yards away from the theatre.

"Really nice?" went on the boy in his thrilling voice. "Or only so-so?"

"You'll see at the dress rehearsal."

"Can't you describe it to me?" He leaned forward artlessly, and his brown eyes darted admiration at Sheila.

"It's black silk," she admitted. "Quite simple, of course. They can't afford to spend any money on *my* clothes."

"Black!" His intuition caught at the disappointment she was trying to hide from him. "But surely that isn't right for the character? Miss Meredith might wear black. You ought to be in something girlish. Pale pink? Pale blue? And besides"—he hesitated, aware of disloyalty to his employer—"isn't Doris Gray supposed to be a millionaire's daughter?"

"She is," snapped Sheila, "but she'll look like—like a charity orphan."

"But why——" began Basil; and in that moment Sheila *knew*.

She had not known before, only surmised—vaguely through long, lonely evenings in her tiny flat—the influence at work against her. Young to the jungle of stageland, it had needed the mating fervour to sharpen her instincts of self-protection. But now both mating fervour and defensive instinct were fully aroused.

"Does it matter?" she said.

"*I* think it matters frightfully," retorted the boy, "not only to the play, but to you. You see, the public nowadays are funny. They insist on our being well-dressed. You've no idea what *my* tailor's bill is."

"Men have such an advantage, paying for their own clothes."

"I can't see that—we don't get any bigger salaries for dressing ourselves."

"But you can wear more or less what you like," said Sheila.

Somehow or other—every successful artist knows that there is such a moment—realization of her dual personality was being born in the girl. Self-knowledge added itself to the knowledge of Marcia Meredith. She grew furiously conscious of two Sheilas: the one tender and girlish, who could play Doris Gray to the life, who could surrender herself, would surrender herself, without question to the adorable boy with the crinkly hair and the clean-shaven lips; the other a hard-headed, hard-hearted unwomanly little person who meant to do battle with tooth and claw for success.

Curiously enough, even the hard-hearted, hard-headed Sheila loved Basil Harrington. "He," she said to herself, "doesn't realize that we are in the jungle. He's too *nice*. I must fight for us both."

"Time we were getting back to rehearsal," suggested the boy, paying his bill. She powdered her nose, pulled down her veil, and followed him into the sunshine.

All the two hundred yards down Shaftesbury Avenue Sheila's new instinct was at work. She said to herself, "It's in my own hands. It's always in our hands once we're 'on.' The producer can't interfere with me. Miss Meredith can't interfere. Once the curtain goes up on the first night, the issue rests between me and the public. Do the public really care for clothes as much as Basil thinks?"

Entering the stage-door, looking in the glass cage to see if there were any letters for either of them, scurrying along the whitewashed passage, down the stone steps on to the half-lit stage, Sheila's instinct still functioned. Instinct urged, "This is enemy territory. Tread softly. Speak softly. Veil your voice. Veil the purpose in your eyes. Pretend! Pretend! Pretend!"

"Beginners for Act Three!" called the stage-manager, and the "beginners," Mrs. Masterson's husband and Mrs. Masterson's maid, took up their positions; started in to stumble through their lines.

Sheila found herself a packing-case in the wings, sat down, and began to study her part. But her mind was not on the typewritten words; her mind was hovering about the auditorium, empty save for Mr. Peaston, the producer, and the cleaners, sweeping carpets against the evening performance. In ten

days—thought Sheila—those stalls, those boxes, that pit, gallery, and dress-circle will be full of eyes. And every eye will see Doris Gray looking like a charity orphan.

She forced herself to study. “But I love him, Mrs. Masterson. Won’t you let him come to me?” And quite suddenly Sheila Tremayne wished that the stage issue between herself and Marcia Meredith had been the real issue. “That,” she thought, “would be a fight worth fighting.” (For this is yet another curse of the acting art, that anyone with a due sense of values—and that sense, too, was being born in Sheila—must realize its utter futility.)

A shadow blurred the typescript; and, lifting her head, she saw her antagonist.

“Hard at work, Miss Tremayne?” purred Marcia Meredith, regal if a trifle middle-aged in ospreys and sables.

“I’m afraid I’m a terribly slow ‘study,’ ” prevaricated Sheila.

“Then I’ve good news for you,” went on the elder woman. “You know that last speech of yours, the one that begins ‘But I love him.’ Well, Mr. Peaston and myself have been talking it over, and we both think it too long. It holds up the action. Don’t you think so?”

A protest rose to Sheila’s lips, was forced down. The speech in question was the climax of her part. To cut it would make Doris Gray a colourless nonentity.

“The author agrees with us. So, if *you* don’t mind,” (as if she’d *dare* mind, thought Marcia), “we’re going to take out a few lines of it. If you’ll give me your part, I’ll show you just where the cuts come.”

The actor-manageress took the typescript Sheila proffered: took a gold pencil from her gold bag, and carefully excised all but the first two and last three lines of the speech.

“*My* cue,” she said, “is not altered.”

“No, of course not,” murmured the girl, and then, remembering her new self, she smiled. “I think it’s a great improvement, Miss Meredith.”

“I’m glad you don’t mind,” said a disarmed Marcia. “Some people are so silly about cuts. As if anything or any of us matter except the play.”

She stood chatting amicably for a moment. She could afford to be amicable now. Sheila Tremayne, in Doris Gray’s black silk frock, speaking

Doris Gray's attenuated lines, could hardly cast the shadow of an eclipse on the stardom of Mrs. Masterson.

"Oh, and I do hope you didn't think the dress we chose for the last act *too* simple. Miss Tremayne," said the actor-manageress.

"I think it simply adorable, Miss Meredith," cooed the girl who was learning her jungle laws.

A moment later, with a rustle of charmeuse and a jingle of golden accoutrements, Marcia tripped away towards the "prompt" side—there, with Basil Harrington, to await her cue. But all that dreary rehearsal afternoon, and all the dreary rehearsal afternoons which followed, Sheila Tremayne—the tender, girlish Sheila—cried those bitter tears which never rise to the eye; and all that dreary home evening, and all the dreary home evenings which followed, Sheila Tremayne, the hard-hearted, hard-headed Sheila, worked on the full speech as it was before it had been cut to colourlessness, and totted up her tiny balance in the Postal Office Savings Bank.

* * * * *

Monsieur, there is a young lady to see you."

"What young lady?" Monsieur Lepine, of Paris, London, and New York, lifted a brilliantly brilliantined head and stared, black-eyed, across the ormolu desk of his lavishly-furnished private office at the pert secretary who had interrupted his sartorial musings.

"A young lady from the Piccadilly Theatre."

"Her name?"

"Miss Tremayne. Miss Sheila Tremayne."

"I do not know a Miss Tremayne of the Piccadilly Theatre. Of the Piccadilly Theatre, I only know Miss Meredith. And of her I know too much. If the Tremayne want to buy any clothes, let Miss Jameson attend to her."

The secretary hesitated.

"The young lady won't see anyone but yourself, Monsieur. She says it is about a frock for to-morrow's performance of 'Devotion.' "

"'Devotion!' 'Devotion!' I am tired of 'Devotion.' I am tired of stage people." The dressmaker twirled a black moustache. "The Meredith woman has bothered me enough already."

Nevertheless, after further protest, he consented to leave his office, and strode into the showrooms below.

There is nothing shoppy about Lepine's London showrooms. The effect, artfully contrived to discourage the economically minded, is midway between that of a drawing-room and a picture gallery; wall-colour a pale yellow; chairs upholstered in orange brocade; ceiling black; floor parquet; mannequins' stage—which occupies the entire south wall—velvet-curtained and mysterious as a palmist's cave.

Sheila, rising nervously from one of the brocaded chairs, was aware of a tallish foreigner in black cut-away coat, flower at button hole, whose eyes seemed to cheapen the inexpensive tailor-made, the inexpensive hat she wore by at least five guineas.

“Mademoiselle Tremayne?” Monsieur Lepine queried.

“Of the Piccadilly Theatre,” smiled Sheila. “I want your help, Monsieur Lepine. I want your advice.”

“*Tiens!*” retorted the Frenchman. “So you want my advice. That is more than most English actresses want. They are fools, your English actresses. They think they know everything. In Paris it is different. There, they realize that I, too, am an artist.” He altered his tone. “You want some frocks, eh?”

“I only want one frock,” stammered Sheila. “And I—I don't know whether I can afford it.”

“For the stage?”

“Yes, for to-morrow night. It”—the girl's voice dropped—“it's rather a secret, Monsieur Lepine.”

“A secret!” The man's eyes twinkled. “I do not make secret frocks.” He swished away the secretary, who had been listening intently, and went on: “What part do you take in the play, Mademoiselle? The young lady, eh? I thought so. I remember you, once, at rehearsal, when I came to see Miss Meredith. Why did the management not send you to me at once? Now, we must find a model. There is no time to make. And models are not cheap, these days.”

Sheila's dark-blue eyes veiled themselves under long lashes. “Supposing the management knew nothing about my coming to you, Monsieur, would that make a difference?”

Said the Frenchman, after a perceptible pause: “Mademoiselle, I, too, am an artist. You spoke of a secret. To me it is no secret. Let me tell you. Miss Meredith is jealous of you; therefore she send you to a cheap dressmaker. Is it not so?”

“Well—” began the girl.

“Do not interrupt. I have not been in this business twenty years for nothing. I know these—how do you call them?—stars. One day, you also will be a star. Then you will do precisely as Miss Meredith.” He altered his tone. “This dress—you pay for it yourself?”

“If I can,” said Sheila, a little taken aback by the rapidity of the Frenchman’s intuition.

“And Miss Meredith, when she find out, what happen to you? What happen to me, Lepine? I tell you—you get the sack—and I—I make no more clothes for Miss Meredith.”

“But she needn’t know *you* made the dress. I would promise not to tell a soul.”

“Foolishness.” The dressmaker’s hands plunged to trouser pockets. “Foolishness. A Lepine dress is a Lepine dress. All the world recognizes it at sight. I do not need to plaster my name on programmes.”

“Then you refuse?”

“I have not said so. This dress, for which act is it? The last? Miss Meredith wears purple in the last act. And you?”

“I’m supposed to wear black.” Sheila’s heart was beating furiously. She felt, somehow, that her whole career hung on the next sentence.

“And you do not want to wear black. No? Then you are a little fool. All English actresses are fools. What do you want to wear? Pink? Blue? Foolishness. Wait. I, Lepine, show you the black you should wear.” He called across the room. “*Clotilde, Clotilde, faites montrer la robe noire que nous avons fait pour*”—he hesitated—“*pour la petite Henriette.*”

Some twenty minutes later, Sheila Tremayne—not the hard-hearted, hard-headed Sheila who had bearded the great dressmaker at half-past ten of an autumn morning, but a tender, girlish creature frightened almost out of her wits at the risk she ran—faced the lens of a camera in Monsieur Lepine’s private studio. Monsieur Lepine was bawling at her. “Name of a name!” he bawled. “Those hands! Do not clench them. Let the fingers lie loose. So. That is better. And the lips. Half open. So. Yes. Take her now, Jacques!”

The shutter clicked, clicked again.

“And that will be enough,” said Monsieur Lepine. He handed Sheila down from the black velvet steps on which she had been posing, and said:—

“Now remember. Not a word. You take it off. We put it in a box. It goes home with you. The shoes and the stockings you fetch this evening.”

“But the price, Monsieur? The price?” stammered Sheila.

The dressmaker bowed. “When you wear it, Mademoiselle, the frock is priceless. And remember, for two years we have the exclusivity of your photograph. Also, when you are a star,” he smiled, looking at his handiwork, “but, indeed, you are a star already—it is I, Lepine, who will dress your plays.”

And he added, to himself: “Perhaps, also, I teach the Meredith woman that it does not pay to bother the great Lepine.”

* * * * *

TO the audience, a West-end “first night,” especially a Marcia Meredith first night, is little more than a Society function. The audience well knows its Marcia, knows the type of play she is sure to have selected. The audience is prepared to applaud, more or less vociferously, for three hours—and read about itself in the papers next morning.

But behind the scenes all first nights are electric with tension. From the author, pallid in the wings, to the least important stage-hand runs a current of nervous anticipation—of sheer longing for the moment when the final curtain-call shall signal “Success.”

Sheila Tremayne, darting—second act over—to the dressing-room she shared with Mrs. Masterson’s maid, was hardly conscious of Basil Harrington’s—

“Going well, Miss Tremayne. And you’re simply splendid.” She knew only that now, *now*, *NOW*, was the moment. For this moment she had borne with Marcia Meredith through four long weeks; for this moment she had faced Lepine; for this, through an interminable dress rehearsal, she had suffered Mr. Peaston, the producer, suffered the agony of that “simple black frock,” of that cut and colourless speech.

She said to herself, as she closed the dressing-room door and began to unfasten the “simple” day-dress she had been wearing: “She’ll have to wait—she’ll have to wait for her cue. I mustn’t fluff—or she’ll chip in. I *must* be calm. I *must* be calm.”

The tiny dressing-room spun round her. Round and round. She was aware, dimly, of Mrs. Masterson's maid, of the dresser tying the black apron round Mrs. Masterson's maid's black silk dress. And she thought, "Black silk! The maid wears black silk. I, too, was to wear black silk. So that was Marcia Meredith's idea. The maid and the millionaire's daughter. Both colourless. Both nonentities."

"And that finishes *you*, Miss Arkwright," interrupted the dresser's voice. "Now for Miss Tremayne."

"I think I'll be off, dear," said Miss Arkwright. "The curtain'll be up in five minutes." She nodded excitedly, went out.

By now Sheila was ready for her stockings.

"Bought these yourself, I expect," said the dresser, admiringly. "Must have cost a pretty penny. Pity the dress doesn't come up to them."

*Sheila's whitened hand
felt in her corsage, and
came away clutching a
piece of paper.*



Sheila's whitened right hand felt in her corsage, and came away clutching a piece of paper.

"I'm not going to wear *that* dress, Mrs. Fell. There's a box under my table. You might get it out." Her right hand passed the paper. "And this is for you."

Mrs. Fell took the paper, uncrinkled it—and laughed. "Bradburys is scarce these days," said Mrs. Fell. "Funny their changing your dress at the last moment: and me knowing nothing about it."

"Nobody knows," murmured Sheila.

The fat, red-faced woman looked up from her dragging out of the box.

"Nobody? Bless my soul!"

"Nobody—except you. And you're to keep quiet till I'm on. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Fell cut the string of the box, and laughed again. "'Tain't none of my business," said Mrs. Fell, "but the theatre's the theatre. There's rules, and there's regulations. There's contracts." She fumbled with the tissue-paper. "I shouldn't do anything to upset folk if I was you, my dear. Not that I won't keep quiet if you wants me to." Then, with a little staccato cry, "Lor', what's this?"

"Oh, that"—to Sheila her own voice sounded like a stranger's—"that's only a black wrap—to wear in the wings. The dress is underneath."

A shrill howl sounded down the corridor—the call-boy's howl.

"Curtain's up. You've got ten minutes yet," said Mrs. Fell.

* * * * *

Sheila's brain still spun as she waited, in the wings, for her cue. She tried to hear the words being spoken on the stage, but her ears dithered, refused to carry sound. She tried to think of her own words—but the words wouldn't come. Almost it seemed to her as though the cue itself would fail her memory. "And as for Miss Doris Gray—as for Miss Doris Gray"—that above all things she must not miss. Would she hear it? She did not even dare peep sideways through the wings on to the stage.

And then, quite suddenly, her brain ceased spinning; froze to chill unemotional intellect. This was her one chance of success—and of Basil. She must not, dared not, could not fail.

"Cold, Miss Tremayne?" whispered a voice, Miss Arkwright's.

“No.” Sheila drew the black wrap which had provoked the whisper closer about her figure. Miss Arkwright tiptoed away.

Now the girl in the black wrap could hear, quite distinctly, every word of the scene on the stage. In three minutes, less than three minutes, she would have to discard the wrap to make her entrance. And Basil, Basil would be “off.” She would be alone with the audience, that audience all eyes and shirt-fronts, with the audience and Marcia.

She peeped through the wings, saw Basil, heard his voice. He was making love, stage-love, to Mrs. Masterson. Beyond his bent head, she guessed the audience. The audience were silent; all eyes; tier upon tier of eyes.

“Cyprian!”—Marcia’s voice—“dear, dear boy.”

“Marcia, don’t. It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair to Doris.”

The fatuous words stung Sheila to quick rage. “That old woman,” she thought, “that old woman and my Basil.”

Then Sheila Tremayne disappeared from Sheila Tremayne’s mind—and “Doris Gray” took her place. Doris Gray tiptoed, still shrouded, to the door through which she must make her entrance; Doris Gray listened—real for the moment—to her rival, Mrs. Masterson. Doris Gray flung aside the wrap that hid Lepine’s masterpiece; heard the gasp of a staggered stage-manager behind her, heard the opposite door click to Basil’s exit, heard her cue, and trod from gloom to glare without a tremor.

She stood in a blaze of light. She had forgotten the audience, forgotten the scenery, forgotten Sheila Tremayne. She was Doris Gray—facing Mrs. Masterson. And Mrs. Masterson loathed her. That she could see in Mrs. Masterson’s dark-green eyes. In those eyes, too, she could see herself—the millionaire’s daughter, a tiny shimmering vision of black and silver, gold hair high on white nape.

But Marcia Meredith—who was always Marcia Meredith and never the character she played—saw more than a tiny vision. Into her mind—even as she mouthed her part—came one clear thought “Lepine! Only Lepine could have designed that black velvet, slashed it to show the silver underskirt.” And the audience—Marcia never forgot the presence of her audience—the audience was “eating” both the girl and the frock. Marcia could see, out of the tail of her mental eye, women’s glasses focused, women’s mouths wide in wonder.

Rage took her by the breasts. How dared this girl, this Tremayne girl, play such a trick! To-morrow—no, not to-morrow, to-night—she should leave the theatre, leave it for good. Yet the scene must be played out to the end. Thank goodness, she had had the foresight to cut that last speech—would they never come to that last speech? Must she, Marcia Meredith, stand there for ever, mouthing her foolish lines, knowing herself outwitted, outshone before her own first-night public, in her own theatre?

And now Doris Gray, too, grew conscious of her audience—as of a great friendly dog, faithful-eyed and adoring—a great dog that would leap to protect her against all enmity. She knew she could whistle that dog at will; could feel it thrilling at her voice, at her very gesture.

And so those two—painted women between painted walls—played out their comedy.

“But I love him, Mrs. Masterson, I love him.” Marcia knew, even from the first inflection of the girl’s voice, that the speech would be spoken to its finale; and Sheila, watching those green eyes, knew victory. How those green eyes, those thin lips, could hate! And yet, and yet the thin lips were powerless. They dared not speak. She—Sheila Tremayne who was Doris Gray—she, Doris Gray who was Sheila Tremayne—held that great dog in leash. If those thin lips dared but interrupt, the dog would growl.



"And you won't, you won't keep him away from me any longer, Mrs. Masterson?"

“And you won’t, you won’t keep him away from me any longer, Mrs. Masterson? You wouldn’t do anything, anything beastly?”

Now—she thought—now, open those thin lips! The game’s played out between us.

And the thin painted lips opened. “Miss Gray, you have taught me a great lesson to-night. Have no fear. Cyprian is yours—and yours alone. Go to him.”

* * * * *

She had made her exit. Behind her, as the “built-in” door clicked, she had heard for the first time that rattle of handclaps which signifies an audience carried away. The rattle still sounded in her ears; her heart still beat to the triumph of it. And abruptly came reaction, silence in her ears, a coldness at the heart of her. She knew only that now, *now*—so soon as the curtain fell—she must pay for the thing she had done.

Marcia Meredith, that Marcia whose voice carried shrill through the painted canvas, would never forgive. She, Sheila Tremayne, had broken the unwritten customs of the theatre; next night, and all the nights to follow, the theatre would cast her out. Standing there, in the semi-gloom of the wings, Lepine’s masterpiece draping her in shimmers of black and silver, she knew herself disgraced. They were all there, the whole company, twelve of them, waiting for the final curtain-call. But none of them dared speak to her, to Sheila Tremayne. Not even Basil! Basil was whispering to Miss Arkwright. Basil was afraid. She could see the fear in Basil’s paint-reddened eyes; she could not see that his fear was all for her. Supposing that her very temerity had lost Basil for ever.

“Curtain!” said a voice. “First call.” And almost before she realized it, Sheila was on stage again. They were all on stage in the full glare of the footlights. In front of them, over banked flowers, the house rocked and rang. They could see the applauding hands.

Three times the curtain had risen and fallen—four times—five times. Now Marcia Meredith and her flowers must have the stage to themselves. Sheila, rushing off, found Basil next to her. His hand caught her arm. “*You* did it,” he stammered, “you saved the play. That isn’t her call. Hark at them!”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Sheila. “Nothing matters. Let me get away. I want to get away. I don’t want her to see me in this frock.”

Another hand caught her arm—Mr. Peaston's. Mr. Peaston was screaming in her left ear: "Miss Tremayne! Miss Tremayne! For God's sake, go on! Can't you hear them?"

"Hear what?" said Sheila; but even as she asked, she heard them, the audience, her audience. And the audience was chanting, with monotonous reiteration:—

"Doris Gray! Doris Gray! *We* want Doris Gray! *We* want to see Doris Gray!"

"I daren't," stammered Sheila. "I daren't. Miss Meredith!"

But it was Marcia Meredith herself—Marcia, clutching a great bouquet of the management's flowers—Marcia, with a stage-smile on her thin painted lips—Marcia, astutest of business women—who ultimately handed her rival on stage, flung out two whitened arms, and *kissed* her before the whole house.

For this is the one consolation of all artistic endeavour for financial success: that the public, the great, honest, child-hearted public, is the final judge thereof, the judge whose verdict not even the most powerful dares gainsay.

Which is the only reason why Marcia Meredith has offered her house in Park Lane for the forthcoming marriage of "Miss Sheila Tremayne, whose performance of Doris Gray in 'Devotion' has revealed a new delight for London playgoers, and that rising young actor, Mr. Basil Harrington."

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 *The Moth and the Star* by Gilbert Frankau]