

An Entr'acte

By FANNIE HEASLIP LEO

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With a final squeal from the first violin, that apparently tuned hard, the orchestra broke into a rippling overture and the asbestos curtain rose upon the painted one beneath.

An usher slammed down the seat beside Elizabeth and laid a programme on it; then he handed the seat check to its owner and slid away.

When you have broken your engagement with a man the night before, after a stormy discussion, it is not the happiest surprise in the world to find him seated beside you at the matinee, where you have gone to kill time and forget yourself.

Elizabeth bowed stiffly.

The man responded with equal frigidity.

She read her programme with absorbing interest. It was continuous vaudeville.

"I had no idea," said the man at last, "that you would be here or I!"

"My movements need not interfere with yours, Mr. Gayden," said Elizabeth icily.

She grew still more absorbed in her programme.

A dear old lady, with water waves and gold rimmed glasses, sat down with a thud in the seat on Elizabeth's left and turned a delighted smile on the girl.

"Well, I declare," she cried, "if it ain't Bessie McIntyre! Law me—the very last person on earth I was thinkin' of seein'. How are you, dear? And how's your mother? My son brought me up to town yesterday for a little visit. He got seats for the show here today, and he's comin' for me soon's his office hours are over. Ain't that Nick Gayden beside you? Howdy, Nick? You haven't changed a mite since you left Girtan. I'm real glad to see you."

She stretched a black gloved hand across Elizabeth, and Nick was forced to shake it smilingly.

"Well—well—well," said the old lady, "to think of my meetin' you all here. And we were just talkin' about you both last night. See her blush." She chuckled to Nick, as the quick crimson spread over Elizabeth's face.

"I hear you're to be married. Yes, indeed—we hear things in country, too, and, of course, since you all's families used to live in Girtan, everybody's interested in you. Well, well! I wish you all the happiness in the world, my dear—and you'll need it. Marriage is a mighty risky thing. And the weddin' is to be in the spring, I hear. That's good. June and brides and roses sorter belong together." She stopped for breath.

"We are not!"—began Elizabeth. She bit her lips and began again. "We have"—

"We have decided nothing definitely," Nick interrupted easily.

"That right," the old lady agreed; "hold on to your sweetheartin' as long as you can. It's mighty nice playin', and it only comes once in a lifetime." Elizabeth smiled in spite of herself.

"Some girls are engaged three or four times, Mrs. Barton," she suggested.

"Oh, jus' fly-up-the-creeks," said Mrs. Barton comfortably, "not nice, sincere, honest girls like you that know the right man and stick to him when they find him. I said the minute I heard of your engagement: 'Now, there's a proper match. Both of 'em young, both of 'em handsome, well off, good tempered, sensible and steady. Show me a better, Josiah,' says I."

"I ought to tell you, Mrs. Barton," said Elizabeth, with a rush. "You're mistaken. I'm not!"

The curtain went up noisily. "Shucks, honey," Mrs. Barton whispered, "you're too modest—now don't talk to me. I haven't seen a show in three years."

Elizabeth turned to Nick with a furious whisper.

"This can't go on."

"What are you going to do?" he asked stiffly.

"Tell her!"

"I won't."

"It's perfectly absurd."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"S-s-s-h!" Mrs. Barton cried in a focal whisper. "You'll have time enough to talk to each other all your lives. Keep quiet now."

After an unhappy half hour the white curtain of the vitograph rolled down, and Mrs. Barton turned to the girl again.

"I can't look at those things," she said; "hurts my eyes. Now tell me some more about yourselves—makes me feel right old to think of your two children goin' to get married. Law me! I remember the time you want no higher than my knee. You were the worst youngster in the county, Nick, and Bessie wan't far behind you. And, law, how you used to hate each other! Many's the time I've seen her pull that tow hair of yours."

"It isn't!"—began Elizabeth impetuously.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Barton laughed, "it always was tow, and it still is."

Nick grinned cheerfully.

"And then you'd take her by her little skinny wrists and hold her off," went on the old lady, "till she was jus' like a ragin' little cat, clawin' and furrin'!"

"She's still that way sometimes," said Nick, smilingly.

Elizabeth gasped furiously.

"Nick Gayden," she cried.

"Law me," said Mrs. Barton, "I knew it, honey, without his tellin' me! What's bred in the bone— But you all always made it up then, and you always will. I know that too."

"I hope so," Nick assured her earnestly.

Elizabeth looked straight in front of her.

"You were pointedly made for each other. Where you goin' on your honeymoon?"

"We had thought of California," said Nick quietly, while the girl beside him winced.

"That's right," Mrs. Barton agreed. "See your own country first and heathen lands afterward. And who're your bridesmaids to be, Bessie?"

Elizabeth hesitated miserably. Mrs. Barton's words were like salt in a new cut. They had discussed their plans so happily, and now that it was all over, she could not forget it. She waited, like a coward, for Nick, but he sat quite silent.

"Your sister, of course?" said Mrs. Barton.

"Oh, it's all"—Elizabeth stopped.

"All undecided," the old lady suggested. "I s'pose so. But June is only three months off now. Goin' to housekeepin' afterward or goin' to board?"

"Housekeeping," said Nick curtly.

"The curtain is going up again," Nick added hastily.

Elizabeth sat in comparative peace through the rest of the programme. Then the last performer came to the front of the stage—a boyish looking man in the conventional evening dress of the vaudeville songster. The orchestra preluded softly for a moment, and over the darkened theater the man's voice rang out infinitely rich and deep:

"Oh, 'twas sweet of old, when our love we told—"

"Asthere," whispered Mrs. Barton delightedly.

The beautiful voice sobbed and sank and rose again with the plaintive cry of the song and the last wailing chord:

"I am waiting for thee, asthere," died away into a perfect silence. There was a thunder of applause.

"You used to sing that," Mrs. Barton whispered to Nick, "the year after you finished college. I guess Bessie remembers it. You sang it at my house one night—don't you know, Bessie?"

"I—I—yes, I think I do," said a wretched and uncertain Elizabeth.

The man on the stage sang the last bars of the song again.

"Elizabeth," said Nick, very low.

Elizabeth turned, startled at the sudden call, and the eyes she lifted were heavy with tears.

"Asthere," said Nick, lower still.

Then he helped her into her coat and wrung her hand beneath its sheltering folds.

Mrs. Barton bestowed a parting benediction on them.

"I'm real glad I've seen you," she said, beaming. "Give my love to your mother, Bessie, and don't forget to send me my invitation to the weddin'."

"It shall be the first one sent out, dear Mrs. Barton," said Elizabeth happily.

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