

THE DERELICTS

I had known Lydia Stevenson as an actress of old women in various travelling companies some years after she had played the lead in many of Williamson's plays in Spring Street, said Billy Matthews, as he toyed with a glass of rum in his favorite bar. Billy had been in the theatre most of his life behind the scenes but never on the boards.

When salaries were good, or landlords trusting, strong waters moved her to confidences, he said. These were either bitter bemoaning over a spoilt career ending in barnstorming, or pathetic hopes of a future yet to be hers. But as she had never asked me to carry a bag for her, or wished me to make love to her, I had kindly recollections of the warm-hearted, if maudlin old lady. Therefore when the leader of the Thespian Benevolent Society told me that Lydia had applied for relief I offered to call on her and make a report.

At Poverty Point I ran into a number of actors beguiling the tedium of awaiting engagements by laughing over one of Hughie Guthrie's doubtful stories. Someone had once told me that Hughie was a star Romeo in the long ago, but I had never met an old actor who was not. I mentioned my errand and the Rabelaisian grin died off Hughie's ribald lips.

"Dying", he said in the tone of one receiving a terrible reminder.

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"It was I who introduced her to the business. Forty years ago you'd have said she couldn't die. There was no dying in those days", he said as he shuffled along beside me.

Hughie had offered to accompany me to Lydia's lodgings. The slowness

of his hobbling gait was compensated for by the swift succession of reminiscences.

"At the turn of the century I might have started down this street sober but I'd never get so far as this without wanting a cab. They'd simply drag me into the houses. In women and waistcoats I tell you that Hugh Guthrie always headed the bill. But now I've almost forgotten what it's like to be called mister. I tell you, young man, this is a most God-abandoned city", and he stopped impressively.

I thought he alluded to a highly colored damsel standing in a doorway, who discharged a battery of ogles in our direction.

"It is an awful city. I declare that I stood at the Point this morning, sustaining a brilliant flow of anecdote, and do you know not one man asked me if I could swallow a beer".

Luckily I had a dollar in my pocket and so was able to rise to the occasion. After we came out of the bar Hughie's garrulity was intensified.

"Ah, we knew how to drink in those days. It was that made us the men we were. Never mind what Cassio says. Shakespeare was probably drunk when he wrote it. I always had to be when I played it. There's something in blank verse that demands beer. In those days the actors drank, the critics drank, the audience drank, and one helped the other. I once went up front to see Beerbohm Tree in a role I had often played myself, and I'd had a skinful. But this night Tree gripped my soul with Satan's tongue; at his last exit he had acted every drop of liquor out of me, and I was sober, sir. Could he have done that if I had only tea and lettuce in me? We've no great actors today because your modern please-and thank-you fashionable audiences haven't got enough ginger; they'd only be languidly interested if they were sitting before the Day of Judgement in tableaux".

Hughie stopped, but his puffing didn't. "I'm not as young as I used to

be, you know", and he looked around hopefully, but fortunately the next pub wasn't in sight. Sadly he took my arm and our slow progress resumed, as did his talking.

"They certainly were tough in those days. I remember a theatre in Geelong, then a big show town, owned by a publican where a sober man couldn't get an engagement. Once, when I was on the spree, the boys put me on the old Edina and I landed on the pier down there, out to it. With my card pinned on my back I was taken on a lorry to the theatre, where the manager put me to bed and, when I had sobered up, I was given a two months engagement. Ah, they were men in those days..... My boy, you don't know - your generation can't conceive what they were. They'd act your hair into ringlets and out again. None of your modern English sissies - making up with napkins under their chins, and voices only fit to soothe a baby to sleep with. 'Spose some of them are passable - why it's only in trousers. Put them in tights - where are they then?"

By this time we were turning down a side street - once populated and attractive in the boom days of the 'nineties - now with just enough squalid life in it to supply trade to the public house on the corner.

"In those days", Hughie continued, "if you had Lydia Stevenson's name or mine, on your boxes you could go anywhere in Australia, and every landlord would boast of your staying with him. There used to be strings of hansom cabs waiting at the stage door for her. She'd dodge them out the front until they'd wake up, and then often she'd put on my wardrobe and beard and get through them that way. This was because she used to string them all on, and say no to none. There was a fellow, I remember, who offered her fifty pounds to be allowed to touch her ankle - and when he wanted more she told him to add another nought to it; he did, and then she tore up his cheque and told him not to be a fool. Ah, what a lady. She could have

bathed in milk, yes, and in champagne, too."

"Here's the place, Hughie", I said, stopping before a decrepit weather-board cottage, with its verandah posts out of plumb, and a French horn emitting melancholic groans somewhere in its interior.

Our knocking brought a worried-looking woman to the door, together with the sound and odour of frying chops. I explained my mission, and she grew somewhat more gracious,

"She's gone quite ratty - goes on h'acting and wantin' to dress up. But I had to pawn the last of her dresses yestiday. She owes me six days rent. I only got fifty cents for it - a blue spangled tights thing. Lord knows how she ever got into it. 'Twouldn't go round her neck now. Come on, I'll take you to her".

She then showed us in, down a passage which ended in the perspective of a kitchen and a yard beyond, where two grubby children were playing. Then, to the accompaniment of a high note from the unseen horn-player, she opened a door. Hughie and I entered.

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Lydia, a toothless wizened old woman, with death in every feature, was half up in the bed, one hand clutching a small hand-mirror, and the other feeling in a small box on the quilt.

"My God!" whispered Hughie, "she's making-up!"

A few ends of grease paint were in the box, but she had not the strength to sustain her arm. A few ghastly dabs of rouge had been all she could accomplish. The landlady explained that the dying woman had insisted that the make-up box be brought to her; then attendance on the meal being prepared in the kitchen carried her from the room. Looking at the pitiful form on the bed I thought that milk baths and champagne were a thousand years away.

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"Hello, Hughie! You've come then. I've been waiting for what's seemed like years for you, for I knew you'd forgive me".

She recognised Hughie, and I grew suddenly conscious that I should not be present. But the room was small and Hughie blocked my exit.

"Hughie, I treated you badly old man, didn't I? Kiss me, please".

My back was turned to them and they appeared quite unconscious of me. I was staring at an old box with many labels on it, but I saw as well as heard Hughie's dry lips meeting hers and holding them long. Mixed up with the horn-players' scales, the grubby children's cries and the rattle of the landlady's kitchen pots, I heard Lydia wandering on, in and out of delirium, while Hughie, with his arms around her, for the first time in many years tried to attune his voice to tones of tenderness.

"But I loved you all the time, Hughie. The house is full and he's out in front. He has offered me five thousand a year, but he says he can't marry me as yet - oughtn't I to take it? Damn it, don't take all the stage. Who the hell wants to look at you? Good night, Hughie Number 77, Church of England section, the old Melbourne Cemetery.... I know you haven't forgotten it I know Go and have a look at it for me, will you.... Listen....there's the music. Lights up, damn it, Lights up. Ah, dear Hughie. If our boy had only lived, I must have been true to you".

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When I got Hughie outside and we walked back towards the Point, he was strangely silent for a time, then "You heard Lydia mention a boy. Many years ago I married her and we had a child, but he died when he was two. His death was responsible for a nervous breakdown and after her recovery she wanted only the

brightest of bright lights and there were plenty of johnnies to provide them. We drifted apart eventually and today was the first time I had seen her for ages. I'm glad I came along with you for I was able to make her happy, even if it were only for a little while. I feel like a drink; let's slip around the corner".

After he had swallowed a couple of rums Hughie appeared much brighter, and soon he began to tell some risqué yarns to his fellow drinkers. When he started on one about an actress he knew and a naval officer on a yachting trip, the old dirty lights were kindled in his eyes as he warmed to it. But the picture of tears on his wrinkled cheeks as he wiped rouge off a furrowed, tired face, and, with his arms around her, kiss the dry lips of a dying woman, was still with me, and I left without hearing the end.