

May Yohe — Her Portland Days

Local Career of Once Noted London Concert
Hall Favorite Who Descended From Diamonds
and Titled Rank to the Scrub Brush and Mop



By Earl C. Brownlee

BORN in a hotel room, reared amid the hum and litter of a dressmaker's crowded quarters, far from the realm of childhood, educated in concert hall and vaudeville shop, finally to be graduated into the lap of luxury and foreign title, with millions as her dower, May Yohe, pampered puppet of princes, came to the end of her rope in a war-time shipyard—a scrubwoman.

Descending from the pinnacle of favor in which she found herself as Lady Francis Hope, wife of the nobleman who later became Duke of Newcastle, May Yohe came to Portland several years ago—perhaps to forget, perhaps to hide from the world she had trifled with and whose roughness her bruised soul resented.

It was in Portland that nearly 10 years of the woman's sometimes weird, always sensational, life history was recorded. It is in Portland that many memories of her palmy past mingle with the story of the wreckage of life and love this odd woman is writing.

May Yohe, it is testified by those who knew her when she catered to favor here—and later, when in hiding she sought surcease from her cares—was ever ready for a sporting chance in the game of life, yet never armed for the defeat she always suffered. The Indian blood of her half-breed mother surged strong in her veins. Perhaps that will account for some of her odd temperament and temper.

Now that she is personally reviewing the cruelties of a world whose bars she braved defiantly, carelessly, May Yohe's story brings elucidation from those who knew her. The carefree days when, womanly pride tossed aside, she walked to sorrow on a path of jewels and human hearts, are passing again in retrospect, down to the day when she was discovered in poverty and privation in a little tent house at Metzger station just outside Portland—nursing the injuries of her buffeted being.

It is recorded in local annals that May Yohe, once petted by her famous husband, Lord Francis Hope, man of vast estates and wealth in Great Britain, came to Portland quietly in 1907, shattered happiness and international scandal in her wake.

She took up her modest residence in an humble home at Twenty-fourth and Northrup streets, supposedly soon after she arrived, and thereafter lived to herself under the assumed name of "Fellows," her presence little known to the many who might have courted her favor at an earlier date.

Her first public recognition here was unwelcome. It was inspired by the filing, over a decade ago, of a written consent to the adoption of her 8-month-old son, the offspring, it was said, of a secret marriage. The child was adopted by a man named Thomas of Portland and proved a closed chapter in May Yohe's life when Thomas' name was bestowed upon it.

Immediately thereafter May Yohe disappeared—assumed name and all—and was lost to her few friends. Her child, born while she lived in seclusion in Portland, was not a binding tie. It is reported that she fled, under cover of darkness, in an ambulance as soon as her son had been placed in other hands.

But her whereabouts remained only briefly a mystery, for she suddenly appeared in the limelight at Seattle, whither she had fled, in the role of a rooming house keeper. She had purchased a small house and, with her mother, had attempted to set herself up in a profitable business that would restore, at least in small part, the comfort of the life she had forfeited through folly.

It was then, late in January, 1910, that May Yohe, believing herself to be upon the threshold of a new life, said:

"I realize that I have been an awful fool, and now I am determined to do as much as I can to forget the past."

The "past" would not down in the face of a weak woman's determination. The past included Captain Putnam Bradley Strong, characterized as cad and scallawag, who was her husband.

Indian blood may have brought to this woman her love of adventure according to her own interpretations and it may have given her that unusual belief in the supernatural. Her life story is marked



MAY YOHE

AS SHE APPEARED DURING HER LIFE IN PORTLAND

throughout by the effect of the fiction fortune tellers wove for her pleasure and their own profit from her none too heavy purse.

For Captain Strong, May Yohe had forfeited title and estate; had torn from her plump neck the wondrous Hope diamond, fateful or otherwise, and had forsaken the very wealth her paramour sought to obtain by marrying her.

Lord Francis Hope, a gentleman of England's bluest blood, was left with his millions, his titles, his jewels and his love to mourn the faithless woman who fled with the dapper United States army captain.

The gilt of the uniform she accepted—the glitter of real gold she gave up.

She married Strong, son of ex-Mayor Strong of New York city, at Buenos Aires, Argentina, October 3, 1902. The step was fatal. Her escapade with Strong had precipitated a scandal that spread with the wind over two continents to the far corners of the world. While Lord Hope mourned, his faithless wife found no greater happiness as her own lot.

Strong, the scandal of his actions an odium that spelled ruin, was forced to resign his commission in the army—a court martial was the alternative, and he chose the guilty man's role. He who had been a major of volunteers in the Philippines, deserted his wife in New York city after three turbulent, unhappy years of wedded life. That was November 27, 1905.

On November 5, 1907, May Yohe, known to fame only a few years before as Lady Francis Hope, came to Portland as Mrs. Putnam Bradley Strong and established her residence. She assumed the name of Mrs. Fellows and remained for many months unwelcome.

In the spring of 1909, her son gone from her life, she disappeared from Portland and her movements remained a secret to an uninterested public until March 8, 1910, when she was back here—her arrival

again unheralded. Portland, meanwhile, declined to become enthused over one who shielded her presence under fictitious names.

It was on that date, at Oregon City, that she filed suit for divorce from Captain Strong, with whom, she testified, she had not lived since 1905, when he deserted her in New York city. She made desertion the principal allegation in the divorce complaint that won her legal separation from the one-time army officer.

Although in the interim between her departure in 1909 and the date of her divorce suit her whereabouts had been secret, it is said that she lived constantly in or near Portland, thus establishing her right to sue in the Oregon courts.

Another chapter in the odd life story of this woman who persisted in toying with the fate that always defeats was opened near the end of July, 1910, when announcement was made that she had signed a contract for a revival of her vaudeville career at \$250 a week.

Few persons remained who knew her to be still a resident of Portland, yet she had been here, and on August 1, 1910, she sailed for San Francisco, there to open her "come back" tour, aboard the steamer Beaver.

It was following her divorce, friends discovered, that May Yohe had been in retreat, living quietly, unsought and unsung, at Metzger. There, in a dingy tent house, she survived upon the provisions obtainable with a very meager financial remnant. She had poor shelter in the little tent house, and on two acres of land struggled with a garden to augment a never laden larder. Three dogs were her chief possessions.

Explaining her vaudeville revival at that time, she told local friends: "You know, I've had no settlement from the Strong, and my money is gone. I am forced to return to vaudeville to get money." Her vaudeville days were short



MODEST HOME OCCUPIED BY THE NOTED ACTRESS

lived, however, for she soon confessed to nervousness and eye troubles and withdrew from a contract that did not inspire anew her footlight fame. She who had drawn \$1700 for a single night's work in Manila now proved to be of too little merit as an entertainer to be worthy of \$250 a week.

From the Hope palaces and the satins thereof to a Metzger station tent house and its poor gingham had been May Yohe's descent. Misery paced her footsteps, their echoes always reverting to Portland.

Yet Portland found a sympathetic note in the news flashed from New York on June 9, 1912. May Yohe's handbag had been found in Central park. May Yohe was missing.

The bag contained tell-tale evidence. A letter bemoaned the end of her vaudeville days and the fact that her agent could promise no work through which she might weather the storm of life. Grim testimony was offered by a pawn ticket, showing that she had not redeemed a ring she had pledged for a loan of \$40; there were letters from theatre managers—re-

fusals of contracts—and pictures. May Yohe was gone.

Like the evil that bedided her, though, she appeared again after an unaccountable, unexplained absence of several years from the scene of activity. In the meantime the world had forgotten her and was quite startled, early in the period of the war, to learn of her presence as a scrubwoman in a Seattle shipyard.

Her one-time multitude of friends was gone; her power to enthral large audiences had been diverted to the genius of the scrubbrush; her physical beauty, never very enchanting, and her pompous demeanor were so mingled with the mechanics of scrubbing that they were lost charms.

She was given her measure of notoriety at the bottom as she had been at the top of the ladder of success. And she was promptly forgotten again by the world that always treated her roughly because she always dared the world with her trifling.

Now the story of May Yohe is being revived. She is its author. She has gone back to that hotel room, to the quarters of the dressmaker-mother from whom she re-

ceived the Indian blood that has had its effect upon her life, and is bringing to light what she chooses to tell of her life.

Her last attempt to revive interest in herself in Portland—scene of much of her sorrow—was on July 3, 1918, when she appeared suddenly in the city as Mrs. I. A. Smuts, wife of a British army captain. She told news writers who discovered her that she and her husband, reputed to be a son of General Jan Smuts of British army fame, were en route to France—he to take command of a fighting unit and she to become a Red Cross nurse.

The story must stand at its face value. It has not been verified. It is a fact, however, that 10 days later she appeared on a local vaudeville stage in what has been described as a pitiful revival of her once delightful entertainment—the winsomeness that won her wealth and title was gone.

Here she attempted none of the high, flute-like notes that had won her fame and paved her pathway to fortune—and the Hope diamond. Her voice was a travesty—the delights that had reached the hearts of nobles in many lands had vanished.

The unpleasant fantasy that May Yohe made of her life was ended, so far as Portland has been concerned, with her ill-timed reappearance on the stage here.