

THE UNDERSTUDY

By GILBERT FRANKAU

ILLUSTRATED BY R. M. BRINKERHOFF

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Once upon a time Margaret Binyon had been a girl with illusions. In those far-away days she had believed, for instance, that the world was a pretty decent sort of place; that people, taking them all round, neither lied, thieved, cheated, nor threw stones at lame hounds trying to get over pecuniary stiles; that quite a lot of good things could be bought for one gold sovereign; and that if one were a young woman with a certain amount of talent, a pleasant voice, an attractive face, and a good figure, the stage afforded one every chance of a jolly existence.

To-day—rather a foggy day in suburban London—Margaret Binyon knew better! Life, and more particularly stage-life—she saw from the vantage-coign of her thirty winters—was a dog-fight. To succeed on “the boards” one must have neither scruples, mercy, nor decent instincts. So long as one possessed tooth, claw, and the hypocrisy necessary to use them in the dark, one needn’t even be an artist.

It had taken Margaret exactly twelve years, nine on the stage and three of war-service, to arrive at this knowledge. She saw herself at twenty-one understudying a leading lady whose faulty elocution was pardoned for her faultless legs; she saw herself, twenty-three, making a little headway at last—twenty-five, getting her fifteen pounds a week, and almost certain of continuous engagements—twenty-six—twenty-seven. And “If only it hadn’t been for the war,” thought Margaret, bitterly, “I might have been in work to-day.”

You saw her, making her way down Long Acre, as a well set-up, young person in a grey check tailor-made. The black-winged hat added a good two inches to her five-feet-six. Her hair was very nearly blond, her eyes that particular shade of blue which is useless to the motion-picture man, her nose a trifle aquiline, her cheeks thin (one doesn’t put on flesh when one is eking out existence on one’s savings at a lodging-house—especially when there is a—circumstance one doesn’t mention, to keep one awake o’ nights,) her lips full, her ears flat to the skull, and her throat—bare of jewellery—attractive. Also, if you were very observant, you might have noticed the determined jut of her chin.

For Margaret Binyon was “on business,” “after a job.” The—circumstance one didn’t mention, made it vital for her to secure an engagement. Luckily, there was one in sight. Otherwise, she couldn’t have risked the fare from Ealing! It must, it simply must, come to something, she thought, as she hurried along.



“I’m the producer, ain’t I? What I say goes, till the first night’s over.”

II

Cyprian Todd called himself a “theatrical manager;” and lived up to the reputation of that artistic calling. The old saw “honesty is the best policy,” having been brought home to him with some force when, at the age of twenty-three, only the intervention (and the purse!) of a powerful relative in the business had saved him from the unpleasant consequences of misappropriating certain seaside box-office takings entrusted to his care, Cyprian had cultivated for many and many a year the policy of straightforwardness. “A little provincial in his ideas,” folk said of Cyprian, “but straight—straight as a gun-barrel.”

Theatrically speaking, folk were more or less right. Cyprian Todd no longer misappropriated box-office takings: his methods of money-making, though a trifle more complicated in plan, were infinitely safer in execution. Instead of crudely laying hands on other people’s cash, he now persuaded

them to put it into “theatrical syndicates.” These syndicates, camouflaged under the magic words “Cyprian Todd presents—” bought plays, dealt with scene-painters, dressmakers, “property” merchants; engaged actors and actresses; leased theatres; sent companies on tour; and generally performed—in a modest way—any and every operation wherefrom Cyprian Todd could derive benefit.

How, exactly, Cyprian derived those benefits is hardly a fit subject for light literature; it sufficing for our story that he did so in a second-floor office, with a pert brunette typist in its outer compartment and an enormous board-room table—flanked on one side by a leather-covered sofa and on the other by a revolving chair—in the inner.

“Miss Binyon is outside,” announced the pert brunette, entering without a knock.

“Ask her to wait,” ordered Cyprian, his bullet-head bent over some accounts.

The accounts—dealing as they did with a venture out of which Cyprian, having released to one of his syndicates from another of his syndicates a theatre of which he himself, in association with three others of his ilk, was the actual owner, drew fees that our iniquitous income tax laws made it advisable to describe as “expenses,” and “expenses” that the suspicious nature of modern investors practically forced a man to put down as “advertising and press-agent’s salary”—took a goodish half-hour to scrutinize. At the end of that time our manager, stretching a virile hand towards the bell on the table, summoned the brunette typist, and told her, “I’ll see Miss Binyon now.”

Cyprian Todd, true to type, did not rise as his visitor entered; and Margaret, looking down across the desk, saw a broad forehead from which the brown hair, just touched with grey for a sign of middle-age, had receded two inches, a pair of shrewd, sapphire, semi-Hebraic eyes, a dingy complexion, full cheeks, a largish mouth, and a chin with a distinct dimple.

“I’ve come about your letter,” said Margaret.

“Good. Sit down.” The manager’s voice was crisp, businesslike, a trifle condescending. “I’m afraid I haven’t got much to offer you, Miss Binyon. The part’s small, as I wrote you—but it wants playing. The outside we can afford to pay for it is five pounds a week.”

“But, Mr. Todd,” Margaret’s voice betrayed her anxiety, “you know that, even before the war, I used to get far more than that.”

“Of course, I know it. But five pounds is all I can afford for the part. You must take it or leave it, I’m afraid.”

And Margaret thought, “It won’t pay to refuse. I’m down and out—and he knows it. If he knew about—about the circumstance, he’d only offer three.” Aloud, she said: “I’m a member of the Association now, Mr. Todd. You’re giving out standard contracts, I suppose.”

Cyprian, who liked the Actors’ Association about as much as a fox-hunter likes barbed wire, replied, curtly, “You can have a standard contract if you like. Personally, I can’t see any sense in the Association. Trade Unions are all very well for stagehands. Artists ought to be above that sort of thing.”

“And when do you start, rehearsals?” went on Margaret, thinking of the half-salary Todd would, thanks to the Association, now have to pay for them.

“Day after to-morrow. At the Belvedere. We produce in three weeks.”

Margaret, conjured up a stage-smile; and, after a little palaver, accepted the part. Todd, also smiling, rang for his typist, and ordered her to bring him contract-forms. These they signed and exchanged.

The manager, all affability, then drew the script of the entire play from a pile of papers on the table; and—to Miss Binyon’s great astonishment—handed it over.

“I’ve just been thinking,” he said. “Miss Sulgrave’s understudy has disappointed us. You wouldn’t mind reading for her, would you? Just at an occasional rehearsal.”

“But surely if I’m to understudy the leading lady—”

“I never suggested *that*, Miss Binyon.”

“Didn’t you, Mr. Todd? I thought, as you were giving me the script, you intended me”—she managed another smile—“to take on that duty as well.”

Cyprian, having reached the core of his business, leaned back in the revolving chair and politely lit himself a large cigar.

“To be perfectly straight with you, Miss Binyon,” he began, chewing at the weed, “what with the enormous rent I have to pay for the Belvedere and the absurd cost of production these days, I really can’t afford a regular understudy for Miss Sulgrave until we see whether ‘Lucy’s Lover’ is a winner or not. If it’s a winner, of course, someone’ll have to be specially engaged. Meanwhile, you certainly would be doing me a great favour—”

He paused meaningly; and Margaret, taking her cue, murmured: "Lucy Manners seems rather a *long* part to learn—for nothing, Mr. Todd."

"Of course, I don't insist." The cigar elevated itself five degrees. "A contract, with me, is a contract. We've signed ours—and that's the end of it as far as I'm concerned. You must do just as you like about the understudying. Only—if you listen to my advice—you'll take it on. You see, we're bound to send the show out on tour sooner or later—and Miss Sulgrave's understudy would naturally be my first choice for leading lady."

Margaret, who knew the exact value of such promises, hesitated. By every custom of the stage, she was entitled to extra pay if she understudied. But Todd, obviously, had no intention of offering more money. What Todd required was treble work for single salary. Query—was it worth while offending the man?

"And supposing the play *does* succeed," she parried, "should I continue understudying Miss Sulgrave?"

"Well—" The cigar, abstracted from Cyprian's mouth, described a hesitant circle. "Well, honestly, I don't see why you shouldn't."

"At an increased salary?"

"Look here, Miss Binyon!" Todd, as though suddenly smitten with an idea, rose—all five-foot-six of him—from his seat. "I'll tell you what I'll do. You *shall* understudy Miss Sulgrave—for the run of the piece. I don't believe in contracts between artists and managers. We'll make this a little private arrangement. Just between you and me. A family party, don't you know." He came round the table. "You see us through the rehearsals and the first fortnight. After that—if the play's a winner—I'll give you eight pounds a week for the part and the understudy."

It sounded fair enough, theatrically speaking, and Margaret, with a charming gesture, accepted. "After all," she thought, bitterly, "it's dog-eat-dog in this profession—and beggars can't be choosers. This may lead on to something ever so much better; you never can tell."

III

Ten days after her interview with Cyprian Todd, Margaret Binyon sat huddled in a seat of the empty dress-circle of the Belvedere Theatre. On her knees, unregarded, lay the full script of "Lucy's Lover;" on the stage, posing artless among the nondescript scenery of another play, Thelma Sulgrave played Lucy Manners.

So far the two women had not spoken to each other—and this, as she watched her principal, studying each gesture, rankled in Margaret’s mind. All said and done, who was Thelma Sulgrave? A leading lady? Undoubtedly! A star? Very much so! But that did not do away with the fact that she and Margaret had been “girls together” long before Thelma—by sticking closer than a sister to a married matinée idol—won her taloned way to top-dogdom in the theatrical rough-and-tumble.

“I wonder if I’m jealous?” thought Margaret vaguely. It seemed so absurd to be jealous of any actress—especially of one whose acting, apparently, success had deteriorated as much as Thelma’s. One might be jealous of women who were creative artists, of women with husbands who adored them, of women who didn’t have to fight for five pounds a week. But to be jealous of “grease paint,” to dislike someone simply because they had got to the top at home while you had been nursing smashed-up soldiers in France—And, “Oh, dear!” thought Margaret, “what an awful little beast the profession’s made of me.”

“Going to be a success, I think,” whispered a confident voice at her side; and, turning her head, she saw the broad, grinning countenance of Lulu Hart, the comedy-man.

“If only she wouldn’t say ‘sol’ instead of ‘soul’ and ‘phlegm’ instead of ‘flame,’ ” said Margaret in an unguarded moment.

“Thelma, you mean.” Lulu laughed. “Oh, but the public don’t notice little things like that. The public”—he flung out a massive hand—“love to hear Thelma Sulgrave bark, ‘Oh, Gard—I have a phlegm in my sol.’ And besides, even if they didn’t, Miss Sulgrave owns a share in the play. Hector Beamish bought it, you know, just before he died. And so—But we mustn’t talk scandal, Miss Binyon.”

Miss Binyon chuckled. She liked Lulu Hart. There was something—something boyish about the bluff, big-cheeked, clean-shaven comedian, something that inspired confidence.

“You’re rather malicious, aren’t you, Mr. Hart?” she countered.

“I didn’t intend to be.” A look of contrition softened the big face. “But Miss Sulgrave is so very capable of taking care of herself.”

The rehearsal continued. Stephen Bannock, the lover, made his exits and his entrances; Miriam Wheeler ran through her sob scene with Miss Sulgrave; Arthur Cotton, the producer—a swashbuckling cosmopolitan with

Dago moustaches, and a Broadway accent—swaggered on stage and off again; Lulu Hart disappeared.

But Margaret Binyon sat on, wondering exactly what it was about the comedian which appealed to her.

“Mardy, *dear!*” The leading lady, her morning’s work over, had deserted the stage for the auditorium. “How are you?”

“Very well, thank you, Thelma.”

“I’m so glad.” The little woman of the dark hair, the dark eyes, and the hard, Oriental face, began to babble—with the childishness she had affected since reaching thirty. “One hears so little of one’s friends, these days. The war seems to have changed everything, doesn’t it? I was telling Lady Gore-Parker only the other day—you know the Gore-Parkers, don’t you, Mardy?—such dear people—that the stage seems to have altered completely. These syndicates are simply terrible. All they think of is money. And money *spoils* things. Don’t you think so, dear?”

“Well——” began Miss Binyon.



“Fancy casting you to play a parlourmaid. I must say”—the thin lips pursed maliciously—“I’m surprised you took it.”

There was, however, no stopping the Sulgrave. “I so often wish,” she went on, “that we could put the clock back to the old days when the theatre was the theatre. My heart bleeds—just bleeds—when I think of the harm

these commercial managements are doing. And they're so stupid, so *lamentably* stupid. Fancy casting *you* to play a parlourmaid. I must say"—the thin lips pursed maliciously—"I'm surprised you took it."

"Are you, Thelma?" Margaret, looking at her one-time friend, wondered what could have prompted the sudden volubility.

"Of course I am. *I* thought, when you married, that you were going to give up the profession."

"When I married—" stammered Margaret. So Thelma knew—one side of the story!

"Oh, I heard all about it!" The leading lady fairly bubbled. "He was a soldier, wasn't he? And you nursed him in hospital. So romantic! How could he let you come back to the stage?"

Luckily, Mr. Whyteleafe, the stage-manager—an oleaginous, little man with indeterminate features and the blackest of negroid hair—interrupted their conversation with a subservient, "Miss Sulgrave, I do hope you won't mind if we call a rehearsal for to-morrow afternoon. Mr. Bannock has to be away on Saturday, and Mr. Cotton thought——"

"How distressing!" Thelma made one of her famous *moues*. "How very distressing. I wish I'd known sooner. Now, I'm afraid it's quite impossible." She gave reasons to which Whyteleafe listened with deference, ending, "But my understudy could read for me? And, by the way, who is my understudy, Mr. Whyteleafe?"

The stage-manager hesitated. Then he said, "Well, really, Miss Sulgrave, I'm afraid I don't know. Mr. Todd told me this morning that—for the present—he hadn't engaged anyone. That is to say"—he hesitated again, looking sideways at Margaret—"Mr. Todd thought that perhaps, just until the first night, you'd be satisfied if Miss Binyon were to er—— read for you in case—er—it happened you couldn't be present at a rehearsal."

Thelma turned effusively to Margaret.

"But how sweet of you, my dear," she cooed. "How perfectly sweet of you." And to Whyteleafe, "That will be splendid."

But as the stage-manager and the leading lady wandered off together, "Miss Binyon"—her ears cocked—heard the leading lady whisper, "Oh yes—but not a permanency. You'll tell Mr. Todd, won't you?"

If it had not been for Lulu Hart, Margaret said to herself, she could never have got through the next fortnight. Thelma—for no apparent reason—had taken a spite to her part. Her attendances at rehearsal were spasmodic and tempestuous. The rest of the company, though superficially pulling together, were in a state of semi-mutiny. Cotton, the producer, seemed to have lost faith in the play. Todd wandered in and out of the Belvedere like a Napoleon with a bilious attack. When, as frequently happened, Margaret had to read Thelma's scenes, she used to catch him looking at her as a man at his own funeral.

"He seems to have got his knife into me," she confided to the comedian, after one particularly wearisome afternoon.

"Who?" Lulu leaned across the table of the tea-house to which, he had succeeded in persuading her. "Todd?"

"Yes. He looks as though he'd like to murder me."

"Never mind him." The big man chuckled. "Todd's not the trouble. The trouble's Thelma Sulgrave."

"Thelma?"

"Of course. She's kicking to get her own particular understudy. Whyteleaf told me. And Todd's kicking at the extra expense. Between the pair of them"—Lulu grew serious—"they'll ruin the play. And that's a pity, because it's rather a good play."

"It's a wonderful play!" Margaret's eyes lit, saddened. For a fortnight now, studying Thelma's part, she had been seeing herself in it; realising, as the various speeches implanted themselves in her brain, how much—if only she were in Thelma's place—she, Margaret Binyon, could "get out of" Lucy Manners.

"No," corrected Hart. "It's not a wonderful play. Far from it! It's just an ordinary play—with one actress-proof part. I wish to goodness"—he glanced boyishly over the teacups as he made the tactless remark—"that *you* were going to play it."

"Don't!" To Hart's surprise, he saw that his companion was very close to tears. "Please don't. You—you don't quite understand what it would mean to—to—"

Margaret broke off, biting her underlip. Lulu Hart's words had fired in her a spark she thought long since dead—the spark of ambition; so that her mind, tired almost to hysteria, saw two pictures—the picture of what might

have been, "Margaret Binyon, leading lady," with the stage-world at her feet—and the picture of what actually was, "Miss Binyon," of the lodging-house, with everyone's hand against her, and only that scrap of paper, her Valentine contract, between employment and starvation.

"Sorry, Miss Binyon," said the comedy-man bluntly. "I'm sorry if I said anything to upset you."

"It wasn't your fault." The lady who had lost her illusions fumbled furtively for her handkerchief, found it, and pretended to blow her nose. "I'm a bit tired, I expect."

"No wonder. Ten-thirty till five is a fair day's work for anyone. Look here—I've got my old 'bus just round the corner. Supposing I fetch it and drive you home?"

"I'd rather not." Surprisingly, the woman's voice grew harsh. "I'd rather go home by myself."

"Supposing I won't let you—"

"Supposing you—won't let me?"

Their eyes met, and in that moment Margaret Binyon realised the worst. Lulu Hart was in love with her! Lulu Hart meant to propose! Lulu Hart would have to be—to be choked off because—because of the circumstance one didn't mention.

Thelma Sulgrave's temporary understudy sprang up from the table and ran—literally ran—out of that tea-shop.

V

Stage-fright, that particular form of stage-fright which precedes a first performance, always had a most peculiar effect on Margaret Binyon.

Primarily, it affected her limbs. She knew, as she stepped into the train on her way to the theatre, that the handbag in her fingers would, unless clutched with all her might, fall with a crash; and that, if it once fell, she would never be able to pick it up again. But her brain—as always on such occasions—was functioning with extraordinary clarity.

Looking back on the days which had followed her "get-away" from Hart, she saw them in exact perspective. Firstly she realised that she was in love with the big, boyish fellow; that it had cost her the supremest pain to rebuff his clumsy efforts towards an explanation. Secondly, she perceived that Hart's diagnosis of the theatrical position had been correct; and thirdly,

that Thelma Sulgrave and Cyprian Todd must have made up their differences.

Obviously, the manager and the leading lady were no longer at loggerheads. The last three days of rehearsals had gone on oiled wheels. The play would be a success. And within a week she, Margaret Binyon, would find that Thelma's own particular understudy had—despite Todd's promises—been engaged.

Todd, promise or no promise, would not risk upsetting Thelma Sulgrave. Miss Binyon might whistle for that extra three pounds a week. Who cared about Miss Binyon? She had done the unpaid work conscientiously, memorising every sentence of the part. She was ready—word-perfectly ready—to play “Lucy Manners” in the million-to-one eventuality of any accident happening to Thelma Sulgrave. And there, for her, the thing began and ended. Once the play had been successfully launched on London, another would reap where she had sown—

Margaret Binyon wondered, picking her macintoshed way through the rain-drizzling street to the stage-door of the Belvedere, whether she really minded. After all, so long as “Lucy's Lover” succeeded, she would be certain of five pounds a week till the early summer. As for ambition, ambition was foolish; as foolish as imagining that Lulu Hart could—could possibly tolerate the—the circumstance.

“Six telegrams for you, Miss,” said the stage-doorkeeper, “and I've sent some flowers up to the dressing-room.”

Five of the telegrams, opened as she went slowly up the echoing staircase, turned out to be the usual first-night greetings from friends—the sixth, from Hart, read, “Love and luck to the lady who ran away.”

VI

Margaret entered the dressing-room which she shared with two subsidiary characters to find herself alone. On her table were two bouquets: a bunch of cheap blooms carded, “To my dear Mardy. From Thelma Sulgrave,” and a huge sheaf of red roses which she knew instinctively came from the comedian.

To her active mind the flowers typified a double failure. Thelma's parsimonious courtesy, interpreted, meant, “I've won. I can afford to be generous.” Hart's too-liberal offering said plainly, “You haven't only lost in the dog-fight of theatre-land. You've lost something really worth while—the right to matrimony.”

Margaret, her hands shaking, divested herself of macintosh and street-clothes; put the flowers on one side; switched on the light over her dressing-table; and began to “make-up.” The two other girls came in, chattering excitedly.

“Don’t you love first nights?” twittered Janet Tyrers, a slim young blonde who had paid Cyprian Todd under the guise of an “investment”—fifty pounds for the privilege of walking-on.

“Oh, I adore them,” chorused Marion Moon, a black-eyed, bobbed-haired, three pounds-a-week pocket-money girl.

Margaret said nothing; but her blue eyes—seen blue-lidded in the slanting mirror—saddened. The pair reminded her of her own youth and her own illusions, so that—memory abolishing the years between—she visualised herself twenty. If only, at Marian Moon’s age, she had known about the dog-fight! If only, when youth was on her side, experience had equipped her for the hypocritical tooth-and-claw of the struggle! Then, not even Thelma Sulgrave would have won greater triumphs. And “I’ve been a softie,” thought Margaret Binyon, “a sentimental softie. I’ve deserved all I’ve got.”

The call-boy came, knocking on the door. “Half an hour, please.” “Quarter of an hour, please.” Sounds of the overture carried faintly to the dressing-room. Miss Tyrers and Miss Moon wandered down, amateurishly early, towards the stage. Margaret, who was “on” in the prologue, followed slowly her parlour-maid’s garb seeming like a uniform of degradation. Passing Thelma’s door she caught a glimpse of the leading lady chatting casually—amid a hedge of flowers—to the producer.

Nervously Margaret made her way to the wings, and waited limply for the ordeal. At her side—ready to open the play with her—stood Hart.

Both, bad first-nighters, were too nervous even to speak with one another. Margaret, though, could hear the comedian cursing—under his breath—the scenery. “Stage is like an obstacle-race,” he kept on saying. “Too many chairs. Too many tables. Bar across the bottom of that French window. Mustn’t trip over it.” “Tum-tiddy-tum-tum-tum,” played the orchestra. “What’s my opening line?” thought Margaret.

Then Whyteleafe signalled them on the stage; the orchestra stopped playing; they heard the switches click as the house-lights were turned off; the merciless velvet rolled sideways, exposing them to the house—and Margaret, nerves on edge, heard her own voice, camouflaged to Cockney,

exclaim, "My! Mr. Parker, what are you doing in the drawing-room at this hour of the morning?"

"I came to look for my cigar-case," answered Mr. Parker.

"It's on the escritoire," retorted Margaret.

"Oh, so it is. Thanks." Mr. Parker, stubbing his toes on the bar of the French window, stumbled off the stage; Stephen Bannock entered left; the house gave him "a round"; Margaret's nerves steadied. "The prologue's going all right," she thought, as she made her first exit. "The prologue's going splendidly," she decided, re-entering. And then, quite suddenly, she was aware of Thelma.

Thelma, for whom they were all "working up an entrance," had descended from her dressing-room, and was eyeing them, superciliously, from the prompt corner. In a minute Thelma would show herself to the house. And the house would greet Thelma with a roar.

Margaret heard her own voice, "I'll see if Mrs. Manners is at home, sir"; made her second exit—and watched enviously as the leading lady, timing her entrance to the fraction of a second, tripped on stage and stood smiling her thanks to the applauding auditorium.

VII

The prologue neared its last minute. From the prompt corner, ready to ring down, Whyteleafe—his eyes on the book—listened to the dialogue. "Opposite prompt," ready to take the first call, stood Hart and Margaret, Janet Tyrers, and Marion Moon. The "house" made never a sound.

"I hate you," came Thelma's lifted tone. "I loathe you. My hol sol revolts—revolts at the thought of living in your house."

"Do as you like," answered Bannock's voice, quietly supercilious.

And Margaret thought, "I should move up stage on that. I should turn away from the audience." But Thelma Sulgrave stood her ground. Thelma Sulgrave, throwing her words straight at the house, spoke her last speech to its conclusion. Then, as Whyteleafe rang down the curtain, she turned and ran—ran away up stage from Bannock.

The accident happened so quickly that it seemed to Margaret as though Thelma's fall, the swish-to of the velvet curtains, Whyteleafe's panicked face, her own dash across stage, the semi-circle of painted

people all around her as she knelt, the impatient applause of a misunderstanding house, and Thelma's scream "Oh God—I've broken my leg—I've broken my leg," were one simultaneous occurrence. Automatically, she heard herself say, "Keep quiet, please, Thelma"; automatically she realised herself at nurse's work—the only trained person in an undisciplined mob; automatically she took command of the situation. Only after a doctor had been found, after Thelma had been carried off stage by Hart and Bannock, and after an ambulance had been telephoned did Margaret Binyon—watching the scene-shifters at their work—notice that Whyteleafe, dashing off panic-stricken to find Cyprian Todd, had given no order to stop the performance.

And a moment afterwards she found herself face-to-face with Cotton—Cotton in full evening-dress, his lips working, his brown eyes red with hysteria.

"You're the understudy, ain't you?" barked Cotton. "Then get upstairs. Get dressed. Go on. Go on with the play. I won't have the play stopped for any blood-stained actress in England. Where's Whyteleafe? Where's that fool, Whyteleafe?"

"Mr. Whyteleafe went off to find Mr. Todd," said Margaret, her brain abruptly and curiously awake to the one supreme fact that here—if only Todd backed Cotton's astounding decision to carry on with the performance—was her million-to-one chance of playing "Lucy Manners."

"To hell with Todd," rasped Cotton. "And to hell with Whyteleafe. I'm the producer, ain't I? What I says goes till the first night's over. You get upstairs. Get dressed. Tell Sulgrave's dresser I said you were to have her room. And for God's sake get a move on you—"

As Margaret raced for the star's dressing-room, she caught a glimpse of Thelma, white-faced and unconscious, being carried down the corridor to the waiting ambulance. But her thoughts were not with Thelma. Thelma was down—down and out. At last, at long last, she, the under-dog, held the key of the position.

Rapidly, to an astounded Mrs. Wilkins, she transmitted Cotton's order; rapidly, changing her clothes and altering her make-up, she ran over, not Lucy's part in the First Act—but the part which she herself must play if Todd backed Cotton. "He had no mercy on me," she thought, "I'll have none on him."

A knock, an anticipated knock, sounded on the door. Mrs. Wilkins, running to open, announced the stage-manager.

“Mr. Cotton told me I’d find you here, Miss Binyon,” stammered Whyteleafe. “Mr. Todd has decided that the play must go on. Are you sure you know the part? Can you be on in ten minutes?”

Margaret’s reply hit the stage-manager full between the eyes. “I didn’t contract to understudy,” she said, quietly. “If Mr. Todd wants me to play Lucy Manners, he’d better come and see me himself.”

“You—you’re joking, aren’t you, Miss Binyon?”

“No.” The actress’s voice stung. “I’m very far from joking. If you can find Mr. Todd, you’d better send him up here at once.”

Whyteleafe fled. Hastily Margaret continued her dressing. Hastily, in the two minutes which elapsed before Todd’s appearance, she decided to risk—everything.

“You wanted to see me, Miss Binyon?” Todd swung in, without knocking. “Why?”

“Because,”—there was no time for finesse with the house waiting like an impatient terrier for its bone—“because, before I go on, I want a contract to play ‘Lucy Manners’ until Miss Sulgrave is well enough to come back.”

“Miss Sulgrave”—Todd lied instinctively—“has only sprained her ankle. She’ll be back in a week.”

“She hasn’t. She’s broken her fibia. Do I get my contract or not?”

Todd’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve got a contract. A verbal contract. I’m paying you eight pounds a week to understudy Miss Sulgrave.”

“You’re not. You’re paying me five—to play the parlourmaid.” Margaret motioned her dresser from the room. “If I’m to play ‘Lucy Manners’ I want a fresh contract—and forty pounds a week.”

“Forty pounds a week!”

“Just half Thelma’s salary.” Margaret, her eyes hard as steel, glanced around the beflowered dressing-room. “There’s a pen and some note-paper on the writing-table, Mr. Todd.”

“Beginners for Act One,” sounded the call-boy’s voice outside.

“And, Mr. Todd,” went on the actress, “there’s one other condition I’ve got to make. Before you put up the curtain somebody—either yourself or Mr. Cotton—will have to tell the audience——”

“You needn’t trouble to make any more conditions, Miss Binyon,” snarled Todd. “I’m not going to be blackmailed like this. I’d rather ring down and give the audience back their money.” And he made, ostentatiously, for the door.

Watching him, Margaret’s heart sank. Almost, the bluff beat her. She wanted to shout at the man, “No, no. Don’t; I’ll go on. I’ll go on.” She remembered, frantically, how she had always longed to play the part, its value to her career, her need of the five pounds a week which would cease if Todd carried out his threat the danger Todd could be to her in the future. Then she remembered the—the circumstance. And on that her nerve came back.

“Good night, Mr. Todd,” she said, genially; and Todd, rage in his every feature, turned from the door.

“Thirty pounds. I won’t give you a penny more,” he flung at her, his shoulders hunched over the writing-table.

“Forty,” retorted Margaret, “*and* an announcement to the audience *before* the curtain goes up.”

The signed paper—she knew better than to leave it in the dressing-room—burned Margaret’s skin as she listened through the closed velvets, a dumfounded Hart at her elbow, to Cotton’s full-throated: “Ladies and gentlemen, I very much regret to have to inform you that Miss Sulgrave has had an accident. In order not to disappoint you, her understudy, Miss Margaret Binyon, will continue the performance.”

* * * * *

It was all over; and she, the under-dog, had won! In two hours and a-half, in one hundred and fifty magical minutes, the Miss Binyon of the sopped macintosh and the lodging-house had become Margaret Binyon, leading lady. The applause of an audience held from disappointed suspicion to tolerance, from tolerance to mild approbation, and from mild approbation to the maddest enthusiasm, still rang in her ears. She still heard the cries, “Margaret Binyon—bravo! Margaret Binyon”; still saw Cotton, gigantically grotesque in his silk-sleeved 1890 opera-cloak, apologising grandiloquently for the author’s absence in America; still visualised Cyprian Todd excusing himself—positively excusing himself to her—for “having made a bit of a fuss about that contract.”

“Thelma Sulgrave’s clothes aren’t *quite* right for *you*,” Cyprian Todd had said. “I’ll re-dress you next week. Where do you usually go for your dresses,

Miss Binyon?"

Margaret—in one of Thelma's kimonos, the grease paint already cold-creamed from her face and eyelids—could not help laughing, as she waited for Mrs. Wilkins to bring her own frock down from Number Seven dressing-room, at the memory of a fawning Cyprian. Realising—none better—the commercial effect of the night's surprise, the advertising value of her strange success, she knew that from henceforward not only Cyprian Todd, but every other parasite who battered on the theatre would, metaphorically speaking, lick her patent-leather shoes. Over-adulate and overpay the winner, insult and slave-drive the loser—that was the one and only rule of theatre-land.

And there Margaret's laughter ended. Her mind, reacting from overstrain, found no pleasure in her success. She felt all debased and degraded by the trickery she had been forced to employ. She saw herself as hardened out of semblance of womanhood—a wooden puppet grinning hypocritically across eternal footlights at an eternal mob. Her one-time jealousy of Thelma Sulgrave smirched her self-esteem as mud smirches a mirror. The hot-house scent of Thelma's flowers stank in her nostrils.

She thought, "I must have been glad—glad of Thelma's agony. What a beast I am." She said to herself, "All the same, I've had my success. My triumph. It was a triumph to create Lucy Manners at a moment's notice."

But at that her brain, remembering Hart's words in the tea-shop, appraised the triumph at its true value. "Lucy Manners," as a part, was actress-proof; not from her, but from the author emanated the success of it. *She* had contributed nothing but a little technique and a grease-painted countenance. *Her* triumph only put her on a par with Cyprian Todd, with Whyteleaf and his scene-shifters.

"I've brought your clothes, Miss," announced the dresser, entering suddenly, "and Miss Moon said these was yours, too."

"These"—Hart's red roses and Thelma's already faded posy—completed the mental *debacle* of Margaret Binyon. For the first time in many years she felt herself on the verge of tears. And the tears came—slowly, painfully—to her tired eyes. Through the bitter water of those tears she saw the girl of the illusions and the woman who, winning success, had lost the last of them.

"What you want, Miss, is a nice drop of whisky," confided Mrs. Wilkins. "I expect one of the gentlemen has got some."

The dresser slipped away, closing the white door gently behind her. Margaret, her blonde head bowed in her capable hands, wept on. "I must be

going home,” she thought, vaguely. “Home. Back to Bobbie. Bobbie will be asleep. I only did it because of him—because of him.”

So thinking, she lifted her head from her hands to see Hart’s imposing bulk framed in the doorway.

The comedy-man held a motoring-cap in one massive hand, a brimming whisky-and-soda in the other.

“Your dresser said you were rather tired—” he began.

“Did she?” stammered Margaret—a paler, more pathetic Margaret than Hart had ever known.

“Yes. And so you are. Anyone can see that. No wonder, too. My word, though, what a performance you gave. Now, be a good girl and drink this.”

He came across the lavishness of the star’s dressing-room, and gave the glass into her unresisting hands. Drinking, gratefully, she thought, “I was wrong. He doesn’t want to marry me. He’s only a pal, a real pal. I’m glad of that. Glad.”

And then, surprisingly, she felt the pal’s arms go round her; heard his voice close to her ear. “Margaret! My little Margaret! I love you. I worship you. I want you to be my wife!”

“Don’t. Don’t.” She was on her feet at the instant. “If you’re my friend, don’t ask me that.”

“Why not?” He drew away and his eyes widened, boyishly.

“I can’t tell you. I daren’t tell you. There’s a circumstance——”

“Circumstance?”

“Yes. A—a reason why I can’t marry you.”

“If there’s a reason,” he came close once more, and she saw the determination, the manhood in him, “I’ve got to know it.”

“Not to-night.”

“Yes. To-night.”

“But”—the room was spinning, spinning round Margaret like a squirrel-cage—“I don’t want to tell you. It’ll only hurt you. It’ll only hurt—both of us.”

“I’d rather know,” he said stubbornly.

For answer, Margaret Binyon drew a gold-set miniature from the bosom of her kimono; and, detaching it from the chain round her neck, gave it into Hart's outstretched hand.

"Is this the—the only reason why you won't marry me?" asked the actor, peering puzzled at the face in the miniature.

"Yes, dear." The actress's voice softened. "That's the—the circumstance. That's my Bobbie. He's barely two, and"—her voice broke—"he's only got me to look after him. You see, Bobbie's father is rather—rather a bad hat. I only found out after we'd been married a month that he—that he had another wife, a legal one, in Australia. He's there, living with her now——"

Followed a tense, unbearable silence, broken—incredibly broken—by Lulu Hart's Homeric laughter.

"In Australia, is he?" laughed Lulu Hart. "Thank God for that. I'd hate to start our married life by committing a murder." And he added, handing back the miniature. "We won't let the little beggar go on the stage, will we, darling? It's a dog's life, these days——"

"Still—even the stage has its compensations," murmured Thelma Sulgrave's understudy, who, collapsing between two vast arms, had regained quite a few of her illusions!

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 Understudy* by Gilbert Frankau]