

Vivid Valeska Suratt of Terre Haute

by Walter
Anthony

HE was vivid though she was dressed in modest brown. Her gown, as nearly as I can describe it, was indescribable. It was very long, for one thing, like the dresses that Madame Nasimova wears when she plays the neurotic and murderous role of Hedda Gabler. Its brown silk and clinging folds swathed her figure, imparting the suggestion of slender shapeliness. Her enigmatical eyes of a sort of violet hue looked in a friendly manner, through the mesh of a heavily figured veil, which, drawn tightly over her features, held a plume surmounted turban of brown in its place on her dark hair which was carefully curled—not in the middle of her forehead but over each eye. About her throat was tied a knot of bright yellow, the strings of which, disappearing mysteriously like a woman's pocket, reappeared under her girdle and splashed another bit of color at her waist. The knot slipped through a polished horn oddly carved into the likeness of an Indian's angular countenance. From her ears hung two pendants of pearls, and on her finger was another about the size of a large hazel nut. The oyster from whence that pearl was taken must have lived a long and irritated life. Thinking of oysters made me think of other shell fish and I longed to ask her something about Fletcher Norton, whom she married last December, but concluded to wait until Valeska Suratt and I had become a little better acquainted—for it is always my policy as interviewer to reserve my greatest impertinences until the end of the interview.

Whether Miss Suratt's familiarity with the effects of modern French art is responsible for her skill to produce the faintly rosy flush of her cheeks, or whether the glow proceeded from unimpaired health, I do not know; for her veil, as I have said, was very heavy and she did not raise it during our interview, because she said she was going out to ransack more stores and buy more clothes just as soon as my departure would permit her to indulge her prodigious tastes for clothes.

Neither can I tell you by what process she achieves the splendor of her lips, compared with the crimson of which coral is cold, granitic and gray. Perhaps she is impelled from a sense of loyalty to her musical comedy, "The Kiss Waltz," to call as much attention as possible to her qualifications for the role of the heroine thereof, as a shoe merchant sees to it that his wife is always well shod and a dentist that his teeth are good. Personally, however, I am inclined to suspect the sagacity of this last observation, with relation to the lips of Valeska Suratt, because I doubt that they would ever pucker in response or to tempt to a tender salute, but that they would rather writhle with feminine scorn at the thought of damaging their expensive and extravagant adornment; besides, it isn't likely that any one would have the temerity to attempt such a despoiling process with the attendant risk of bearing away from the encounter a scarlet and damning witness to the deed. However, as to all of this very idle speculation, my statements remain in the pure realm of the hypothetical and are without foundation in any tangible evidences of experience.

YOU may guess from this long introduction, wherein nothing has been said, that I was embarrassed about the interview. The reason why you should also be able to guess.

Whether as a result of a deliberate publicity department or the logical consequence of her own erratic nature, the fact is that Valeska Suratt is the most discussed occupant of the spotlight on the American stage. She manages with wonderful regularity to acquire additions to her scrapbook, and if not famous, at least she is notorious for her escapades. The police of New York, not easily moved to moral or esthetic protests, closed up her show in the New York theater, "The Girl With the Whooping Cough," because they said it wasn't fit to be seen. Then they interfered with her at Hammersteins and begged her in the name of the law to put on some clothes. Courtied by a multimillionaire, she jilted him in order to marry an inoffensive nonentity by the name of Fletcher Norton, who, according to the busy tongue of rumor, was offered \$50,000 to give the newly made wife grounds for divorce; thus indicating at once his devotion to the fair Valeska and his generous confidence in her inability to supply herself, the basis for a Reno decision.

These and other similar episodes in a somewhat brief but eventful theatrical career promised material enough for the purposes of cautiously imparted gossip,

but seemed to be preclusive of much matter for the wide dissemination of a printed interview—assuming, with your indulgence and permission, the extent of this interview's publicity.

So I didn't know what to talk about when ushered into the presence of the alluring Valeska, who awaited me in her apartments at the St. Francis hotel, surrounded, I know not why, by a cordon of undecorative publicity agents, who were there, perhaps, to see to it that their independent and erratic charge talked enough and yet not too much.

BUT Valeska, being incapable of embarrassment, as befits the heroine of "The Perfume Fiend," wherein she dressed incompletely, and "The Girl With the Whooping Cough," wherein she was too lavish with the favors of her kisses, which imparted her malady in a most indecorous manner to others in the plot, and so incurred the police wrath—Valeska, I say, put me at my ease at once with a cordial handshake—she wore the pearl on the third finger of her left hand—and an invitation to be seated.

My eye roamed the room while we began conversation with commonplace. No emptied bottles of perfume were to be seen on the tidy writing table or center table or mantle. Neither did my senses encounter even the slightest odor of perfumed cigarettes or sandalwood. A crisp invigorating breeze warmed by the afternoon sun came freely through the opened window, making the place like an open space in the park, and quite different from the heavy scented and oppressive apartments that Maud Allan tenanted when she granted me the privilege of viewing a neurotic personality at close range. I was much surprised, too, that, unlike the Allan apartments, Valeska seemed unable to get too much fresh air into them and the eye was not put to the discomfort of accustomed its vision to the darkened, mystic shadows of a sun excluded room. Though Valeska Suratt has entered the tongue of scandal to wildest ravings, she does not exhibit any of the qualities of a perverted personality, but rather one that, animal like, delights in the open air, in sunshine, health and in an immediate abandonment to impulse.

During this time the chatter was commonplace and concerned the weather, of course, which I told her mendaciously was always that way in San Francisco, and then, as though it had been put there for the purpose, I noted the famous leopard skin coat laying over the huge easy chair that stood in a far corner.

WHEN you talk about clothes to Valeska Suratt you mention a subject she knows all about. From the sample of her taste as exhibited in the gown she wore I should credit her with a sense for color as wonderful as Debussy's and a sense for line and contour as fine as Bouguereau's.

"I think," said she, "that it is a woman's duty to make herself as attractive as she can. That leopard skin coat is the third of its kind in existence. It comes from Canada, and I was the first to wear one. The Princess Patricia was the second and Mrs. Clarence Mackay was the third. How much did it cost? I think it was \$300. I'm not sure. It is not what you would call an expensive coat, but it is unusual."

"What would you call an expensive coat?" I asked, thinking of one I saw in a window marked up to \$400.

"Well," she said, "my chinchilla I value at \$5,000."

"Might I see it?" I asked reverently.

"Certainly you may."

From its length and other dimensions I should say that the Andes were ranged from Patagonia to the United States of Colombia to provide the fur that went into that coat. It was lined with sealskin.

"If you are interested in gowns," said Valeska, mistaking my desire for a personal curiosity in the intricate subject of feminine attire.

"I'll tell you about the dress I think the most of. It has a history, and you may believe it, too, for it is quite true."

"Jake Shubert was anxious that I make a big feature of the waltz in this piece, and so I was anxious to dress it well. I didn't go to Paris last summer so I wasn't able to find a foreign made garment and I didn't have any very clear idea what I really did want in the way of a dress for the 'Kiss Waltz.' One day when I was at my dressmakers in New York she said she had something she wanted to show me."

It was just from Vienna, she said, and sent for it for Mrs. John Jacob Astor, who had ordered a house dress wherein she could take her ease while she admired her baby. She brought out a white affair knotted in the middle like a Turkish towel. When she untied it the dress resumed its shape, no wrinkles were left in the fabric which had the elasticity of a sponge, the sheen of satin and the texture of the finest silk. It would stretch to five times its apparent width and when released it would come back to its original size as though its fibers were of the finest microscopical steel. I coveted this dress and said I'd take it.

"Oh no you'll not," said the modiste, "its for Mrs. Astor."

"I don't care if its for the queen of England, the empress of China, or the czarina of all the Russias, I'm going to have this for my 'Kiss Waltz,' and if you say 'no' I'll never buy so much as a street dress from you again."

"She nearly wept, in her anxiety, and so to put her out of her misery and to release her from all responsibility so far as the new mother was concerned I ran out of the store with dress unwrapped in my hand, and waving it at her, climbed into my motor car and left her protesting in the doorway. I never found out how she squared herself with Mrs. Astor, but she didn't forget to send me a bill for the gown. It was for \$300, which I thought was reasonable enough considering what she might have taxed me. The only trouble with the gown is that I can't get anybody who will take the chance of cleaning it. The material is so different from any that ever has reached the hands of the cleaners that they are frightened at the job and won't undertake it."

It would appear that Valeska Suratt exercises her powers of fascination with the prodigality born of an unlimited stock of charms. She seemed quite proud of a conquest lately achieved in San Diego, and therein rested the story of the carved horn that she wore at her throat.

It was given to her by a gentleman of the name of Moonlight Joe, who was, according to Miss Suratt's expert testimony, one of the finest looking men she had ever seen, albeit a pure blooded Indian. He came to see the show with a crowd of cowboys when the "The Kiss Waltz" was played at



Valeska Suratt

they all held a party in the dressing room of the star.

"We had a fine time," said Valeska, "and Moonlight Joe made some wonderful speeches of affection. I didn't know anything about the laws governing such matters and so I sent out for some champagne. The cowboys were visibly embarrassed when I poured a second glass for my Indian friend. I thought perhaps he preferred some other variety of drink and asked him if he didn't like the wine. He answered between sips, and with a countenance expressive of celestial delight: 'Don't you hear my toes laughing?'"

How is that for pagan poetry?

Next day Moonlight Joe brought his inamorata the horn he had carved and

London eight years or so ago. Gould was to play an engagement over there, and Leslie Stuart, who wrote "The Belle of Mayfair," backed Valeska's request that he ("Billy") give her a chance to "go on" with him. They rehearsed a song, "The Maiden and the Jay," and Miss Suratt's success was sufficient to induce Stuart to make her an offer to go in his company, an offer that she refused, because, since Gould had given her a chance to get before the footlights, and as there wasn't any place for him in the Stuart company, Valeska preferred to remain loyal to the one who gave her her start as a player. So she continued as a member of the Gould and Suratt team, and in that capacity came to the Orpheum about a year before the fire.

ALL this while I hadn't forgotten my impertinent question, No. 1, about Fletcher Norton, but Miss Suratt was telling me about the home she has built in her home town, Terre Haute, for her father and mother and was showing me photographs of the same, likewise assuring me that she had serious views relative to the stage, and that she was going to appear in a drama that she saw in Paris—a real, genuine high art drama, that had been turned down, she said, by four leading emotional actresses, but that had been, nevertheless, a great hit in Paris. She begged me to believe in the reasonableness of her ambitions to be a serious actress, and explained that she had a scene put into "The Red Rose" in the first act just to show her competence to enact an emotional episode.

Looking carelessly out of the window and preparing to leap therefrom in case the emotional capacity of Valeska was turned loose upon my impudent head, I propounded the question in a casual tone.

Said I:

"What ever became of Fletcher Norton?"

For three minutes by the clock I waited for an answer. The young woman's emotions overcame her. She tried several times to speak, but could not from excess of feeling. I thought that she would lapse into hysterics, so overwhelmed was she with merriment.

Finally she contrived to gasp:

"Heaven only knows why I married him. I had a kind of a grouch on that afternoon. For one thing, I had quarreled with my sweetheart and I wanted to do something to make him mad, so I said to Norton, who was my leading man at the Manhattan: 'Let's get married.' He didn't seem to mind, and so we climbed into the motor car belonging to my long time friend Amy Crocker Gouraud, and all the way over to Jersey City her chauffeur was trying to persuade me to change my mind. Even the justice of the peace, when I gave him my name, asked me if I was sure I really wanted to be married. I asked him what business it was of his, and called his attention to the fact that nearly everybody married and so why shouldn't I. The upshot of it all was that we were married. My maid left me, she was so mad, and all my friends rang up to tell me what a fool I was. That was all there was to it. As soon as we got back to the theater I sent my bridegroom about his business and that was the end of my matrimonial career."

But it set Broadway to gossiping so that the echoes reached the Golden Gate, and the multimillionaire whose assiduity had been so conspicuous and whose confidence in the stage ability of his fiancee so unlimited that he backed her for \$50,000 in "The Red, Red Rose" is, she allowed me to understand, persistent still in his importunities that she change her picturesque name to Mrs. Robert Mackay.

"When I marry again," said Valeska, "it will be for love. Of course, he must have lots of money, too."

"I dare say," said I, with complete resignation and thinking of the chinchilla coat.



VALESKA SURATT IN HER \$8000 COAT

the Spreckels theater in the far south-eastern city. After the performance he wanted to meet the charmer and they brought him back on the stage, seeing that he too was something of a celebrity. Through Moonlight Joe, the cowboys who accompanied him were also introduced to back stage mysteries and

which with its barbaric suggestion completed the costume of the vivid Valeska.

I ASKED her how she happened to go on the stage, and she blamed it all on "Billy" Gould, who was a member of a party with which Valeska traveled to