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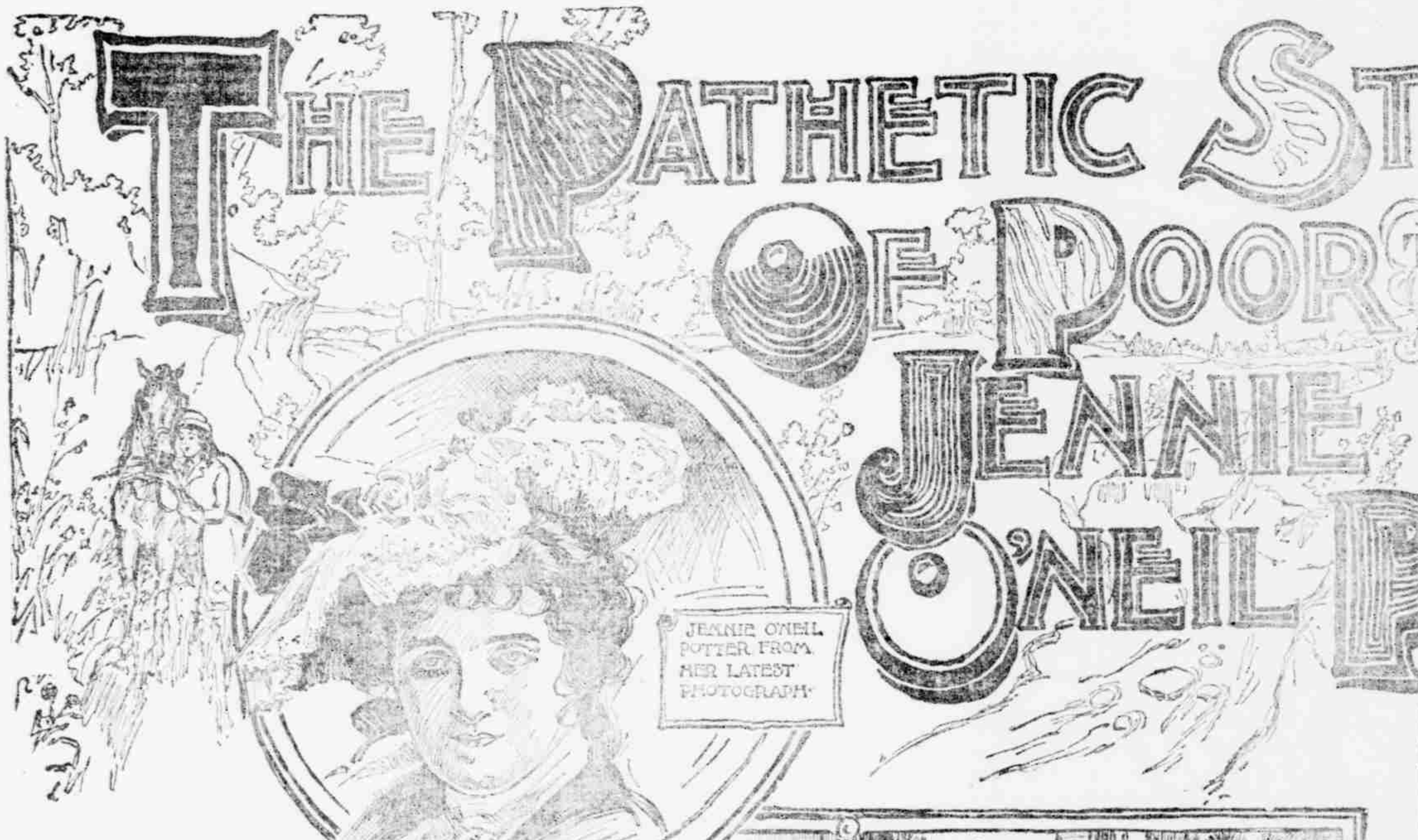
THE PATHETIC STORY OF POOR JENNIE O'NEIL POTTER.

THE ST. LOUIS REPUBLIC. MAGAZINE SECTION. Part 4 14 Pages


JENNIE O'NEIL POTTER FROM HER LATEST PHOTOGRAPH.

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JENNIE O'NEIL POTTER IN HER BED AT THE HOSPITAL.

WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away.
Change and decay in all around I see,
O Thou, who changest not, abide with me.

Softly, sweetly, peacefully, happily, the words of this old hymn are sung in St. Luke's Hospital, New York, as the pain-laden days and nights that lie between Jennie O'Neil Potter and Death are rolled back into the unending past.

The song is not like that of the swan. For the death-song of the swan is its first one. Jennie Potter has been singing all her short life—that life which began among the quaint, fragrant old roses that are almost a part of her parents' home at Patch Grove, a dotting of human habitations upon the Wisconsin prairies. She sang when she was but a toddling child, wheedling her father and her brothers into lifting her behind them upon the horses which they rode; she sang as she sat in the old grape-vine swing, clutching her tiny fingers about the rough bark of the drooping vine, digging her toes against the ground that had been made hard by the swishing of many feet across it, and was carried with the motions of the swaying vine in a semicircle, whose points were among the trees.

She sang—and dreamed.

When years had made of the child a girl, and the dreams had become an ambition and a purpose, she sang in great cities. The songs were not those where the notes and semi-notes, the pauses and the beats, the trills and the crescendoes and the diminuendoes are all written down upon a sheet of paper and are called the music man's score. They were word-songs of that time when she had swung in the old grape-vine swing—when she had ridden behind her brothers and her father on their horses—when she had drunk the fragrance of the old roses and the swift wind of the prairies, and had found in them a potion which brought dreams of the days to come, the sweetness of life, the joys of living, and of the great things that she, a tiny wisp of a girl, would do when she came to be grown. They were songs that thrilled by the music that was in the hearts of the singer and those who listened.

People called them recitations—these songs that Jennie Potter sang. They honored her; they showered favors upon her; they called her a great elocutionist, and took her across the sea; and there, in London, she became more in a way than even her dreams in the old grapevine swing had shown her that she would be.

Now all that is ended. Childhood days were passed when she left the old Wisconsin home. Girlhood's days are ended now—and the door that stood ajar in her way to what seemed full womanhood has beyond it only that huge, dark abyss which shuddering man calls the grave.

Jennie Potter has seen beyond the door. It has swung back full upon its mystic hinges, and learned doctors have peered with her beyond its threshold and told her that on the other side there is—death!

The learned doctors trembled as they told her this—trembled and bent their wise eyes upon the ground. When they lifted them again, they saw that the girl was smiling—smiling at the thought, now made into knowledge, that soon that which was she would drop into the chasm—another atom in that stream of sacrifices which, from its inception, life has been offering in its vain efforts to fill the maw of insatiable death.

She smiled, and her clear eyes met the misty ones of those men who study life—its beginning, its continuance and its end—as an abstract thing—a cold science in which cause produces effect, and effect through the workings of that mysterious thing called Nature, is evolved again into cause.

"I know it, gentlemen," she told them. "Last night I had a dream. A great black horse laid his huge head upon my shoulder, and pressed his velvet nose against my cheek. I was frightened—I begged him to go away. But the huge head still rested upon my shoulder, and the cold, soft nose still brushed my cheek, and the soundless hoofs still fell upon the floor in steps that kept pace with my own. I ran, and in another room I saw the man that I love. I cried to him. He sprang to me and held out his arms; but sorrow came into his face and tears welled into his eyes and his eager arms dropped to his sides. He groaned and said: 'It is too late, Jennie; little girl, it is too late!'

"Then I knew that the great black horse beside me was death. It was hard for me to think that life was ending—that love, the pretty things, the sweet things, the noble things, the happy things that make the sum of the bright side of our existence, were no longer to be mine. But in a moment the sadness had passed. Death had lost its dreadfulness. It took on a new form; it came to be a surcease from pain—that terrible thing that has been my agony for so long. It came to be rest, and a life again among the roses of my old home; for do you know that I can never think of heaven but as a place where fragrant roses grow as they do about the old house at Patch Grove, and where there is a great old grapevine swing? And as I thought of this, there came to me that dear old hymn:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide,
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see,
Oh, Thou, who changeth not, abide with me.

"The sound of my voice as I sang awoke me. Fear was gone."

The doctors say that Jennie Potter has a cancer, and that she will live only a few weeks—possibly a month, but certainly not more than two months. "If you had only come to us sooner," they say. "But now it is too late."

Now and then there are tears in the eyes and in the voice of this pretty little sufferer; for she is pretty. There are roses in her cheeks, though they be from fever; there is a brightness in her eyes, though it, too, be from fever; there is a soft music in her voice, and a cheeriness, albeit a trace of sadness, in her smile. Disease has not wasted her; there is no fear of death to bring wrinkles to the forehead. But now and then a wistfulness comes into her face, as she thinks of all that death will mean in the severance of ties that have made life sweet to her. She thinks of the successes that she has achieved in her art, and longs for just one more taste of the intoxicating draught of applause. She wants to recite again; and the song that she wants to recite is not "Swinging in the Grapevine Swing," in which she made her first great hit; nor "How Salvator Won," another old-time success; nor "Flirts and Matrons," that wonderful monologue which tells of the life of a woman from the cradle to the grave, and in which she introduced and appeared in the costumes of over fifty different characters. It is another monologue that she wishes to recite—one that shall be a history of her life, that shall tell of the time when she was a child on the prairies of Wisconsin; of the dreams that she dreamed; of the struggles that she had; of the successes that she achieved; of the romance that budded, but did not bloom; and of the end of it all in death. She does not want it to be bitter—she wants it to be only bright where her life was bright, and sweetly sad where her life was sad. This song she wishes to recite in some great hall with the last bit of strength that is left to her.

"I want to tell the people that come to hear me how it feels to know that one is dying, and not to be afraid. I want to tell them that 'it is not all of life to live, nor all of death to die.' I want to tell them that I hope to live again in the home of my childhood, where I dreamed great dreams of what I should do in this great, good old world. I want to tell that I feel that I shall see once more the fragrant roses that grow about the old home, and see other children sit in the old grapevine swing, where I used to sit for so many, many hours and looked up into the great blue sky and wonder what it all held, and if heaven were really away up there. I want to tell them good-by. For the world has been good to me, and life has been sweet, even though the pain that tortures me at times is so awful to bear. One should not expect all of the pleasure of life and none of its pain. I am thankful that it was given to me to live only such a wee little term of suffering, and if that suffering is so intense that at times it is agony, I feel that I should be glad that it is concentrated, and that misery did not extend over the whole of my short existence, as it has done over that of so many, many that I have known.

"My work? It will be hard to leave that—yes. How I loved my work! It was the one motive that I knew—the one great thing of my life until I knew—him. Yes; I have had the romance without which life could not be complete. There is a man whom I love, and who loves me. He has not been to see me yet; but he will come. And it will be sweet to see him again, even though it will be only to tell him good-by. But it is of my work that I should talk, isn't it? How I loved it—the music, the perfume, the dazzling light, the intoxication of the applause—the fascination of it all! Sometimes I feel rebellious that I should have to leave it all now—when I am still young, and when there are such heights that are yet unreached. I look out of my window, and see the stream of people passing to and fro—some of them young, some of them of middle age—some of them leaning upon their crutches and canes that they may more easily bear the weight of the years that rest upon them. Do you think it is wicked for me to wish that I were with them once again?—to think that it is a hard fate that will allow them to live for so many, many years, while I may live but for so few?

"But, after all, life is not so much a matter of years. It is a matter of feelings, of sensations. I would far rather live only until March—that is the limit that the doctors have fixed—and see all—all—of my friends, than to live for years and years and years, and never see them again. For I have such dear friends. They have not forgotten me. See these lovely pink slippers—what a pity I shall never wear them! See all these pretty flowers, these dainties, these notes, these books—all of them were sent to me by my friends. And the newspapers have not forgotten me, either! That is the kindest thing of all, for when we who have once been in the public eye have sunk from its view, the newspapers wait until we are dead to write and say nice things about us—to tell what we were, and how we were loved and admired—and how nobly we met our death!

"But how I digress! I really mean to speak of my work; but there is so much that I want to say, and I have so little time in which to say it.

"Do you think that the doctors will let me recite again? I do so hope they will. Now they make me keep quiet. They catch me now and then when the old spirit comes over me, and I begin to recite the poems that I used to recite before I came into the shadow of death. They say that it causes excitement, and that excitement produces fever, and they make me lie down again. But I can't help it. When they are gone I sit up in bed and imagine that I am once more on the platform, before the footlights, speaking the lines that hold them silent, and swaying them by the power that God has given me to express the feelings that I have. Ah! how good it all is! With a voice and a gesture to sway men's souls, as the wind sways the fields of corn!

Off to the race track! Off!
See Salvator win!
My Salvator—fair to the lovers of horse
As a beautiful woman is fair to man's sight;
Pure type of the thoroughbred, clean limbed and bright—
Stood taking the plaudits as only his due,
And nothing at all unexpected or new;
And then, there before us that bright flag is spread!
There's a roar from the grandstand, and Tenny's ahead!
I thumbed the reins of Prince Charley's great son—
He's off, like a rocket—the race is begun!

"And then I stand, flushed and excited, bowing and smiling, as they burst into applause—applause, the sweetest sound that ever fell upon human ear and swelled human heart! Applause, which means that there is something in poor, insignificant You that has stirred others—that means that—oh, what it means, all that it means, no one can tell! It is the essence of the life of an artist!

"Ah! I tell you many's the good race we've ridden to the finish together, Salvator and I! Both in New York and London I made my big success with that poem. You should hear them shout on the grandstand—I mean in the audience—when we got to the post. It was my dear old daddy's blood that did it. Do you think I could ever have ridden Salvator in the drawing-rooms of the world if I hadn't grown up in a stable?

"And to think that it is all ended for me! And that poor, old Salvator must find another jockey—but never one who will love him as I did! Pshaw! There's a tear! And I was meaning to be so brave! But perhaps my friends will not think I am ungrateful for that life has held for me because now and then a tear will come when I think that I must leave it."

A CHARACTERISTIC POSE IN RECITATION.

MISS POTTER IN ST. LOUIS.

Miss Potter was once a guest of relatives in St. Louis. It was before she had become a professional, some ten years ago. She remained here several weeks, and was frequently heard at receptions, but did not appear in public. She is remembered as a very dashing girl, beautiful, clever, witty, ambitious, and one of the best-dressed women that ever visited St. Louis. She had a great fondness for children, and took unusual pleasure in teaching them to recite. A young woman, now married and still living here, remembers Miss Potter chiefly from the fact that she, then a little girl, learned from her the art of reciting "Why the Dog's Nose Is Cold."

From St. Louis, Miss Potter went to Joplin, where she also visited relatives, and where she took the place, then a little town, by storm by her dashing appearance and her fascinating manner. From Joplin Miss Potter went to New York, and in a few months she was well known.

THE CAREER OF JENNIE POTTER.

Jennie O'Neil Potter was born twenty-eight years ago. She lived at Patch Grove, Wis. She was born there, and was 18 when she left and went to New York. She had talent as an elocutionist—the people of Patch Grove told her that she had, and she knew that she had. When she went to New York she took with her letters of introduction from the "leading people" of Patch Grove. Her first disappointment was in the discovery that the "leading people" of Patch Grove were not known in New York. But this was about her only great disappointment. She was pretty, and she was fortunate in making her first application for an engagement as a parlor entertainer to Mrs. William C. Whitney. Mrs. Whitney was impressed with her, and when she heard her recite "Swinging in the Grapevine Swing"—her beautifully rounded body moving in perfect rhythm to the cadences and the sentiment of the poem—she engaged her at a fancy price for her next reception. Her first appearance was made in a dainty, fluffy gown of pure white; and she so looked the fresh, pretty country maid of whom she told a simple story that her success was assured. Engagements came thick and fast. She next recited "How Salvator Won," describing a race of that great racer with a spirit and a faithfulness that had never been equaled in a New York drawing-room. "The Volunteer Organist" was another of her successes, and then she began the recitation of her most ambitious effort, a monologue, "Flirts and Matrons." This was the story of a woman's life, from the cradle to the grave. She depicted the story with a naturalness and assumed the fifty characters that she introduced with a versatility that stamped her as a genius and made her famous. With that monologue she toured the United States and then went to England. In London drawing-rooms she scored even a greater triumph than she had scored in New York, and honors and wealth were showered upon her.

But Jennie Potter was a charitable little genius, and a generous one. Much of her effort was given for the assistance of the poor, and the needy, and the last public appearance she made was on December 5 last, when she got up an entertainment for the poor children of St. Thomas's Church, New York. The entertainment was a success, and the children not only had a Christmas tree, but they got many presents that have kept from them the discomforts of winter ever since.

Soon after this, Miss Potter became seriously ill. She did not realize that fact, however, and it was not until she had a very severe hemorrhage one night about three weeks ago that she was put under regular medical and surgical treatment. The doctors said that she had touched the brink of the grave, and that if they had been ten minutes later she would have been dead. She was removed to St. Luke's Hospital, and it was hoped that an operation, which would relieve her and possibly remove the cause of her illness, might be performed. But the surgeons decided that to operate upon her would only hasten a death that was inevitable, and told her so.

How she received the news has been already told. She is the wonder of the hospital attendants, and of the other patients. Her bed is a dainty affair, all pink and perfume, and she is the daintiest part of it. She is never down-hearted, although she has no hope of living. She smiles, and sings, and murmurs lines of favorite old poems, and tells those who visit her how good God has been to her.