

The Best Performance BY FLORENCE WARDEN

(Copyright, 1936.)

It was an all-night journey, and a very cold one. Perhaps the state of the thermometer would not have mattered so much if the "Great London Success" with which the company were traveling had made a stronger impression upon the audiences of the provincial towns to which it had been presented.

They were going north, and there was a "wait" of four hours in one of the finest of the Lancashire manufacturing towns. The company's carriage had been detached from the train and shunted on to a siding to wait for the early morning train which was to take it on to Paisley.

The men of the company had all got out as soon as the train drew up to the platform, and had gone off into the town in search of some establishment, no matter how lowly, which would open its doors to them and give them refreshment.

The ladies, five in number, remained in their compartment, huddled up in their warmest cloaks, trying to get a little sleep. But it would not do; it was too cold. The "old woman," who was really old, rubbed her eyes miserably.

"They've all got off, I suppose!" she grumbled. "And of course they never think of us."

A bright young girl, from whose cheeks not even an all-night journey could take the roses, sprang to her feet and let down the nearest window.

"They shall think of us, though!" cried she, as she thrust her head and shoulders out of the window. "Come and let us out! Come and let us out, some of you, any of you!" cried she, imperiously. And the next moment, catching sight of the dimly-lighted platform of a figure she knew, she cried: "Mr. Ardener! Mr. Ardener! Come and have pity on us. We are

locked in like wild beasts; and I assure you we are getting very nearly as savage. We've been kept too long without food, you see."

The person addressed stepped nimbly down from the platform, and plied his way in the dark across the tracks to the siding.

A tall, well-made young man, with a kindly, open face, Cyril Ardener looked what he was, a really nice fellow, a favorite with his own sex and with the other. As the girl above him looked down into his face, it was easy to see that she was one of those upon whom the "juvenile lead" had made a deep impression.

"You had much better stay where you are," said he, persuasively. "The other fellows have gone wandering about in search of drinks. And as they are making a great noise and disturbing everybody, without succeeding in their quest, I should advise you to give them a wide berth for the present."

"Never mind. I'm coming out," said Miss Fairbrother, with the obstinacy of the spoilt beauty. "Open the door, please."

"You'll have nobody to talk to," persisted Cyril, as he took out his key. "Not even you?"

"Not even me. I'm going off to try and keep others out of mischief."

The door was opened by this time, and she was preparing to descend. She graciously allowed Cyril to assist her, and rewarded him with another smile.

"Come along," said she, rather impatiently. For Cyril was lingering to cast a glance inside the carriage before he shut the door. As his eyes rested upon a pale, worn, refined face that of the leading juvenile lady, a change came over Cyril's face.

"I wish I could get you a cup of hot coffee, Miss Wells," he said.

But before she could thank him the impatient Lilian had pulled him by force away from the door, crying out in pretended terror that she heard a train coming. The face of Constance Wells flushed slightly as she settled herself again in her corner.

It was about an hour after this when they heard steps on the line again, and somebody mounted up and looked in. Through the steam on the glass the face of a man could be dimly seen. He tapped softly at the window in Miss Wells' corner.

A deeper flush came into her white cheeks as she came face to face with Cyril Ardener.

"Won't you ladies come out?" he said. "I've found a fire, a real fire."

But they refused, preferring the ills they had to suffer to trudging over the rails in the keen outside air. Miss Wells, however, had not spoken.

"You will come, won't you, Constance?" said he, in a lower voice.

A shiver ran through her, not caused by the cold. It seemed a long time since Cyril had called her by her Christian name.

She hesitated and then said: "Yes." Cyril helped her out, and led her across the lines back to the platform. Then she asked suddenly:

"Where's Miss Fairbrother?"

"She's gone off with Glynn," said Cyril, smiling. "After quarreling with me."

"Ah!" said Constance. Cyril could detect jealousy, pique, pride in the simple utterance. They walked along the platform in silence to the office of the station master, where a bright fire was blazing.

With a cry of delight Constance went down on her knees before it, and spread out her stiff fingers in the welcome warmth. Cyril stood near, looking down at her delicate, worn face, in which the blue eyes looked preternaturally large. After a long silence he said suddenly:

"You think I asked you to come out because I had quarreled with that little flirt? You were wrong."

Constance flushed slightly, but did not glance up.

"I asked you because the little goose let out something which was the last thing she should have let me know it. She wanted me to forget you. You have been fretting, it seems."

Brought to task so abruptly, Constance could not keep the tears out of her eyes.

"No," she said, rather feebly. "Oh! but you have. Now tell me, is it true that you are not so hard on your pretend to be? Is it true, for instance, and he came nearer to her, "that you are sorry you snubbed me so unmercifully that day—you know when?"

There was a pause. Constance was much agitated. But she gathered her forces together, and answered with some spirit:

"No. It is not true. I am not sorry."

But there was a tremor in her gentle voice, a tenderness in her eyes, which belied her words.

"I don't believe you," said Cyril, as he knelt down on the floor beside her. "I mean I don't believe your words. I believe your eyes. And I can read in them that you do care; that you have been unhappy, lonely, since you quarreled with me."

Then she gave way, and in a piteous little sob betrayed the feeling she had been trying to hide. He stole one of her white hands, which not even the frost had succeeded in making red and ugly, and held it tenderly in his own. She cried in silence for a few minutes, and then turned upon him fiercely:

"Why do you torment me?" she asked, with something like terror in her voice. "Because I love you, Connie; because I know you have had a hard life, which is not growing any easier, and because I want to give you some ease, some rest, some happiness, darling."

"But you can't. You know you can't. Oh, Cyril, don't begin it all over again!"

But he had both hands now. He was holding them in a firm grip, looking into her face, with an expression of longing tenderness which thrilled her, warmed her in spite of herself.

"My darling, couldn't you trust me? Don't you think I would make you happy as long as you live?"

He could see in her eyes the struggle which was going on between her feelings and her instincts of duty and honor.

"Don't you think I would make you a kind husband, Constance?"

With a sudden impulse she snatched her hands away.

"Ah, if you could! If you only could!" she said, piteously. "But you know you

can't, you can't, while my husband is alive!"

Cyril moved impatiently. "Now isn't that nonsense, child?" said he with an air of indulgent tolerance. "Your husband treated you disgracefully; as badly as a man could treat a woman. He deserted you for another woman five years ago. Since he went to America three years ago, you haven't heard whether he is alive or dead, and have the strongest reason for thinking he is dead. And yet you must bring this hideous memory—he is nothing more to you—to stand in the way of your own happiness. For you would be happy with me. Don't you know it? Come now, tell me!"

"Yes, I know it; I am sure of it," whispered she. "And yet—"

"Well, and yet what?"

"I can't do it, I can't, I can't."

"Give me only a reason, and I'll respect it."

Her head dropped.

"Though I never really cared for my husband and do care a great deal for you, still, I can't pretend to be your wife while he is alive. I don't say I'm wise; I don't even say I'm right. But that's how I feel, and—there's the end of it."

She sprang to her feet and drew her cape round her shoulders again. She would go back to her carriage, she said. But he coaxed her. And because she loved him, because it was a delight to her to be with him once more, even if their interview was as full of pain as of pleasure, she stayed.

At last, though she would not yield to his entreaties, she gave a half-consent to his proposal that she should take lodgings for the ensuing week in the house where he was going to stay. This seemed a very good suggestion, as the town to which they were going was notorious for the badness of its lodgings, and the poor Scotch inn, where Cyril and the manager were going, offered a prospect of comparative luxury.

But Constance, when she again sat back in her corner of the railway carriage, found herself dwelling with so much eagerness on the pleasure she would have in being for a week constantly in the society of the man she loved, that she recognized with fear that the joy was in fact a temptation. When, therefore, Cyril came to the door of the compartment at their journey's end, he found that her mood and her manner had changed.

"Come," said he, gently, as he took her bag and offered her his hand. "We shall have to walk, but it isn't far to the hotel."

She looked steadily before her, with a white face.

"Thank you. But I have changed my mind. I am going to stay with Miss Browning."

And she walked quickly away without giving him time for protest or reply.

There was no reward of virtue for poor Constance. All that week Cyril devoted himself to Miss Fairbrother; and Constance, although she managed to hide the misery she felt, could not stifle it. She felt that she loved this man so deeply that her powers of resistance were growing unequal to the strain. After all, was there not truth in what he urged, that she owed no duty to the man who had so neglected her? This nominal husband that must in deed be dead. For three years she had heard nothing of him. Was she not free, in law as well as morally, to contract a fresh marriage?

So she tortured herself, and meanwhile held aloof as much as possible from all intercourse with Cyril except on the stage. But the parts they played were those of lovers; and the harassed woman felt that they betrayed their feelings in every word, in every look, that they were forced to exchange in the business of the stage.

At the end of the week, as she left the theater after her night's work, the hall-keeper told her that there was a man outside waiting for her.

"He wanted to come in and wait here, miss; but he was too drunk to stand, and I wouldn't let him in. There he is by the doorway. If you go the other way you'll miss him."

But Constance was looking at the human wreck the man pointed out with wide eyes full of fear. She knew him, changed though he was.

He was in rags, dirty, haggard; an appalling spectacle. She answered the hall-keeper by a gesture rather than by words and made a step in the direction of the doorway within the shelter of which her husband was standing.

He staggered forward and clutched her arm. As she stopped Cyril Ardener came out by the stage door on his way home. He uttered an exclamation of disgust and darted forward to send the wretch about his business. With one quick movement he released her, and supporting her trembling figure in his arms, said, quickly:

"My poor darling! Don't be frightened. I'll see you home."

The other man uttered a hoarse sound meant for a laugh. He was slinking away without a word, when Constance recovered herself.

"Let me go. Let me go, Cyril," she whispered. "It is—my husband."

Cyril was so much shocked that he was speechless. Before he could recover from his disgust and amazement Miss Fairbrother, pretty, bright, brimming over, as usual, with provocative coquetry, ran out and stopped at the strange group. She had caught Constance's words, and her face was a picture of amusement, horror and malicious satisfaction by turns.

Constance gave Cyril one eloquent look, full of pathetic sadness, of rigid determination. Then she glanced at the young girl, who seemed unable to pass the group.

"Take her home," she said, in a low voice.

And she turned to her husband.

"Tom," she said, "are you coming home with me?"

"Yes, if you'll have me," he answered in a hoarse voice.

He was less grateful than sullen, spiritless. Perhaps he was hardly sober; but his tottering footsteps were the result of illness rather than of intoxication. She led him to her lodgings, got him some clothes, gave him food, and placed him in a chair by the fire.

In all that she did there was no pretense of welcome or affection; but she was kind, thoughtful, attentive, gentle, as she would have been to a stranger.

For the truth was that there was nothing in Tom Anderson to rouse tender feelings in the woman who had found him out. He took her attentions in a hang-dog fashion, with some little shame, perhaps, but with still more irritation. When he had eaten his supper and was provided with a cigarette he began to assume the airs of lofty indignation at the words he had overheard Cyril address to her.

"I don't know whether that's the way you have been allowing every young jackanapes you met to speak to you while I have been away!" grumbled he. "My poor darling, indeed!"

But, much to his amazement, Constance burst out laughing.

She had been so gentle that he was prepared to find her humble also, and of it.

The Barber's Dream.

The shop was dull; 'twas a sultry day, And not a customer came that way, And the barber's eyelids softly closed, And a vision came as he gently dozed, Of a man who wanted a shave, shampoo, And hair-cut—used hair-tonic, too— A wonderful man who wanted a drop Out of every bottle in the shop. A man who wanted all the news, And made the barber express his views On countless topics of widest range, And last, not least, didn't want his change. —Life.

Caught Napping.

"Baptiste!"

"Monsieur?"

"You are getting careless, my boy."

"O! monsieur!"

"You don't brush my clothes now."

"I assure you—"

"I left a half-franc piece in my waistcoat pocket yesterday—and it is there yet."—La Petit Parisien.

She Bit Her Lips.

Mother (suspiciously)—What makes your lips so red? Has that young man—

Sweet Girl—No, he hasn't. If my lips are red, it's because I've been biting them. I was mad.

"Mad because he tried to kiss you?"

"No. Because he didn't."—N. Y. Weekly.

Not a Fighter.

"How did your great unknown pan out?" asked the sport.

"We had to drop him," replied the trainer.

"What's the trouble?"

"At almost the last minute he became incapacitated for work."

"How?"

"He lost his voice."—Chicago Post.

A Remarkable Man.

Deacon Elderby—I must say that I can't see anything remarkable about this new minister.

Deacon Podberry—Dear me, brother! Don't you know he has been preaching for ten years and has never tried to answer Bob Ingersoll?—Indianapolis Journal.

Wants His Money's Worth.

"Come around next week Saturday, Hawkins. My wife and I are going to celebrate our silver wedding."

"Silver wedding? Why you haven't been married more than 12 years."

"I know it; but silver has depreciated. It's only worth 12 where it used to be 25."—Life.

Reason in All Things.

"I want to know why, Mrs. McCorkle, you give me hash for breakfast this morning, when you know that yesterday at breakfast I did not touch it?"

"That's just why. When you have eaten that, I shall provide something else."—Harper's Bazar.

Interested Him.

Perry Patetic—Mister, kin you give me a dime?

Wallace—None of my good money goes for whisky, my friend.

"I don't? How do you work it?"—Cincinnati Enquirer.

An Appreciative Soul.

He plinned up his overcoat— He sighed when he saw a lady. A high chrysanthemum and said: "That's what I call colour!" —Chicago Tribune.

FEMINE LOGIC.

He—Yes; I consider it dangerous to travel in the car that's next to the engine; people there are always killed when there is a collision.

Nervous Party—Then why do they put it on, if it is so dangerous?—St. Paul's.

A Heartless Parent.

Miss Bullion—Papa says we can't be married until you are able to support me.

Adorer—Great Scott! Does he want his only daughter to die an old maid?—N. Y. Weekly.

Tried and Found Wanting.

Jack Hardup—Lend me a dollar, will you? I haven't anything but a large bill in my pocket.

Amicus (to whom Jack has often applied before)—Whose is it, your tailor's?—Bay City Chat.

Two Souls.

Bride—We must do our best not to let people know we are on our wedding trip.

Groom—Indeed we must, or we'll be charged four prices for everything.—N. Y. Weekly.

Bull's Eye.

Ethel—George is a wonderful shot. Maud—Indeed?

Ethel—No matter how dark it is, he never kisses you on the nose. — N. Y. World.

The Snapper Snapped.

Miss Antiquie—I don't see why young married people make such fools of themselves!

Old Goodfello—Maybe it's because they have the chance!—Truth.



"I MEAN I DON'T BELIEVE YOUR WORDS."

ready to allow him to get the upper hand again.

"You won't talk like that, will you, please?" she said, trying to repress her involuntary, bitter amusement. "You must be satisfied to know that I have behaved rightly, according to my own ideas, as you no doubt have, according to yours."

He glanced at her quickly, with a rising flush of indignation in his sullen face. But he was abashed, and had the sense to say nothing.

"I am not going to worry you with any moralizing, any questions," she went on, looking at the fire. "I would, of course, if I cared; but I don't. I will do what I can for you—take care of you till you are better able to go away. But—that's all."

"Then you are not going to make it up again?" whined he.

Constance looked at him quickly, and her eyes filled with tears. If there had been a spark of affection in his stone-hard heart, she would not have been hard to him. But love for another and love returned had made her clear-sighted.

"No more than that," she said, gently.

He kept his head bent for a little while, looking at the fire. Then he nodded philosophically. After all, he had outgrown any feeling for his wife long ago. In the meantime he might think himself sure of a roof and a crust as long as she was in an engagement.

"Well, as you like," said he, at last.

Over her face there passed a curious look. In the pause that followed her own words she had been woman enough to hope that he was going to coax, to entreat. And she was disappointed.

She rose quickly from her chair.

"I couldn't get another room in this house," said she. "So I've got one next door. But it's a poky little place, not what you would like; so you can have mine. I will have the one in the next house. Good night."

She waited one moment at the door, looking at him curiously. He glanced up.

"Thank you. Good night," said he.

In another moment she was outside the house. On the opposite side of the road a man was standing. He crossed quickly over to her.

"Constance, I want to see you."

"Cyril!"

"Oh, my poor child, what an experience for you! What are you going to do?"

Then he stopped, looking at her in amazement.

"Why, I don't understand. You look happier than I have seen you for ever so long. Is it possible you care for—for him?"

Constance shook her head, smiling rather sadly.

"I wish it were possible," she said. "I don't care for him. I care for you. And yet, now that he has come back, I am happier than I was before. I am thankful Heaven that he did come—in time. I was so afraid."

But Cyril looked impatient, miserable.

"You have sacrificed your life!" said he, passionately.

"And saved my—what is it?—pride? Well, I am satisfied, Cyril; a man can never understand a woman; I don't understand myself. But I am happier to-night knowing that I am out of danger, that there is to be no more struggling and no more questioning, than I was before."

"He will be a burden to you as long as you live."

"I can't help that."

"Constance, this is quixotism."

"Well, I can't help that either. Good-night."

And she disappeared into the house.

When Tom Anderson died, six months later, Cyril Ardener was already the husband of Lillian Fairbrother. But Constance was not unhappy, except in the fear that the little coquette would make an indifferent wife.

She had been true to her best self; she had gained a victory which had made her strong. And to the end of her life she will congratulate herself upon her very best performance.

THE END.

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RAILROAD TIMETABLES

THE DELAWARE, SUSQUEHANNA AND SCHUYLER RAILROAD.

Time table in effect December 15, 1895.

Trains leave Drifton for Jeddo, Eckley, Hazle Brook, Stockton, Beaver Meadow Road, Roman and Hazelton Junction at 2:30, 6:00, 4:15 a. m., daily except Sunday; and 7:05 a. m., 2:35 p. m., Sunday.

Trains leave Drifton for Harwood, Cranberry, Tomhicken and Deringer at 5:00 a. m., p. m., daily except Sunday; and 7:05 a. m., 4:25 p. m., Sunday.

Trains leave Drifton for Onedia Junction, Harwood Road, Humboldt Road, Onedia and Drifton at 6:00 a. m., 4:15 p. m., daily except Sunday; and 7:05 a. m., 2:35 p. m., Sunday.

Trains leave Hazelton Junction for Harwood, Onedia and Drifton at 2:35, 5:40 p. m., daily except Sunday; and 8:00 a. m., 4:25 p. m., Sunday.

Trains leave Deringer for Tomhicken, Cranberry, Harwood, Hazelton Junction, Roman, Beaver Meadow Road, Stockton, Hazle Brook, Eckley, Jeddo and Drifton at 2:35, 5:40 p. m., daily except Sunday; and 8:00 a. m., 4:25 p. m., Sunday.

Trains leave Shepton for Beaver Meadow Road, Stockton, Hazle Brook, Eckley, Jeddo and Drifton at 2:35 p. m., daily except Sunday; and 8:00 a. m., 4:25 p. m., Sunday.

Trains leave Hazelton Junction for Beaver Meadow Road, Stockton, Harwood, Hazelton, Cranberry, Jeddo and Drifton at 3:00, 5:40 p. m., daily except Sunday; and 10:05 a.