

The Villain Unmasked



She knew Bill Powell when he was star of the Shakespeare Club

By

Leonora Ross

HE came out of the room in which the Shakespeare Club was holding its meeting just as I dashed around a corner to avoid being seen by an unsympathetic algebra teacher. My mind was on escape—his evidently upon something Shakespearean. We met like the irresistible force and the immovable body—only in this case the body, being quick-witted, stepped aside in time to be knocked only half-breathless, instead of going down for the count.

Any other boy would have yelled, "Say, you—whatta you think ya are—a fire engine!"—that being an age when a fire engine moved faster than anything else that could be thought of.

But not this young man. Instead he drew himself up to a commanding height of what seemed at least six feet and said, with a dignity that froze me, "I beg your pardon! I didn't mean to get in your way."

Being a freshman, I had been snubbed before, but never so effectively. He might be a senior, but I'd show him. Lady Vere de Vere might have envied the scorn with which I retorted, "I don't know who you are and I'll thank you not to speak to me until we're properly introduced!"

The boy's face, from the rather prominent bump of his Adam's apple to the roots of his thick dark hair, turned painfully pink, but it couldn't have been more uncomfortably warm than my own was as he strode down the hall. And the parting reproof he tossed after me lingered pretty vividly in my mind for more than sixteen years.

"I—I'M Bill Powell, since you're so particular," he informed me, "but I don't care now who you are—I think you're an immature little fool!"

I've thought so myself a good many times since then, and several million women who have admired Bill's charming and polished villainy on the screen will heartily agree with me. However, I was well punished—and all the satisfaction I got out of it was the doubtful pleasure of having snubbed the boy who became one of Central High School's "favorite sons."

It wasn't any small distinction, either, to be mentioned as "one of those who have made good," as the assembly hall speakers used to put it, in that school. Kansas City's oldest high school has been put on the map by several of its graduates, among them a red-haired young artist who was a classmate of Bill's—a certain Ralph Barton. Maybe you've heard of him, too.

But it was Bill who taught me the meaning of the word repentance—and spent sixteen years doing it. For the rest of that year he passed me by as if I'd been the picture of Moses that hung on the corridor wall. And I couldn't fail to see him, because all of a sudden he became the most important boy in school.

(Above)

Bill Powell's first dress suit! He was adorning the cast of the Kansas City Central High production of "An American Citizen"

She knew Bill Powell

THE Shakespeare, one of the school's numerous literary clubs, cursed us annually with a program of the works of the Avon bard. Usually it was pretty awful—but the year that Bill put on trunks and tights and did *Malvolio* there was a sudden feminine rush to join the Shakespeare.

He had nice legs, too—speaking of tights. I'd forgotten how shapely they were until I saw them, some ten or twelve years later, when he revealed them in "When Knighthood Was in Flower" and "Romola."

And how he could wear a dress suit! Even a rented one—nobody in the school ever owned one, for that matter. The annual Christmas play that year was a "society drama" called "An American Citizen," and Bill had the title rôle. Maybe John Barrymore could have looked more the man of the world to my fifteen-year-old eyes, but I doubt it!

The editor of "The Luminary," the school paper, took upon himself the job of dramatic critic, and wrote of Bill with all the masculine magnanimity he could command: "William Powell, in the title rôle, is well-suited to his part and played it with unusual feeling."

THE editor, as it happened, was moon-eyed over the pretty blonde heroine to whom Bill made love—with unusual feeling. But the editor couldn't have felt any worse about it than I did. Especially when Bill finished school that year and temporarily left a void in my heart.

The same heart almost had acute palpitation the next year, however, when Bill came back to town during Christmas vacation and dropped in to watch a rehearsal of the annual school play. Bill had fired my dramatic ambitions and, because I looked the ingénue, I'd been cast for the part of *Cecily Cardew* in Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest."



Ah, there were actors then! Mr. William Powell, when he trod the boards in the brilliant Harry Davis stock troupe in Pittsburgh

I was supposed to get all fluttery about the juvenile—and I fluttered pretty well until that rehearsal, when I saw Bill sitting out in front.

From that moment I became as self-conscious as a microbe under a magnifying glass.

When rehearsal was over, the coach called me over and told me that it must have been an error in casting that gave me the part, and maybe I'd better go in for writing essays instead. Gosh—that was an awful moment! The only thing that saved it was a note from Bill, thrust into my hand when the coach wasn't looking. On it he had written, "You put about as much feeling into your acting as a wooden Indian, but I'd like to help you if you'll let me. How about taking you home tonight?"

The note, still preserved for posterity, is not for sale at any price.