

THE EPISODE OF THE THEATRICAL VENTURE

Third of a Series of Six Stories [First published in Pictorial Review,
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It was one of those hard, nubby rolls. The best restaurants charge you sixpence for having the good sense not to eat them. It hit Roland Bleke with considerable vehemence on the bridge of the nose. For the moment Roland fancied that the roof of the Regent Grill-room must have fallen in; and, as this would automatically put an end to the party, he was not altogether sorry. He had never been to a theatrical supper-party before, and within five minutes of his arrival at the present one he had become afflicted with an intense desire never to go to a theatrical supper-party again. To be a success at these gay gatherings one must possess dash; and Roland, whatever his other sterling qualities, was a little short of dash.

The young man on the other side of the table was quite nice about it. While not actually apologizing, he went so far as to explain that it was "old Gerry" whom he had had in his mind when he started the roll on its course. After a glance at old Gerry--a chinless child of about nineteen--Roland felt that it would be churlish to be angry with a young man whose intentions had been so wholly admirable. Old Gerry had one of those faces in which any alteration, even the comparatively limited one which a roll would be capable of producing, was bound to be for the

better. He smiled a sickly smile and said that it didn't matter.

The charming creature who sat on his assailant's left, however, took a more serious view of the situation.

"Sidney, you make me tired," she said severely. "If I had thought you didn't know how to act like a gentleman I wouldn't have come here with you. Go away somewhere and throw bread at yourself, and ask Mr. Bleke to come and sit by me. I want to talk to him."

That was Roland's first introduction to Miss Billy Verepoint.

"I've been wanting to have a chat with you all the evening, Mr. Bleke," she said, as Roland blushing sank into the empty chair. "I've heard such a lot about you."

What Miss Verepoint had heard about Roland was that he had two hundred thousand pounds and apparently did not know what to do with it.

"In fact, if I hadn't been told that you would be here, I shouldn't have come to this party. Can't stand these gatherings of nuts in May as a general rule. They bore me stiff."

Roland hastily revised his first estimate of the theatrical profession. Shallow, empty-headed creatures some of them might be, no doubt, but there were exceptions. Here was a girl of real discernment--a thoughtful

student of character--a girl who understood that a man might sit at a supper-party without uttering a word and might still be a man of parts.

"I'm afraid you'll think me very outspoken--but that's me all over. All my friends say, 'Billy Verepoint's a funny girl: if she likes any one she just tells them so straight out; and if she doesn't like any one she tells them straight out, too.'"

"And a very admirable trait," said Roland, enthusiastically.

Miss Verepoint sighed. "P'raps it is," she said pensively, "but I'm afraid it's what has kept me back in my profession. Managers don't like it: they think girls should be seen and not heard."

Roland's blood boiled. Managers were plainly a dastardly crew.

"But what's the good of worrying," went on Miss Verepoint, with a brave but hollow laugh. "Of course, it's wearing, having to wait when one has got as much ambition as I have; but they all tell me that my chance is bound to come some day."

The intense mournfulness of Miss Verepoint's expression seemed to indicate that she anticipated the arrival of the desired day not less than sixty years hence. Roland was profoundly moved. His chivalrous nature was up in arms. He fell to wondering if he could do anything to help this victim of managerial unfairness. "You don't mind my going on

about my troubles, do you?" asked Miss Verepoint, solicitously. "One so seldom meets anybody really sympathetic."

Roland babbled fervent assurances, and she pressed his hand gratefully.

"I wonder if you would care to come to tea one afternoon," she said.

"Oh, rather!" said Roland. He would have liked to put it in a more polished way but he was almost beyond speech.

"Of course, I know what a busy man you are----"

"No, no!"

"Well, I should be in to-morrow afternoon, if you cared to look in."

Roland bleated gratefully.

"I'll write down the address for you," said Miss Verepoint, suddenly businesslike.

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Exactly when he committed himself to the purchase of the Windsor Theater, Roland could never say. The idea seemed to come into existence fully-grown, without preliminary discussion. One moment it was not--the

next it was. His recollections of the afternoon which he spent drinking lukewarm tea and punctuating Miss Verepoint's flow of speech with "yes's" and "no's" were always so thoroughly confused that he never knew even whose suggestion it was.

The purchase of a West-end theater, when one has the necessary cash, is not nearly such a complicated business as the layman might imagine. Roland was staggered by the rapidity with which the transaction was carried through. The theater was his before he had time to realize that he had never meant to buy the thing at all. He had gone into the offices of Mr. Montague with the intention of making an offer for the lease for, say, six months; and that wizard, in the space of less than an hour, had not only induced him to sign mysterious documents which made him sole proprietor of the house, but had left him with the feeling that he had done an extremely acute stroke of business. Mr. Montague had dabbled in many professions in his time, from street peddling upward, but what he was really best at was hypnotism.

Altho he felt, after the spell of Mr. Montague's magnetism was withdrawn, rather like a nervous man who has been given a large baby to hold by a strange woman who has promptly vanished round the corner, Roland was to some extent consoled by the praise bestowed upon him by Miss Verepoint. She said it was much better to buy a theater than to rent it, because then you escaped the heavy rent. It was specious, but Roland had a dim feeling that there was a flaw somewhere in the reasoning; and it was from this point that a shadow may be said to have

fallen upon the brightness of the venture.

He would have been even less self-congratulatory if he had known the Windsor Theater's reputation. Being a comparative stranger in the metropolis, he was unaware that its nickname in theatrical circles was "The Mugs' Graveyard"--a title which had been bestowed upon it not without reason. Built originally by a slightly insane old gentleman, whose principal delusion was that the public was pining for a constant supply of the Higher Drama, and more especially those specimens of the Higher Drama which flowed practically without cessation from the restless pen of the insane old gentleman himself, the Windsor Theater had passed from hand to hand with the agility of a gold watch in a gathering of race-course thieves. The one anxiety of the unhappy man who found himself, by some accident, in possession of the Windsor Theater, was to pass it on to somebody else. The only really permanent tenant it ever had was the representative of the Official Receiver.

Various causes were assigned for the phenomenal ill-luck of the theater, but undoubtedly the vital objection to it as a Temple of Drama lay in the fact that nobody could ever find the place where it was hidden. Cabmen shook their heads on the rare occasions when they were asked to take a fare there. Explorers to whom a stroll through the Australian bush was child's-play, had been known to spend an hour on its trail and finish up at the point where they had started.

It was precisely this quality of elusiveness which had first attracted

Mr. Montague. He was a far-seeing man, and to him the topographical advantages of the theater were enormous. It was further from a fire-station than any other building of the same insurance value in London, even without having regard to the mystery which enveloped its whereabouts. Often after a good dinner he would lean comfortably back in his chair and see in the smoke of his cigar a vision of the Windsor Theater blazing merrily, while distracted firemen galloped madly all over London, vainly endeavoring to get some one to direct them to the scene of the conflagration. So Mr. Montague bought the theater for a mere song, and prepared to get busy.

Unluckily for him, the representatives of the various fire offices with which he had effected his policies got busy first. The generous fellows insisted upon taking off his shoulders the burden of maintaining the fireman whose permanent presence in a theater is required by law. Nothing would satisfy them but to install firemen of their own and pay their salaries. This, to a man in whom the instincts of the phoenix were so strongly developed as they were in Mr. Montague, was distinctly disconcerting. He saw himself making no profit on the deal--a thing which had never happened to him before.

And then Roland Bleke occurred, and Mr. Montague's belief that his race was really chosen was restored. He sold the Windsor Theater to Roland for twenty-five thousand pounds. It was fifteen thousand pounds more than he himself had given for it, and this very satisfactory profit mitigated the slight regret which he felt when it came to transferring

to Roland the insurance policies. To have effected policies amounting to rather more than seventy thousand pounds on a building so notoriously valueless as the Windsor Theater had been an achievement of which Mr. Montague was justly proud, and it seemed sad to him that so much earnest endeavor should be thrown away.

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Over the little lunch with which she kindly allowed Roland to entertain her, to celebrate the purchase of the theater, Miss Verepoint outlined her policy.

"What we must put up at that theater," she announced, "is a revue. A revue," repeated Miss Verepoint, making, as she spoke, little calculations on the back of the menu, "we could run for about fifteen hundred a week--or, say, two thousand."

Saying two thousand, thought Roland to himself, is not quite the same as paying two thousand, so why should she stint herself?

"I know two boys who could write us a topping revue," said Miss Verepoint. "They'd spread themselves, too, if it was for me. They're in love with me--both of them. We'd better get in touch with them at once."

To Roland, there seemed to be something just the least bit sinister about the sound of that word "touch," but he said nothing.

"Why, there they are--lunching over there!" cried Miss Verepoint, pointing to a neighboring table. "Now, isn't that lucky?"

To Roland the luck was not quite so apparent, but he made no demur to Miss Verepoint's suggestion that they should be brought over to their table.

The two boys, as to whose capabilities to write a topping revue Miss Verepoint had formed so optimistic an estimate, proved to be well-grown lads of about forty-five and forty, respectively. Of the two, Roland thought that perhaps R. P. de Parys was a shade the more obnoxious, but a closer inspection left him with the feeling that these fine distinctions were a little unfair with men of such equal talents.

Bromham Rhodes ran his friend so close that it was practically a dead heat. They were both fat and somewhat bulgy-eyed. This was due to the fact that what revue-writing exacts from its exponents is the constant assimilation of food and drink. Bromham Rhodes had the largest appetite in London; but, on the other hand, R. P. de Parys was a better drinker.

"Well, dear old thing!" said Bromham Rhodes.

"Well, old child!" said R. P. de Parys.

Both these remarks were addressed to Miss Verepoint. The talented pair appeared to be unaware of Roland's existence.

Miss Verepoint struck the business note. "Now you stop, boys," she said. "Tie weights to yourselves and sink down into those chairs. I want you two lads to write a revue for me."

"Delighted!" said Bromham Rhodes; "but----"

"There is the trifling point to be raised first----" said R. P. de Parys.

"Where is the money coming from?" said Bromham Rhodes.

"My friend, Mr. Bleke, is putting up the money," said Miss Verepoint, with dignity. "He has taken the Windsor Theater."

The interest of the two authors in their host, till then languid, increased with a jerk. "Has he? By Jove!" they cried. "We must get together and talk this over."

It was Roland's first experience of a theatrical talking-over, and he never forgot it. Two such talkers-over as Bromham Rhodes and R. P. de Parys were scarcely to be found in the length and breadth of theatrical London. Nothing, it seemed, could the gifted pair even begin to think of doing without first discussing the proposition in all its aspects. The amount of food which Roland found himself compelled to absorb during the course of these debates was appalling. Discussions which began at lunch

would be continued until it was time to order dinner; and then, as likely as not, they would have to sit there till supper-time in order to thrash the question thoroughly out.

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The collection of a cast was a matter even more complicated than the actual composition of the revue. There was the almost insuperable difficulty that Miss Verepoint firmly vetoed every name suggested. It seemed practically impossible to find any man or woman in all England or America whose peculiar gifts or lack of them would not interfere with Miss Verepoint's giving a satisfactory performance of the principal role. It was all very perplexing to Roland; but as Miss Verepoint was an expert in theatrical matters, he scarcely felt entitled to question her views.

It was about this time that Roland proposed to Miss Verepoint. The passage of time and the strain of talking over the revue had to a certain extent moderated his original fervor. He had shaded off from a passionate devotion, through various diminishing tints of regard for her, into a sort of pale sunset glow of affection. His principal reason for proposing was that it seemed to him to be in the natural order of events. Her air towards him had become distinctly proprietorial. She now called him "Roly-poly" in public--a proceeding which left him with mixed feelings. Also, she had taken to ordering him about, which, as everybody knows, is an unmistakable sign of affection among ladies of the

theatrical profession. Finally, in his chivalrous way, Roland had begun to feel a little apprehensive lest he might be compromising Miss Verepoint. Everybody knew that he was putting up the money for the revue in which she was to appear; they were constantly seen together at restaurants; people looked arch when they spoke to him about her. He had to ask himself: was he behaving like a perfect gentleman? The answer was in the negative. He took a cab to her flat and proposed before he could repent of his decision.

She accepted him. He was not certain for a moment whether he was glad or sorry. "But I don't want to get married," she went on, "until I have justified my choice of a profession. You will have to wait until I have made a success in this revue."

Roland was shocked to find himself hugely relieved at this concession.

The revue took shape. There did apparently exist a handful of artistes to whom Miss Verepoint had no objection, and these--a scrubby but confident lot--were promptly engaged. Sallow Americans sprang from nowhere with songs, dances, and ideas for effects. Tousled-haired scenic artists wandered in with model scenes under their arms. A great cloud of chorus-ladies settled upon the theater like flies. Even Bromham Rhodes and R. P. de Parys--those human pythons--showed signs of activity. They cornered Roland one day near Swan and Edgar's, steered him into the Piccadilly Grill-room and, over a hearty lunch, read him extracts from a brown-paper-covered manuscript which, they informed him, was the first

act.

It looked a battered sort of manuscript and, indeed, it had every right to be. Under various titles and at various times, Bromham Rhodes' and R. P. de Parys' first act had been refused by practically every responsible manager in London. As "Oh! What a Life!" it had failed to satisfy the directors of the Empire. Re-christened "Wow-Wow!" it had been rejected by the Alhambra. The Hippodrome had refused to consider it, even under the name of "Hullo, Cellar-Flap!" It was now called, "Pass Along, Please!" and, according to its authors, was a real revue.

Roland was to learn, as the days went on, that in the world in which he was moving everything was real revue that was not a stunt or a corking effect. He floundered in a sea of real revue, stunts, and corking effects. As far as he could gather, the main difference between these things was that real revue was something which had been stolen from some previous English production, whereas a stunt or a corking effect was something which had been looted from New York. A judicious blend of these, he was given to understand, constituted the sort of thing the public wanted.

Rehearsals began before, in Roland's opinion, his little army was properly supplied with ammunition. True, they had the first act, but even the authors agreed that it wanted bringing up-to-date in parts. They explained that it was, in a manner of speaking, their life-work, that they had actually started it about ten years ago when they were

careless lads. Inevitably, it was spotted here and there with smart topical hits of the early years of the century; but that, they said, would be all right. They could freshen it up in a couple of evenings; it was simply a matter of deleting allusions to pro-Boers and substituting lines about Marconi shares and mangel-wurzels. "It'll be all right," they assured Roland; "this is real revue."

In times of trouble there is always a point at which one may say, "Here is the beginning of the end." This point came with Roland at the commencement of the rehearsals. Till then he had not fully realized the terrible nature of the production for which he had made himself responsible. Moreover, it was rehearsals which gave him his first clear insight into the character of Miss Verepoint.

Miss Verepoint was not at her best at rehearsals. For the first time, as he watched her, Roland found himself feeling that there was a case to be made out for the managers who had so consistently kept her in the background. Miss Verepoint, to use the technical term, threw her weight about. There were not many good lines in the script of act one of "Pass Along, Please!" but such as there were she reached out for and grabbed away from their owners, who retired into corners, scowling and muttering, like dogs robbed of bones. She snubbed everybody, Roland included.

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Roland sat in the cold darkness of the stalls and watched her, panic-stricken. Like an icy wave, it had swept over him what marriage with this girl would mean. He suddenly realised how essentially domestic his instincts really were. Life with Miss Verepoint would mean perpetual dinners at restaurants, bread-throwing suppers, motor-rides--everything that he hated most. Yet, as a man of honor, he was tied to her. If the revue was a success, she would marry him--and revues, he knew, were always successes. At that very moment there were six "best revues in London," running at various theaters. He shuddered at the thought that in a few weeks there would be seven.

He felt a longing for rural solitude. He wanted to be alone by himself for a day or two in a place where there were no papers with advertisements of revues, no grill-rooms, and, above all, no Miss Billy Verepoint. That night he stole away to a Norfolk village, where, in happier days, he had once spent a Summer holiday--a peaceful, primitive place where the inhabitants could not have told real revue from a corking effect.

Here, for the space of a week, Roland lay in hiding, while his quivering nerves gradually recovered tone. He returned to London happier, but a little apprehensive. Beyond a brief telegram of farewell, he had not communicated with Miss Verepoint for seven days, and experience had made him aware that she was a lady who demanded an adequate amount of attention.

That his nervous system was not wholly restored to health was borne in upon him as he walked along Piccadilly on his way to his flat; for, when somebody suddenly slapped him hard between the shoulder-blades, he uttered a stifled yell and leaped in the air.

Turning to face his assailant, he found himself meeting the genial gaze of Mr. Montague, his predecessor in the ownership of the Windsor Theater.

Mr. Montague was effusively friendly, and, for some mysterious reason, congratulatory.

"You've done it, have you? You pulled it off, did you? And in the first month--by George! And I took you for the plain, ordinary mug of commerce! My boy, you're as deep as they make 'em. Who'd have thought it, to look at you? It was the greatest idea any one ever had and staring me in the face all the time and I never saw it! But I don't grudge it to you--you deserve it my boy! You're a nut!"

"I really don't know what you mean."

"Quite right, my boy!" chuckled Mr. Montague. "You're quite right to keep it up, even among friends. It don't do to risk anything, and the least said soonest mended."

He went on his way, leaving Roland completely mystified.

Voices from his sitting-room, among which he recognized the high note of Miss Verepoint, reminded him of the ordeal before him. He entered with what he hoped was a careless ease of manner, but his heart was beating fast. Since the opening of rehearsals he had acquired a wholesome respect for Miss Verepoint's tongue. She was sitting in his favorite chair. There were also present Bromham Rhodes and R. P. de Parys, who had made themselves completely at home with a couple of his cigars and whisky from the oldest bin.

"So here you are at last!" said Miss Verepoint, querulously. "The valet told us you were expected back this morning, so we waited. Where on earth have you been to, running away like this, without a word?"

"I only went----"

"Well, it doesn't matter where you went. The main point is, what are you going to do about it?"

"We thought we'd better come along and talk it over," said R. P. de Parys.

"Talk what over?" said Roland: "the revue?"

"Oh, don't try and be funny, for goodness' sake!" snapped Miss

Verepoint. "It doesn't suit you. You haven't the right shape of head. What do you suppose we want to talk over? The theater, of course."

"What about the theater?"

Miss Verepoint looked searchingly at him. "Don't you ever read the papers?"

"I haven't seen a paper since I went away."

"Well, better have it quick and not waste time breaking it gently," said Miss Verepoint. "The theater's been burned down--that's what's happened."

"Burned down?"

"Burned down!" repeated Roland.

"That's what I said, didn't I? The suffragettes did it. They left copies of 'Votes for Women' about the place. The silly asses set fire to two other theaters as well, but they happened to be in main thoroughfares and the fire-brigade got them under control at once. I suppose they couldn't find the Windsor. Anyhow, it's burned to the ground and what we want to know is what are you going to do about it?"

Roland was much too busy blessing the good angels of Kingsway to reply

at once. R. P. de Parys, sympathetic soul, placed a wrong construction on his silence.

"Poor old Roly!" he said. "It's quite broken him up. The best thing we can do is all to go off and talk it over at the Savoy, over a bit of lunch."

"Well," said Miss Verepoint, "what are you going to do--rebuild the Windsor or try and get another theater?"

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The authors were all for rebuilding the Windsor. True, it would take time, but it would be more satisfactory in every way. Besides, at this time of the year it would be no easy matter to secure another theater at a moment's notice.

To R. P. de Parys and Bromham Rhodes the destruction of the Windsor Theater had appeared less in the light of a disaster than as a direct intervention on the part of Providence. The completion of that tiresome second act, which had brooded over their lives like an ugly cloud, could now be postponed indefinitely.

"Of course," said R. P. de Parys, thoughtfully, "our contract with you makes it obligatory on you to produce our revue by a certain date--but I dare say, Bromham, we could meet Roly there, couldn't we?"

"Sure!" said Rhodes. "Something nominal, say a further five hundred on account of fees would satisfy us. I certainly think it would be better to rebuild the Windsor, don't you, R. P.?"

"I do," agreed R. P. de Parys, cordially. "You see, Roly, our revue has been written to fit the Windsor. It would be very difficult to alter it for production at another theater. Yes, I feel sure that rebuilding the Windsor would be your best course."

There was a pause.

"What do you think, Roly-poly?" asked Miss Verepoint, as Roland made no sign.

"Nothing would delight me more than to rebuild the Windsor, or to take another theater, or do anything else to oblige," he said, cheerfully.

"Unfortunately, I have no more money to burn."

It was as if a bomb had suddenly exploded in the room. A dreadful silence fell upon his hearers. For the moment no one spoke. R. P. de Parys woke with a start out of a beautiful dream of prawn curry and Bromham Rhodes forgot that he had not tasted food for nearly two hours. Miss Verepoint was the first to break the silence.

"Do you mean to say," she gasped, "that you didn't insure the place?"

Roland shook his head. The particular form in which Miss Verepoint had put the question entitled him, he felt, to make this answer.

"Why didn't you?" Miss Verepoint's tone was almost menacing.

"Because it did not appear to me to be necessary."

Nor was it necessary, said Roland to his conscience. Mr. Montague had done all the insuring that was necessary--and a bit over.

Miss Verepoint fought with her growing indignation, and lost. "What about the salaries of the people who have been rehearsing all this time?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry that they should be out of an engagement, but it is scarcely my fault. However, I propose to give each of them a month's salary. I can manage that, I think."

Miss Verepoint rose. "And what about me? What about me, that's what I want to know. Where do I get off? If you think I'm going to marry you without your getting a theater and putting up this revue you're jolly well mistaken."

Roland made a gesture which was intended to convey regret and resignation. He even contrived to sigh.

"Very well, then," said Miss Verepoint, rightly interpreting this behavior as his final pronouncement on the situation. "Then everything's jolly well off."

She swept out of the room, the two authors following in her wake like porpoises behind a liner. Roland went to his bureau, unlocked it and took out a bundle of documents. He let his fingers stray lovingly among the fire insurance policies which energetic Mr. Montague had been at such pains to secure from so many companies.

"And so," he said softly to himself, "am I."