

AT THE MATINEE

A Story

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She stood in the lobby of the theatre, looking alternately from the dial of her watch to the door, and then back again. The air of vexation which would have made an ill-natured girl ugly only added a piquant charm to her prettiness. A young man, moodily surveying a life-sized photograph of Maude Adams, hanging high on the wall, allowed his attention to wander to the severe little frown creasing the smooth forehead where frowns hardly seemed at home.

People were hurrying in. The orchestra was playing. In a minute the curtain would go up. Peggy looked despairingly at the watch, hopefully toward the door. But there was no sign of Violet, and the red in Peggy's cheeks deepened.

"It was so foolish to leave Violet to buy the tickets," Peggy told herself, swallowing uncomfortable lumps in her throat which would not stay-swallowed. It seemed incredible that she should not have foreseen what now she saw so plainly. Of course, Violet would be late. She was always late. Her promise to be on hand at 2 o'clock meant absolutely nothing. Violet's tardy arrivals were never her fault. Invariably she came full of excuses which no reasonable person could refuse to accept, but there never was an occasion when excuses could be dispensed with. Peggy blamed herself for not having taken this into account in her planning.

She was going to be late. Peggy blinked and swallowed. "It's a shame," she declared, just as the young man at her side uttered an impatient exclamation. Involuntarily they turned and started at each other, and he lifted his hat. "I beg your pardon," he said interrogatively.

"I—I didn't mean to say it out loud," Peggy explained. "But I thought it so hard that it just popped out. I'm waiting for a friend."

"So am I," said the young man gloomily. "He promised to be on time, but he never is." He sighed.

"And neither is Violet," Peggy exclaimed. "And how I could have been so foolish as to leave her to bring the tickets I can't imagine."

"Haven't you got your tickets, even?" asked the young man, with sympathy.

"No. Of course not. I shouldn't wait if I had. Have you yours?"

He drew two tickets from his pocket and displayed them. She looked onviously at the cardboard slips. "Oh, why do you wait?" she cried. "I wouldn't. Very likely he won't come till the second act, anyhow."

"Perhaps he won't," said the young man thoughtfully. He looked at the tickets and then at Peggy. Then he looked at the photograph of Maude Adams.

"It seems a pity for you to miss the opening of the play," said the young man diffidently. "With a second ticket in my pocket, why shouldn't you go in with me? Since your friend has two tickets, you need not feel any scruples as far as she is concerned. And we can adjust matters in the first intermission."

There was a long pause. The young man began to be afraid that Peggy was too much offended to reply. He turned his eyes from the picture on the wall to the picture at his elbow. But Peggy was not angry. Her eyes were shining, her hands were clasped, her lips parted.

"Do you—do you think it would be awful of me to say yes?" Peggy inquired anxiously.

"I think it would be very sensible of you," the young man replied, and that seemed to settle the question.

They went in swiftly and took their seats just as the curtain went up. And Peggy straightway forgot her escort, and the unconventionality of her action in accepting his invitation, and laughed and cried and enjoyed herself after a fashion incomprehensible to the blasé theatregoers. The young man gave comparatively little attention to what was taking place behind the footlights. Instead he watched Peggy. He was sorry when the curtain fell at

the end of the first act, and glad that Peggy was rather slow in coming back to the world of reality.

"Oh," she exclaimed at last, with a start, "I forgot." She looked at him guiltily. "I'll step out into the lobby and see if Rodman is there," said the young man with no signs of elation at the prospect. "And you might look around for your friend."

He returned after a brief absence, suspiciously cheerful. "No sign of Rodman," he said, taking the seat beside Peggy. "Have you discovered your friend yet?"

Peggy nodded. "I've discovered her," she said with an inflection that puzzled him. "But"—

"Well!"

"But she isn't alone. She's with a young man."

"Where?"

"Over by the second box. The girl in blue and white."

"The young man looked and whistled.

"Rodman, by all that's wonderful." He bent a little nearer. "Shall we disturb them?" he questioned.

Peggy stole a glance at Violet's direction before she answered. Then her eyes dropped demurely. "They seem to be enjoying themselves," said Peggy. "I almost think it would be a pity to interrupt them."

"That," said the young man with feeling, "expresses my sentiments exactly."

It was a short play. The young man with Peggy wondered irritably why the deuce they couldn't have added another act or two. He felt very unhappy as he helped her on with her wraps. He did not know her name, and she did not know his. He could not presume on a chance which had made it possible for him to do her a favor. He might never see her again. His sigh was so suggestive of melancholy that Peggy looked at him wistfully, with the impulse to be comforting which is implanted deep in the hearts of Eve's daughters.

"Why, Peggy?"

An expansive lady in black satin was smiling and holding out her hand. Peggy started guiltily. "O, good afternoon, Mrs. Ellsworth. Delightful, wasn't it?"

"Adorable," said the expansive lady, and looked expectantly in the direction of Peggy's companion. Before she knew it Peggy had taken the plunge.

"Mrs. Ellsworth, let me present"—

"Rutherford," whispered a voice in her ear:

"My friend, Mr. Rutherford," said Peggy brazenly, but blushing like a rose.

"So pleased to meet you, Mr. Rutherford," smiled Mrs. Ellsworth. "You must let Miss Dixon bring you in to see me some day. I'm always at home Sunday afternoons. I'm so glad I ran across you, Peggy."

And Rutherford had his own reasons for being pleased at the encounter.

Violet telephoned Peggy that evening.

"What in the world happened to you, dear? I was on time. O, well, I might have been a few minutes late, but nothing that would really matter. A heavy dray got stuck on the car track and delayed us. But I happened to meet an old friend in the lobby, a Mr. Rodman. And, queerly enough, the friend he was expecting didn't show up, so we sat together and had a lovely time. But what detained you, Peggy?"

"O, something unexpected happened at the last minute," Peggy replied. And she was smiling as she hung up the receiver.

It was to Violet that Mrs. Ellsworth went for information a month later. "What about this young Rutherford who is always hanging about Peggy Dixon? Are they engaged or not?"

"She says not—yet," laughed Violet. "But the announcement won't surprise anybody."

"I knew it," Mrs. Ellsworth exclaimed triumphantly. "I met them at the theatre a few weeks ago, and when she introduced me she blushed in a fashion that gave the whole thing away. I told my husband about it that evening and I said to him, 'Mark my words, Tom, that's as good as settled.'"