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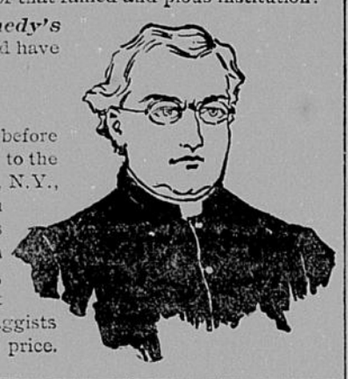

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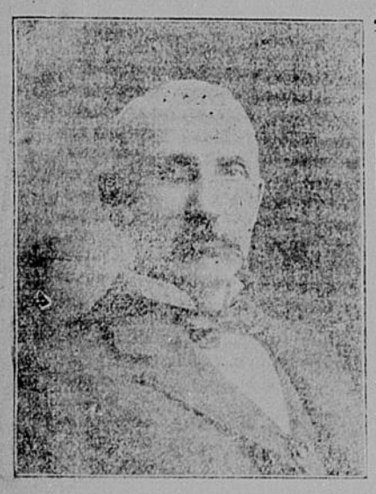

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AN AMERICAN ASPIRANT

BY

JENNIE BULLARD WATERBURY

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CHAPTER I.

Few of the muffled up, mummylike passengers reclining uneasily in their deck chairs converted by the warring elements into dangerously perverse commodities could have imagined—had a nauseated consciousness permitted them to turn their patient eyes aside from the monotonous horizon of stormy sky and heaving sea—that the bright figure in the doorway of the ladies' saloon exemplified a reckless would be gambler in nineteenth century methods.

The figure was supple, girlish and dashing. It was, too, essentially ladylike. Like a scarlet breasted robin perched on a twig, it stood swinging itself lightly on two tiny feet. Its chin was thrown up. Its two large bright eyes mastered amusedly the pathetic avowal of the wind swept deck, with its row of unlucky passengers. Obviously their reasoning was struggling against the saddening conviction of the poverty of science in general where seasickness was the cause in particular. The superb sweep of wind swept ocean wildly tossed higher and higher as the elements roared responsively to the kiss of the oncoming storm, picturesquely emphasizing the maxim that what was poison to the seasick was meat to that bright onlooker.

With a glad little sigh of joy the girl stepped over the threshold of the saloon and stood lightly out on deck. With an irrepressible laugh of mischievous satisfaction two fur gloved hands were lifted to settle more firmly a golf cap on a neatly coifed head. Then the hands were plunged deeply into the pockets of a Redfern ulster. Priscilla set forth, head bent forward, shoulders thrown forward, limbs sternly self controlled, for a battle with the wind. The solitary figure paced the deck for some moments unmolested and undisturbed. The seasick passengers turned uneasily, shifted fretfully, groaned unmistakably, and finally one by one crept, a shivering, weather beaten pack of cowards, below.

Priscilla was left alone. The little figure paced to and fro. A vivid color had sprung into the pale cheeks. The brown clear eyes were alight. The storm hissed and roared. The sea gulls screamed. The screw, like a giant heart beat, thudded out its dutiful, monotonous throb.

"I beg your pardon. How stupid of me! I beg your pardon."

"It's nothing," said Priscilla mendaciously. Her hat was awry; her hands had been swiftly pulled from their pockets to ward off an unexpected force which had descended upon her like an avalanche. She was swaying, laughing and blushing, protesting, but impotent, in the arms of a complete stranger—a man with a strong, kind, beardless face and a pair of honestly repentant eyes.

"I did not see you," explained Priscilla. "My head was down."

"So was mine. I beg your pardon."

The stranger lifted his cap. His hair was crisp, curly and cut very short. He was well set up. He had a pair of magnificent broad shoulders. Altogether he looked a desirable acquaintance.

Priscilla sighed. Only the night before, in the sitting room of an imposing New York mansion in Fifty-fifth street, she had been holding forth, to a ring of breathlessly admiring brothers and sisters, on her pet hobby.

"If I had the world to make over," she said—like most youthful and aspiring maidens, Priscilla was guilty of badly proportioned ambitions—"if I had the world to make over, I should banish introductions."

"Because?" Tom had questioned. Tom was the red haired one. His family had denominated him the "interrogation point."

"Because," Priscilla had answered, in her fresh, unstudied voice, "because I consider, since we are all of us God's creatures, introductions are bad form, ferociously bad form." Priscilla was wont to be a trifle exaggerated. "But then what is the use of adverbs if not to employ them?" she retorted, airly, when reprimanded, to which original query no member of her adoring family had as yet discovered an adequate response.

"Why 'bad form?' " asked Harry.

"It's on the face of it," cried Priscilla. "Democracy is our portion. Why assume an aristocracy of manners when we are a free country and are supposed to ignore caste and to refute defunct issues?"

"Why, indeed?" chimed in Harry. He hadn't the slightest idea what Priscilla was "driving at," but then she was a "dear," and for some time he had advised his parents to let her "have her head," so he repeated noncommittally, "Why, indeed?"

Today Priscilla remembered the little conversation. Last night already seemed a long way off. She hugged the flattering unction to her soul at this highly opportune moment that her family had agreed with her in her broad views.

Her conscience therefore was perfectly free from a shadow of guile as she looked up innocently in her companion's face and questioned with a natural curiosity born of the moment's loneliness and the rich promise of a future in unknown lands, "Going abroad?"

"Obviously," answered the man, laughing. His eyes twinkled irrepressibly.

"So am I," retorted Priscilla delightedly. "Isn't it lovely?"

Her companion looked a trifle dubious. Then with a perceptible effort not to dampen her ardor he answered: "It depends upon what part of 'abroad' one is going to somewhat, doesn't it? Where are you going?"

"To Paris," returned Priscilla almost before he had got the words out of his mouth.

Her companion made a round hole of his lips and raised his eyebrows quizzically. Then he asked nonchalantly, "Alone?"

"Oh, no!" returned Priscilla immediately, with perhaps unconsciously regretful emphasis on the "no." "Oh, no; there are Aunt Mildred and Mary—my little sister, you know," explanatorily.

There was a pause. The two commenced to pace to and fro rapidly.

"Paris, to me," began Priscilla, "is what America was—to Dickens."

"H'm!" replied her companion in a muffled voice. "Why not Columbus?"

"I prefer Dickens," protested Priscilla obstinately.

"Dickens never discovered us," returned her companion perversely. "Far from it. Columbus discovered us."

"Well, as you please," acquiesced Priscilla, unwilling longer to prolong the ecstasy of the great moment which was to come. "Now, why do you suppose I am going to Paris? What do you imagine I am going to discover?"

"Can't imagine," answered her companion. His gray eyes caught her dancing ones for a moment, and he wondered unjustly why those well groomed girls with the little feet and the long lashed eyes didn't live in Chicago as much as in New York.

"I am going to Paris," announced Priscilla in what in a man would have been denominated stentorian tones, but in Priscilla were only shrill and rich with cheerful possibilities—"I am going to Paris to sing in grand opera."

"Oh!" said her companion shortly. Then he added flippantly, in a tone charged with mirth: "The lack of novelty contained in the contemplated situation may be the reason why it strikes me as a very old joke. Otherwise I might believe you were laughing at me." The tone was deeply ironical.

"Laughing at you!" Priscilla shouted. The wind was blowing very hard, and she was obliged to approach her companion closely to make herself heard. "Laughing at you! It's you who are laughing at me. Why?" The slender figure was drawn up very straight. The man began to remember that, after all, girls' eyes in Chicago, and even in Philadelphia, were softer than these magnificent orbs which were blazing at him so defiantly.

He looked down at her sharply. Then he drew a long breath. "You don't mean to say you are in earnest?" he asked.

"Yes," said Priscilla.

"You are going to sing in grand opera. You? In grand opera?"

"Yes," said Priscilla.

"Easiest thing in the world, isn't it?" remarked her companion sarcastically. "Just walk in and say to the manager, 'Here I am, old boy—voice, beauty, family, fascination—drawing card.' The manager is only too glad of such an opportunity. That's your idea, isn't it?"

Priscilla's cheeks were bright carmine.

"Of course," she began lamely, "I know I will be obliged to work very hard. But my voice is a natural voice, a perfectly natural voice. It requires very little tuition. My teacher in New York told me so. Besides, it has an individual timbre—quality, you know." As her companion remained stolidly unimpressed she stopped.

They had begun walking to and fro again.

"I wonder," began the man, a little gruffly, "if you will be very angry with me if I ask you a question, if you will think me impertinent?"

"No," returned Priscilla earnestly. "No, indeed. I think, I know already, that you and I will be very good friends, because, you see, we have both begun by speaking the exact truth to one another. I hate lies," she added irrelevantly.

Her companion did not appear to have heard her.

"What is the question you wish to ask me?" demanded Priscilla curiously.

"Let's go and lean over the railing there for a moment," said the man.

When they were comfortably ensconced, with a wall of coiled rope behind them, the green billows ahead, her companion spoke.

"Are you poor?" he asked gently.

"Oh, no," said Priscilla.

"Then why in the name of everything beautiful do you wish to sing in grand opera?"

"Well," said Priscilla comfortably, "I'll tell you why. You see, my friends think it's such a pity a voice like mine should be lost. It's so sweet. You've no idea how very sweet it is. I love to listen to it myself. You shall hear it some day." She made this promise so naively that her companion contemplated her for one moment directly and then as directly desisted.

"Women," said he, a trifle awkwardly—he disliked sickly sentimentality—"women have been known to sing to their babies very successfully, so sweetly as to put them to sleep."

"Yes," answered Priscilla simply. "But, you see, I have no babies."

There was a pause.

"But the poor girls!" her companion began. "How about all the poor girls who are endeavoring to obtain a hearing? Don't you think it is rather selfish of you to seek to crowd them out?"

Priscilla's rosy chin was lifted very high indeed. "Ungenerous," she cried superbly. "Why, poor or rich, should a voice be denied its opportunity to be heard?"

"That is not original," he remarked rather daringly. "It's too stilted from you. Your friends have said that to you, and you repeat it."

"Perhaps," admitted Priscilla.

"I am going to tell you a story," the other began.

"Oh, do, please," begged Priscilla.

"But before I begin I must tell you my name." He drew from his coat pocket a neat russia leather case surmounted by a modest monogram in silver letters, replaced the case, buttoned his ulster, and lifting his cap handed Priscilla his card.

"Mr. John Stormmouth," it read, "Union club."

"I am a lawyer," asserted Stormmouth.

"Thank you," said Priscilla indifferently. "Now the story, please. Oh, perhaps you would like to know my name. It is Priscilla Delno. My father is Judge Delno of the supreme court. My mother was born and brought up in Newburg."

"Nice place, Newburg," suggested Stormmouth.

"I think it's a perfect hole," announced Priscilla conclusively.

Stormmouth's eyes twinkled. "I met your father once," he remarked. "If you write to him, remember me to him. He won a suit for me in regard to my father's estate. It made a vast difference to me. I have every reason to remember your father."

"Dad's a brick," remarked Priscilla unexpectedly. "He understands me perfectly."

"I should think most 'bricks' would understand you," returned Stormmouth.

"Why?" asked Priscilla wickedly.

"To continue," said Stormmouth, "with my story. It is about a girl who five years ago, like you, started out to sing in grand opera. She was the sweetest little thing, with the bluest eyes and the happiest rosy face! She was poor, though, so she was desirous of singing for a living. Poor child!" He checked himself abruptly and clinched the hand which was tucked in between the buttons of his ulster. He scowled.

"Don't look so ugly!" cried Priscilla, who was watching him narrowly, her radiant speaking face alert with the interest the subject held for her. "What became of her?"

"She's dead," muttered Stormmouth.

"Dead?" she asked in a shocked voice.

"Heartbroken."

"But why?"

"Why?" echoed Stormmouth. "I'll tell you why. She thought, like you, that all she had to do was to sing; that all she had to struggle against she could win through prayer and pluck; that life was a fair fight, the battle fought with open doors, the result a just reward for merit. She found, child"—Priscilla's countenance had paled visibly; one little hand had grasped the railing; he continued less violently—"that she must crush out every natural desire, every evidence of spontaneity, every thought of hope, for the first was misunderstood, and the second was dubbed heart, not art. She would have been more than human to believe she could succeed in spite of facts which were exemplified in the broken, ruined lives of her friends, who were spent upon as dire a rack as saints were wrenched upon in the inquisition."

"Was anything the matter with her voice?" asked Priscilla.

Stormmouth laughed bitterly. "No. It was as rich as the voice of a thrush

They had begun walking to and fro again.

and as full of promise when she began. When she finished, it was heartbroken, strident. It had been torn in two by the conflicting elements of misery and revolt."

"I don't understand," began Priscilla faintly.

Stormmouth turned and confronted her sternly. "Listen," he urged. "Don't try to understand. Don't try. There is no slaughter of the innocents known today so inhuman, so utterly worthy of a counter woman's movement, emancipated or otherwise, as that slaughter of American song birds abroad who think—God help them!—that the world is not full enough of birds without them."

"I would like to try," said Priscilla firmly.

Stormmouth eyed her narrowly.

"Try what?" he demanded.

"Try to sing."

"If you sing," he said, "you will forget to laugh. Why not do both and remain at home?"

Priscilla's eyes filled with tears.

"They would all be so disappointed," she murmured, "all my friends."

Stormmouth laid a firm hand upon her wrist. "You are thinking," he urged, "that others have succeeded. You are thinking that courage is your portion; that immortality is your birthright; that a broader field stretches before you on the boards than off them. Remember what I tell you ten years from now, when your illusions have vanished. Vanity lies at the root of your desire. You will lose woman's best opportunity, wifehood and motherhood, chasing a chimera. You will give your bloom for disappointment, your freshness for unattained opportunity, your youth for mediocre notoriety. Count on your fingers today the American girls who have succeeded on the stage of the Grand Opera. Ask them if their life is not a Calvary." He stopped, breathing heavily.

"The girl you speak of," Priscilla questioned gently, her eyes still moist and her lips quite ashen—"who was she?"

"She was my sister," said Stormmouth.

"Did she sing at the Grand Opera?"

"No," answered Stormmouth, "a thousand times no. She spent money, strength, time, youth and patience waiting. Then she came home, crept like a tired bird to my heart, and—you know the rest." His voice was husky. He drew one strong hand across his eyes.

"Thank you," said Priscilla very softly.

"Shall we walk a little more?" she suggested after a few moments' stroll up and down the deck. "It is nearly luncheon time. I am cold."

"Not a word of this to any one," said Stormmouth. Then, "You will not renounce your plan?"

Priscilla shook her head. "I mean to succeed," said she.

Stormmouth held out his hand. It was large and firm and warm. It had a grip like iron. "Promise," he said, "that if what I say proves true you will recede before it is too late; you will choose obscurity instead of unworthy notoriety."

"I will promise," answered Priscilla, with a light little pressure of her hand, which, instantly withdrawn, reminded Stormmouth in an odd fashion of a bird which fluttered to its nest only to fly away again, "that if to sing means I must renounce one iota of my high ideals I will go home. There is no power on earth should induce a woman to accomplish anything whatsoever except in so doing she can cling to her best womanhood." The young face was very pure and beautiful. The girlish eyes were clear and true.

"You are made of good stuff," remarked Stormmouth skeptically, "but only time will tell."

"You mean"—

"Nothing. If you were my daughter, you should have remained at home."

Priscilla laughed a little girlish ripple of intense amusement. "Dad believes in me," said she.

"Pshaw!" cried Stormmouth. "Who ever heard of a father understanding his daughter? It takes a mere man to understand a girl."

"But dad's a 'mere man.' "

"No, he isn't," asserted Stormmouth dryly. "He's judge of the supreme court."

CHAPTER II.

"Mademoiselle has the voice of a rossignol," announced Purrini.

"At home we always say she sings like a lark," remarked Aunt Mildred. "What is a rossignol?"

"I know," said Mary, who was eagerly thumbing an eloquently misused pocket dictionary; "r-o-s-s-i-g-n-o-l—nightingale."

"I never heard a nightingale," said Aunt Mildred unenthusiastically. "The question is, professor, will she be able to sing in grand opera?"

Purrini rubbed his hands together and lifted his eyebrows quizzically.

"There are 2,000 American girls in Europe today," he affirmed, with apparent irrelevance, "who are studying for grand opera. If mademoiselle succeeds, it will be all the more a triumph, will it not?"

"I always thought I'd like to sing like a Patti or a Melba," announced Priscilla. "It seems so easy for them to fire off those little roulades and then dip down like swallows before the footlights and then run off the stage like schoolgirls who have done nothing whatsoever but amuse themselves."

"H'm-m!" murmured Purrini.

"A friend of mine told me that one of the De Reszkes told her," cried Aunt Mildred shrilly, "that the American voices are the finest in the world. Do you think it is true, professor?"

"I have never been in America," remarked Purrini evasively, "but it is none the less quite possible."

"How nice these foreigners are," thought Aunt Mildred, "so suave if a little noncommittal. Their manner is far more elegant than ours. To hit straight between the eyes the way we do at home is so unpleasant."

"Let me see," mused Priscilla out loud. "There will be the four lessons a week at 25 francs a lesson, and the diction lesson at 10 francs, and the French lessons at 5 francs, and ultimately the acting lessons. Is that all, professor?"

"C'est tout," Purrini assured her affably, with unconscious irony.

"How many months do you think it will take for me to perfect myself?"

"That depends upon the intelligence of mademoiselle."

"About a year?" suggested Aunt Mildred encouragingly.

Purrini frowned suddenly and fiercely. Then he remembered who and what he was and concealed the frown with a spasmodic grin.

"Possibly," he said.

"What is a diction lesson?" questioned Mary.

"The art of learning to sing in French. It is totally different from speaking, you know."

"I don't see why," remarked Aunt Mildred obstinately.

"Mon Dieu, qu'elle est bavarde, cette vieille!" muttered Purrini as he turned and showed them to the door. "A Lundi, alors, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, I will come for my first lesson on Monday," said Priscilla.

"I think," she said later, aloud, as