

Lola's Contribution

The blank is slowly breaking! I've just dared to open the portmanteau and look at one of those yellow posters. I put it away quick; there's a lump in my throat that seems as if it will never go. One look, and I could see my little Lola's brown face smiling up at me, and her hands reaching out to tell me there's nothing in the world to forgive. Nothing! No; she would love to have us think she died for her Canadian boy who's out fighting in the war—died just as bravely as he would. She never knew; and Will Holly, if ever he returns, will find no one to tell him the truth. That is between Heaven and me; and if there's a price to be paid, why, I pay it in full every time I look back—back to dear, terrible Montreal!

Yes! It was just after we knew that the war was going to tighten the bond between Britain and her colonies. The Exhibition had been in full swing, but people were beginning to forget it and talk of nothing but the far-away struggle on the veldt. Still Lola, and I, who had worked our way up from the South in time for the circus engagement, were doing splendid business; and one of the biggest lines on the yellow bill of attractions was, "Twice daily—Little Lola, the Dusky Queen of Snakes."

Anyone who has been to that part of the world knows two things: How the people there love a healthy sensation, and how they would all be in a fever of excitement to do something to help the Mother Country through her war. That's why the place was in a ferment—and why Lola's performance with the snakes had been all the rage. For one thing, I invariably challenged criticism when I claimed that my daughter had brought a charmed life from her plantation home, and experts and others who had stepped sceptically into the ring had had to publicly own themselves mystified—that the poison-glands of the full-venomed cobra were intact. And then, more than all, it was Lola's big shining, dark eyes, her nut-brown skin, and crop of little black curls, her childish unconsciousness as she crooned her "charm" lullabies, all of which she had inherited from her Octoroon mother, that added to the witchery of the thing, and made people flock to see her for herself alone.

Little Lola! Never forget that she was the one thing I had in the world to love, and that the mere thought that some day a man might take her from me had always made my blood tingle vaguely. I had no tangible fear of it, she was such a clinging little thing that I could not imagine her leaving me for any husband; but the time had come when I scarcely ever let her go long out of my sight. . . . And it was here, at Montreal, that one day I had to wake up to the fact that my Lola was a woman, and had a woman's heart.

It was just after one of the final evening performances. As the cheering died away a man had leaned over the barrier and thrown a fresh rose into the ring. A few minutes later when Lola had dressed and we were outside, the usual small crowd had collected at the artistes' entrance to stare at the cases being placed on the trolley—although they could see nothing of the reptiles inside. I happened to swing round suddenly, and my heart jumped; the man was there, whispering something to Lola; and Lola's face seemed to show that she had heard it before. I stared at him, and he moved away. Afterwards, I could recollect having seen the man several times in the front row of the circus stalls; his lips parted, watching Lola like one fascinated.

"You have—you have seen that man again?" something made me say to her a few days later.

"Yes," she whispered. "He was waiting. I never knew it."

"You never knew?" I threw down my cigar, and got up. "But who is he? What has he said to you?"

"Oh, no, you won't!" she breathed quickly, as if she guessed I had meant to stride after him then and there. She stood looking at me, with piteous eyes and twitching lips. Although turned seventeen she was in many ways infinitely far more of the child than the woman. "I did mean to tell you,—soon! He only said it frightened him—he wished I could give up the life, and—"

"And be his wife, perhaps!" I filled in, in a stifled passion.

"I—I don't know!" Ah, but the way she ran forward to put her arms round my neck and hide that hot face told me more than any words. I stood fairly stupefied.

"You'd better tell me at once," I

got out at last. Who is he? You must know that, or you would never—"

"Yes! Holly," she whispered. "Will Holly. He saw us at Duluth. He spoke to me there, but I thought no more of it. He says he is miserable thinking of it—I don't know why. He would have liked to speak to you, but was afraid. But now—now he thinks he is going to the war; they tell him he has been chosen; and—"

"And—Go on; you know it all!"

"He only begged me to tell him where we should be when he comes back! That was all. I couldn't help liking him a little!"

As if it was last night, I can remember how the swimming eyes looked imploringly up into mine; how I had to shut my teeth on words that choked up.

"Going to the war, is he?" I said, with a laugh. "So much the better—for him. If he's a gentleman, and wants to know anything of that sort let him ask me."

"But you don't think I'd ever leave you—ever give it up? I never thought of it at all! Don't I know you could never do without me? Why," she whispered smiling, "where could you find another Lola—another Queen of Snakes?"

A minute later I had slipped quietly from the house. There was a man walking slowly down the block. He looked back once or twice, but I could not be sure. Then, late as it was a newsboy came shouting out some war news; the man stopped, purchased a paper eagerly, and stood still to read it. I walked past, brushed his arm, and he looked up with a start. It was the man who wanted my Lola—a tall, strong young fellow, with a determined, thoughtful face.

"Excuse me—Mr. Holly?"

"Certainly!" was the quick answer. "It gives me my chance. Mr. Joyce, I'm a man, same as yourself. I do hope I've given no offence in thinking of, or speaking to your daughter!"

"No offence whatever," I said, steadily, "so long as it ends there, as it must."

"It—can't!" He dropped the paper, and stepped back, as if I had struck him a blow. His voice went husky. "Can I help myself? Your daughter—I have only seen her a dozen times, but I can't forget her—can't bear to think I may never see her again. I start for headquarters to-morrow night. I meant to see you first. I ask nothing—I cannot, of course,—except that I may write to you, and just think of her as a friend till we come back. She will of me, I know, if you let her!"

"I'm sorry," I said, "but it is out of the question. I can't say—we may be hundreds of miles away before that happens. Besides, my daughter has her professional engagements for a long time to come."

"Oh, if it's a question of money, you need not fear—excuse me! That's just it; I feel it is no life for a woman—for a pure, innocent child like that! It's dangerous—unnatural! I shuddered every time I saw her perform, Mr. Joyce—there! I'm not a mad, impulsive boy, but a man who knows when he has met the one woman to make him happy."

With a choke, he swung away. I stared after him, swayed between anger and a queer desire to call him back. Why, yes, it was somehow unreasonable on my part staggering as the revelation had been. I had wooed and married her mother on just such an irresistible impulse, and I was pooh-poohing this man's fascination as an incredible piece of impertinence. But I had lost that sweet patient wife long ago; and now to lose little Lola, her legacy to me—no!

If Lola slept that night, I did not. At breakfast-time two letters were lying on the table. One was signed "W. Holly," and it said that, as I had seen fit to dismiss contemptuously what was with him a vital matter, he should act in his own way when he returned. The postscript—"I am an honourable, if susceptible man, and you may hear that out there I have tried to prove myself worthy of her"—was pathetic; but I pocketed the letter at once, in dread lest Lola might see it. The other, which I read aloud, was from the Exhibition Committee. I should see from the papers that the loyal Canadian contingent would be starting for South Africa in a few days, and it was enthusiastically proposed on all hands to organize a monster performance on the following Monday. Part of the proceeds would be devoted to a presentation for the men Monday. A part of the proceeds would be sent to England to swell the National Relief Fund. No doubt the "Queen of Snakes" would contribute gratuitously her interesting turn, in common with many others who had the cause close at heart.

"Oh, yes—yes; Oh, yes—the brave fellows! Write at once; we will—we will!" breathed Lola, clasping her hands as if thrilled at the mere suggestion.

I bit my lip on the answer. I did not wish her to know my thoughts, and how Holly's last words had rankled in me. It was a perverse bit of spite, no doubt; but, an hour later, the day mentioned. Heaven knows, affect that, for certain compelling reasons, the "Queen of Snakes" would not be able to give her services on the day mentioned. Heaven knows, afterwards, I would have given my right hand to be able to recall that letter!

It was gone. For the next two days I remember, I lived in a sort of uncomfortable consciousness. And then, on the third day, the new exhibition posters were flaming all over the city. . . . At midday I was in the little heated conservatory at the back feeding the snakes. I can see Lola's face now, as she came to the doorway with that wondering whisper:

"Why, I—I am not billed to appear! Not a word—everyone but me. What can it mean? Don't they want me?"

"Mean? Didn't I tell you?" I said, sharply. "I never promised. We shall be going on to Toronto by the first train on Monday."

That was all. The brown face seemed to whiten, the baby-wide eyes stared past me for a moment. She said nothing, but the way she turned and crept away—no, I don't want to think of it!

And we were not to go on to Toronto on the Monday. Looking back, it seems something more than a great coincidence; but the fact remains that on the Saturday I was taken with a feverish chill, and the doctor who came informed me that I must not dream of such a journey for at least three days.

Monday evening, with that dull pain still in my limbs, I was sitting by the fire. I had just been reading of the enthusiastic preparations for the departure of the Canadians, and my thoughts veered to that other scene at the Exhibition—that other outburst of loyalty.

Where was Lola? I suddenly wondered. She had cleared the tea, kissed me quietly, and said she must go out for a little while—nearly three hours ago. Perhaps in her room, crying quietly over what might have been—just her way. Thinking so, I called. No answer, I groped slowly out, tapped at her door, and went in. No, not there. I turned up the gas. She had packed her boxes for the journey; and she had been writing. To Holly, perhaps. I picked up the sheet of blotting-paper on the dressing table out of curiosity. I could just make out a few of the faint words she had blotted:

"My contribution. . . brave soldiers. . . orphans and widows who. . . Most sorry. . . Ah, the silly child had been writing to the Exhibition Committee to tell them she was sorry she could not help as everyone else was doing, and very likely inclosing a bigger sum towards the fund than she would like me to know."

I laughed as I went out, but I had a sort of lump in my throat, I felt very sick and shaky. I would feed the snakes—a thing I had never yet allowed anyone else to do—and then go to bed.

I went down and out to the little conservatory. As I stepped inside with the lamp I had a queer sensation. It was not the sickly heat of the place; it was the fact that the perforated case in which I kept the wriggling score of small, harmless reptiles—the one's which Lola's plantation crooning would bring in a fascinating circle around her—was not there—Why, what—I looked across to the other corner, where the big cobra case should stand. Gone—the cobra case gone! Just my brain could act—act with a reeling swiftness. That letter of Lola's—I saw now, gauged the situation in a flash. She had written to say it was all a mistake—she would give her performance; unknown to me she had taken her opportunity, and—and. . .

How long did I stand, with the sweat beading out on me, and that icy wind from nowhere seeming to fan the hair back from my forehead? I shall never know, never care to calculate. Think of my position; try and realize that I had been playing upon the world a daring professional trick all these years—the trick that had brought me money everywhere, and made little Lola falsely famous as a being with a charmed life.

That big case, contrived by myself on a cunning inspiration was a fraud that I had come to believe would never now be unmasked. Audiences, experts, doctors—even Lola herself, whom I had never dared to tell—all believed that it contained one deadly cobra—the reptile which I had a device for trapping and holding safe-

ly while its fangs were being examined. One cobra—that I always slipped back into the case, while, as for dramatic effect, I addressed the audience and claimed a strange immunity for the "Queen of Snakes!" Then, at the psychic moment, one touch of a spring set free a swift-sliding shutter which imprisoned the genuine snake out of sight; another cobra was there—an exact double,—perfectly harmless. This was the reptile which the public stared at, the reptile which coiled round Lola's arm or waist, and darted fatuously at her while she stood smiling, serene in the implicit belief in her own powers that made her performance so convincing and bewitching. I was always at head, ready to slip it back, touch the spring again, and interview reporters as to my antidotal theory. And now, to-night, I was not there; and Lola knew nothing of the ascending shutter and the cobra underneath. At this very moment, perhaps. . . .

"What's the matter, Mr. Joyce? Anything amiss?" It was the landlady, who had perhaps been watching.

"Who—who—" I whispered pointing.

"Why," she breathed, "Miss Lola! She came back with one of the circus men, not an hour ago. She was all excitement—just time for her turn, she said."

I must have dropped the lamp, sent up one wild prayer to Heaven, and, hatless, in a delirium of fear, staggered from the house. The first thing I realized was that I was panting along the street, people staring and drawing back to let me pass. My Lola—my little Lola! To be in time—to stop the turn, whatever the world thought next day!

Now I had reached the Exhibition main gate. And now—now I had hustled through, and fought my mad way to the big circus pavilion, into the blaze of white light. . . . There was the amphitheatre ring, round which the piebald horses and the Roman chariots had raced. It seemed to me that the violins had been playing, and had stopped; but only a breath-catch here and there broke a great hush as, like a man half-blinded by the glare, I felt my way down one of the tiered gangways, leaped the barrier, and groped into the ring!

I was in time! Aye, in time to see the sight that comes to me in every dream. Dreamlike it was then, and must ever be. I knew afterwards that the music had broken off as the cobra, the hood dilating on its neck, made one savage dart at the white folds covering Lola's breast, and she swayed back with a cry that no one understood. Dead and powerless it lay there now—killed by the attendant's rods as it glided away. And my little Lola, her face twitching in the agony that has no name—she lay back in someone's arms. In time, yes! Just time to catch her in my arms, and hold her convulsively, calling her name, hoarsely, as they said afterwards. Just time to see her eyes open, and feel the little brown fingers close on mine for the last time; just long enough to catch that faint whisper: "Daddy! I'm going—to him—for him—out there!"

No more. . . . The Canadians have gone—many, they tell me, to prove their bravery with their lives. And those who return—they will never know all, but they will hear of the fund, and they may like to hear how little Lola gave her contribution.

KHAKI COSTUMES.

"Khaki" costumes are considered smart and likewise extremely serviceable. They will be used for traveling and all kinds of outing this spring and summer. But to many persons the material not only is trying, but positively unbecoming. This may be overcome without detracting from the desirable features of the khaki by the addition of a dash of red, just a little of it, for example, in the collar, cuffs and belt. For those who prefer some other color than red, blue is good, although the contrast is not so effective.

Khaki suits are showing much stitching in coarse white or blue thread and are extremely useful and suitable for outings. A brass-buttoned pocket here and there gives an additional touch of utility and militarism and is very spruce and trig on the right sort of girl.

MUTUAL SYMPATHY.

Collector—I'm sorry, Mr. Slowpay, but your tailor has put his account against you into my hands for collection.

Mr. Slowpay—He has, eh? Do you work on a commission basis?

Collector—Yes, sir.

Mr. Slowpay—Then I'm sorry for you.

PURELY CANADIAN NEWS.

INTERESTING ITEMS ABOUT OUR OWN COUNTRY.

Gathered from Various Points from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Wingham's population is 2,204. Tilbury has a population of 1,002. Manitoulin is enjoying a land boom. Calgary's now an incorporated city. Galt school teachers have organized an association.

St. Thomas is to have a new Y.M.C.A. building.

All the licenses in North Brant have been renewed.

Havelock's new town hall will be built by day labour.

Orillia's population shows an increase of 60, being now 4,667.

A boat will run daily this year between Port Perry and Lindsay.

Floyd W. Clearwater has been appointed postmaster at Huntsville.

One thousand or more trees will be planted on Orillia streets during May.

W. H. Matthews has been elected president of the Huntsville Board of Trade.

Mr. Calder has been elected chairman of the Parry Sound License Commissioners.

The licenses of the European and Board of Trade hotels at Guelph have been cut off.

Samuel Cameron, at one time proprietor of the Russell House, Orillia, died at Owen Sound.

The Gladstone liner Alice Stafford was the first vessel to enter Owen Sound harbour this year.

Miss Violet Dover, of Peterboro, has been given the degree of M.A. by McGill University, Montreal.

Michael Hennessey, who had his arm torn from his body in a Lindsay mill, will likely recover.

Mrs. Stewart, wife of the first member of Parliament for Bytown, and mother of Macleod Stewart, is dead.

Fred Adams purchased the old exhibition grounds at Belleville for \$3,000. It will be converted into an athletic park.

When the Peterboro fire brigade was on its way to Ottawa, last week the special train made the distance between Havelock and Peterboro, 24 miles, in 27 minutes.

Harten, Renfrew county, has a wild cow. It is a good milker, but is a better "hooker." In one of its charges John D. McNicol had a shoulder dislocated. Several others have also been injured by the animal.

Arthur Pindar, of Kaslo, B. C. enlisted with the Strathcona Horse for South Africa, but before sailing he was notified that he had fallen heir to a fortune of \$500,000 and obtained leave of absence, proceeding at once to England.

A farmer near Burgessville bought a heifer for \$12 a short time ago which developed into the most wonderful milker on record when fed under natural conditions. The Agricultural College, experts at Guelph heard of the cow and got leave from the farmer to make a careful test.

The cow was fed on the most approved plan for securing economical results, and produced 80 pounds of milk per day, being milked three times every 24 hours. The sum of \$700 has been offered for his prodigy and refused.

THE FLOWER GARDEN.

The revival of gardening is almost the most interesting movements in the outdoor life of modern England. It is more than a revival for the flower garden of to-day is more beautiful and contains more flowers and finer flowers than any garden the world has ever seen. It is more permanent than a taste. It is an art well understood in thousands of country houses, not only by the servants, but by the owners.

The modern flower gardening has its "schools," in which the formalist and the naturalist compete on principles well understood, and in their competition advance the common cause in the service of the beautiful. At the present moment the "naturalists" are in the ascendant. They have developed and improved hundreds of the hardier outdoor plants; they have shown how and where they should be planted.

THE MEAN THING.

Miss A.—When I'm asked to sing I don't say, "No, I can't sing," nor wait to be coaxed, but sit right down at the piano and—

Miss B.—Leave it to the company to find it out for themselves.

IN THE BAKERY.

Jaggs—Did you ever see a cake-walk?

Waggs—No; but I've seen a cracker-box.