

# Star-Crossed

A STORY OF LOVE, JEALOUSY, VILLAINY AND REVENGE  
BEHIND THE SCENES IN THE SOPHISTICATED WORLD  
OF THE VAUDEVILLE STAGE

By Florence Clark

**B**UD NOLAN, of the standard big time act known as Neilan and Nolan, Songs, Steps, and Sayings, flung himself out of the stage door of the Supreme Vaudeville Theater. He dug his hands deeply into the pockets of his snappy black-and-white checked suit, threatening that sartorial perfection of line for which he and his partner were noted.

His head was thrust forward and a thin line of pinkish ooze clung to the edge of his collar where it pressed against his taut throat. Clearly, Bud Nolan was perturbed; for his proud boast—"Ten years in the business and never wore a pink-trimmed collar"—was shattered. For once, that poise which distinguished him, off stage and on, had so far vanished as to make him careless in the rite of removing his grease paint to the last trace.

The alleyway leading from stage door to street was dim and deserted. Nolan took advantage of the solitude to utter the pent-up, short, and rather unsatisfactory retort that he had suppressed back in the dressing room in the presence of his partner, Jack Neilan.

"Hell!" he grunted. "Aw, hell!"

The matinee crowd was emerging into the busy street, made dazzling by the thousand incandescents of the Supreme's beckoning entrance.

He paused a moment in the shadowy alley and watched them. Good-natured, rotund housewives, replete with chocolate peppermints from the dime-in-the-slot machines that tempted them from every seat-back, hurried away to prepare supper for home-coming husbands.

High-school students who had cut classes hitched their heavy books higher on their narrow hips and sauntered home-

ward. Night-workers, in the topsy-turvy routine of their lives, cast around for a likely place to have breakfast. A heterogeneous crowd, but a tolerant, infectious spirit of good humor banded them together.

"Wasn't that feller a scream? Neilan—the tall dark one!" called the woman with the diamond arrow in her black satin hat to the woman with the pearl scimitar in hers, who was being swept out of her hearing by the jostling crowd.

"What was that he said? 'My janitor's so mean he'd—'"

"He'd steal his own false teeth to make a vacancy in his mouth," supplied a strange young man who had been swept between the two friends by the current.

The three laughed together.

"Yeh! That's it! He's a card, all right!"

Although Neilan and Nolan had the next to closing spot, their wise cracks were still stimulating the risibilities of the home-bound audience.

La Claire, in "Great Moments in Art," had closed the bill. The crowd had watched her poses respectfully, alert for a quiver, of muscle or eyelid that would betray her fleshy substance beneath the coat of gleaming gold paint that covered her body. They had applauded her with a fine balance of appreciation and restraint.

"We like you," the clapping hands had appeared to say, "but we don't want any encores! We've seen Neilan and Nolan, and for us—the show's over."

Bud Nolan winced as he caught sight of the team name picked out in lights on the marquee.

"Hell!" he ejaculated again.

His monosyllabic remarks were interrupted by a fat, overdressed woman ac-

accompanied by a chubby, fur-coated little girl. They seemed to mushroom out of the pavement with the saucy speed of pixies in an animated cartoon.

"Oh, Mr. Nolan—you are Mr. Nolan—aren't you? We saw you to-day. Your act's so funny! Muriel laughed. Didn't you, dear? Did you hear her laugh, Mr. Nolan? She has a great comedy sense. You must think it funny—I mean strange—our speaking to you this way. Well, of course—it is. And some people wouldn't understand. But being stage folks, it's different with you. And what I wanted to say—you see—"

Bud knew the monologue by heart.

"Muriel's crazy to go on the stage!" the woman said.

In the past Bud had always lied like a gentleman. Diplomatically, he had sent the Muriels and their mothers home, feeling that the race to fame—and, ah, yes—to the fortune their mothers would be thinking of—was all but won. A little striving, a little smile from the goddess, Lady Luck—

Now he told the truth. From the depths of his spirit, he spoke with a vehemence that stripped the words of jest and clothed them with the majesty of naked truth.

"She's crazy if she does!" he snapped.

Muriel's bobbing yellow curls and her mother's dancing feather stopped short. The two stared, bewildered, after the retreating figure of Bud Nolan, judge, jury, and hangman, as he strode rapidly down the busy street.

## II

Bud's troubles had, as far as he could understand it, started three weeks back in Des Moines.

"Rotten town, anyway," he told himself irritably with the helpless lack of rime or reason of one who feels he has to lay the blame for his woes some place.

Up to that time he and Jack had gone along in their irresponsible way, playing their act successfully, shooting pool, sleeping late, talking shop, and tinkering with portable radio sets. Bud had flirted a little, but for the most part he had played fair, tempering the wind of his breezy flattery to the thickness of the coat of sophistication that wrapped the object of his fancy.

Jack Neilan, on the other hand, never "looked over the bill" as they rehearsed

the orchestra Monday mornings. He had loved a girl once, Bud understood vaguely, but his partner and friend had never confided the details of that romance, nor sought consolation for its hurt, if there was any, in the society of other women.

And Bud looked on approvingly. For him it meant that he was secure in the partnership of a good comedian. Back in the lean days, before his fortunate meeting with Jack Neilan, he had played "straight" for a succession of unfunny, ineffectual comedians.

Bud was jealous of his association with Jack, and watchful lest any circumstance interfere with that alliance. Bud flirted with "single" women; exchanged wise cracks with madcap sister acts; took eager young chorus girls out to dinner—but remained heart whole and fancy free.

"Never a cross word between my partner and me," he had boasted a few weeks before to a group of his fellow actors as the train sped on to their next stand.

"Well, you just wait until some jane gets him," advised an old performer, "then he'll be stepping out to do a two-act, or you'll be carrying her with you—excess baggage."

"Not Jack," Bud had answered. "Jack wouldn't give the Queen of Sheba a tumble. Besides," he added facetiously, "he knows when he's well off!"

The week after that they played Des Moines.

The team had the choice spot—next to closing. They took five bows, two encores on Monday night. And when the audience clapped and whistled for more after the lights had changed for the closing act, Bud had to go back and make his speech.

Jack did most of the work, but Bud did the talking. He loved to talk, and Jack looked on from the wings, his blue eyes twinkling and his head cocked slightly to one side in whimsical indulgence of his partner's vanity.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Bud said, "I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, on behalf of my partner and myself, for the way in which you have received our little offering." A local allusion or two followed, and his speech ended with a fervent: "God bless you!"

Another bow, and the audience allowed them to retire.

When Bud reached the dressing room, Jack was not there. He lit a cigarette and,

slumping in the uncomfortable, bent-wood chair, blew the smoke ceilingward.

"Booked solid for next season," he thought, smiling congratulations to his own reflection in the light-bordered mirror. "Knock 'em into the aisles in every town. Have the best partner ever walked on God's green— Say! Where is Jack, anyway? Must tell him about that place in the act where we go into the ambulance driver number. He stepped on my laugh there to-night!"

Just then Bud remembered that he had to see the stage manager, and, slipping into an eye opening dressing gown, he ran lightly down the winding iron staircase to the dim shadow of the wings.

The orchestra was playing a hushed, languorous waltz. Stage hands, impatient for their cue to clear the stage, stood in readiness. Between the flats the stage—a patch of strained white light, clear and vibrant—was to be seen.

Down stage, his back to Bud and his lithe young figure silhouetted against the glare of the stage, Jack leaned. His head was thrown back and his lips were parted as he gazed upward to the center of the stage.

Bud sauntered over and stood close to his partner, looking over his shoulder. The other man gave no sign of awareness, but stood transfixed.

Bud glanced quickly at his partner, back to the stage, and then his eyes shifted and rested steadily, suspiciously, upon the rapt profile of his pal.

Jack's gaze was fixed upon La Claire, who was finishing her act—"Great Moments in Art."

Her gold-painted body, apparently nude except for a loin cloth of metallic tissue that matched the hue of her gleaming flesh, was held aloft on the palms of her assistant, a handsome young athlete whose muscles rippled beneath a similar coat of gold make-up.

She lay there, a slender crescent like a new moon sailing high in the night. Her hair, loosed of its pins, tumbled, a burnished golden cascade across her throat and over her young breasts.

The lilting rhythm of the melody quickened, and the enchanted Jack Neilan's heart raced as the golden girl arose higher and higher above the gilded athlete. The orchestra blared and the curtain fell swiftly.

La Claire's act was over.

The young man lowered her quickly to the floor, and with an impersonal, business-like gesture steadied her for a moment as she gained her balance. La Claire caught up a faded pink kimono that had been hidden by a prop pedestal, flung it about her shoulders, and vanished at the opposite side of the stage.

"Looking over the bill, brother?" Bud questioned with a sly twinkle.

Jack started.

"Maybe," he admitted, "you'd call it that." Turning, he ran, doubling his steps up the circular staircase.

Bud stared for a moment and whistled softly. If his route had depended upon it, he could not have told which word of that answer Jack had hit.

Oh, well, he'd kid Jack about it when they were dressing for the performance that night.

### III

THAT had been three weeks before in Des Moines; three weeks of a moody, irritable Jack, who showed little of the good fellowship that had endeared him to Bud. He did not respond to his friend's wise cracks, especially those concerning the beauteous La Claire.

She had not played on the bill with them since then. A lesser light of vaudeville, her route had taken her over some split-week territory.

But frenzied telegrams had passed between her and Jack Neilan. Bud knew they were frenzied, for the oblong, yellow envelopes were delivered in batches of twos and threes to the lovelorn youth who seemed to live for nothing but the moment when he opened each crisp new one. Then he would place it in his inner breast pocket with the others, now limp and smudged.

Bud found himself looking forward to them, too. He became anxious, his jokes more forced and more pointless.

He was about to lose his grand, good partner!

Women spoiled everything. That had become axiomatic with him. In his years of trouping, Bud Nolan had seen partner turned against partner; money-making acts broken up; promising performers forced into unsuitable rôles by the exigencies of married life.

Of course he could get another partner. He'd have only to stand in front of the

Palace and whistle to find a dozen idle vaudevillians willing to team up with him. But there would be the weary weeks of breaking in. There would be the fight with the booking office to maintain the salary commanded by Neilan & Nolan.

Furthermore—and Bud would not have admitted this for all his hopes of playing a substantial run at the Palace—Jack Neilan was more than half the present act's worth. His was the hauntingly sweet tenor. His was the bubbling Irish wit that slammed home the time-worn gags and made them seem new.

Bud could, however, rattle the ivories, and time to a split second his feeding of the questions that preceded Jack's comedy points. In other words, Bud knew that he was merely a good straight man, who had been allowed through his partner's generosity to share whatever glory accrued to the team.

And so they passed those tense, intervening weeks until that supreme being of the vaudeville world, the booking office, caused the paths of Neilan & Nolan to cross that of La Claire once more.

At orchestra rehearsal that Monday morning the team gave the musical director his cues.

Bud, as usual, did the talking.

"Say, George! Back to page one. Naw! Not there. We cut that out. *Um-pah! Um-pah!* You follow me there George! *Um-pah, um-pah, um-pah!* Now! *Ritardando!* Cue! I give you the cue—'Pretty tough on the bear'—Now! *Pianissimo!* *Tah-yah-yah-yah!* *Tah-yah-yah-yah!* Now, George, now!—where that break comes—*forte, forte, forte!* *Finish!*"

La Claire was not at rehearsal. Her assistant put the orchestra through the changes of her music. Lacking his pretty-fying coat of gold paint, he proved to be a manly looking young fellow.

He was the last to rehearse, and Bud eyed him intently in the hope that he might, by some happy chance, find in La Claire's partner a solution of his own problems. But he let that thought pass. It could wait.

Neilan & Nolan played the matinée with their usual success. When they had taken their last bow, Bud lingered on the side of the stage and puffed a comforting cigarette in defiance of the fire laws. He looked around for Jack and presently came upon him in second entrance.

Jack Neilan stood in exactly the same worshipful attitude he had been found on that memorable day three weeks back in Des Moines. His head was thrown back, and now a tender smile played about the corners of his mouth.

As he beheld him, Bud saw it all in a new light.

"Why, it's nothing but a one night stand with Jack," he told himself. "He'll snap out of it."

Buckling on the faithful sword of insouciance that had pulled him through many an awkward moment in the past, he sauntered over and stood near the silent Jack.

"I see," Bud remarked casually, "that Aphrodite without her sweat-shirt is with us again this week!"

The orchestra was mounting in the passionate strains of the waltz. A flash of gold claimed the stage.

Jack turned. His forehead wrinkled angrily under its grease paint, but he answered in kind.

"Cut it," he said. "That line's sour!"

"Kidding, Jack. Don't get sore."

Like a shower of comets, the orchestra crashed out with a final long drawn, triumphant note as La Claire's body trembled aloft and then lay like a drooping golden lily on the rim of a Grecian urn.

The curtain fell.

She caught up the faded pink kimono, and, wrapping its well-worn folds about her figure, looked searchingly into the wings. As she caught sight of Jack her stiffly painted, small, round face twisted into a metallic grimace. But his lover's heart knew it for a smile.

Jack caught his partner impulsively by the shoulder.

"Want you to meet her, Bud," he said.

She was coming toward them, and he reached out a helping hand as she stepped over a small platform.

"La Claire, meet my partner, Bud Nolan."

The girl held the shabby gown closer and shyly offered Bud her hand. "I'm glad to—" The rest of her greeting was lost in a thumping clatter of scenery.

Stage hands, with no audience to consider now, were striking the set with a great accompaniment of noise.

Bud would have liked more favorable circumstances for the meeting. He wanted to assay the little lady, and found him-



self somewhat handicapped. Her face told him nothing.

Her features were almost indistinguishable beneath the gold lacquer. Her eyelids were heavy with it, and her hair, like masses of molten gold, hung about her cheeks and shoulders.

Nevertheless, a winsome, modest personality shone through this strange mask. She was no ordinary girl. The garish make-up would have accentuated even a trace of coarseness.

Bud was sorely puzzled. How was he to offset her spell over Jack? That he had been presented to her was a good beginning.

#### IV

BUD NOLAN was fond of his partner in a shallow, selfish way. He knew, or thought he knew, that love mattered little to Jack.

Jack would forget her. Jack would even thank him. Together they would laugh and wise-crack over the incident as they dressed for the many performances to come.

Bud was no twentieth century Machiavelli, however. He had neither the intelligence nor the energy to plan deliberately. Ridicule, wise cracks—oh, above all, wise cracks!—were his only weapons.

He went up to the dressing room.

Jack was there, softly humming the waltz tune from *La Claire's* act as he shrugged into his street clothes. He lingered on the high notes, shaping them to sweetness and warmth with his pursed lips.

"Happy, Jack?" Bud asked.

"Happy?" The young lover spurned the utter inadequacy of the word. "I'm cuckoo!"

For a moment Jack was silent. Then he turned to Bud, and the other man saw that his partner was deep in thought.

"Bud," he said steadily, "we've got to break up the act. This is our last week of this time. Hold on a minute—"

Bud had dropped into a chair, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

"*La Claire* and I are going to be married next week," Jack said. "We'll wire Bloom that we can't take that summer park time he offered us. She's playing *Chi* the first half of next week. Bud, I wouldn't part with her again! I've been through hell these past three weeks. I felt weak all over, Bud, every time I opened a tele-

gram from her; and worse when I wasn't opening one! I'm hit! And hit hard! And you know, Bud, it isn't her figure, either: I've seen pretty girls before. How can I explain it to a leatherhead like you?" Jack smiled, a paternal, affectionate smile. "She doesn't seem to even know she's beautiful."

Then he summed it all up in an old, old line. His eyes grew wide with wonderment at his own marvelous discovery.

"She's different from the rest!" Jack Neilan said. "Anyway, I'll treat you right, Bud, but we won't talk about that part of it now."

When this moment came for Bud Nolan to face his friend, he proved himself a far better actor than his stage performances had ever shown him to be. Although he felt peevish and hurt, he grasped his partner's hand firmly and looked him straight in the eye as he spoke.

"I understand, Jack! I wish you luck, old man!"

"Good old Bud!"

Jack was much relieved by Bud's gracious acceptance of the situation. He brightened perceptibly as he plied his face with a greased towel and chatted in the old, frank way.

"You know what you've always said, Bud—about women spoiling things?" Jack remarked. "Now, as I see it, it isn't the women who spoil things; it's the fact that no act is big enough for three people when two of them are in love. I want *Claire* and myself to start off on the right foot. Ours isn't going to be one of those vamp-till-ready-to-exit marriages. We fixed it up by telegram mostly—though I had dinner with her the last three nights in Des Moines. Gee! I'm going to try awful hard to make her happy!"

He talked now as much to himself as to his partner.

"We're going to get a boat," he expanded joyously, "a fourteen footer—flat bottom—all steel—outboard motor. Thought about plunging on a two-thousand-dollar speeder, but I guess we'll take it slow. Maybe we'll get a house in Freeport later, and that'll take a good chunk out of the old bank roll. And, say— Oh, you're dressed!"

Bud had, indeed, dressed with astonishing rapidity. For the first time in his career he neglected to remove all his grease paint. With a brave and casual, "So

long!" he flung himself out of the dressing room.

It was then he relieved his feelings with the cuss word. It was then he met up with and neatly disposed of Muriel and her mother.

## V

BUD NOLAN hurried on to his hotel. It was a favorite with performers, and known in their lingo as a madhouse. Which meant that everything went, provided it was within the bounds of decency.

Hilarious games of Red Dog, impromptu piano recitals at 2 A.M., supper at 7 A.M., breakfast at 5 P.M.—these untimely doings were understood perfectly by the management. In the phrasing embossed on its letterhead, the Royal "catered to the profession."

Bud entered the dingy, red-carpeted lobby with its profusion of high, brass cuspidors, and sauntered in the direction of the telephones. The miraculously marcelled, thirty-five-year-old girl who presided at the switchboard flashed him a wide smile of welcome.

"Anything for me, Gladys, my love?" he asked.

"Guess she don't know you're in town yet, Mr. Nolan," the telephone girl replied, and smiled again.

He leaned on the top of the switchboard.

"Gladys!"

"Mr. Nolan!"

"I've thought about you constantly since we—"

"Hello-lo-lo! Yeh? Number— No!"

"—played here last time. I wondered if we couldn't go for a bite after the show. I wrote you several letters, but I tore them up. Thought I'd wait until I saw you personally."

Then he gave her the look.

Dropping his gaze, he waited humbly for her answer.

She glanced quickly at his young face with its curious suggestion of weariness in the droop of the mouth.

"Well, mebbe," she admitted. "Let you know later. Say, your partner's stopping here, ain't he? I saw him go out this morning. Who's the girl with him?"

"Some jane," Bud replied, and yawned.

"Well, you'll let me know, Gladys."

He scarcely heard her answer. He had an idea. The inspiration had come to him

as he stood before her. If—if he could show Jack that La Claire was like all the rest of them! No fireworks, of course, just a mild flirtation—

There was a week in which to do it.

"Poor Jack! Poor, daffy Jack! Going and getting himself a ball and chain! Why—"

Bud felt it was his solemn duty to save his partner from his own folly.

"I'll look you up after the show, Gladys," he said aloud.

Women were like that. He gave them the look, dropped his gaze humbly, and they were won.

Bud Nolan dined well and returned to the theater earlier than was necessary. The show had commenced, but there was no need to hurry. He looked over the dressing-room list and saw that La Claire was scheduled for No. 12 dressing room. Then he consulted the key rack and saw that the key to No. 12 was not there. That meant that La Claire had come in.

"Which is no surprise to papa," he thought. "Must take her a pretty long time to get on that trick make-up."

He proceeded to No. 12, which was on the opposite side of the stage to his own dressing room. He paused outside the door.

For a moment he had considered breezing up, *rat-tatting* his fingers on the panel in the manner of a buck dancer's finishing steps, and calling out the fraternal greeting that is honored by star and chorus girl alike. It is the greeting that has held the place of honor as long as the oldest character man can recall— "Are you decent?"

But caution stepped in. Instead, Bud knocked respectfully.

"Uh-huh?" the response came.

"Bud Nolan, Neilan and Nolan. I'd like to see you, Miss La Claire, if I may."

He hadn't the least idea upon what pretext he would engage the girl in conversation, but he trusted to his ready wit to help him. No matter how foolish-sounding, it would be the thin edge of the wedge.

One week only remained in which to— well—he would have laughed at himself and pretended to curl a waxed mustache in true villain fashion if the idea that he was deliberately going to try to break La Claire's spell over Jack had suggested itself to him. He had no plan, only a vague notion that it would be better to scout

around and see where he stood in the matter, than to let Jack chase off to a marrying minister with some little whipper-snapper that he had just met.

After a few moments' delay La Claire opened the door. She was already made up except for the arranging of her hair, which was always coiled tightly about her head at the beginning of her act. Now it hung in glittering confusion about her shoulders.

She smiled a careful, wry little smile. Then, in pantomime, she conveyed to Bud that she could not move her lips for fear of cracking the gold paint make-up. Her manner, however, was as cordial as he could have wished.

"Oh, I see!" he exclaimed. "Your make-up stops you from being yourself! Well, guess I'll have to do all the talking. My partner—"

That was a false start. A puzzled proposition, this immobile, painted face!

"I like your act immensely, Miss La Claire."

Safe ground here!

"I watched it every performance in Des Moines. It's a marvelous finish you have. Suppose you go big at the Palace?" He laughed. "I forgot—you can't talk, but it's hardly necessary to answer that. It's marvelous how you hold 'em in. The manager in Des Moines was telling me that it's seldom a dumb act does that in closing position in his house. Well, I hope to see something of you here. I had a bad cold in Des Moines."

She had been seated before her dressing table, coiling the masses of her hair and securing it with shining gold pins. The last pin put in place, she turned to him.

Bud Nolan bent nearer and gave her the look as he had Gladys. Then he glanced away as though abashed by his own boldness.

Still she sat, an impassive, golden figurine, draped ludicrously in an old pink kimono.

Bud shifted uneasily in his chair. Her golden covering formed a mask beyond which he could not see.

Was she favorably impressed? He hoped so, but the blank little face with its half-closed, shifting eyes told him nothing.

## VI

He looked instinctively at her hands, those expressive members of the body

which relentlessly betray what the face oftentimes conceals. The tiny, smooth fingers were twitching convulsively. Those golden hands fluttered like exotic birds caught in a net. Suddenly, they dropped and hung at the sides of the chair as her body relaxed.

Bud made a move as if to prevent her falling, and in a moment she had sprung to her feet and flung the chair aside. With quick, darting movements, she tore off the blond wig, revealing a closely cropped silky black head, seized a wet sponge from the dressing table, and with a few deft passes removed the golden mask.

Patches of the paint remained on her cheeks, and the water from the sponge, trickling over her shoulders, streaked their smoothness to a fantastic pattern.

"Bud Nolan!" she said evenly.

He stared for a moment, and then his face broke into a friendly, relieved smile.

"Laura Clarey! Well, well! Pretty clever—these Chinese! Why all the second act stuff? You had me scared for a minute. How are you, Laura? Well, well!"

Bud had always held to the belief that human perplexities and their solutions were controlled by what he called "the breaks."

You started things going; in a lazy way you saw that they didn't stop going, but the final success or failure of any given thing depended ultimately on the breaks. Simple!

In his most hopeful moments, however, he had never anticipated a break so utterly satisfying as this.

"Gee, Laurie, it's good to see you." He settled down in his chair with an air of proprietorship.

La Claire looked at him scornfully.

The thin edge of the wedge had been inserted successfully. He decided that he had better leave well enough alone. Moreover, he had to have time to think.

"Well, I guess I'll be going," he remarked. "I expect you'll have to do a little patching on that make-up of yours. See you after the show to-night."

"No, you won't, Bud!" she blazed. "You won't go out of this room until we understand each other perfectly. When I met you, I was nothing but a kid. There were twenty of us in 'Henri's Dancing Dolls,' and I was the youngest. Guess that's why you picked me out of the mob to make love to."

"I was new to the show business, and

I was flattered by the attentions of an actor. An actor? You were only a utility man in Sam Garson's act then, but you talked a big line.

"You rushed me, and then grew tired of the chase— Don't interrupt me! Even though I had done nothing wrong, I was jeered at by the girls in the dressing room. They taunted me night and day. 'Bud's thrown you down, has he?' they snickered. 'Mustn't fall for actors that way your first season out or you'll get a bad name. You'd better look out or Henri'll throw you out of the act.' I'd done nothing wrong, as you know, but things were dull, and they did it for amusement.

"At last I could stand it no longer, and when your route took you to Kansas City, I jumped the act and followed you. I thought my reputation in the show business was gone unless you married me. 'Henri's Dancing Dolls' was my whole world, then. Now"—she laughed at the child she had been then—"I'd tell them all to go to the devil! I've learned a thing or two since you pushed me out of the stage door of the Gayety in Kansas City, to sink or swim."

The girl paused a moment to control her voice.

"Oh, I love Jack! I never let on I'd ever seen you before. I didn't know how he'd take it. I hardly knew him then. What a fool I was not to tell him. Jack said we both had to—to—"

She crumpled into her chair, a pathetic figure of defeat. Tears came fast, elaborating the mottled pattern on her small, elfin face.

"—to start," she sobbed, "on—the—right—foot!"

"But, Laurie," Bud protested, "I'm awfully fond of you. You didn't give me a chance back there in Kansas City. I've always wanted to explain how that was. Give me another chance, Laurie."

She continued to sob, and did not answer him.

"Anyway, Jack isn't the fellow for you," Bud declared. "Now I like Jack, and all that, but he's—well—he's—"

He broke off uncertainly.

"Why, Jack's girl crazy!" Bud went on. "You're probably the first one who ever gave him a tumble. Girl crazy! That's what! Some girl sent him a post card once and he remembers the picture on it!"

"That's a lie!" Laura cried. She was

on her feet now. "Come on! Come on to Jack's dressing room now and we'll have this out. If he loves me he'll understand. If not—" She glared defiantly at Bud. "But he does! Oh, he does!"

She started for the door, but Bud stepped in front of her. She flung herself upon him and pounded the rough tweed of his shoulder. When he dodged, she reached, womanlike, for his hair. He caught her wrists and held them in an easy, firm grip.

"Listen to me, Laurie," he pleaded. "I think both you and Jack are clean crazy. Look at yourself! Just look!" He propelled her gently toward the mirror.

"You look like a hardware pushcart! What will Jack think? You talk about being afraid he won't understand. Holy Smokes! That rig would stump a blind man!"

She stared fixedly at her disheveled reflection, and as he saw that she was considering his arguments, he went on:

"I know Jack better than you do, honey. If you run to him looking like this he's sure to get a wrong impression. Why don't you be sensible? We'll make a joke of it all instead of taking it so damn serious!"

Bud spoke sincerely and with a praise-worthy show of good sense. Even then half formed plans to bring about a peaceable understanding with the girl occupied his consciousness.

Bud was no dyed-in-the-wool villain, but a Smart Aleck, and an opportunist. He had little of the intelligence and resource of the thoroughgoing ladies' man.

"There's a good girl, Laurie," he said soothingly; "patch up your make-up. *Whew!* I'll never be on unless I hurry. You leave it to me, Laurie."

La Claire nodded assent wearily. Bud, with a smile of tribute to her wisdom, slipped from the room.

## VII

MEANWHILE, Jack Neilan had been waiting in No. 20 dressing room for La Claire's unknown visitor to depart. The room was occupied by Hal Norcross, the young man whose splendid physique served to make a pedestal for the loveliness of the golden girl. The two men had been chatting. Norcross applied the gilt mixture mechanically as he talked.

Jack lounged in a chair, and occasionally



glanced through the door which he had left ajar, the better to command a view of La Claire's dressing room door. He had heard low voices within a few moments before, and, supposing that she was discussing a business matter, probably with the house manager, had decided to wait in Norcross's room until her visitor had gone.

He glanced up just as Bud Nolan withdrew from No. 12. Jack saw the intimate, knowing smile Bud flashed to the girl, and noted his airy swagger as he turned down the hall.

Jack knew instinctively that no ordinary errand had brought Bud to La Claire's dressing room. From long, close association he was familiar with every expression that crossed his pal's face.

In that smile, Jack read triumph. The insolent strut meant only one thing; Bud's vanity had been flattered by a woman who flirted.

Jack was on his feet quickly. His heart pounded, and for a blind moment his head felt as though it were being pierced with long, cruel needles that sparked red points of light. Without a word, he left Norcross, who had reached boredom, anyhow, in his story of the difficulties of a professional underlander.

Jack knocked shakily at the door of No. 12.

"Oh, it's you, Jack," La Claire called out with forced gayety. "I'm not decent, and I'll never be on unless I hurry."

Down the stairs he went, across the stage behind the back drop and up the stairs to his own dressing room, No. 1. Jack's temper had cooled somewhat by this time.

Bud was there, bustling noisily about his preparations. He snapped towels and clapped plasters of cleansing cream upon his face with loud smacks. He fairly beamed at Jack.

"Ah, here you are, old man!" he remarked. "Say! You remember that act we played with—Williams and White? Well, did you know that Williams, the little guy, is out in Hollywood now and getting big money as a gag-man for one of the big concerns?"

When Jack saw that Bud did not mean to tell him anything about his visit to La Claire's dressing room, he answered the other's trivial questions casually. His emotions, love, loyalty, distrust, jealousy, like unfriendly chemical elements, were min-

gled explosively within his heart and he dared not uncover them.

Then suddenly he said:

"How do you like La Claire, Buddy?"

Here, if ever, was Bud's opportunity to keep his promise to Laura. He thrust it aside.

"Couldn't see much of her on the stage this afternoon," he replied. "Don't believe I'd know her if I met her on the street. That make-up covers her pretty well. But she seemed a nice girl, and if you like her, Jack, that's good enough for me!"

When Jack tapped on La Claire's dressing room door that night after the show, she pleaded that her head ached, which it did, indeed, and begged prettily to be excused from her supper date with him.

He agreed rather more promptly than she would have liked, and turned his footsteps toward the Royal Hotel. "Something between Bud and Claire," he mused bitterly.

The thought tortured Jack. He swung between a stanch loyalty to the girl and an implacable, ugly jealousy that ran like fire in his veins. He fought the two as he walked, and by the time he reached the hotel love had triumphed.

Jack had made up his mind to ignore the circumstance of Bud's visit to Claire's dressing room, whatever occasioned it. They would be married the following Monday in Chicago. Years of happiness were ahead for both of them.

His heart was light now. He took the three steps that led to the big door of the hotel at a bound. Then he looked up to see the familiar broad tweed back of Bud Nolan and the slender profile of La Claire. Her face was hidden by a drooping hat as the two stepped into the elevator and were shot upward out of sight.

That the pair had met only a moment before on the very spot he now saw them, Jack could not divine. All his charitable thoughts, the tenderness and loyalty he had felt for her, deserted him violently. The wrench left him standing white and quivering in the red-carpeted lobby.

## VIII

Jack was through with both La Claire and Bud. He made that plain to them: not in so many words, but in a grim determination to avoid their society as far as possible. He had torn up the boat cata-

logue that only a few weeks before he had scanned so lovingly as he dwelt in fancy upon the joys it pictured.

Two or three miserable days wore on. Jack was unapproachable in the dressing room, and disappeared in his leisure hours, but on the stage he was superb. The laughs came faster than ever before, and the applause equaled any that had ever come to Neilan and Nolan.

On the fourth day La Claire determined to see him and tell him everything. She had spent wakeful, troubled nights, inventing and abandoning plan after plan to win him back.

The chief difficulty was to reach him. Her messages were unanswered. He seemed never to be in his room at the Royal. She had appealed to Bud, who assured her that he hadn't the least notion why Jack was acting upstage. He cheered her, too, and told her that all would be well if she would only wait.

Meanwhile, Jack was like a wraith who took mortal form only when he appeared on the stage. About the fourth day he abandoned No. 1 dressing room altogether, appearing in his street clothes, without any facial make-up. He had often done it before when he was rushed, and, as Neilan and Nolan were a sidewalk act, it made little difference.

The Saturday matinée arrived. In a few hours their paths would lie in opposite directions. Bud was going to Los Angeles to await the opening of their act in September. He was considering an offer from a prominent film company to become their head gag-man at a most tempting salary. At any rate this was his story.

La Claire had three split weeks around Chicago, and then she was laying off until the opening of the new season. Jack did not speak of the future.

La Claire reached the theater before the first act had gone on. She dressed in her gold costume, topped by a new, lustrous, cobalt blue kimono. What woman in the throes of a star-crossed love affair has not found some little solace in the possession of new clothes?

She waited for Jack at the left of the stage. When he finally appeared his face was haggard and seemed thinner to her. It was almost time for his entrance cue. He walked directly to first entrance.

"Jack!" she whispered as he passed her. He appeared not to hear.

"Jack!" She caught his sleeve. "I want to tell you about Bud and me."

The act preceding Neilan and Nolan was finishing. Muffled applause rolled back of the stage.

"Long ago, Jack, I knew Bud, and—" She searched for words that would tell her story quickly in the few moments left to her. "And Bud— Oh, Jack!"

The boom of the opening bars of Neilan and Nolan's music broke over them like a wrathful sea. He squared his shoulders as if for physical combat and strode upon the stage. La Claire looked after him, swallowed convulsively, and then set her mouth into a firm, hard, little line.

"If Jack Neilan wants me," she told herself, "he'll do the waylaying!"

Nevertheless, she waited for him in her dressing room after the matinée. As she tapped the toe of her patent leather pump impatiently, arranged and rearranged the hair that swept her cheeks beneath the brim of her small, black hat, a fearful doubt took shape in her mind.

"He isn't going to come!" she mused forlornly.

She studied a tiny scratch on the rim of the can of "Goldine." How she had looked forward to the time when, as Jack's cherished wife, she would have no further need for the sticky, uncomfortable mixture! But the dream was over.

Well, she had the formula to make more of the golden stuff. She would continue her work. She gathered up her hand bag and gloves, covered the tin can with a clean towel, and locked her dressing room door.

At that moment, on the other side of the stage, Bud Nolan was regaling his partner with the story of his escapade with the then Laura Clarey. He had been talking for some time.

"She was stuck on me, all right," the straight man was saying, "back in those days. We had a little misunderstanding and lost track of each other. When she saw me again— Poor kid! She didn't know how to tell you, Jack, but I think something of the old feeling came back. Don't ask me to explain it, Jack. You know as much about it as I do!"

Jack Neilan sat dejectedly at the dressing table, listening thoughtfully. All his fighting spirit was gone. His eyes were dull and lifeless.

"There's just one thing I want to know,

Bud," he said. "Answer me truthfully, no matter how it's going to hurt. This is what I want to know: How stuck on you was she?"

"Stuck?" Bud repeated. Then he answered promptly.

"Lots!" he said significantly. "Lots!"

## IX

OVER at the Royal Hotel the usual six o'clock rush was on. Groups of new arrivals and departing guests passed through the lobby. The brunt of the work fell upon Gladys, the telephone operator. She snapped plugs out, jammed others in, and kept up a singsong:

"Yeh! Yeh! No, he's out! Ice water? Yeh! A pack of cards? Wait a minute—" Then she turned from her job to become social.

"Oh, Mr. Neilan! How are you? I ain't seen you all week. I saw your partner, though. That guy gives me a pain! You don't mind me saying that, do you, Mr. Neilan? He's got gall, all right! Where do you play next week? Oh, breaking up your act for the season? Yeh! Say, Mr. Neilan, there's something worrying me. You know that cute little girl who poses in the gold paint?"

Gladys attended to the board that had begun to buzz angrily, and continued:

"Well, I couldn't help hearing them two talking—her and your partner—over the phone. She was crying like anything.

She's just like me; can't fight good because she cries when she's mad. Well, she was accusing him of telling you a whole lot of big lies."

Gladys's eyes flashed indignation. In protecting La Claire she was defending herself and all womankind.

"Mr. Neilan, who's the liar? It seems she was just a kid when she met him, and she ain't done a single thing wrong. But she cried a lot, and said something about you and her starting off on the right foot. Your partner was going to fix up something he didn't fix. I wouldn't trust that guy. He makes too many promises he doesn't keep! He's an awful liar, if you ask me, Mr. Neilan, and she's awful cute!"

The board was buzzing furiously now. Gladys selected a favored drop.

"It's her room, Mr. Neilan," she confided. "She's asking if you came in yet?"

"Tell her I'll be right up!" Jack Neilan almost shouted. "And Gladys, you're—you're one of the Choir Invisible out of celestial peace! You've made me so darned happy I feel religious!"

She watched the young man as he dashed into the elevator.

"What he said about me sounded like a race horse's breeding," she mused. "But Mr. Neilan wouldn't say it if it didn't mean something awful nice. Anyhow, I've just been plugged in on a real romance!"

Gladys sighed, and a far-off dream suddenly blurred her tired eyes.

## ARTIFICE

WHEN youth is in its Maytime  
It sings of unlived years,  
Of grief and pain and sorrow,  
Of terror and of tears;

It sounds the throb of heartbreaks,  
It apes the pang of loss,  
And paints upon its canvas  
A spear thrust and a cross.

But age in bleak December  
Lives over vanished Junes,  
Love, laughter, mirth and kisses,  
And puts them into tunes.

It blends delight and rapture  
In one triumphant chord,  
And paints a golden stairway,  
A resurrected Lord.

*L. Mitchell Thornton*