

Indian Summer

By Arthur Stringer

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IT WAS one of those warm and showery days of April when the humming brick and stone of the city seemed like the walls of a prison that Richard Deering first appeared at my door.

When the three Moorish bells had tinkled out their musical Moorish discord I turned away from the open window and the pearl mist that hung over the wet tin roofs, and stared with languid discontent toward that door.

It was a model, I told myself, for it was nearly always a model in that high-ceilinged old studio building, where at least two dozen of us toiled at art like so many tinkers in their booths. I scarcely know whether it was the Corollike pearl mist or the humid hothouse warmth of the world or the outlandish Moorish bell tinkle, but something touched my tired spirit into sudden Aprilian lightness. And I hoped that the applicant at my door would be a girl, a slender and Hapsid-eyed girl in white lawn and with flowers in her hat. It seemed only fitting, with all the world yearning and bursting toward the rupture of living, that one's visitor should be something radiant-eyed and youthful-bodied, with the joy of life valiantly burgeoning from her innocent vernal headgear.

When I opened the door, however, instead of finding a girl with flowers on her head, I found Richard Deering with his hat in his hand.

I found the sorriest figure that the tides of life could wash up on the shores of mischance. The sorriest he seemed, for he stood there such a wreck of what he must once have been! He reminded me of a last year's bird's nest.

There was something autumnal about the seediness of his attire, about the dingy hat with its abraded brim, about the shiny and threadbare frock coat that adorned the gaunt figure. This figure itself was upstanding and

tended to eat with the studious concentration of a hungry child. There were polite hesitations, there were half-hearted moments of reluctance, to be sure. But they were nothing more than a sop to convention. He ate, in fact, until the taboret top was as bare as a tombstone. And I saw that my surmise had not been wrong. The man was almost famished.

"I believe, after all," I said as I once more filled his cup, "that I could use you now and then. But the trouble is I'll only have two or three weeks more in the city. I'm packing for a year or so in Europe—and the studio here will be taken by a china painter from Syracuse.

"I'd be glad of anything," he humbly acknowledged. "Has it been a bad season?" I ventured.

"A terrible season, sir, a terrible season!" he heartily declared. "I remembered that every season in that world of his seemed to be a terrible one. There were the stars with Broadway engagements, of course, who smoked in their clubs and ate their suppers in be-mirrored restaurants and visited their photographers and telephoned for their motorcars, who might be finding it the best of seasons. They were having their brief hour, and when an actor has his hour all the world knows about it. But here, I told myself, was one of the underdogs, one of the army about which the outside world hears and knows little, the army of proud-spirited, easy-going, empty-handed children who haunt the back corners of rooming houses and make the rounds of the agencies as feverishly and foolishly as a hyena making the rounds of his cage.

"What's made this a terrible season?" I asked. He turned slowly about and faced me. The lines of his face deepened. The look of revolt about the flaccid old mouth became almost vindictive.

"The same thing that is ruining the stage, sir," he

taken a second glass of Madeira that she began to talk. Then she talked with that frankness which I have so often remarked in women of the stage whose lives are lived in candid and daily contact with men.

She told me more, perhaps, than she had intended. I am afraid that after I had "placed" her—and she was openly disappointed that it was not on the model throne—I even encouraged her to be communicative. She talked mostly of her husband, of how hard he had worked and how long he had studied. She acknowledged, thanks to the Madeira, that they were quite at the end of their rope. And Richard had felt so proud of his art, and was now so hopeless about getting an engagement.

"But why shouldn't he get work?" I maintained, depressed by the thought that such a fine figure of a man should find no foothold on the stage of the day, the possessor of an art to which years of study must have gone should find himself of no possible use in the world. She looked across the studio at me with her wide and infantile blue eyes.

"They say Richard's old-timey," she admitted, with the ghost of a sigh. "They all say the day of the romantic method has gone."

"But look at his voice," I declared, a little at sea as to what the romantic method meant. "Look at the volume and power he must have there!"

"Yes, he has a wonderful voice. But it doesn't seem the sort they want nowadays. They keep saying it went very well for the old-fashioned plays. But they claim the moving pictures have killed that kind of play, that the romantic drama's dead now!"

"It seems to me," I said as I went on with my work, "these moving pictures have a lot of good actors out of 'em."

"Yes, they've thrown a lot of faded little women, work," wistfully acknowledged the faded little woman.

"But surely, somewhere, there must be work for an intelligent and willing actor?"

"Richard has tried and tried. But nothing ever comes of it. He even had to give up the dollar houses. Then he tried Shakespeare in the aerodromes, and then a Hiawatha play he'd worked out for the open-air circuit. But even that failed!"

"Why?"

"Everybody seemed to go to the moving pictures. They said we were too old-fashioned and cancelled our time."

"But what do they mean by old-fashioned?" I demanded.

"I'm afraid it's rather hard to describe," complained the little woman. "But one year you've an engagement and a good part and get good notices. Then something seems to happen, something you can't account for. But you wake up and find the younger people are taking your place, and saying you belong to the older school and have had your day!"

"But why should they say that of your husband?"

"I can't quite understand it all, but they complain that Richard's gestures are too theatrical, that his poses are too obvious. They call it barnstorming nowadays. And it's second nature to Richard now. It's the only method he knows. He can't get rid of it!"

Her faded and babylike smile, as she spoke, carried home to me more poignantly than the most tragic posturing could have done the actual hopelessness of that forlorn couple. I had to bury my face behind the drawing that she might not see my expression.

During all the rest of that month, as I quietly made ready for my year in Europe, I kept up a pretense of using the Deerings. My work suffered through them, as must all work into which the personal equation intrudes itself. They were not professional models; they were not even adaptable. And what was worse, they seemed to carry about with them an aura of foreordained failure, a blight of assured unsuccess.

It's a law of life that we must inure ourselves to those forces which too repeatedly or too poignantly assail our sympathies. I reached a state where I no longer worried actively and acutely about the Deerings. I no longer woke up at night laboring over the hopeless puzzle picture of their predicament. I became more impersonal in my contemplation of their faded careers. And one result of this release was a portrait study I did of Richard Deering one sunny afternoon, a portrait of which I was rather proud. I was so proud of it, in fact, that I was blinded into letting Deering himself see it.

It was not until I watched his face as he studied the canvas that I actually comprehended what I had done. I had painted him as he was, a hopeless failure. I had memorialized his misery. I had elucidated and elaborated on his broken and useless life.

Deering studied the picture in silence. But I could

mystified by her husband's behavior, and sighed a little over his wayward mood.

A few days later she came to me with the startling news that Deering had a chance to "go on" with a vaudeville sketch, a very silly sketch called "The Jealous Husband," but it might after all give him the start he had been waiting for.

It was three days later that she came back to the studio with the dolorous information that Deering had refused to appear in "The Jealous Husband" when he found it was merely to be an interpolated number in a Harlem moving-picture hall. He refused to be in any way identified with the celluloid drama, as he contemptuously termed it.

It was a week later that she came to the studio again and acknowledged that her husband had found work as a "ballyhoop" for a Third Avenue museum. It was hard work, and it kept him out in all sorts of weather, but he was getting a dollar and a half a day for it.

Before the week was over, however, Deering had to give up his work as a "ballyhoop." His wife brought me the news that he was down with the grip. He recovered in a week's time, but his throat kept troubling him, my emsary reported. It grew so bad, in fact, that she became alarmed and proceeded to take things in her own usually docile hands. This belated anger led to an operation on Deering's throat at a Bellevue clinic, where a small fibroid tumor was removed.

A week later she brought me the news of his recovery. But there was neither relief nor joy on her face as she told me of it. When I asked if I might go and see him, she hesitated, flushed, and said she would rather that I did not.

"But won't he look for work again?" I inquired. The torn-up studio about us, for it was my last day in the city, only added to the sorrow of the encounter and made the afternoon seem heavy with a vague sense of desolation.

"He can't now," were her answering words. And in the curlious baby-blue eyes were actual tears, the first I had ever seen there.

"Why not?" I sharply inquired.

"His voice is gone!" she huskily admitted. And this proved, in a way, to be true. His voice, his speaking voice, was not completely lost. But from the standpoint of the stage it was a thing of the past. As an organ, as an instrument, it had parted with its power. The final blow had fallen. The seal of ultimate failure had been imposed on him.

"Could I come and see him before I sail?" I asked, exasperated by the knowledge there was no way in which I could actually help them. Money, I knew, they would not accept from me—and even the gift of that, as I could give it, would be merely a postponement of the inevitable.

"It wouldn't do any good!" was her response. "But why can't I see him?" I demanded, and I tried to picture the broken man in his gloomy back room.

"He likes being alone now!" was the only answer she gave me.

It was late in the second fall when I finally returned from abroad. I came back without that sense of exhilaration which should accompany the return to one's native country. And in some way I was able to blame the Deerings for it.

My very studio seemed shadowy with their somber figures. I had several times written to their old address, it is true, but no word had come back from them. And now, back between the walls on which they had left their memories, I was more than ever troubled as to their fate.

I made my way to their old rooming house, but could learn nothing about them. I made inquiries, but no one seemed to remember them. They were merely two small units in that tumultuous and ever-hurrying food tide of city life which had been swept away and forgotten.

They were forgotten, but with me at least they had left a vague heritage of content, of discontent, of revolt, of the feeling of the knowledge there was no way in which I could actually help them. Money, I knew, they would not accept from me—and even the gift of that, as I could give it, would be merely a postponement of the inevitable.

It was early one afternoon when I had set out my sketching box in a little amphitheater of hills affairs with scrub oak after a black frost. I had felt myself blissfully alone with my trees and skies and rocks, when the entire valley was filled with a sudden invasion tending to make one's back hair stand up.

For sweeping down from the far side of that placid parliament of hillocks I beheld a galloping and screaming band of half-naked Comanche Indians, sinister with war paint and embellished with feathers and suggestive of the wildest days of our wildest West.

The chieftain of that fleeing band, I saw, carried across his saddle pommel a slender-bodied white girl of about sixteen, as white girl on whose face I could plainly see protest and horror.

But I had no time to dwell on that startling and somewhat distressful figure, for tearing on after the fleeing Indians came a galloping, swarming, shouting band of cowboys. And these cowboys, I perceived, kept discharging their huge six-shooters as they rode.

They were nothing more or less than a band of moving-picture actors going through their turns for a "Western" film. I had wandered into the realm of the "movies." I had caught a glimpse of "canned drama" in the making, as Deering had called it. But it was useless. That little landscape of peace seemed as denuded of tranquillity as though a fire had swept through it from east to end. So I repacked my sketch box, folded up my stool, and moved on to the other side of the village whose apices showed over the next dip in the hills.

There I stumbled on a road vista that seemed to meander off into some misty second valley of romance. That road, with elms on one side and the raw color of a circus poster flaring along an old barn on the other, caught my eye and held me there. And there I painted



"He was like a crazy man"

wide-shouldered enough. But every calamitous line of it was still eloquent of fruition, of exhaustion, of something gone to seed. About its very erectness there was something pathetic, something too vocal of the fact that its valor was factitious. And his voice itself when he spoke was funereal, a husky and wintry ghost of a voice that made me think of a December wind in a Florentine cypress top.

"Do you use models?" he wistfully asked. Yes, I somewhat petulantly reminded myself, I could have used a model in that last pearl-mist hour of an idle April afternoon. But it would have to be a bithe-lipped Ariel floating in blossomy laughter and touched with the sunny lightness of meadow birds.

"Sometimes," I answered, with my hand still on the door knob, for I was studying his solemn and staid eyes.

"Could I be of service to you?" And he put the question almost automatically, with a calm hopelessness that carried its own answer.

"Who sent you to me?" I temporized.

"The one," he acknowledged. "I was merely looking for work, sir."

"But what," I inquired, "is your line?" He seemed puzzled by the question. The great gaunt face was clouded by a frown of perplexity. He put forth an expostulatory arm, as though to argue his adeptness, but I cut short his gesture.

"Are you a professional model?"

The funereal eyes were fixed on me as the funereal black shoulders were thrust back into their forlorn line of dignity. It was like the wing stir of a coriander eagle.

"I have never posed before, sir," he solemnly intoned. "I have never posed before, it is true. But I hoped that my career as an actor might have equipped me for a kindred art."

"It very seldom does, I'm afraid," was my deliberately candid and none too encouraging retort.

There was no protest on his lean and hungry face as he essayed his courtly bow.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you, sir," he said. I watched him as he turned mournfully away.

It hurt me in some nameless manner to see him go. There was something so poignant, so arresting, about that autumnal figure that I found myself moved by it even against my will. Inured as I was to the importunate of the news, I could not find the heart to dismiss him in that blunt manner.

"Will you step inside?" I found myself saying. And with a look of wistful wonder he stepped into the studio. He stood there, solemn and gaunt, a blur of gloom enlivened by the gayer colors of my wall canvases.

"Won't you sit down?" I said, motioning him toward my most comfortable chair. And he solemnly seated himself, placing his hat on the floor beside him.

"Have you given up the stage?" I asked him, wondering just how to begin.

"No-o!" he hesitated. "I have not precisely given it up."

"But you prefer posing?" I went on.

"I was looking for something to tide me over, as it were," was his answer.

burst forth. "The same thing that has degraded our noble art of acting!"

"What's that?" I queried.

"Those moving-picture contraptions!" he retorted. "This mania for what they call the canned drama! The canned drama! Brrrr!" And his head shook with that inarticulate cry of disgust.

An accidental pose of that fiery old face as he spoke caught my eye. I began to see that he had possibilities.

"I believe that I could use you for a charcoal sketch," I told him as I stepped out and swung my easel into place. "Can you use you now if you keep just as you are—and, of course, if you can give me an hour or so?"

"By all means, as long as you wish," he answered in his pompous boom. And I set to work while the mood was on me, for I knew the light would not last much longer.

"It's very often that I can use men," I explained as I drew. "My work calls mostly for women."

He looked up at this.

"I do use them," I admitted.

He cleared his throat, paused, grew reflective, and again cleared for action.

"I was wondering if—if my wife might chance to suit you?" he finally ventured.

"What's she like?" I asked, intent on my work. Yet I could not help looking sharply about at my question, as though to make sure it was not an impertinence.

"She was a very beautiful woman," he said, and he said it with a childlike simplicity that made it pathetic.

"Is she on the stage with you?" I asked, trying to picture what the struggles of that strange couple could have been.

"Not of late," he pensively admitted. "The fact is, she's not overly strong. She'd be better off of New York, her doctor tells me. But I have been tied down here. And she says when an actor was an actor, when I began to understand the situation."

"Could she pose for me?" I asked.

"Think she would like it," he announced with blithe solemnity.

"Could you send her to my studio here, say tomorrow at 9?"

I saw the look of anxious doubt that crossed his seamed old face, and for a moment it troubled me. Then I remembered the fact that I was disregarding a fixed habit of the profession. The day, with them, only began with noon.

"Or perhaps two in the afternoon would be better?"

"If it would be the same to you," was his courtly rejoinder.

And as I worked away at my drawing—and an atrociously bad study it proved to be—he told me a little of his past life, of the Shakespeare repertoire with which he had once been successful on the road, of the later melodramas in which he had been compelled to play, of the decline of the dollar houses, of an unhappy excursion or two into vaudeville, of the increasing difficulty of hearing a dancing comedian sing ragtime through his nose, to see a divorcee court celebrity trail a \$500 gown through a transplanted French face!

I should think you'd give up the stage, you'd turn to something else!" I mildly suggested, as I sat back and waited for him to round out one of his Johnsonian periods.

"What is there to turn to?" he asked with the wistful helplessness of a child. And in the ways of the world, I knew he was still a child.

It was promptly at 8 o'clock the next afternoon that Richard Deering's wife came to my studio. She was a small blonde with a faded little smile and a petite regularity of feature. The very clothes that she wore, only too plainly the necessary makeshifts of earlier stage costumes, carried the same sense of incongruous blitheness. The one vital and unfaded thing about her were her eyes, and these were still ardent and infantile. They were the bluest eyes I have ever seen, a mid cerulean blue, as serene and soft as any April sky.

I had craftily delayed ordering in luncheon so that she might be compelled to join me in that midday meal. And this she did in a little timidly, eating with the fastidious haste of a hungry bird. It was not until she had

see the tightening of the lines about that flaccid old mouth grown large and loose in the delivery of heretics. It was in silence, too, that he took his seat for posing and left the studio. He never returned to it. He not only understood, but he understood that I understood! Deering never came back to the studio, but his wife did. I saw to it, however, that the picture was well out of sight before the time of her arrival. She seemed

myself back into a humor of contentment with life in general and Jersey roads in particular.

I was still joyously working on the mysterious soft tones of that meandering road, making the most of the slowly waning light, when I became conscious that a touring car had stopped somewhere close beside me and that I was being stared at by the occupants of that

car.

"A slender-bodied girl of about 16, on whose face I could plainly see protest and horror"

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"Instead of a girl with flowers on her head I found Deering"

My name must have been called out several times before I became actually aware that I was being addressed.

When I looked about I beheld an elderly man, with a shock of silvery white hair showing from beneath the rim of his sombrero, smiling down at me from the driving seat of the automobile. It puzzled me a little to see that he was clad in a jacket of stained and weather-worn buckskin adorned with much fringe and embellished with a well-weighted cartridge belt. The blue-eyed woman beside him was also clad in a much-fringed garment of buckskin, with a colored handkerchief knotted loosely about her plump throat, and a tip-titled sombrero pinned back on her head.

These two extraordinarily clad figures would have startled me more, I suppose, if my thoughts had not gone promptly back to the morning's panorama of the film actors and their antics.

"He doesn't even know us!" cried the lady in buckskin, with a half-humorous wail.

I stood up and turned about at the sound of that voice, for there was something startlingly familiar in it. I stared at the benignant sunburned face of the man with the silvery hair showing under his sombrero.

"He doesn't know us!" echoed that benignant figure, with a gesture of mock indignation.

Yes, I knew him the moment I saw the gesture. It was Richard Deering. And the woman in the cowboy suit beside him was his wife.

I stepped over to their running board of their car. I stepped slowly over to them, so wide-eyed and incredulous that they laughed together at my uncouth amazement. Equally startling to me was the easy light-heartedness of that laughter.

"It's the artillery he's afraid of!" crowed the jocular Deering. And in the tonneau of his car, for the first time, I saw the litter of carbines and blue-barreled six-shooters.

"What are you doing with this stuff?" I weakly inquired as I reached up and shook hands with them. The movements on my part were abstracted and automatic. I could not co-ordinate things into anything approaching the rational. And the two of them seemed to be enjoying my obvious distress of mind.

"Oh, that's only a part of our equipment!" laughed Deering.

"Your what?" I demanded, blinking up into his wind-roughened and sun-darkened face.

"They're only some of our studio props," his wife explained. I could see the two of them exchange glances, like children with a happy secret between them. It was a happy secret, I noticed, it was the last thing in the world I was prepared for.

"You're not a moving-picture man?" I almost gasped, staring from the carbines to the oil-stained buckskin jackets. At the back of the car, I noticed, trotted a mouse-colored burro with a pack saddle on its back.

Deering seemed a little hurt by my incredulous inquiry.

"You never go to see the movies?" he demanded.

I had to confess that I did not, though that morning I somewhat maliciously added, they came to see me.

"Richard's been the character man for the Rudin Film Company about as long as I've been in the business," his wife, as though in dread I might say something to commit myself.

"You've been for fifty-two weeks in the year!" gloated the sun-bronzed Richard. "Nine-tenths of the work in the open air, the best equipped studio in all Jersey, and seven weeks off to California in the winter!" And the surreptitious squint of his buckskinned arm gave to the quiet-eyed woman at his side did not escape me.

Seated half-guiltily about, and chained to the seat by the burr's placid browsing on the third lining of the car.

"Lied at Beppino!" he cried. "Lied at Eddie and new car!" And their dust of happy laughter as the great gaunt figure of the man in the buckskin jacket set up his back on the seat and chuckled.

The burro was good to hear. It seemed like the laughter of contented and happy children. Then Deering pointed up past the poster-covered barn.

"Go see that snake!" he called out. "Well, there's a dago up there who makes five dollars an afternoon sending us this donkey. He just fits into the Western set. And now I've got to take him back to his home."

He looked about as though he were waiting for a cue. "He's like me, this old burro. He hasn't even worth burying, until the movies got him! And now they can bury him down with dollars and cents!"

I sat upon the burro's running board and stared after the stalwart, leather-clad figure as it strode up the path with the burro at its heels. "How did it happen?" I asked, as I leaned through the open door of the car.

Deering's jovial chirrup to the donkey trotting behind them.

The woman in the car stared after the chirruping man and the mouse-colored burro.

"It was just after you went away," she said. "Everything seemed to be hopeless. I was going to a Brooklyn studio to make a super in the mob scenes. Richard found out and came to take me away. The studios are open stages, you know, with scenery and back drops and all that, with a square of tape tacked down to mark where the action must take place—to get in the line, you know. We were rehearsing, and Richard came right up to the stage. He was like a crazy man. He stormed and railed at me, at every one. I thought they'd arrest him!"

"Go see that snake!" he prompted as she paused.

"Something about him, as he stormed around there, caught the manager's eye. He took Richard to one side and talked to him. He told him he'd have to pay for a wide-angle shot as he'd come over to the studio."

I looked up at the woman as she stopped again. From under the elms the low October sun shone across her celestial blue eyes and ruffled her round and child-like chin. She seemed, in that light, little more than a girl.

So Richard had to come back and work it out. He pretended to hate it. But he was more than a good word than he'd imagined. And he knew more than the other because he'd been a better actor. And when I saw him working in another set, I understood. He was liking it. Against his own will he was liking it. And his very faults, as an actor, were at last a help to him. Those gestures and things that seemed overdone in real drama were just what he had to do for the work. It didn't matter, either, that his voice wasn't strong. It wasn't needed.

She stopped again, and for some absurd reason, began to cry softly and contentedly. Then, as she caught the sight of her husband striding back down the farm path, she hurriedly wiped her eyes.

"You must come along with us for dinner," she said. "Or Richard will feel hurt."

"Along where?" I asked, still watching the approaching figure as it swung down toward us, bathed in that mellow evening light that turned everything to gold.

"Why, we've a little farm now, a mile the other side of the film studio. And a garden, my dear, and white Leghorns, and cherry blossoms every spring. She lifted her head and smiled at a happy little sight. "It's a new life for us, isn't it?"

"It sounds like Indian summer," I said.

"Yes, it's our Indian summer," she echoed, and her happy tears.