

TRUTH TO THE STAGESTRUCK

BY MARGUERITE CLARK



Now, this is not going to be the conventional, cut and dried "advice to young stage-struck girls" that finds its way into print every little once in awhile. I appreciate, indeed, that some of this sort of "advice" is all right in its limited way, and that it has some basic elements of truth; but whenever my reading eyes have encountered it I have longed—oh, I can't tell you how much!—to take out some of the things expressed in it and put in a lot, a whole lot, of other things.

The one biggest thing that ought to be veined into such "advice," if it is to be of any use and attain its end, is sympathy—not sympathy for the stage, nor an understanding sympathy with the young girl who will read it. And never have I found this quality so want. I say frankly, from my double viewpoint—that I am a young stagestruck girl and chanced to read the kind of "advice" I have mentioned, it would not hurt me for one little second from my determination to take up what I believed was the glorious, glamorous life of the theater. When I read, "The road to success is a rough one," I should, if I were the stage-struck girl, go to myself, as probably every stagestruck girl says to herself, "Of course it is; but so is every road to success." That would not cause me to change my mind for a moment. When I read, "Without talent a girl should never think of a theatrical career," I should smile to myself, as every stagestruck girl who reads would and complacently assure myself that I had the necessary talent. And of unvarying warnings such as these that "advice" usually made up.

The stagestruck girl is generally a very young girl, and she must be reckoned with as such. When an actress of many years' experience gives the girl advice, she generally speaks unconsciously to the girl (through the printed page, as if the girl was of her own age). And the girl, upon reading, will say to herself, "Oh, it is all very well for the actress to talk this way and try to dissuade me, but she forgets that she has succeeded, and that I am so much younger than she is, and when I get to be her age—" and so on.

The purpose of all the "advice" I have ever read (I believe I have looked over most of it in the last five or six years) seems to be to scare the girl who thinks in her heart of it into a safe, intended for a stage career. I believe that is the only possible way to go about accomplishing anything with a young girl. The moment you try to reason with her, she suspects you of insincerity. And, furthermore, ambition is the one thing in the world that cannot be reasoned out of a person, be that ambition possessed of a strong reasoning foundation or not. The old-fashioned "talk" of a wise old fashioned medicine. It may work if it is given to the young patient to take it; but it is a very, very difficult really to get that patient to take it. The actually effective advice must be sugar coated with sympathy.

THE young stagestruck girl of today is a far more "sophisticated" girl than was her sister of yesterday. She is not to be fooled in a new way. A day never goes by that I do not receive at least fifteen letters from some of the girls in every section of the country, asking for my "advice" about their going on the stage. You see, I am little myself, and some people tell me I don't look much older than a kid (although I surely am), and I suppose the young girls think that I am one of them. I will tell them the truth. I always have had my "advice" for answer the letters and tell the girls just how I felt, and I have often received letters back assuring me that what I had told them that had caused them to change their minds about going on the stage and to go home instead.

Let me show you a typical letter I received a few weeks ago from a girl in Chicago:

MY DEAR MISS CLARK.—I am tired of the narrow, uneventful life at home with my family, and want to go on the stage. I am seventeen years old; I have studied elocution and music for two years; and my friends tell me I am pretty. I am willing to, and expect to, start at the bottom of the ladder, and am sure I shall succeed. Won't you please tell me what you think of my ambition and plan?

I wrote the girl in the simplest and most "school-girlly" style I could summon that I wished with all my heart I could change places with her, and that I should trade every bit of my stage success for the "narrow, uneventful life at home" she described. Then I went on and anticipated her thoughts by telling her that the traveling around the country was great at first; but it was so awfully hard to do your hair up nicely and keep your clothes looking well on trains and on the road, and that traveling almost all the time might be somewhat exciting; but it didn't give you any time to make friends. A week later, the little girl wrote me that she guessed I was right, and that she had changed her mind about going on the stage.

Now, you see, if I had written her in the old fashioned "advice" manner, and told her merely that stage work was very hard and that she "should not sacrifice a good home for the doubtful career of the theater," very likely she would not have paid much attention to me. An older actress might in all sincerity, yet in complete ineffectualness, have written the little girl in that vein; but I kept one thought uppermost in my mind when I wrote,—how I had felt at the Chicago girl's age! I remembered that then I thought I should dearly love to "travel all the time and see the country and make a lot of friends on the road and look eternally pretty and have a lot of fun." I realized that the girl was thinking of all these things too when she wrote me, and that it was not the stage as the stage on which her eyes were centered.

MOST stagestruck girls look upon the stage chiefly as the means for amusement, pleasure, and what they call "life." So I tried to hit my girl correspondent in the weakest spot of her ambition. I spoke the whole truth, nevertheless. And when she read my letter and the only half-thought of that she could not always "look pretty" while traveling (every girl knows that down in her heart), and that there was no time to have fun on the road, she believed me, hooded me—and saved herself. I sympathized with her and "understood her" at least she was certain in her own mind that I did; and as a result the little stagestruck child stayed where she belonged, at home.

I have not the slightest intention of belittling my profession. The drama is a glorious art, and its exponents are worthy people; but the sad fact is that stagestruck girls have their eyes less on drama than on what they are pleased to believe is the "gay, glamorous life of the theater." It is against this that "advice" should be directed—and rarely is. Every stagestruck girl (I am sure the "severe" is not too strong) thinks of the "glamour" and "fun" of stage life a hundred times where she thinks seriously of drama and work once. Accordingly, these girls must be dissuaded with this in mind and from this point of view. And they must be dissuaded truthfully, because the truth of the case should be exactly ample unto itself to discourage everyone of them. To such stagestruck girls, therefore, I would say in all honesty:

(1) That traveling with a theatrical company (which they believe to be great sports) is, truly enough, novel and interesting for the first year, maybe even for the first two years; but after that it is unqualifiably as mean an existence as a girl can imagine. In all the "advice" I have ever read, I have seen it stated that the life of the road is fearful from the very beginning. This is not

true—in the case of a young girl. I know I loved it at first; but that soon wears off.

And then, when the edge of novelty goes, the ceaseless travel becomes a nightmare,—miserable hotels; bad food; cold cars; up out of bed at dawn to catch trains (because the one-night-stand life falls to all beginners, and they must go through its lengthy ordeal); no time for relaxation; little time to take care of one's health; no new faces, but the same old persons to talk to day in and day out,—in short, a gipsy life without a dash of color, without the vaguest tinge of romance. Even in later years, after the hard period of apprenticeship, there comes months of this sort of thing. The period of stay in the larger cities is variable and fickle, and the road must be resorted to in the endless campaign for financial gain. Even after success comes, that dreaded nightmare of travel haunts the actress. She has no place she may call home. She no sooner gets settled in a place, than off she must go again. And this holds for the most famous star as it does for the lowest little chorus girl.

(2) That the "glamour" of the theater is a greatly overestimated institution. The home girl who goes to a party once a month sees, gets, and lives in a greater atmosphere of real glamour than her little sister of the playhouse. Stories about men who send you huge bouquets of American Beauties, candy by the ten-pound, and dinner and supper invitations by the hundred, are stories. To be sure, a girl on the stage, if she is attractive, does receive attentions from men; but not any more than she would if she were not on the stage.

What glamour may be invested in the name of "actress" is paid for a thousand times over by sacrifice of the real normal pleasures of life, and by interminable rehearsals in dark, gloomy theaters, and steady, relentless hard work. Youth's fresh face pays its price, too, to win a bit of this dubious "glamour" of the stage, and when once the "glamour" is won for a personality it is analyzed to be absolutely nothing. In the eyes of young boys and silly schoolgirls it may be wonderful, this "glamour"; but in the eyes of men and women, real men and women, it amounts to so little!

And, as years pass, the glamour of stage personalities is dimming more and more before the strong light of the drama's achievement. It is now only the hard worker who wins applause in the theater. The public refuses to be glamourized any more. It wants good actors and actresses, able players, and it is not influenced a whit, as in other days, by mere "personalities."

So don't be misled, dear little girl. Your prettiness will no longer win you fame. You must have a strong constitution, and you will have to work a thousand times harder than you ever had to work in school.

(3) That you will not be able to take care of yourself so well as you think if you take up the life of the theater. Unless you have a mother, or brother, or sister, or someone to look out for you, you are destined to have a great deal of trouble. In their commendable desire not to seem fingers of mind against their own calling, my sisters of the stage have permitted themselves to fib somewhat about temptation in the life of the stage. Their not entirely true statements are to be pardoned for the reason cited; but the fact, the grim fact, remains that the truth ought to be told.

The theater is full of temptations for the young girl. I do not believe I am doing wrong in saying so, because other professions as well are probably not entirely devoid of temptation. This is not a pleasant subject, and need not be gone into in detail; but I do want to impress all these little girls who think the stage is the place for them with the truth of the situation. If anyone tells you that there is no temptation in the theater, he is leading you into error. It is silly to attempt to deny what exists. In no circumstances should a young girl enter into the life of the theater without someone to protect her and watch out for her. The theater is a