

# Green Tulle for Tragedy

PRETTY LUCIA FINDS FAME A HEARTBREAKING MIRAGE, BUT  
PLAIN JIM DISCOVERS THAT IT IS A COMEDY

By Larry Barretto

THE acrobats had gone, followed by the jugglers; the humorous monologist had given place to the woman who impersonated, well enough, the voices of cows, hens, and dogs, and she had been forerunner to a ballad singer.

Jim Nelson, dozing in the back of the half empty vaudeville theater, had opened his eyes wide enough to read her name on the white cards that were placed on either side of the stage—Arletta Bonaventure—then he closed them again.

His experience with this sort of thing was limited, but he knew enough to realize that the last act on the bill of a ten, twenty, thirty cent vaudeville show would be a "chaser"—something sufficiently poor to drive the remainder of the listless audience to the street, but not bad enough to hold them while they laughed at it. A manager had to watch that; sometimes an act was so terrible that it became excruciatingly funny.

The woman's voice came to him through a haze of sleep, sounding dimly as if far off, and about him men and women began drifting toward the exit. It was as bad as that, but not worse. There was nothing to hold them.

The thin tones rang true enough, and the voice had been trained, if badly, but there was no color, no life to it. It trailed on evenly, monotonously, through one song as if the singer herself did not care. There was no applause at the end of it, and almost without pause the meager orchestra swung into the opening bars of another.

Jim Nelson began to listen intently. This was familiar, it plucked at his memory—then suddenly he opened his eyes and looked at the girl on the stage. His heart began a riotous clamoring and he stiffened in his chair, wide awake now.

Lucia Forrest—and here! It was unbelievable, of course, but he could not doubt the evidence of his eyes. Now he watched her hungrily, intent on every move. She had his attention as completely as if she had been the greatest of singers.

After all, it was only two years since he had last seen her, and she seemed hardly changed in spite of the mask of grease paint that covered her face, and the reddened lips. Lucia had always been pale, with a clear pallor that made her glow like a night-blooming flower. Her black hair was banded back as she had always worn it, and if further corroboration were needed she had on the same dress that had charmed and hurt him on the night of her party; the same or a duplicate of it.

It was green tulle, the color of leaves in early spring, and it was made with many flounces that flared crisply away from the underskirt, exposing her slim ankles beneath. The bodice was cut low—low, that is, for Foxboro—and her smooth arms were hardly veiled by the transparent material.

A triumph of the local dressmaker, many a woman had looked at it enviously without realizing that not everybody could wear it. It was a pretty dress worn by a pretty girl, and she had flouted him in it. Well, not exactly flouted—Jim Nelson began to recall poignantly that evening of his pain.

Foxboro was seeing the last of Miss Lucia Forrest, who was going to New York to find fame and fortune as a singer—so the phrase went—and a farewell party was being given in her honor. She had talent and would succeed, not in grand opera, perhaps—her voice was too light for that—but in light opera or concert work.

Lucia knew it; the town knew it. Even Professor Gildersleeve, who had taught in

Foxboro for years and conducted the choral singing, admitted that he could do no more for her. She was trained now, he said, and there was nothing to do but go to New York, where fame awaited her.

It was hers to take if she would, and indeed she ought; such a voice should not be hidden. It was glorious; he gave his word for that, and believed it.

Her departure caused a flutter of excitement in Foxboro, although the town had known all along that Lucia was destined for great things. No evening was complete without at least one song from her, and no other soloist had ever been considered for the church.

Everybody was happy about it except Jim himself, and no doubts as to her success had stained his thoughts. He felt sure that she would be famous, and immediately, unfortunately.

He had watched her as she stood under the steel engraving by Landseer shaking hands with the line who pressed past her offering congratulations, the green tulle of her dress fluttering and billowing slightly in the draft from the open door. Her pale face was faintly flushed and her dark eyes were laughing even while they searched the back of the room for some one who did not come.

But Jim Nelson did not withdraw from the window where he stood half concealed, and it was Lucia at last who found him. The reception was over and the floor was being cleared for dancing.

"You didn't come up to shake hands or say any of the nice things the rest have been saying to me," she told him reproachfully.

"I couldn't," he mumbled through his bitterness and shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Not before all that crowd. Lucia, will you come outside with me now, on the lawn?" His voice more than the words begged that favor.

"Well, I'm the guest of the evening," she said with a pretty air of importance; it was her due to-night. "But, yes, I will for five minutes," she added generously.

## II

It was dark under the trees and through the thick canopy of maple leaves an occasional star shone down, pale and distant. A summer breeze brushed them, freighted with the odor of honeysuckle and the fainter smell of open fields beyond the town—warm rich earth filled with growing things.

Jim Nelson recognized it and loved it as he loved everything connected with this quiet county seat, this old town that drowsed intent upon itself, aloof and indifferent to the clamor of great cities. There was a certain peace in its calm streets, in the friendly shops where one was known, in the even and easy social life that flowed along stirred only by gentle undercurrents of excitement.

And on the farms that surrounded Foxboro there were fields filled with sweet smelling haycocks, and beyond them patches of virgin land, forest and bare spaces crossed by trout streams; and in the late fall when hunting was good there was a toll of small wild animals—rabbits and foxes.

Distant hills, blue and impalpable, formed a barrier that shut Foxboro from the world. And Lucia was leaving all this.

"Why are you going?" he demanded of her. For days, weeks, ever since she had announced it definitely he had been trying to puzzle it out.

"Why?" She turned to him, wide-eyed, and he noticed that her tulle dress was olive colored in the dimness. "Oh, Jim, you won't understand. I have something to give the world—something which I haven't the right to keep to myself. It is my duty to pass it on. You must see that." She was very sweet and natural about it. He knew that she meant her voice.

"Couldn't you pass it on to us here in Foxboro?" he asked without much hope. "After all, we're part of the world, Lucia."

"But there aren't the opportunities here," she answered gently. "You know that. I need to meet managers, people who arrange tours, the chance to hear and be heard." She breathed deeply. "New York, Paris, London. Big auditoriums and people applauding me. Can't you see how wonderful it will be?" She was carried away, intoxicated by her dream.

From the house the squeal of a violin sounded, supplemented by the deeper notes of a piano. It caught the boy up and swept him along until he, too, saw her vision—the frenzied multitude, the cheering and tears for this slight girl, hands outstretched above it, her feet banked with flowers, but it did not bring him happiness.

"That's the trouble," he said miserably. "You'll be famous in no time, and probably I'll never see you again. Oh, Lucia, I love you so!"

His anguish touched her with quick emotion and she laid her hands on his shoulders. "But you will, Jim dear, you will," she declared, and her eyes filled with tears. This broad-shouldered, quiet young man with the honest face had meant more to her than any one else since childhood.

"When?"

"When I'm famous," she replied. "Then I'll come back to— Oh, Jim! Please! My new tulle dress! You're crushing my dress!"

He had caught her in his arms and was pressing her against him, his mouth buried in the smooth sheen of her hair, whispering inarticulate things.

He released her then, and by his silence she knew that he had been hurt that she should have remembered her dress at this time.

"Never mind the dress, Jim," she whispered. "A year from now I'll have plenty. Just kiss me good-by." She put her arms about his neck and drew his head down to hers.

He took her back to the house, but he did not go in again. Until the party broke up at twelve Jim Nelson lingered near an open window watching with hopeless pain the figure in gay green dancing in the arms of other men.

Later there was a silence and then she was singing, with Professor Gildersleeve at the piano. He could not see her from where he stood, but he could hear her voice, and once when she stepped forward there was a flash of tulle colored like the leaves of early spring. The words of the song came to him: "Hands joined, we wander through this shadowed vale."

They faded, died, and came to him again here in the rear seat of a ten—twent'—thirt' vaudeville show.

The singer's last song was finished. In the front row a small boy, fearful of being turned out of the theater, began to applaud vigorously. His claps resounded through the theater and echoed back from the empty gallery.

Jim, in the back of the house, joined him and together they contrived a hollow booming. The curtain half rose in a perfunctory manner, revealing Arletta Bonaventure bowing, her painted lips curved in a wistful smile, then it dropped again and there was no encore.

Slowly Jim Nelson left the theater and made his way around to the stage door. A

narrow passageway, flanked by brick walls and dimly lighted, the shabby entrance held for the man all the mystery of an unknown profession, and he hesitated, timid now at what lay before him. He had never been back stage before.

Suppose Lucia did not want to see him. It had been eighteen months since she had written to anybody in Foxboro. Resolutely he put the thought from him; she might have forgotten him, but he had not forgotten her—no, never for a day—and a fever in his blood which had of late been quiescent urged him on.

A fat old man dressed in a greasy suit, a dead cigar hanging from his mouth, sat on a broken chair before the stage entrance guarding the door. Fishing in his pocket, Jim produced a card case and detached one of the cards which were held together by serrated edges.

"James Nelson, representing Conger & Mulhall, Wholesale Paints," it read. Jim had been terribly proud of it when he first had been graduated to the road.

"I want to see," he began firmly, then hesitated over the strange name, "Miss—er—Bonaventure."

"Oh, go in," growled the doorkeeper, hardly glancing at the card, and cross at having his nap disturbed. "The dressing rooms are to the right."

### III

INSIDE the barrenness was confused by guy ropes hanging overhead like the strands of a giant spider web, gilt chairs with red plush seats thrust into a corner, and pieces of scenery, torn and dirty, leaning against the walls. An arc light cast a white and dismal glow over all, intensifying the blackness of the shadows.

There was a stale smell in the air, as if the place had been long shut, and the nostrils were oppressed by particles of unseen dust which drifted back from the stage, where two clowns who opened the bill were romping and whacking each other with hollow playfulness. The orchestra was droning an accompaniment to their act. A call boy sauntered past, hands sunk in his pockets, and Jim spoke to him.

"Where will I find Miss Bonaventure?" he demanded.

The boy indifferently took the quarter offered and indicated the direction.

"Third door to the right," he said. "Walk right in."

He was fifteen years old, and viciously sophisticated. These small town guys would fall for anything, he thought, and sighed for the glories of a real city. Harrisburg wasn't that.

Jim knocked on the door and, at the command of the muted voice within, entered. Lucia sat before a bedraggled dressing table, leaning over while she laced her shoe. She was dressed now in a street suit, and Jim had time to marvel that she could have changed so quickly. Cold cream was still smeared on her face and touches of black lingered about the eyes.

The room was in indescribable confusion—clothes flung here and there, an open suit case on a chair spilled its contents to the floor, and the dressing table was littered with powders, creams, rouge, and the combings of hair. A cigarette smoldered in an ash tray.

A blond wig hung on a peg, and on another was a pair of dirty pink tights. The man's heart contracted. Good God, she didn't wear those!

"Hello, Lucia," he said uncertainly and made his lips smile to hide the pain in his heart.

If this was the way to Paris and greatness, Jim Nelson didn't like it—not for Lucia.

The girl looked up, resentfully it seemed, at this intrusion, then her face changed. She sprang to her feet and one hand went to her breast.

"Jim!" she cried. "Jim Nelson! I didn't know you were here."

There was instant recognition in her eyes, but, as he noted with a despairing feeling, no pleasure. Rather it was fear. Then she looked down, and whatever else she felt was hidden.

"I only just hit town this morning," he told her diffidently. "I finish up tomorrow."

"Hit town?" To her theatrical vernacular it meant only one thing.

"Yes," he explained. "I'm a salesman now. For Conger & Mulhall." At one time it had filled him with pride which he had wanted to share with Lucia. Now suddenly it seemed unimportant.

"Oh," she said, and her eyes brightened. "You're still with them. I'm so pleased they have moved you up."

Her thoughts fled back reminiscently for a moment to Foxboro's only factory. It stood beyond the railroad station—a red

brick building, not very large, surrounded by shade trees.

"But it's splendid to see you," she continued, composed enough now. She might not be able to sing, but she had the makings of an actress. "Here, sit down." She swept some garments off a chair. "This place is a mess. I'm sharing it for the present with two other girls. There is so little space. I've just finished my turn and now I'm going out for a cup of coffee. If you'll wait a minute we'll go together. How did you find me?"

Jim had the impression that she wanted him to leave the theater—was in fact desperately anxious to get him away from it.

"I saw you," he said bluntly, "in your act."

Lucia's lips whitened at that. "Oh, you were out front! A poor house. This time of year is never a good season." Her voice was nonchalant, careless, as if she were stating a fact of no importance:

"I don't know anything about that," he said huskily to reassure her. It sickened him to see Lucia like this, making excuses—trying to put a brave face on things. "I thought you were great." Two years ago he would have believed that, but now something swelling within him carried conviction to his voice.

The girl smiled wanly at him, and then began to rub vigorously the rest of the cold cream off her face.

"Not great," came in muffled tones from behind the towel. "I wonder you knew me with all this make-up on, and another name, too."

Her unspoken thought was that she had changed—something of her freshness, her youth, was gone. Two years, after all, in this work made a difference.

"But of course I knew you," Jim insisted. "And anyway I would have recognized the dress you wore—your pretty green dress."

He gestured toward the dress which lay across a trunk, and instantly knew that he had said the wrong thing. Its freshness was gone, its flounces hung limp and draggled; there were tears in it that had been mended and other tears that were not mended. A coffee-colored stain showed on the bodice, but from the orchestra of the theater it had not looked so bad. The green tulle dress was worn and shabby now. A sound like a sob came from behind the towel and was checked.



"Oh, that old thing," she said with an effect of indifference. "I've been wearing it to save my better gowns. This little tour doesn't amount to anything."

She had been wearing it while she tried to save money for better gowns, but that was desperately hard work on this circuit. Her newer dresses had long since gone beyond repair. Besides, it did not do for a "chaser" to dress too well. The agent who booked her had said so.

"Come on, dear," he said, falling naturally into the old phrase. "We are going to get something to eat now."

#### IV

SAFETY lay for the moment in commonplace remarks. She was like a frightened bird that might flash away before his eyes. Her breast, rising and falling, told of her fight for composure. He would have to be very careful.

The street was garish with electric light and the shop windows glittered with an illusory brilliance. Men and women wandered to and fro idly, or hurried with an assumption of importance. A few lingered before the entrance to the Colonial Theater, looking dubiously at the posters of the bill, hardly tempted. A group of half-grown boys stood on a corner and commented on the women who passed. In the distance a trolley car clanged sturdily.

"It isn't a city, and it isn't a village," Jim said. "One thing I've learned on the road—I'm always mighty glad to get back to Foxboro."

In the shining white restaurant with its nickel trimmings they talked more freely while they ate the steak, potatoes, coffee, and pie that Jim had insisted on ordering. He said that he was hungry, but the girl's appetite when the food was set before her convinced him that she had hardly had the complete dinner she claimed, and he wondered if it happened often.

That Lucia Forrest should want for anything filled him with dumb misery, but he was filled also with a passionate admiration for her spirit. Not once had she admitted that anything was wrong, or that this road led anywhere but to Paris and the concert stage, even though the way were roundabout.

Sitting next to her, he had a better chance now to observe her without stealing covert glances. She was pale, of course, but then she had always been that. Her

cheeks, however, had fallen into slight hollows, and shadows had darkened her eyes, increasing their brilliancy. A smudge of rouge reddened her lips and heightened the pallor of her face.

Lucia looked tired, older, and beyond that desperately frail. The pity of it caught at his heart and choked his throat. One of her hands rested on the table, and he noted the delicate tracery of blue veins—its thinness.

Now he wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her before all the world, pressing her head down on his shoulder and closing her eyes to ugly things, but he could not. She had uttered no word to indicate that she was in straits, that she was not on ascending steps leading to the pinnacle of success.

And so they sat at that white-topped table and told gay lies of what might have been. My engagement here—my engagement there—what will I do next year when I get more important work—

"Tell me about Foxboro," she begged at last. "How are the Channing girls? Married yet?"

"You never wrote to find out," he reproached her gently. "After the first six months no letters came."

"I couldn't," Lucia said hurriedly. "After Aunt Ellen died there wasn't any direct reason to write, and I was busy."

"You wanted to forget your old friends," Jim pressed his advantage. He did not wish to hurt her, but something had to be done. This trailing around the country and living in grimy dressing rooms could not go on.

Lucia had failed, and he knew it. She must know it, too, if they were to find happiness. He was filled with pity at her fiasco and gladness which was tinged with guilt, as if he had been disloyal. But Lucia, famous, would never come to him.

"No, no," she protested. "Not to forget my old friends. I couldn't do that. Can't you see how hungry I am for gossip? Jim, don't say things like that." Her voice pleaded with him, and she was near to tears. They came rather easily these days.

"There wasn't room for us after you found fame," he said deliberately, and clenched his hands until the knuckles were white at the cruelty of it.

Something snapped in her at that. An unending picture arose before her of dirty boarding houses, bad food, miles and miles

of pavement, hot or cold, which she had tramped forever with worn soles and aching feet. And he had said fame!

"Fame! Oh, Jim, I haven't done anything! I'm a rotten failure!"

She was crying now, her head frankly down on the table pillowed in her arms, the brown hat with its depressed feather slightly askew, and all her gay pretense gone.

In a far corner of the empty restaurant the waitress turned away indifferently. Girls were always rowing with their beaux. The little fools! Give *her* one and she'd show 'em!

The man waited until her sobs grew less, only patting her shoulder at intervals to show his sympathy. "Tell me about it, Luce," he said at last.

And she told him in a blurred voice of the snubs, the rebuffs, the outrageous advances while she struggled, and begged agents, managers, impresarios, any one who had the power to give her a chance. How her voice had been judged impossible until at last she had gone to music teachers, fraudulent she knew now, who had made her dwindling money go the faster.

Work came at last in cheap cabarets, in obscure road companies, but she had been glad to take whatever offered, for it was necessary to live. Dreams of Paris and London, however, were gone. She would never stand before frantic, applauding audiences while ushers submerged her with bouquets of costly flowers.

It was a usual enough story, but Jim flamed at the telling of it and bit his lips in an effort for control. It was worse than he had imagined. A silence fell between them.

## V

"Why don't you chuck it all, Lucia," he asked after a time with planned casualness, "and marry me? The paint business is looking up and there's always Foxboro."

She smiled at that and her wet eyes were warm with gratitude. "Dear Jim, it's so like you, but I couldn't do it. You wouldn't really want me. Like my green tulle dress, I'm a little worn and faded now."

"It's a darned good-looking dress," Jim began indignantly, but Lucia interrupted him.

"Oh, the time! It's twenty to eleven. I'll be late for my act!" Her voice was

frightened and she was out of her chair, running to the door.

Jim waited to pay the bill, but halfway to the theater he caught up with her.

"It will be all right," she insisted breathlessly. "I'm sure it will be all right."

They entered the brick passageway together that led to the stage door and passed the old man who sat there on sleepy guard, the cold cigar still clutched in his teeth. Inside, the manager—a tall, thin man with a huge nose and hideous hands—was fuming back and forth between the wings and the dressing rooms, infuriated at the emptiness of the house and seeking for a victim.

"Where the hell you been?" he demanded. "Here you go on in three minutes and you're not dressed yet!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Boal," the girl began. "I didn't—"

"You'll be docked," he told her. "Get into your duds." One ugly hand caught her by the shoulder and swung her around. It was not roughly done, but at it all the rage which had been accumulating in Jim during the evening arose to the surface and burst through. He particularly hated ugly hands.

"This lady is not going on again this evening, or ever," he said in a choked voice and thrust himself between them.

The manager spat contemptuously on the floor. "Who says so? She's under contract. And say, where the hell do you get off to—"

Without any waste motion Jim caught the man by the throat and forced him back until he bumped the wall. He was very quiet about it, but his face was desperately white and his eyes glowed.

"You are going to release her from that contract—now!"

Thirty years of theatrical experience had taught August Boal when to submit. He looked into the deadly face before him and kept silent until the hand began to relax.

"She's through," he admitted. "Tell her to get her things together and beat it." Then as the hand dropped he stepped away to comparative safety and fingered his bruised throat.

"As a matter of fact I'm damn glad to get rid of her," he remarked confidentially to the empty wings.

Jim paid no attention to him. "Go pack your clothes, dear," he said to the girl.

Then he waited, a placid statue, apparently thinking of nothing, his face calm again.

The manager disappeared behind the set, his mind recalled to his duties.

"Tell Kitty to extend her act ten minutes," he bawled. "We got to go on without Arletta. I've sacked her."

As they left the theater the woman who impersonated animals began to moo, cackle, and bark with renewed vigor.

In the passageway Jim Nelson took Lucia's suit case.

"Well, that was easily done," he said cheerfully. The theater was not such an awe-inspiring place after all. Its followers were open to persuasion like other men. He wished regretfully that he had given one more squeeze to that skinny throat.

"Easily done!" the girl exclaimed. "You've made me lose my job, and now I haven't any money. He owes me for a week." She began to cry.

"But dear!" he said, bewildered and hurt by her tears, all the triumph of victory leaving him. "You're going to marry me and go back to Foxboro, aren't you?"

Lucia's head went up with that defiant toss he remembered and loved.

"Never!" she said, and her voice was firm now. "I can't go back and I don't want to. I may be a failure, but I'm young yet, and in the end I'll make good. You'll see. And Jim, dear, don't worry about tonight. That is nothing. I'm glad to be rid of a bad job." Her eyes looked up at him, brave and determined. "If—if you could lend me enough money to get back to New York—" she hesitated.

"Yes," he said dully. "Anything." It came to him then that he had failed.

"And Jim," she said softly. "If when you go back to Foxboro you could make them think—my friends—that I'm on the way to success—or perhaps not mention me at all—"

Jim Nelson suppressed a whistle. So that was it! That curious Forrest pride which had persisted in every member of the family! He could not understand it, for failure meant nothing to him but an opportunity to try again, nevertheless he respected it.

His intuitive sympathy made him see something of the agony the girl would suffer. And the Forrests had always held themselves high. He dropped the suitcase and placed his arms on her shoulders.

"Listen, Luce," he said quietly. "Aside

from that, do you care for me enough to marry me?"

The girl looked up into his grave eyes. Before his patient strength she knew then that this was not such a great game after all—that the rewards, even if they came to her, would be bitter—without him.

"Oh, Jim, I do!" she cried. "You know I do; but—"

"All right," he interrupted, happiness growing in him. "If Foxboro thought that you were famous, and that you were retiring of your own will, would you go back there?"

"Yes," she promised, and pressed closer to him. "But they would never—"

"Leave it to me," he said, and kissed her.

In the distance the old doorkeeper regarded them cynically.

"The kid is roped all right," he thought.

He wondered why a young husky like that should be interested in such a skinny little thing. In his youth his taste had run in another direction.

## VI

FOXBORO was gathering for the farewell appearance of Lucia Forrest. The opera house had been hired, and all evening the square before it had been gradually filling up with buggies, carryalls, farm wagons, a few automobiles. The news had spread even to the outlying districts, for all the week the town had been plastered with posters—huge sheets done in red ink:

MLLE. ARLETTA BONAVENTURE

(MISS LUCIA FORREST)

Lately under the management of

NEWMANN & FRANK

Favorite singer in New York's most exclusive circles, who has refused a European engagement, will give ONE CONCERT on the eve of her retirement into private life.

Tickets for sale at the box office and Simmons's drug store.

Lucia had been rather appalled when she saw them.

"Oh, Jim, a European engagement!" she reproached him; but Jim, proud of his work, lightly turned it off.

"There might have been if I hadn't dragged you away from it all," he said. "Anyway, Foxboro will never know. You were great to the town before, and you'll be greater now." The girl remained silent.

The opera house was filling up. By twos and threes the people drifted in to their seats; sometimes a whole family occupied one row. There was a hum of comment, friends called greetings, light laughter was in the air, and a current of anticipation, of excitement.

Mrs. Conger and her husband, who owned the paint factory, sat in one of the boxes; the mayor and his wife with select guests occupied the other. The small balcony was filled with boys of the town and farmhands with their girls, conscious in their best clothes.

Old Professor Gildersleeve, the singing teacher, shouldered his way forward and disappeared behind the stage. The audience concentrated its attention firmly on the canvas curtain painted with an authentic picture, and so labeled, of the Place Vendôme.

In her dressing room Lucia Forrest untied the strings on a large cardboard box and drew out a dress, white and all lace, the gleam of satin underneath. For a long time she held it in her arms, turning it this way and that, until it shone under the gas light, then with a sigh she replaced it and took another dress from its hook.

They might laugh, even hoot her—the girl who had left to become a great artist and had returned a failure; but she would not care. She assured herself that it made no difference, but her lip trembled.

Perhaps if she fixed her eyes on the spot where he had promised to stand she would get through without a breakdown. For once she had need of her stage presence, but her step was sure as she walked from the room and gave the signal to the boys who were to manage the curtain.

It arose slowly, but without a hitch, and she faced the crowded house. At the piano beside her Professor Gildersleeve smiled up, turning the leaves of his music. There was a moment of silence followed by a roar of applause which plucked at her heart with a suggestion of unaccustomed panic, then deliberately forgetting it, Lucia began to sing.

She sang the simple things they knew and loved—old songs: "This Shadowed Vale," "Together," "Sweet Adeline." For some reason—because she was happy, because now she did not care, because in a sense this was her defiance to it all, she never sang better.

Her voice filled the small house; it float-

ed to the roof—thin, but sweet and clear. The professor was the only man who could properly accompany her. In the audience sentimental women wiped their eyes and men allowed themselves the luxury of subdued coughs in their handkerchiefs.

It was over at last, and the young men who acted as ushers hurried forward, bearing flowers—roses, long sprays of crimson ramblers, sweet peas, elaborate bunches of phlox tied with ribbon. They piled them about her until her slim feet were hidden.

Above them the pale girl stood with outstretched hands and bowed her thanks to the tumult of applause that greeted her. Finally they permitted her to escape.

## VII

IN the darkness of the quiet street Jim led her away. Overhead the stars paled and glowed in the summer night. In the distance carriages were driving off, lighted lanterns swinging beneath them. Foxboro was very proud.

"What went wrong? Why didn't you wear my dress?" he asked. It was the first thing he had given to her, and he was disappointed. It had seemed very lovely.

Lucia put her hand on his arm.

"At the last minute I couldn't," she confessed. "It seemed too mean to try to fool all these people who love me. After all, I couldn't be cared for more even if I was a success—very great. It was just my pride, I found; and that is not a very nice thing, is it? Not that kind. So I wore the old green tulle just to show them that I *had* failed. The women at least would remember it; but they were kind just the same. Jim, I have never been so applauded!"

"Do you know what they are saying?" he asked her in an odd voice. "They say you wore the green tulle to show that Foxboro meant more to you than any other place, that you wore it when you left and again when you came back. You'll never convince them that you're not great, Lucia, and I think you are."

She kissed him for that.

"It seems too bad," he said after a time. "That lovely white dress—"

"I'll wear it at the wedding," Lucia consoled him.

Mrs. James Nelson has never sung a note in public since her marriage. Foxboro feels that she is perhaps a bit ungenerous when she smiles refusal, but after all a great artist should conserve her voice.



# The Back Room Man

A SOMEWHAT UNUSUAL LOVE STORY OF THE OPEN ROAD

By Frank Richardson Pierce

THE night had been cool and moonlit, the air heavy with orange blossoms and romance. Dawn found Dan Cupid somewhat exhausted, and with but a single arrow remaining in his quiver. He paused for a brief rest in a sprawling oak tree.

"Some night!" he sighed. "I'm about all in." Then he smiled. "Not a bad shot in the bunch!"

As usual, he had waited until he saw the whites of their eyes before firing, which perhaps accounted in a measure for his accuracy. He examined a thumb and forefinger calloused by drawing many arrows, and then cocked an alert ear.

"Flivver coming up the grade," he muttered. "Rather early in the morning, but that's the time to make speed in these mountains. Might be worth while to look the outfit over—just as much romance in a flivver as there is in a ten-thousand-dollar car!"

The oak tree was halfway up the grade, affording the only spot where a car might stop with all wheels off the pavement. The red column in the motometer had climbed to the top. Marcia Collins drove the coupé under the limbs of the friendly oak, and stopped. Gurgling sounds came from the radiator, vagrant wisps of steam eddied above the cap.

With an appreciative glance at the rolling mountains tipped by the first light of dawn, Marcia set about the practical task of providing the inner girl with something substantial. She had covered fifty miles of valley road before breakfast that morning, and she was hungry.

"Old Betsy is all het up, too," she observed; "so it might as well be here as anywhere."

She pumped up a portable gas stove, filled the coffeepot, and raided the grub box.

The bacon was sizzling nicely when the approach of another traveler was heralded by a bad motor knock. He struggled into view in second gear. Marcia glanced up, and a cold little chill played up and down her spine. The vehicle was painted the conventional somber gray of all hearses, but it lacked the usual neatness and polish. It was a hearse plainly down at the heel. Steam plumed from the radiator with all the enthusiasm of a sawmill on a cold morning.

In keeping with the conveyance, the young man at the wheel was solemn. It was evident that the beauty of sunrise in the California Coast Range was lost on him. He pulled up beside the coupé and regarded Marcia without the enthusiasm that young men, as a rule, displayed in her presence.

"Say," he queried, without preliminaries, "can you spare me some water? This old boiler is all in."

Marcia glanced at the sagging springs. It was evident that the hearse was heavily loaded and the radiator about dry. She supposed that the customary camaraderie of the road might well include hearse drivers. The steepest half of the grade was ahead, and the vehicle had probably been intended for level pavements, and not for mountain climbing.

"Just a minute," she said, "and I'll see." She emptied a canteen into the radiator, and still the water did not show. "That is all I can spare, but I think it's enough to carry you to the summit."

"Thanks! You sure saved my life."

Marcia wondered if he had lost the fine art of smiling. Up in the tree Dan Cupid wondered the same thing. He was facing the toughest job of his life. The height of his ambition had been to bring about an unusual union of hearts—say a romance between an embalmer and a lady poet. He