

BETTER NOT KNOW

Life is so kind, never to let us know, The time of our descent down the long steep hill; Never to know when he falls, the last soft snow, Nor which bright bird will be the last to trill.

DIRTY WORK.

Lawrence Bates, the clear-cut cameo of his profile a beautiful thing to see even while he surrendered to such overmastering rage as this, towered above Jean Kellogg as she shrank imploringly back from him. "You liar!" he cried tensely. "You rotten liar!"

His fingers gripped her throat. He choked her, shook her, threw her from him so violently that she went crashing down upon the floor. As he left her and strode toward the door she sat up and pulled herself into a chair, trying her best to do it gracefully, but aware that this was next to impossible.

She fought to take their minds away from the grotesque fall. Somehow she succeeded. In the chair, her back to Bates, she got out her handkerchief. She could not see him, but she knew he was standing by the door. "You—you hurt me," she said. And he replied: "I wouldn't care if I had killed you."

He did not answer her. In silence she wept into her handkerchief. Her anger and resentment were tempered by triumph. Bates had almost ruined her part of the scene and she had saved it. But the triumph, in turn, was tempered by apprehension. If he did that again and again, she could hardly hope always to save it, and it was vitally important that at this second act curtain the audience should sympathize with both the husband and the wife.

While thus she quietly wept, a forlorn and tragic victim of misunderstanding and injustice, Bates had his chance, and took it, as always, admirably. He stood by the door, looking at her. His mobile, intelligent features, his long-lashed expressive eyes, even his broad shoulders and tapering hands registered to all that firmly intended never to return to her—but that he surely would; he could not do otherwise. Jean heard the door close behind him, and the house burst into applause. He had succeeded in getting them with another of his wonderful speechless exits.

have to be on at the next rise, you know, Miss Kellogg." "Did you see him throw me all over the stage in that scene?" she demanded. "It nearly killed my curtain."

Hampton looked as though he might be about to agree with her, but Bates said sharply: "If you interfere with my work, Hampton, you'll have to take the responsibility." "Now, now," the director said. "You are both nervous and wrought up. It is only the second night. Things will settle down in the next day or two. Don't quarrel."

"Do you mean," Jean protested, "that you're going to let him keep on doing it?" "Of course he is," Bates exclaimed, and Hampton said, placatingly: "Well, for the present. Later, we'll see, Miss Kellogg. It seemed to me you both got over very well, indeed. But we'll see."

"When?" "Oh, when things get a little more set—next week, perhaps. We're in for a run, you know. The speculators made a ten week's buy this morning as soon as they saw the good press. I'll look at the scene from out front some night."

Bates was smiling ironically as Jean went to her dressing room. And she knew as well as he did that Hampton would do nothing. Hampton was a good director, but it was his first job with the Aarons management. Bates had been a popular leading man in New York for five years, and Jean had no particular Broadway public; this was her first big part.

Her mind raced as she made her change. What was it all about? Why should Lawrence Bates want to ruin her in the play? It didn't hurt his part in the slightest to have hers played well. He hadn't done it—yet. She had succeeded in pulling herself out of the situation tonight; perhaps she could continue to do so indefinitely. If she couldn't—if she failed to hold the audience in that big scene at the close of the second act—if the audience once laughed at her—? Her two week's notice; smaller parts again; probably never another chance at a lead in New York. And she had worked so hard to climb. Her first great opportunity—

The assistant stage manager tapped on her door. "Third act!" he called. She snatched one final glance into the mirror and hurried to the stage. The curtain rose. She forced herself to forget the second act and concentrate on this one. There was no place in it where Bates could damage her work without also injuring his own. The act went magnificently. Together, after their powerful reconciliation scene upon which the final curtain fell with her in his arms, they took several calls.

"Except play this part opposite him," replied Mrs. Shore. "With Paula Joy at liberty." Jean stopped the progress of her toilet. "Oh, is that it?" she said. "I hadn't heard. Is she—?" "I don't know. Talk is they're engaged. At any rate, Wayward Wives, with Paula Joy in the lead, is closing tonight. Joy has no engagement, she has played with this management, and if there should be a vacancy in the woman lead of this piece, she would stand a good chance of getting it."

"I see. And he is in love with her." "He's never in love with anybody but Bates," the old actress snapped. "The most reasonable explanation of it is that she is clever at giving him cues that allow him to mention how good he is. I can worry along indefinitely without having her in this company. I played with her two seasons ago in 'Trial Divorce,' and she stepped on my best line for seventy-one nights and twenty-four matinees. But if Bates can make you flop in that second act—it's bad enough to have him in this cast without having her, too. I am depending upon you to see to it."

Jean smiled wryly. "Be assured I shall if I can," she promised, "but if they ever laugh when he tips me over in that second-act climax, I'm afraid I'll be sunk. If Hampton would interfere—" "He won't. You'll have to attend to it yourself." "I wish you could tell me how." Mrs. Shore considered this, and then asked: "Have you ever done much dirty work?" "Do you mean plays that are—?" "Great heavens! Is every tradition of the stage to be lost to this generation?" cried the veteran. "I thought every walk-on knew what dirty work means. Stepping on good lines—killing laughs—upstaging the other woman—"

"I know. I just never happened to hear it called that," Jean said. "Mean tricks of the trade." "Devices of the profession," Mrs. Shore corrected her. "One shouldn't have to do them, but the only way to beat a scene hog is to root deeper than he does." "In this particular case, how?" "I don't know. You have no chance to hit him back, have you? I have never seen that second-act climax, except at rehearsals, and I paid no attention to it then, not being in on it. But as I recall it, you have to take what he gives you."

"Yes," Jean agreed. "Too bad. If you didn't, perhaps—" Mrs. Shore chuckled slightly. "I was thinking of a most interesting experience I had at the New Wallack's in 1883. My husband was on the road that season with Mr. Booth—doing Horatio, Cassio and Edmund. Mr. Booth often said that Adrian's Horatio—but I mustn't digress. We were playing a melodrama called 'Out of the Night.' I had the lead, of course. And the villain was a man named Leayroyd—he drank himself to death some thirty years ago, poor fellow! He had formed a dislike for me over a small matter of curtain call which I received and he pretended to think should have been his. And the feud got bigger, with one thing and another, and he set out to make me leave the company."

"We had a big scene together—just he and I—at the close of the fourth act. He struck me, and I retaliated by hitting him over the head with a pottery vase. There were two vases on the table and one of them—the one I used—was a rubber one, of course. And he got to using so much force in that scene that I literally had the mark of his hand on my back every night when that act was over."

"Unconsciously, Jean stroked her left wrist, still sore from the violence of her fall in the second act. "Perhaps I should have gone to Lester Wallack about it," Mrs. Shore went on, "but he had many other things on his mind, and actors were supposed to solve their own personal difficulties—and, after all, Leayroyd was making the scene convincing, and, with Wallack, the play was the thing. My dear, you should have seen his Charles Surface and Benedict back at the second Wallack's. With the exception of my husband—where was I?" "You didn't go to Mr. Wallack about it."

Bates. You've got to fix this with him yourself." "A fine chance!" "There's always a chance—when you're fighting somebody with less brains than you've got, especially if he's all swelled up with vanity. Bates would make terms with you in a minute if you could kill some big scene of his. Oh, without seeming to do it intentionally, of course. That time I smashed the vase over Leayroyd's head it was only because he had hurt me so much that I became confused. And he was more than ten years' experience already; but Mr. Wallack looked as though he believed it—there was an actor! What is Bates' best scene with you?"

"That one in the second act climax, after he has thrown me to the floor and I have crawled back into the chair. At his exit." "I forget the scene—if I ever noticed it. Is it the way he does an exit speech?" "No. It is all business. Hesitation. Determination never to return. Yet a pull that is sure to bring him back—which I with my back to him, don't see; if I did, I would never go to the phone and call Richmond. He has got a big hand every performance on that exit."

Mrs. Shore's myriad wrinkles deepened with her thought. "And what do you do," she asked after a moment, while he has that exit business?" "Cry." "How? Show me just how you do it, please." Jean produced her handkerchief and showed her. The old lady emitted a cry of delight that was almost a whoop. "Oh, lovely!" she exclaimed. "I have it, my dear. Give me that handkerchief. You never stop weeping until he has left the stage, do you? Never mind how long he might take to do it, or how much he might change the timing of his business."

"No, I don't move till he slams the door." Jean looked-listened—laughed. Mrs. Shore returned the handkerchief and came a trifle creakily to her feet. "I'll be getting back to my room," she said. "You have to get your dinner, and I must have a nap. If I don't, I might drop off to sleep during that long scene in the first act where I have nothing to do but twiddle my thumbs—thanks to Bates getting Hampton to cut my lines. Good luck to you. I propose, if possible, to be in the wings to see the denouement of this plot myself."

She paused before she opened the dressing-room door and delivered an exit speech. "He calls me 'Miss Shaw,'" she exclaimed. "And better actors than he is have carried spears for me." Bates crossed to the door at the end of the second act that night and stood there, doing nothing to take the eyes of the audience from Jean, who was desperately wrestling with her twisted skirt. Disappointed he realized that again she had extricated herself from the situation; she was in the chair, her handkerchief in her hand, and they had not laughed.

He and she had their three lines of dialogue. He made his exit. The door slammed behind him. He took one step, stopped, listened in incredulous and shocked amazement. Not one handclap came from the audience. He blinked, seeking to recall every detail of business just past. What had he failed to do that he ought to have done? Nothing. He felt certain of that. Not for one second had his mind been off the technique of that scene. There could be only one explanation. Old Mrs. Shore was standing a few feet away, in her second-act dress, having postponed going to her dressing room until the curtain. Bates did not appreciate that this was unusual; he had never noticed whether or not she was an offstage observer of this climax, or cared. He spoke to her now because she was the only person at hand.

"Rotten audience tonight," he said. "No intelligence." "You never can tell," the old lady replied. It did not, could not, occur to Bates that she possibly might mean anything except that there was no predicting the mental quality of audiences. "Must be a houseful of yaps," he said disgustedly. "Mind's on the price of butter and eggs. And now no call unless Hampton forces it." Jean's voice, on stage, was speaking into the phone, and quick upon the fall of the curtain came the loud rattle of the audience's appreciation of the act, as enthusiastic as during any of the other three performances. Bates returned through the door to share the call with her and the two more that followed. As Jean came off, preceding him, Mrs. Shore nodded to her and said: "Nice work, child."

where you were standing. What did she do?" "Nothing but the usual business." "Yes, she did. She must have. I've made that exit two nights now without getting a hand." "I noticed that," Hampton remarked. "Well, can it be my fault?" "You haven't got them." "Have I done anything different from the way I did it the first three performances when I did get them?" "I don't know; can't see you make that exit on this side from where I'm standing at the curtain. I'll get out into the house some night—" "You don't need to get out into the house any night, Hampton, to know that I'm doing my work right," Bates broke in. "I don't have to be told how to make exits, and when I make an exit like that and when I get a big hand or, somebody has killed it. And there isn't anybody on stage but Kellogg." He scowled suspiciously. "If I thought you and she had put up any job on me—" "Now, Mr. Bates," the director remonstrated. "Don't get nervous and excited. If there's anything being done that's wrong, of course I'll stop it. I'll wait tomorrow night—but I was looking tonight, and I didn't see anything."

"Your eyes are getting old," Bates told him brutally, and turned away. And the eyes with which the director followed him were unquestionably old—and, as unquestionably, resentful. In a quiet corner at the Lambs, at mid-night, Lawrence Bates recounted his trouble to Jerome Wilstead, an actor well-nigh as decorative as Bates himself, who for the moment was at liberty. Between them there existed a friendship as warm as could be possible between any two Broadway leading men of similar type. "And there you are," Bates concluded. "Every eye in the house swings over to her at exactly the minute I start that exit business—I know it. She does something to get them, and that old fool Hampton can't see it. He can't really be in on it, of course. It isn't likely he could be a party to doing anything to me. If I fall down, where's his show?"

"Right," agreed Wilstead. "It's the woman, no doubt. What a woman will do to kill a man's artistic work is unbelievable. Last season, when I was playing in 'Frald Lady' opposite Lola Trask, I had a wonderful scene. It was in the last act; quite the most outstanding thing in the piece. Trask—a nice little woman, but temperamental—became quite jealous. Oh, naturally enough, I suppose; it really must have been hard for her, the way I held them in that scene every night. So on the night I am speaking of—" "I know, old man. You told me at the time. Whatever Kellogg is doing, it is while she is in that chair, facing down, right. I want you to set in the front row, tomorrow night, away over on that side—" "Thank you, I'll be glad to. I might bring Home Atkinson, the playwright. He is crazy to get me for a new play he is doing—" "Forgive me, but I'm afraid I can't offer you but one seat. I'll have to buy it, you know—at speculators' prices."

"Why, of course, if you have to do that," Wilstead sympathetically agreed. "It didn't occur to me. I am always able to get paper for my friends, even with a sellout." "I, too, naturally," replied Bates. "But even I couldn't get a special, definite seat, and you'll have to be in the front row, on that side of the stage. That means the ticket broker will have to find it or pretend to have to have a certain location! Come on back right after that scene; I'll tell the doorman to send you to my room. We'll have plenty of time to talk. I'm not on in the third act for nearly ten minutes."

"I might wait until the final curtain, as long as I'm there, I'd probably like to see the opening of the last act." "There's little of any consequence in it, I assure you," Bates said. "Still, if you want to, you can hurry out front again, but I'd like to have you come on back at once, while it's fresh in your mind. I want to know. And don't take your eyes off her for a moment. Regardless of how artistic my business may be at the other side of the stage, watch her."

"Just as everybody else in the house does, eh?" said Wilstead. "You may depend upon me, old fellow. It reminds me of an incident when I was playing 'Discretion.' You didn't see me in that, as I recall it, but you know the hit I made. I had a big scene in the third act—Jerome Wilstead, at a cost of Bates of eight dollars—sat on Tuesday night in row AA, the third seat from the left-center aisle. He remained there not only until the curtain had descended upon the last of the calls that followed the second act, but until the house lights were up and most of the rush to the lobby was over. Then he went up the aisle very slowly and his progress through the lobby and the sidewalk crowd was also leisurely. He hastened, however, when he came to the alley leading to the stage door, and he so accelerated the conversation in Bates' dressing room that he was able to return and pass down the length of the aisle while still there was ample light. But the talk between him and Bates, brief and concise as he made it, was sufficient. The leading man in 'Mistaken Marriage' was no longer mystified as to what was restraining audiences from giving him his meed of exit applause."

The third act moved on to its end of passionate reconciliation and he and Jean made their final bows. Then, as the director signaled for the footlights to go off, the smile which throughout the curtain calls had accentuated Bates' beauty left his face quite as though it were controlled by the same electric switch. "Hampton!" he called sharply. And no less sharply said to Jean: "Wait

a minute, Miss Kellogg. You need to hear this." Jean's eyebrows lifted politely, and she waited. "This woman is killing my second act: exit by blowing her nose," Bates snapped at Hampton. "I want you to stop it." "Blowing—oh, no," the director said. "You could hear it." "Some of them can hear it—over on that side, down front. But the point is that the whole house sees it. She has a handkerchief to her face, and just one second before I begin my exit business she bunches her fingers and twitches the end of her nose with it. And every eye stays on her till she stops. And she doesn't stop. She doesn't stop until the door closes and I am gone. She does it two or three different ways."

"I'm sure I don't see what all the fuss is about," Jean told the director. "I merely cry. The business calls for it." "You blow your nose. And twit it. I had you watched," exclaimed the leading man. "Had her watched—what do you mean?" Jean asked innocently. "Surely the business of that scene is no secret; the whole house sees me do it. And why shouldn't I blow my nose—softly—and twit it? A woman always does that when she cries."

"Not when I'm making an exit she doesn't." "Oh, but Mr. Bates!" she protested. "Can't help being realistic? You couldn't ask it. Mr. Hampton couldn't. And even if you did, m, art—" "Art, hell!" cried Bates. "Listen Hampton! She's stealing my scene—every night. Are you going to stand for that, or must I go to Aarons?" "But the public expects our best, Jean murmured. "Always. We can't give them any less."

"It is Miss Kellogg's interpretation, and a very mutual one, Hampton said. "I don't believe Mr. Aarons would interfere—not with this calls she is getting every night or that scene. You can see him about it if you want to, of course, although naturally I'd rather you didn't." He explained: "I'd be afraid, if I called his attention to the fact that your work isn't going over at the spot, he might wonder why I am still letting you take all those calls with her." Bates' gasping ejaculation may have been intended as a prayer. "I hate to do it, Mr. Bates, if you don't like it," Jean said. "Really, do. But you'll get used to it—th same as I am getting used to the fall."

Hampton's old eyes were quite expressionless as he said mildly: "I hope this is going to be a harmonious company. And while I can see my way clear to stopping any thing in that scene that is good acting, it does seem to me the scene a whole went just as well the first night as it has been going since—without either that awkward fall or the new weeping business. Excuse me—I have to catch Props before he locks up."

The smile with which Jean walked off to Bates to speak, as the director bustled away, was in no wise triumphant, but artless—the smile with which she had conquered audiences when her parts had been those of naive ingenues. And Bates after swallowing twice, became that charming actor and achieved a most winning manner of friendly consideration. "I certainly have no desire to hum your scene, Miss Kellogg; you know that," he said. "I'll tell you what, let's do it. It really isn't a new idea I've had in my mind ever since that little talk we had the other night, but I've been terribly busy new photographs and other demands. Suppose we have a little rehearsal tomorrow and work out a proper scene that what I do will look proper rough and yet leave you in a good position for the remainder of the scene."

"That's a good idea," Jean agreed. "Shall we say 12 o'clock, here?" "If that is most convenient for you," Bates said. He seemed to wonder if perhaps he had not conceded too much, too quickly. "Of course," he added, "there might be some performance when I became carried away by my emotions." "Of course," said Jean amiably. "Every artist has moments like that. And I know, when you do, that you will understand it—and not feel badly at all—if I, too, get carried away by emotion and sniffle." Behind them sounded a most loud like laugh—the sort of laugh that would be described in the script of society dowager's part as "slight amused"—and Bates turned to go serve that old Mrs. Shore, dress for the street, was standing not far away. He wondered how much she could have heard. "At noon tomorrow, then," he said to Jean, and strode toward her dressing room. As he passed her Mrs. Shore said to him in her sweetest grandmotherly voice: "Good night, Mr. Butts." Copyright, 1931, by J. Frank Dav

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