

The Slim Syrens

by

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'The first show what I ever went out with was Mr Sloper's Company for the Society Gal, what was called "The Syrens." You see, when the play was first done, society 'ad long wysts and thin 'ips and no bust to speak of, and the lydies what plyed in it original was chose according. My! but they was a skinny lot - reg'lar bags o' bones; if ye'd a biled down the lot for stock you'd no need to 'ave skimmed it. W'y, the tights they wore! - Speakin' of legs as yards of pump-water ain't in it; theirs looked as you might 'ave rolled 'em up on a spool. And as to their chestys - why, you might 'ave put 'em through the mangle and none ever the wuss - except the mangle from jerkiness, where it might 'ave well expected to take it a bit india-rubbery. But the ply 'ad so long a run that the fashion got changed, and the swells began to like 'em thick. So the gals got changed, too; some of 'em makin' up with 'eavy

fleshings an' them shove-up corsets, what'd take a pinch out of your - your stummick an' swell out your throat with it, till they come into line with the fashion. Lor', the things I've seen the girls do to make theirselves look bulkier than what nature made 'em! Any'ow, when they 'ad run the fust companies twice round the Greats, Mr Sloper thought as 'ow 'e'd go one better on the fashion. "Ketch the risin' tide" was ever 'is mortar! So the company engyged for "The New Edition Society Gal" was corkers! They used to say in the wardrobe as 'ow there was a twenty-stun standard, and no one would be engyged that couldn't pass the butcher. Of course, the wardrobe of the theayter or the travelling shows was no use for "The Slim Syrens" - for that's what they came to be kown as. We 'ad to 'ave a lot of tights made a purpose, and when they come 'ome the young man 'as brought 'em laughed that much that he cried, and he wanted to stay an' see 'em put on, till I 'unted 'im out. I never see such tights in all my time. They was wove that bias everywhere as I felt my 'eart sink when I thought of 'ow we was to take up ladders in 'em; for fat girls does a deal more in that wy than slim ones - let alone the 'arder pullin' to drag 'em on. But the tights wasn't the wust. You remember, Mrs Solomon, as 'ow there's a scene when Society goes in for to restore Wat-ho, and the 'ole bilin' dresses theirselves as shepherds. Mr Sloper didn't want to spend no more money than he could 'elp; so down he goes to Morris Angel's, tykin' me and Mrs Beilby, that was wardrobe mistress to the Slim Syrens, with 'im. Well, ole Morris Angel trots out all the satin britches as 'e 'ad in stock. Of course, the most of 'em was no use to our little lot, but we managed to pick out a few that was likely for lydies what runs large. These did for some of the crowd, and, of course, the principals got theirs made to order. They wasn't so much fuller than Angel's lot, arter all; for our lydies, though bulky, liked good fits, and sure enough at the dress rehearsal most of them looked as if they had been melted and poured in. Mr Sloper and the styge manager and some of the syndicate gentlemen what came to see the rehearsal had no end of fun, and the things they said, and the jokes they made, and the way that the girls run after 'em and 'ammered of 'em playful, as girls does, 'd made you laugh to have seen it. And talk of blushin'! Well, there! The most particular of the lot, and him what didn't like the laughin' and the jokin', was Mr Santander, that was going to take out the Company as manager - him what they called "Smack" Santander in the green room. There was one girl what was his ladyfriend as he had put into the lead, though the other girls said as 'ow she 'ad no rights to be shoved on that way. But, there! Gals is mostly like that when another gal gets took up and 'elped on. Why, the things what I've 'eard and seen just because a girl was put into the front row! When she was bein' dressed, which it was in the

wardrobe, because Mr Santander was that particular that Miss Amontillado should be dressed careful, well do I remember the remark as Mrs Beilby made: "Well, Miss," says she, "there's no denyin' of that you are very fine and large!" Which was gospel truth, and no concealin' of it either in the wardrobe or on the styge, an' most of all in the orchestra, where the gentlemen never left for their whiskey-and-soda, or their beer or cards or what not, or a smoke, till she 'ad gone to 'er dressin'-room, which most of 'em got new glasses - them what didn't use opery-glasses. Well, when dress rehearsal was over, Mr Sloper 'e tried to be very serious, and, says he, "Lydies, you must try and be careful; remember that you carry weight!" - which that hended 'is speech for 'im, for he choked with laughter till the syndicate gentleman come and slapped 'im on the back, and then laughed, too, fit to bust.

'When we was startin' the season Mr Santander sent for me and spoke to me about Miss Amontillado, and told me that it was as much as my plyce was worth if anything went wrong with 'er. I told 'im as 'ow I'd do my best, and I took Miss Amontillado aside, and, ses I, "Miss, it's temptin' providence it is," says I, "for a fine, strapping young lydy as you in britches like them," I says. "You do kick about that free," I says; "and satin is only satin at the best, and though the stryn is usual on it in the right direction up and down, there's the stryn on yours all round. What if I was you I wouldn't take no chances," I says. Well, she laughed, and says she, "Well, you dear old geeser" - for she was a young lydy as was always kind and affable to her inferiors - "and what would you do if you was me?" "Well, miss," I says, "if I was as gifted as you is, I'd have them made on webbin' what'd 'old, and wouldn't show if the wust come to the wust." She only laughed, and gave me sixpence, and, says she, "You're a good ole sort, Sniffles" - for that's what some of the young ones called me - "and I'll tell Smack how well you look after me. Then perhaps he'll raise your screw."

'Both Mr Santander and Miss Amontillado was anxious about the first night, and there was bets in the dressin'-room as to how she'd come off in 'er 'igh-kickin' act. You'll remember, Mrs Solomon, 'ow the ply goes, as 'ow to the surprise of all, the young Society gal as didn't do nothin' more nor a skirt-dance, sudden ups and tykes the kyke from all the perfeshionals. When Miss Amontillado was dressed for the act in her shepherd dress, I says to her, "Now miss," I says, "do be keerful"; and Mr Santander 'e says, "'Ear! 'ear!" 'e says. "Oh, I'm all right," she says. "Look 'ere, Smack," and she ups and does a split as made my 'eart jump, it was that sudden, and up on her 'eels agin afore you could say Jack Robinson!

'Well, just then I 'eard the Call-Boy a-comin' down the passidge 'ollerin', "Miss Amontillado! Miss Amontillado!" "'Ere!" she says; and as he came into the room she puts 'er 'ands over 'er 'ead and does a sal-lam that low that 'er back 'air nigh swept the floor. And lo and behold! as she bent I 'ears a 'ideous crack; and there was 'er back up and down in two 'alves as you'd 'ave put a sweepin' brush atween.

"Now you've done it, Miss," I says; and there was she laughin' and cryin' all in a moment, for it weren't no joke to 'er to 'ave her big scene queered like that the fust time as she done it. And there was Mr Santander a-tearin' at 'is 'air - which there wasn't none too much of it - and 'im a-bullyin' of 'er dreadful, and sayin' as 'ow 'e'd cancel 'er engygement - which 'e weren't no gentleman, that 'e weren't. And all the time the Call-Boy yellin' out, "Miss Amontillado, there'll be a styge wyte!" and 'im fit to bust laughin'. Impident young monkey! I knew as 'ow if anything was to be done it must be done quick, so I whips out a big sailmaker's needle what we sewed canvas with and the tapes on the stair-treads, an' a lot of waxend twine as I kep' for fixin' reefs in the ballet shoes; for it wasn't no child's play as to them britches with a fine gal like that, and them so tight. I tried to get a holt of the two sides of the tear to bring 'em together; but, lor' bless you! the reef was that wide I couldn't get 'em close any'ow. The dresser that was in with me, she tried to 'elp; but it weren't no use. And then Mr Santander 'e kem and 'ad a try, but it weren't no go. Then I tykes the Call-Boy by the 'air of 'is 'ead and mykes 'im ketch 'old too, 'im bein' a bicyclist and 'is fingers that 'ard. Then the gas-man came to 'elp with two sets of pinchers; but all we could do we couldn't make them sides of that split meet.

'We was all in despair and the time goin' by; we could 'ear the 'ootin' in front at the wayt, and the styge-manager kem tearin' along, yellin' and cursin' and shoutin' out, "What in 'ell is wrong? Where is the bally girl? Why don't she 'urry up?"

'At that very moment a hinspiration came to me. It was a hinspiration an' nothink else, for there was that there poor gal's success at styge, much less 'er situation. "'Ere," say I, "my dear, just you lie down on the sofy on yer fyce, with yer bust on the cushing and yer toes out with yer 'eels in the air." She sor in a flash what I were up to, and chucked 'erself on the sofy, and the Call-Boy shoved a bolster under 'er instep. My! but she bent up double that 'ard that I 'eard the webbin' of the abominable belt as she wore go crack.

'But, lydies and gents, the situation was saved; the roos was a pernounced success. Them two distant hedges kem together like twins a-kissin', and afore you could say "Boo!" I 'ad my needle and was a-sewin' of 'em up that firm. I was in such a 'urry that some of the stitches took in the skin as well as the satin. But she was a plucky gal, and tho' she 'owled, she didn't wriggle away. There wasn't no time to cut the thread, and as soon as the last stitch was in she jumps up, tearin' the stitches through her skin, and bounds out on the styge with the needle 'anging' be'ind. Mind you, 'er blood was up, and she landed on to the styge like a good 'un.

'The roar that come from the Johnnies when they see 'er was good to 'ear!

'But this is nothin' to do with what I was goin' to tell you about that story of the dead byby -'

'Oh! blow the dead baby,' said the Second Low Comedian. 'Put it in a bottle and keep it on the shelf till called for. After an act of living valour like what you've told us, we don't want anything dead.'

'Next!' said the MC, in the pause that ensued.

The Low Comedian being next in order had been gradually becoming more ill at ease as his own time approached; it was manifest that in the armoury of his craft was no weapon suited to deal with a necessity of extempore narration. Some of those on whom he was accustomed to sharpen his wits knew, either instinctively or by experience, of this weakness, and commenced to redress or avenge whatever they might have suffered at his hands. They began by encouragement, outwardly genuine and hearty, but with an underlying note of irony which could not fail to wound a spirit sensitive on the point of its own importance:

'Buck up, old man.'

'Drive on, Gags.'

'Have a drink first. You're always funnier afterwards.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked the indignant Low Comedian, fiercely. 'What do you mean by "afterwards"? Do you mean when I'm drunk, or have had too much, or what?'

'Only a joke!' said the Prompter, in a deprecatory way, for his was the unhappy remark. The Heavy Father who was usually one of his butts struck in:

'He probably meant that you were funnier in your intention after the opportunity of being funny had existed as a fact.' The Low Comedian did not see his way to a fitting reply, so he replied to the arrow with a stone:

'Indeed! If I was you, old man, I would try Irish! It's sometimes hard to understand you through Scotch!'

'Time!' cried out the MC, anxious to prevent what looked like the beginning of a quarrel. The bottle, or I should say the Tribune, rests with Mr Parmentire.' The Low Comedian looked at the fire reflectively for a few seconds; then he passed his hand through his hair, and after glaring all round the Company, began:

'I suppose you know, Ladies and Gentlemen, that there is a current idea that a Low Comedian must be always humorous.' He was interrupted by the Tragedian, who, prefacing his remark with a Mephistophelean Ha-ha-ha! said:

'If there is, it is a mistake; or, at best, an exploded idea. Surely, humour is the last quality to be expected from a Comedian, let alone a Low Comedian. But, of course, I may be prejudiced; I never took much stock of the horse-collar myself'

'Si-lence! Si-lence!' said the watchful MC in the manner of a Court crier, whilst the Leading Juvenile whispered to the Prompter:

'Bones got in at him for the dead baby fingers that time.' The Low Comedian went on:

'Well, if humour in private life is expected, it's not always to be had, as Bones has very properly implied in his best knock-down-and-drag-out manner, however we may deceive the public by our arts and utterances in public.