

# OUR MOST FAMOUS LADY

By

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Ninety-five years ago this month The Chicago Literary Club acquired a new member, named Leslie Carter. In that era most candidates for membership were rejected. The box containing the white and black balls was passed to each member and three black balls rejected. Gookin's History of the Club recalls the arch announcement of the President after peering into the box. "Gentlemen: If black balls elect, this candidate has been elected." But Leslie Carter was a personable young man, the scion of a Scotch family which had built a fortune by banking in the lead-mining days of Galena. Educated in private schools he had graduated from Yale and studied law at Columbia and Northwestern. Later he became President of the elevated lines — a traction magnate in the language of the 1890s.

One year after his election to the Club, our new member married a gorgeously beautiful girl named Caroline Louise Dudley, a slender, slithery girl of

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eighteen, eleven years younger than her husband, with flaming red hair which she wore in two big braids hanging down her back below her knees. Their romance started when he grabbed her braids, wrapped them around her neck, looped them in front and kissed her. Convent educated, facile in French, she had been born in Kentucky and had become a superb horsewoman. She had several close friends in this Club and her husband could not have failed to bring her to our Ladies' Nights which then numbered three a year instead of only one as now.

Her father had been associated with John D. Rockefeller in the oil business, but had died without leaving her mother and her very much. Oil was then used only as kerosene or gasoline for lamps or stoves. Under her father's will General Phillip H. Sheridan, later a valued member of this Club, became one of her two guardians. Mrs. Sheridan and Uncle Phil, as Caroline called him, once took her to the Shenandoah Valley and visited a town named Winchester. As a young girl, she sometimes rode Uncle Phil's fast black horse, named Winchester.

You may remember the last lines of a famous poem:

"Be it said in letters bold and bright  
Here is the steed that saved the day  
By carrying Sheridan into the fight  
From Winchester twenty miles away."

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Later, General Sheridan became "The General of the Army of the United States".

Another valued member of this Club, Franklin MacVeagh, introduced Caroline to Carter. Years later in her autobiography she said, "Dear Franklin MacVeagh . . . had he not been married and had he but crooked his finger at me in those girlish days, I should have walked straight to him." A Yale man, MacVeagh had established the successful wholesale grocery firm of Franklin MacVeagh & Company. He read nine papers before this Club and became its President. The Carters doubtless attended a Ladies' Night of this Club in 1884, where Franklin MacVeagh read a paper on Matthew Arnold, who had been a guest of the Club the year before. Later, President Taft appointed MacVeagh to his Cabinet as Secretary of the Treasury.

But despite its high promise, our member's marriage did not work out. Carter housed his bride with his aunt and his sister who, Caroline said, were grim Scotch spinsters with no sympathy for her youth and high spirits nor for her Kentucky stock farm vocabulary. She thought Carter should have been present, instead of staying at his office all day, when their red-haired boy, Dudley, was born. And I am forced to admit that, from all the evidence, Caroline was a nymphomaniac, a malady more painful to a lady's husband than to her.

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After seven years of marriage, Mrs. Carter went to Europe, she afterwards said for her health, but she told her husband that she intended to make her living in any way she could. She lived extravagantly, buying a carriage and expensive clothes. Mr. Carter's investigators discovered that a man named Constable in New York had remitted to her \$49,000 in less than a year. In the subsequent trial, Carter, though unable to prove her adultery with Constable, found a witness who testified to an occasion when at 6 A.M. she and Constable rowed a boat to a small deserted island in a New York lake where they spent the day "with no company but a lunch basket", a Judge later said. In my youth someone told me about the delights of a liaison on a deserted island where a lady could compliment a man by great screams of agonized ecstasy at certain junctures. But I wouldn't know about that.

It was Mrs. Carter's and her mother's testimony that the money remitted to her by Constable had been given to her by Mrs. Constable, a rich, childless and sympathetic woman and that Constable had no money of his own. But the trial court excluded her mother's testimony to that effect and the Appellate Court was evenly divided on whether this exclusion was proper. However, the Supreme Court sustained it.

But let me go back to the beginning of the trial. After several months in Europe, someone told

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Caroline that the Carters had taken her boy from her mother, with whom she had left him, and, in great distress, Caroline returned at once to Chicago, where she was denied possession of her child by the Carters. She then, she said, had a breakdown and spent eighteen months in a mental sanitarium at Lake Geneva.

At the end of that time she sued Carter for divorce and for custody of her child. Carter cross sued for adultery, naming five men. Members of this Club were attorneys on both sides. Some sixty years later one of Carter's lawyers, Frank J. Loesch, read a magnificent paper before this Club on the famous Carter divorce case. Loesch said that one big problem for Carter's attorneys was whether, in view of the fact that they had charged her with adultery with five men who were not residents of Chicago, they should amend their cross-complaint to add two Chicago men. They decided to employ as a consultant Melville Weston Fuller, just appointed, but not yet confirmed, as Chief Justice of the United States. At that time Fuller, a faithful member of this Club, read a Ladies' Night paper here on Jack Cade and the Senate confirmed him a month later. When Carter's attorneys laid their problem before him, Fuller said, "All my life, I have been a Democrat, but in this case I am a Republican. I am for



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the protection of home industry. Let's leave out the Chicago men."

The case was ultimately decided against Mrs. Carter by the Supreme Court of Illinois after a jury verdict against her and its affirmance by an equally divided Appellate Court. The crucial evidence was that of a witness who occupied a hotel room next to Mrs. Carter's and described what he heard through an ill-fitting door. Even today if you pick up Volume 152 of the Illinois Supreme Court Reports, you will find that it opens to that case. Many conscientious young lawyers through the years have thought that they should not remain in ignorance of the facts and the law of adultery.

After the case was decided against her and she had lost her child, Mrs. Carter conceived the idea that she could achieve a place on the stage. Carter asked that she drop his name, but she refused. She would make it a by-word, she said. At that time society girls with theatrical ambitions sometimes employed David Belasco to fit them for the stage. He could make a stage star out of a telephone pole. Mrs. Carter persuaded Nathaniel K. Fairbank, another valued member of this Club, to finance her dramatic training with Belasco and to support her and her mother during that training. Belasco, she said, needed money at that time and Fairbank in two years paid out \$60,000 for her while she ap-

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peared in two plays: "The Ugly Duckling" and "Miss Helyatt" which, while they were not quite failures, were not an economic success. Fairbank's attorney had originally gone to New York with her to make the financial arrangements with Belasco. She told in her autobiography, with obvious delight in her own naivete, that when Belasco asked them what kind of a play she wished to appear in, she answered, " I am a superb horsewoman and would like to make my entrance on horseback, jumping over a high fence." She said that, up to then, she had never been to the theater but twice in her life. After the economic failure of her first two plays, Belasco sued Fairbank and secured a jury verdict for \$15,000 in addition to the \$60,000 that Fairbank had already put into her dramatic career.

With the loss of Fairbank as her financial angel, Belasco took that place. He spent two years writing a play for her called "The Heart of Maryland." Both she and her mother and Belasco lived in great financial distress in a small flat in New York. She sold her furs and silver and Belasco sold his rare books in order to eat. Toward the end they ate 25-cent dinners at a cheap restaurant on Third Avenue. At one time they moved to a small hotel in Maryland to gain atmosphere for the play. Belasco and she wrote the play together line by line.

The plot was a little complicated. A young

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Maryland beauty, Maryland Calvert, fanatically loyal to the South, falls madly in love with a young Northern Captain, the son of a Southern General. Her brother, a West Point graduate, becomes a Northern spy and is killed in arranging a liaison for her with her lover, the Northern Captain, who is captured and condemned as a spy. She stabs the Southern Colonel, his captor, with a bayonet used as a candlestick on his desk and thus enables her lover to escape. She prevents his recapture by swinging by her hands from the clapper of a churchtower bell which was about to ring violently to warn the Southern troops of the escape of a prisoner. Her beloved with his company then captures Boonesboro where she is waiting with her hands bandaged and they end in each other's arms.

Belasco assembled a splendid company for her. The Northern Captain was Maurice Barrymore, the father of Ethel, Lionel and John. The play was a smash hit when it opened in New York. She had twenty curtain calls after the second act and thirty at the end. During this ovation, Belasco said to her: "Do you know what that means, girl? It means that never, never, never will we have to eat on Third Avenue again." After the New York run it played for a year throughout the United States and then they took it to London where it repeated its success.

While it was playing in London, Belasco went

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over to Paris to see a new play called "ZAZA" written by Berton and Simon. Berton had been Sarah Bernhardt's leading man. As it was played in French, Mrs. Carter said that it was very nasty and Belasco had to clean it up for an American audience.

The plot was simple: Zaza, a young French singer in a provincial concert hall who has never been in Paris, exerts all her allure to win Bernard Dufresne, a Parisian, and they become lovers. After several months her male singing partner tells her that he has seen Bernard at the theater in Paris with a lady to whom he spoke endearingly. Zaza madly dashes to Paris to bring him back to her. She calls at Dufresne's home while his wife is away and gets into conversation with his six year old daughter who closely resembles him. The helpless innocence of the child makes Zaza abandon her determination to break up his marriage. She tells his wife nothing except that she has called at their home by mistake. In hysterics for several days, she gives him up. When he returns to her, she tells him what she has discovered and they separate. Later she becomes famous on the Paris stage and he reads of her fame in the American newspapers where he has settled. When he returns to Paris, she refuses to renew their relations. The play contains many hysterical scenes well suited to Mrs. Carter's talents.

The play opened in New York and was at once a

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great success. The theater marquee at first read only "ZAZA". But in a few weeks the words "with Mrs. Leslie Carter" were added and she realized that, through Belasco, she had arrived. But one day he wrote her a note asking her to look at the new front on the Garrick Theater. "I think you will like it," he said. It read in big letters: "MRS. LESLIE CARTER" and in smaller type underneath "in Zaza." As she said in her autobiography, she "began to taste the sugar-sweet flavor of the world's acclaim." The French Ambassador with his entourage came from Washington to occupy a box at Zaza. But she realized that she owed it all to Belasco. Their relations, she said, "were over and beyond sex."

When they brought Mrs. Leslie Carter in Zaza to Chicago, a great battle occurred. Carter, as President of the Elevated Railroad, refused to accept their advertising. Belasco plastered the town with billboard posters. The next day they were covered up with white sheets and Belasco had to restore them. Again they were covered over and again he put them up. She said in her autobiography that the press took sides with Carter in this war and the Chicago Women's Club spread the fiat that Zaza was taboo. At the first night she made her trembling entrance in a packed theater to half-hearted applause. Soon she was paralyzed by a sound like water being dropped into hot fat. She looked at Belasco

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in the wings and walked to the footlights holding out her hands imploringly. The house was silent. Then someone in the gallery shouted "Bravo!" The hurricane of applause at the end of the third act, she said, drenched her eyes with tears. It is safe to assume that some members of this Club sat in that audience. After her death a movie was made of her life, called "The Red Haired Lady" with Marion Hopkins playing the lead. It depicts the tragic loss of her son and her triumph at the Chicago opening of Zaza.

After playing in the principal cities of the United States, they took Zaza to London where it had a great success. The Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, with Princess Alexandra, sat in a box and after the play congratulated her on her performance. But Mrs. Carter said that even more regal in her loveliness and the triumphant assurance of her bearing was Lady Randolph Churchill, young Winston Churchill's mother, who sat in another box with some bemedalled army officers. Recently when I told a witty English lady of Mrs. Carter's admiration for Lady Randolph Churchill, she said, "But Lady Randolph Churchill was also an American and she also had a touch of nymphomania."

Zaza ended, Mrs. Carter and Belasco went to France to find a new play for her. They ransacked the history of France to find a lady whom Mrs.

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Carter could portray. They finally settled on DuBarry, Louis XV's beautiful mistress, and at great expense, engaged the poet, Jean Richépin, to write the play for them. But when they got his manuscript, it would not do at all. Belasco then decided to write his own DuBarry. He painted, Mrs. Carter said, a poor little gamin of the streets, bewildered, amazed, tormented, who found herself only a pawn in the King's bed chamber. It took Belasco fourteen months to write it, while they gathered DuBarry memorabilia for stage props.

Belasco took liberties with history. The play starts with a scene in the little millinery shop where Jeannette Vanbernier is a young apprentice milliner. She is in love with Cosse. The King passes in procession in the street, notices her, and demands her as his mistress. In order to become that, she has to be ennobled, so she is married against her will to DuBarry, a drunken noble. She is installed at Versailles as the King's mistress and, by her sauciness, has tremendous influence with him. The King discovers her love for Cosse and puts him in a provincial prison. Cosse escapes and she hides him in her bed, against a search by the King's forces. She saves him from execution by agreeing that he should be returned to the provincial prison. Came the Revolution and the beheading of the King. A year later the Revolutionaries turn to the execution of the

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King's friends and she is condemned to the guillotine. She demands that Cosse be present at her execution to support her. In the last scene she is taken off in the tumbril by the executioner, hands tied behind her, with Cosse following on foot.

The 55 actors in the play had to be dressed in historically correct costumes. The coverlet of the bed where DuBarry held her court in Versailles was woven especially from the records at the Bibliotheque Nationale at a cost of \$12,000. Mrs. Carter published a small book on the DuBarry stage props.

Of course, the opening in New York was tremendous with everyone from Nellie Melba to Admiral Dewey present. The newspapers made much of it. A few days later, while seated in her room at the hotel, a small red-haired boy came in without knocking and said, "Well, mother, I have come. I always told you I would. I have come to stay." Fearful for his inheritance, she tried to make him go back to his father. But he would not go and his father disinherited him. Unfortunately, the red-haired boy died a few years later.

After the opening in New York they took DuBarry to 42 large cities as far south as Galveston and as far west as San Francisco. They traveled luxuriously on private trains. During this run Mrs. Carter asked Belasco if he could not write a play



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for her in a part other than that of a courtesan. The result was a play called "Adrea."

Adrea, the eldest daughter and heir to the dead king of the Adrean Islands, is unable to succeed her father because as a child she had been made blind by looking directly at the sun. The laws of the country forbid a monarch to occupy the throne who is not sound in body and mind. Her younger sister, Julia, a wanton hated by the people, is about to be crowned. Adrea is passionately in love with Kaeso, a warrior. Julia wishes to marry Kaeso herself and dresses the ugly court fool in Kaeso's armor and marries him to Adrea, her blind sister, who thinks she is marrying Kaeso, her lover. Adrea's sight is afterwards restored, she is crowned, and Kaeso becomes her prisoner. On his admission that he was a party to the marriage trick played on her, she decrees that he be torn apart by three wild horses fastened to each foot and to his head. But on his plea for a warrior's death, which all her court resists, she steps down from her throne and herself stabs him to death. Fifteen years later Kaeso's and Julia's male child becomes Adrea's prisoner. Pretending play, she puts him on her throne, places the crown on his head and gives him the coronation oath. Then she opens the casement window and lets the sun strike her face, blinding her again. "Long live the King," she cries.

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Belasco insisted that Adrea open in Washington, where his other great successes had started. But he could not get a theater for it there. He finally secured a vast barn-like structure called the Convention Hall. As the play commenced on opening night, it started to rain furiously. Belasco had tried to make a theater of the barn by putting green cloth hangings under the roof. In a few minutes the audience was deluged with fine, green rain. Someone came back-stage and said, "The President of the United States is sitting under an umbrella."

After a successful season with Adrea, Mrs. Carter bought an automobile and took a drive through New England, accompanied by her son and some friends among whom was a relatively unknown actor named William Louis Payne. Suddenly, without explanation, she and Payne were married in a small town. She had given her maiden name, but the minister's daughter recognized her as Mrs. Leslie Carter. When the newspaper men brought this report to Belasco in New York he said, "I can assure you positively that Mrs. Carter has not been married." For some time, on her demand, he had each day sent her a telegram with the letters I.A.W., meaning "I always will stand by you." However, the newspapers secured positive evidence of Mrs. Carter's marriage and came to Belasco with it. He telephoned her in Boston and said, "I have just

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heard from strangers that you have been married." She said, "Yes, Mr. Dave, I want to come and tell you about it." He said, "Listen, can you hear me? I want you to hear me. This is the last time you will ever hear my voice." It *was* the last time, though for thirty years she implored him by letter and through friends to renew their professional relations. She appeared in a few plays after that, but they were never acclaimed as her Belasco plays had been.

Her autobiography contains a broad hint of the reason for her marriage. She had said on the first page that to avoid hurting some persons who were still living, she might have "to veil certain events." Later in her autobiography she reported that her mother had died shortly before her marriage to Payne and said, "I went to fetch a consecrated legacy — a little girl my mother had adopted some years before. Mary now became our own and was no longer Mary Dudley, but Mary Payne."

After exhaustive research, I can only speculate: Was Mary her child? I judge so. An elderly woman like her mother does not adopt a stranger's child. And a child of a stranger would not be a "consecrated legacy." Did Payne persuade Mrs. Carter that it was her duty to marry him to give their daughter a home? In the movie of her life which Payne produced after her death, her romance with him started in her poverty days in an actors' boarding house.

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Payne could have reminded her that her greatest success had been in "Zaza" where a woman gave up everything for an innocent child. And "Adrea" had much the same theme.

But all this is speculation. And Mary Payne thereafter went by the name of Mary Carter Payne. She might have been born in the eighteen months that Mrs. Carter said she spent in a sanitarium at Lake Geneva just prior to her suit for divorce.

Several members of this Club have been listed during their lives, as was Mrs. Carter, in *Who's Who in America*. But very few of our members have had on their deaths their biographies in the 23 volumes of the Dictionary of American Biography published by the American Council of Learned Societies after prolonged study by many experts on who was worthy of a permanent place in American history. As the first lady of our theater in her era, Mrs. Leslie Carter is now immortalized in that canonical book.

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