

# THE NOBLE ORPHAN

By Jack Lait

Illustrated by Ben Cohen



HE show was working north through Illinois, hitting the high spots for a night a spot; and anybody will tell you that Illinois is as flat as an English wheeze.

Off in the distance was two weeks in Chicago—that is, nearly in Chicago, near enough to "stop" in town while "making" the suburban theaters. And that was probably all that kept the troupe together. The prospect of a sandwich with real butter on it has kept many a company from disbanding. And real butter can be had only in the city.

It was a drama—a bedraggled success of hinteryears. The big producer had abandoned it because it had ceased to pay. So the little one bought the rights on royalty. That he bought that kind of shows probably accounts for his being little.

Affairs were at the stage when the players were getting what they got at all in lump sums of one dollar at a time. Regular salaries hadn't been paid in so many weeks that some of the hams had forgotten what they were supposed to be getting, and just hung on, asking every day for large moneys, showing pressing letters from insurance companies and the folks at home, and then thanking their lucky stars when they gouged a "one-spot" from the lean sides of the frantic manager, who was doing the best he could, which wasn't much.

The scenery was going to pieces and the properties were ragged; two disgruntled performers had quit the

nights, Julia Marlowe as Juliet, Fanny Davenport in her prime, Mrs. Leslie Carter in her declension, and Evelyn Nesbit Thaw in her Peter Thompson innocence, all labeled "Elise de Vaille as Kitty Hall in 'When the Angelus Is Ringing.'"

He had no cuts left of Elise, nor had he money to have any made. But he was "plugging" Elise because she was the darling of his heart. He rarely saw her—he was ten days "ahead" of the show. But each night, in the lumpy bed of the stuffy room in the smelly Main street ho-

is the last peg that one may cling to and yet remain in "the business." The under-canvas companies are the ones that travel in wagons, camp at crossroads and play at each stop several nights, switching the bill nightly, every artist doubling for the ballyhoo at the door and the vaudeville between the acts.

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A GIRL who has gone through that, and who is still going through, is not soft, easily moved or highly enthusiastic. She has trampled on her optimism and worn out her faith and starved out her cheerfulness.

Elise had won the fancy of Walter Cass, the press agent, when he had first seen her play her part. With artificial curls and knee dresses she had appealed to him as glorious. He had met her before and after that in her worn-down "street" shoes, her sea-bitten fur bon, her nonmatching party skirt and walking jacket and her own muddy-colored hair. But that chrome had not driven from his imagination the picture he had seen behind the gaslight footlights. And you will grant me that a press agent is endowed with imagination if he has an endowment at all.

Cass, in his flights of brainstorm, always conjured up a vision of some day bringing out Elise in that actors' heaven, Broadway, as a star, surprising the blas-

phemes of insular Manhattan with her beauty and her genius, proclaiming her to the world as making Billy Burke look like a mudhen and acting figure eights around Nazimova.

Thus far he was starting her by getting hyperbolated "notices" about her in the jay papers in advance of the "attraction." These were more or less neutralized by the roasts that the critics thundered after her on her departure from each town. Cass couldn't write the reviews; but he could and did write the "front stuff."

It so happened that one of the big New York managers had been born in one of the little Illinois towns. Because he liked to keep cases on Tom, Zeke and Harry of his boyhood schooldays, he got the home paper every week. And, as he glanced through it one week, hunting "locals," he saw a cut of a beautiful girl, and under it the name of Elise de Vaille. He perked up, got his head closer, and read:

Mlle. de Vaille is the daughter of a French nobleman, orphaned by the war now raging over the blood-soaked fields of sorrow-stricken Europe. Having studied at home for the drama as a pastime, and part of her curriculum in an ultra-fashionable Parisian finishing-academy, she turned to that as a means of livelihood and a prospect of a career when she came to this country. In less than three months she had learned enough English to enable her to play the part of Kitty Dugan brilliantly and tellingly.

What Mlle. de Vaille may lack in the perfect accent she more than makes up by her exquisite and fragile beauty, so appealing that the audience loves her on sight and is in the hollow of her hand before the curtain rings down on the first thrilling act of that terrific and spectacular drama masterpiece, "When the Angelus Is Ringing."

The Forty-second street manager read it twice. He knew the ways of tanktown press agents. But you know how it is—when one sees it in print it seems plausible. Why, I have known the very men who write the stuff (and invent it) to read and believe it! So the wise New Yorker touched a button.

The office boy was sent to summon one of the stage directors, who in turn was sent to Illinois to find that show, watch

"My stars!" she gasped. "It's come!" And come it had.



outfit and two others were "doubling" their parts, which means they were each playing two roles at different times. The billposting "paper" announced it as the "original New York cast." Most of the cast had never even seen Pittsburgh.

The press agent had picked up a miscellaneous collection of left-over cuts at one of the theaters and was feeding to the one-night-stand editors likenesses of Eva Tanguay, Annette Kellermann in

tel of the county seat where he tarried, he dreamed of her.

He always dreamed of her as Elise de Vaille, though he knew that she was Fannie McCann, daughter of Lizzie McCann, the "character woman" of the show, and of a deceased "heavy." She was a hardened, seasoned, weathered, grained, warping ingenue who had done many years in stock, "on the road" and "under canvas in rep." of which the last

Elise de Vaille "work," and wire in a report.

Two nights later the stranger bought a ticket at the box office in a hayseed burg, sat down in an