

A Night At The Vaudeville (cut from "Murder at the Portland Variety)

ACT 1

- \* Miss Ida Fuller, World Famous Illusion Dancer, utilizing over 350 Yards of diaphanous scarves
- \* J. Arthur Longbottom, Shakespearean impersonist, recites highlights from the Bard
- \* Little Anita Lawrence, a child contortionist, will dance a Grotesque
- \* Interlude: The Dancing Whirlwinds present: A Pastoral
- \* The Electrical Magic of Signor Carlos, assisted by the fair beauty, Miss Vera
- \* The Wife Who Ran Away: a Melodrama in one act, presented by Harris Ray Miller and his troupe of actors (featuring The Dancing Whirlwinds as "The Crowd")
- \* The Sadler Brothers Present: A Minstrel Lullaby
- \* Interlude: The Dancing Whirlwinds present "Town Topics"
- \* Mrs. Albert Primrose singing Popular Ditties of the Day
- \* Madame Irina, Romanian Gypsy, and her Trained Monkeys

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Libby slipped out from behind the stage and down the short stairs into the pit. The show would be starting in a few minutes, and already the theatre was nearly full, loud boorish groups hoisting their drinks and laughing, with an occasional woman sitting demurely beside her escort, looking uncomfortable at being surrounded by the high spirited audience of primarily men.

Slipping into a seat positioned directly behind a pole, Libby craned her neck around and decided this was as good a vantage point as she was likely to get this close to showtime. Besides, it would keep her out of the way should any rowdyism break out. She didn't want to be in the line of fire if rotten fruit or, even worse, bottles, were flung. Crowther had worked to add an air of respectability to his theatrical offerings, but at least once a fortnight there was some sort of scuffle in the audience. She had to admit that even in this civilized age, the theatre still seemed to attract what reformers were fond of referring to as "The Lower Element."

The lights overhead dimmed, and an air of rustling expectation came over the crowd. Libby leaned forward in the darkness, waiting for the stage lights to rise. It still seemed something of a miracle when the wide electric arc swept over the bare stage; she remembered the few theatre excursions of her youth in New York where gaslit footlights flickered and one had to squint to make out what was happening onstage. And now, just a few years later, an almost magical incandescent brightness illuminated the entire stage effortlessly, its colors shifting as the gels were switched from red, to blue, to green. A single spot veered

stage left, and in the beam of light, the audience slowly became aware of a single silk scarf, fluttering from behind the proscenium curtain.

A cheer went up as the famous Ida Fuller peeked out from behind the curtain, fluttering the many scarves in which she was ensconced. The program note advertised “Over 350 Yards Of Diaphanous Material” and Libby could well believe it, as the sensual Miss Fuller proceeded to carefully spin and wave her arms amidst a sea of colored silk. The men in the theatre hooted and cheered as she discarded first one scarf, then another. Like gauzy butterfly wings, they wafted slowly to the floor, catching the light as they fell, and Libby had to concede that it was a wonderful gimmick for a mediocre dancer -- even if it was a bit too risqué to be considered high theatre. Ah well, she reckoned, next on the program was that pompous Longbottom fellow doing his Shakespearean readings, so it all balanced out on the bill, equal doses high culture and low slatternly. (Q: Is this a word?) She returned her attention to the stage, where the spinning dancer still had the crowd mesmerized, the few remaining scarves draped artfully around and around her lithe body. As she raised an arm, trailing a bolt of blood red silk in and out of the spotlight, Libby could practically feel the tension mounting in the stalls – would she discard this one and show it all? But just as the last gauzy fabric seemed poised to drop, a sudden blackout signaled the end of her number. Hoots and cheers implored her to come back and continue, but when the lights rose, the stage was set for the next act, which was simply a lectern stage right and a badly painted flat upstage meant to represent a castle wall.

J. Arthur Longbottom strode purposefully across to the lectern, obviously trying to ignore the repeated cries to “bring back the lady!” as he attempted to convey an air of dignity. Clearing his throat, he looked straight into the audience with fire in his eyes, and began to declaim a speech from Hamlet. As his stentorian voice droned on, Libby found herself looking around at the people seated near her, trying to ascertain if a rotten tomato was being readied. Confident that the most boisterous men had apparently chosen instead to head out to the bar for more beer, she let her mind wander to the upcoming magic act, when she would see for the first time her new friend Vera onstage in her role as magician’s assistant. Vera had confided to Libby that Carlos (who called himself “Signor” although the closest he had been to Europe was Kansas) was not all that talented, however, she had stressed that he was a fine showman and put on a good act despite any lack of true magical dexterity.

A loud peal of thunder (actually a sound effect created backstage with a large piece of tin) brought Libby back to the present, as Longbottom did his Lear, lost on the moors. Exhausted, he raised both his arms in a gesture of stardom and strode offstage, no doubt imagining thunderous applause in place of the lackluster clapping that was actually the case. During the next blackout, a wag in the crowd called out “We want more of Ida!” and several hearty cheers rose up in assent. The lights rose and the stage was bare. Libby consulted the program posted on an easel on either side of the stage, and saw that the next act was Little Anita, child contortionist. The audience was still loudly calling for more dancing when the petite girl took

her place center stage and began to dance to the ethereal music emanating from the backstage orchestra. At one point, she leaned backwards until her hands were touching the floor behind her, and slowly lifted first one leg, then the other, off the ground and around her neck. The men in the audience whistled at this, nudging each other and muttering lewd comments under their breath. Libby felt bad for the girl, forced to be exposed to this at such an early age. She had noticed the girl backstage earlier in the week, quietly reading a book or playing with her dolls, but she had assumed she was the child of one of the featured performers and not a performer herself.