

Helen Tyler



The way to the New York City theater world and the name of "Wonder Girl of Broadway" were made by one Enosburg Falls girl with some luck and a tremendous amount of ambition and determination.

Helen Elizabeth Tyler was born in Enosburg Falls on November 1, 1871, and was orphaned by the time she was two years old. Her lawyer father and her mother had died within a year of each other from what was then known as consumption, and Helen and her brother went to live with their mother's sister.

Head-strong and determined, Terry, as she was called, was a difficult child as she was growing up. It is not clear how long she stayed in school before she left to go to work. Her determination to leave Enosburg Falls encouraged her to save all the money she could; and when she had enough, she left to enroll in the Albany Business College, where she learned to become a secretary.

Her first job, when she left business college, was working as a stenographer for Mead, Dodd and Company, a publishing house in New York City. It was not long before her executive ability and good business sense were discovered and she was sent to author's homes to have contracts signed. This was a period when novels were being dramatized and plays were being written into novels, so there was a close tie between authors and playwrights; and Helen knew both worlds. She met many famous people and formed friendships that were to last for her lifetime. It seemed natural that her next job was with Alice Knauser, a play broker.

The Selwyns, famous in the theatrical field, and Miss Elizabeth Marbury, who had contract rights for all foreign plays in America, formed the American Play Company and asked Helen to become their general manager. For seven years she was known as "the cold-blooded business brain who sat in the inner office of the American Play Company . . . signing contracts with no loopholes in them and otherwise establishing her prowess as general manager of the largest play-backing firm in the country." Now she was in a position to invest in stock plays and new plays. Her judgment in plays was always cautious, and she managed to make a profit on most of them.

It must be remembered that at the time when Helen was involved with the Theater, there were no moving pictures as we now know them and no television; so plays were the major form of entertainment and were a big business centered in New York City. Every small town had its own theatre, where traveling actors presented their performances.

Eventually the play company broke up, and Helen stayed as a silent partner of the Selwyns but also began to produce plays on her own. Her success in picking *Within the Law*, a play that had been turned down by several producers, gained her the reputation as the "wonder girl of the theater." She so convinced herself that this was a good play that she was willing to back it with all the money she had and all she could get others to invest in it. Fortunately for her some of the others backed out, and she secured a bigger share of this play that was to be the turning point of her career. It was a great success and ran for four years in America, was translated into at least half a dozen foreign languages, and played all over Europe. Its annual income ran over a half a million dollars, and Helen's share for this play alone was fifty thousand dollars.

Asked one time how she picked a play she said, "I don't know how, I wish I did. I

should have fortunes and fortunes and be able to retire to a little house in the country and do nothing all day but fuss in the kitchen just as I always dreamed I would when I grew very rich . . . but yes there is a certain feeling one gets about a play . . . a hunch."

Helen may have expressed a wish for a little house in the country; but success followed success and Helen was busy living life to the fullest. She had a town house in New York, a vacation home away from the city, a locomobile car, and many European trips. One report describes the pretty dark-haired, brown-eyed girl that entered the theatre in a sealskin coat and a spangled dress, floating along with a gay party of theater goers.

Butterflies became her "trade mark." She used them for custom-made inlaid belt-buckles and powder boxes and in the decoration of her home and clothes. On one of her trips abroad she ordered a tea set made especially for her and decorated with butterflies on each piece. One might wonder if she saw herself as one of those colorful creatures, floating along on her many successes.

During her rapid rise she had kept in touch with her brother's family and spent many Vermont vacations. With a smile, her niece can remember the excitement of Aunt Terry arriving in her locomobile, the gifts that she brought to the children, the hours that she spent playing with them, and the fact that if you admired something she had she would be likely to give it to you. Also remembered are the family trips to New York on the train to see Aunt Terry, the plays they saw every night, the trip to the Zoo, and all the other sights of the city. "I can see her house now," said her niece. "It was tall and narrow with three floors, and I can even remember the address: 14 East Forty-third Street."

Things seemed to be going along smoothly until Helen decided to produce a play called *Polygamy*, based on the Mormon philosophy of marriage. It was booked into a theater in New York and played only one week before the owner of the theater cancelled the run because he felt the play was bad and was shocking to the audiences. Helen Tyler was not to be stopped when she had faith in a play. Within a week she had leased another theater, moved the play in, and had another success on her hands, probably helped along by the scandal the play had caused.

Helen Tyler's career in the theatre was a brief one. No reason has been given why, when she returned from an extended European vacation in 1920, she gave it up. Maybe she felt that she had made enough money, or maybe she had just tired of the whole thing. Her retirement was not complete; she soon organized the Oasis Club in the Hotel Commodore. The club provided contracts, shopping services, chaperonage and a meeting place for women. This venture was successful but brief, and she soon retired from all business activities.

She continued to live in New York among her many friends, but when her health failed and her finances were in bad shape, she turned to her brother and returned to live in Enosburg Falls with his family until her death in 1950.

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