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KATE ELMORE, LEADING LADY

A Chapter From the Life of
a Famous Actress

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CONTINUED FROM SECTION ONE.

Jack came home from school to his father's funeral, and he never went back again. He and his mother had to make a fight for life. The mother's friends did a little for her, and she managed to get a little house of furniture together and to let lodgings to city clerks and so to make both ends bread and cheese. Jack, thanks to the same people—people who had known the Smedleys in their "better days"—was lucky enough to obtain a situation in the office of a stockbroker. He was really only a superior errand boy at first, but he was paid ten shillings a week, and that was a wonderful help to the widow in her struggles with the landlord and the rate collector, not to mention the baker and the butcher.

Jack was a handsome boy and an amiable boy. He had been a favorite at school, and he was soon a favorite with his employers. He was quick, bright and industrious, and always a gentleman. After he had been in the office two years he was a clerk and had £75 a year, and when he was twenty-one he was a superior clerk and had £150.

It was just when he came of age that his mother died, and then Jack having wound up her little estate, went into lodgings and started, in the elegant phrase of the period, "entirely on his own hook."

Fortunately for young Smedley, before his independence, his loneliness, his handsome face and his charming manners had led him into the dangerous by-paths of London life, he fell over head and ears in love with a pretty young lady who lodged with her mamma in the house. Rose Leacroft was a lady. Her papa had been a lieutenant in the navy. He had died of malarial fever in some dreadful foreign seaport, and left his wife and little daughter about £150 a year. Mrs. Leacroft liked the handsome young stockbroker they called Jack very much indeed. He was a gentleman, and his family were "known," and Mrs. Leacroft thought a great deal of family. People who come down in the world generally do. It is a great consolation to them in their poverty to know that no shabbiness, no short commons, no indignity on the part of landlords or tradespeople can rob them of their birthright. They may be poor, but they are "well born." Their clothes may be the worse for wear, they may ride in omnibuses, and they may not always have butcher's meat for dinner, but still they are ladies and gentlemen by birth.

When Mrs. Leacroft found that Jack Smedley was a "real" gentleman, she smiled upon him and was gracious, and she discovered that her "people" had in some years gone by known some of his "people," and she was able to tell him whom his great aunts married and what relation he was by marriage to several people who occasionally figured in the list of presentations to Her Majesty and among the guests at the balls and receptions of the season.

And when Jack and Rose discovered that they were in love with each other, Mrs. Leacroft was glad. Mr. Smedley was a rising young man. He was sure to attain a good position in the city, and though a business man he was "the scion of a county family."

It was not a very long courtship. Six months after they were engaged Jack and Rose were married, and they took a tiny little house in the Camden-road and had one little maid-of-all-work and were very economical, for they had determined to save all they could and never, never to get into debt or to launch out beyond their means.

It was a happy little home, and it grew happier as Jack's position improved and they had a big grown-up servant, and the little drawing-room began to fill with elegant nick-nacks, and Rose had prettier and more expensive dresses, and they could give modest little dinner parties and take their holiday comfortably at the seaside, not in lodgings, but at the best hotel.

Then they moved to a bigger house and had stalls at the theaters and at the opera, and a hired brougham took them and brought them home, and they soon began to taste the pleasure of being "well-to-do."

Everything prospered with Jack after his marriage. The firm had been pleased with him before. They were delighted with him now. He was married, and that removed the last drawback to their complete confidence in him. A handsome young fellow of one-and-twenty is not so desirable as a confidential clerk as a young married man of the same age.

So perfect was the firm's faith in Jack that, when the head clerk started in business for himself, Jack took his place, and from that moment was absolute. He saw the principal clients, managed the biggest jobs, signed checks in the firm's name, and took over the entire command of the ship; and the partners, who were growing old and had made their "pile," gradually left the business more and more to him, until at last they did as he told them, instead of telling him what he was to do for them. And

finally, things going on so well, they took longer holidays than usual and didn't mind about being away both together. "Mr. Smedley" was now practically the firm, and clients asked for no one else. If one of the partners was in and saw a client, the client just said, "How d'ye do?" and then said he would wait and see Mr. Smedley.

When things were in this delightful position Mr. Smedley was very different from the Jack Smedley of old days. He was as handsome and amiable as ever, but not so economical. He had a beautiful house in town, and his wife had her horses and diamonds, and they gave grand parties and had launched out in a life which was a costly and extravagant one.

Everybody knew that Jack didn't do it on his salary. You don't live up to £5,000 a year on £1,000. But there was no mystery about it. Jack, with his intimate knowledge of the markets, had made coup after coup on his own account, so it was said. Why, it was a common gossip that during one panic he had made over £30,000 in American rails, and out of the electric light boom while it had lasted he had cleared another £20,000.

One day—it was a week before the dinner party referred to at the opening of this narrative—the partners came up to town smiling and bland, and when they arrived at the office they invited Mr. Smedley to favor them with a few moments' conversation in their private room.

They told him that in consideration of his talents and his long, faithful service, they had determined to take him into partnership.

Of course Jack thanked them effusively—dream of his life—never repay their kindness, etc.

Then they went into details and explained that as there was to be a partnership, everything must of course be done in a proper way, and so an accountant would come and go through the books and put everything straight, so that they might make a perfectly fair and business-like start as between themselves and their new and junior partner.

"Quite right," said Jack; and it was arranged that the accountant should come in on the following Monday to get the accounts straight, and then the deeds should be drawn up and the partnership should be settled.

The night of the dinner party was the night before the accountant was to commence his labors. On the following morning Mr. Smedley packed his portmanteau and kissed his wife, telling her he had to go out of town to see a client of the firm's who was ill and wanted to sell out his shares in various undertakings and invest in Consols.

He didn't go to the office and the partners were afraid he was ill and sent up to his house. Mrs. Smedley, astonished, wrote a note to say he had gone out of town for the firm.

Then the partners were astonished, too, and couldn't make it out; and didn't until the accountant struck them speechless with horror and amazement by informing them that there was a sum of nearly £50,000 which was not properly accounted for, and which he wanted to know about before he could balance.

This led to a closer investigation, and then there was no doubt as to the motive of the confidential clerk's disappearance. He had embezzled during the last five years about £50,000, and the offer of a partnership had necessitated a thorough balancing of the books, and that balancing he had not thought it advisable to honor, with his presence.

Jack Smedley's disappearance was a nine days' wonder on the stock exchange, and then it was forgotten. The partners whose confidence Jack had so shamefully abused felt bound on public grounds to take some steps in the matter, and they determined to prosecute him, and the police issued advertisements and a reward was offered for his apprehension. But not the slightest trace was ever found of the fugitive.

Poor Rose at first utterly refused to believe that her husband had gone off so unceremoniously. Day after day she expected that he would find some means of communicating with her and letting her know where he was. She gave up everything

to her husband's creditors without murmur, and went back to live with her mother, hoping against hope that she would hear something of Jack; that he would let her know where he was and give her the means of joining him. But the weeks grew into months and still there came no sign, and presently a year had gone by and she was still in utter ignorance of her husband's whereabouts.

She felt that he had treated her very cruelly; the shame was bad enough, the terrible suspense was worse. She didn't even know if he was alive or dead. At last she made up her mind that he must be dead. He might have committed suicide—drowned himself, perhaps—and this was the reason that since the day of his flight the silence had remained unbroken.

She wondered often what could have induced him to turn dishonest. She had never asked for luxury, though she had accepted it when it came. And Jack himself had always appeared quite contented and happy in the days when they practiced economy.

Year succeeded year, and still no news came, and then Rose abandoned her last hope and made up her mind that on this side of the grave she would see her husband no more. Then she determined to accept an offer which she had from an old friend of her family, a wealthy widow named Moncrieff, and accept the position of a companion to her. Rose's mother had died the year previous, and she had no one to consider but herself.

Mrs. Moncrieff was about to take a long continental tour, and the change of scene and the excitement would be the very best thing possible for Mrs. Smedley, whose health had suffered under the long harass and suspense she had endured.

On the evening that was to be her last in the lodgings she had occupied since her mother's death, she was busy packing her boxes, when the landlady came up to say that a gentleman wished to see her.

It was so unusual for any one to call upon Mrs. Smedley that for a moment a wild idea flashed across her mind that it was Jack. But the hope was slain the moment it was born, for the landlady added, "He says that his name's Yarborough, ma'am."

"Tom Yarborough," said Rose to herself, "whatever can he want? I suppose he's heard that I'm going abroad and has come to say good-bye."

She came down stairs to the parlor to see her visitor, and found Tom in a state of great excitement.

"I—I hope you won't mind my calling on you so late," he explained, "but I've only just found out where you lived. I've some news for you."

"I know what it is," gasped Rose, "you've seen Jack?"

"Yes, I believe I have."

The next minute Tom had dashed out into the hall and was yelling for the landlady. Rose Smedley had fallen down in a dead faint.

When the landlady and Tom between them had brought her round and Rose was calmer, Tom told his story.

He had been dining with some friends on the previous evening at a little town some thirty miles from London, and after dinner they had made up a party to go to the local theater.

The piece was not up to much and the company was only a small traveling one, but the voice of the man who played one of the parts instantly arrested Tom's attention. He listened and listened, and the more he listened the more the idea haunted him that he was listening to Jack Smedley.

anybody then." Tom was not to be put off so easily as that, so he said he would wait outside.

As he was turning from the door a young lady came up from the stage, dressed for the street.

"Oh, Mrs. Wilson," said the doorkeeper, "there is the gentleman as wants to see your husband."

Tom turned and looked at the young lady. She was very pretty and about four and twenty.

"I beg your pardon," said Tom, hesitating and wondering how he should get out what was on his mind without making a mess of it. "I only wanted to ask Mr. Wilson a question."

"Perhaps I can answer it," replied the young lady, looking at Tom with a searching glance.

"I—er—I'm afraid not. I'd sooner wait for him. I shan't detain him a minute."

"I'll go and see if he can leave the manager for a moment," said the young lady, and she went down the stairs to the stage again.

Tom waited and waited. The actors and actresses passed out, and presently the fireman came upstairs.

"Seen Mr. Wilson?" said the stage doorkeeper. "This gentleman's waiting for him."

"Everybody's gone," replied the fireman. "There ain't anybody in the house now."

"How long has Mr. Wilson been gone then?"

"I don't know the company by name, but there ain't nobody left in the house, I can tell you that," was the reply.

"Ah," said the stage doorkeeper, "then it's no use you waiting. Mr. Wilson and his wife must have gone through the front."

Then Tom at once jumped to the conclusion that the young lady had told Wilson that he (Tom) was still waiting, and they had both slipped out the front way to avoid meeting him. And this convinced him that his surmise was correct, and that the actor with Jack Smedley's voice was Jack Smedley himself!

Tom Yarborough blurted out his story, for he was full of it. It was not until he saw the effect of his narrative upon poor Rose that it occurred to him that he had done an unwise thing.

"I don't believe it, Mr. Yarborough," she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears. "I don't believe it. My husband was cruel to leave me as he did. He has been cruel to leave me in doubt and suspense all these years, but surely he would not venture back again and run the risk of detection—and—"

She could not bring herself to say what was in her mind, which was that wicked as Jack Smedley had been to her, he would not be so wicked as to come back to England calling another woman his wife.

But her curiosity was excited. The idea that her husband was alive and near London revived all the old feelings of doubt and anxiety which she had after a lapse of years conquered.

"Tom," she said presently, "I must see this matter out. I shall go down to this place. Will you come with me?"

"Certainly," said Tom, feeling that he was "in for it," "but—er—hadn't I better go first and make sure. You see, I may have been mistaken after all."

"No, I'll go myself. I can't rest now till I know the truth."

Mrs. Moncrieff started for the continent alone, Rose explaining that important business of a private nature would detain her in town for a few days.

The next evening, accompanied by Tom Yarborough, Mrs. Smedley went to the theater. It was a different play—the bill had been changed, and there was no Mr. Wilson in the cast.

Tom went round to the stage door and interviewed the stage doorkeeper again. Did he know if Mr. Wilson was in the town still, and could he give him his address? Tom was referred to the acting manager, who said that Wilson had not been to rehearsal that morning, and on sending to his lodgings it was found that he and his wife had taken their luggage and left the town. It was a very extraordinary thing to do, as a week's salary was due to them, and the manager couldn't understand it.

Tom Yarborough understood it and Rose understood it. Jack Smedley had ventured back again, believing that his crime was forgotten and that in the strolling actor no one would recognize him. Directly he had been told that a Mr. Yarborough wished to see him he knew that he was discovered and he had fled, taking with him the woman who called herself his wife.