

# THE DETERIORATION OF NANCY

[I have obtained access to the remaining portion of the Correspondence between a distinguished member of the Royal Academy and Miss Nancy Nanson, of the Variety Stage. I see that the young lady's are the more numerous and the shorter letters ; and in them, as they proceed, I seem to discern some change of tone—a rather quick transition or development (call it what you will) which, if it is really there, is unlikely to have escaped the eye of her correspondent, and may perhaps even have prepared him in a certain measure for a *dénouement* which, nevertheless, when it arrived, disturbed him seriously. That, at least, is my own reading of Miss Nanson's notes. But I am possibly wrong.]

WEYMOUTH :

*September 25th.*

DEAR MR. ASHTON



S I suppose you leave Weymouth to-day I will send this to London. It is only to thank you very much for your long letter and your kindness to me, in which Mother joins. I hope you are well.

I remain yours very sincerely

NANCY NANSON.

MR. CLEMENT ASHTON.

100 YORK ROAD, WATERLOO ROAD.

*Oct. 20.*

DEAR MR. ASHTON

I thought I should like to let you know that I have come to London. I have not an engagement yet, but I have a pantomime engagement in view.

With best wishes I remain yours sincerely

NANCY NANSON.

CLEMENT ASHTON, ESQ : R.A.

100 YORK ROAD, WATERLOO ROAD.

*Nov. 5.*

DEAR MR. ASHTON

I was so sorry I was out when you called. If I had known you were coming I would have stayed at home. We are all right here. The landlady is awfully nice. I would come and see you if you appointed a time.



## THE SAVOY

I think you will be glad to hear that I'm engaged for principal girl for the Pantomime at the Theatre Royal, Hoxton, by R. Solomon, Esq. In about a month we shall begin rehearsing. I am engaged for eight weeks.

We hope you are well.

Hoping to see you soon, with my best wishes, in which Mother unites, I am yours very sincerely,

NANCY NANSON.

100 YORK ROAD, WATERLOO ROAD,  
*November 20.*

DEAR MR. ASHTON

It was so kind of you to take me to the theatre yesterday afternoon. I must write to tell you so. How nice Miss Annie Hughes was! She makes you laugh and cry. I like her more than any actress I have ever seen. The man was funny, wasn't he!

Thanking you again, and with best regards from Mother, believe me yours very sincerely

NANCY NANSON.

*P.S.* I am to do an extra on Saturday nights at the Bedford Camden Town, and at Gatti's, Westminster Bridge Road. I am very pleased, as I am tired of 'resting.' When we go to Hoxton we shall take lodgings where there is a piano. I have been practising an acrobatic trick for the pantomime. The public likes them. The Theatre Royal, Hoxton, is more for the masses than the classes.

THE WALK, HOXTON,  
*Christmas Day.*

DEAR MR. ASHTON

O! thank you for remembering us on Christmas Day. I was so pleased. We hope you will come to see the Panto. It went very well last night. I go very well so far. My voice sounds splendid here. It is not lost in the glass roof, as at the 'People's Delight.'

I have been so very, very busy rehearsing, I have seen very little of Hoxton yet, so I do not know how I shall like it. I shall know better soon; now that we have started the Panto.

With best wishes for a happy Christmas from Mother and from me, I am yours sincerely and gratefully, in haste,

NANCY NANSON.



THE WALK, HOXTON,  
6th January.

I am glad you came to see me yesterday afternoon. How did you like me? But it was so flat. I am sorry you came to a *matinée*. Half the house are mere *children*, then. In the evening it is different. And they cut out part of my song yesterday. It made me cry—I was so cross. I generally jump about much more. I am much merrier. Mother and I shall be so pleased if you have time to come again.

Sincerely yours in haste,  
N. NANSON.

*P.S.* Mr. Solomon wants to engage me for next year, I think. And for *better money*.

THE STUDIOS, WESTMINSTER,  
7th January.

DEAR NANCY,

No, I did *not* think you were up to the mark yesterday. It was a *ragged* performance. I write, of course, frankly. First then, as to your singing,—I never very much believed in that. But you would sing much better if you knew that you sang badly. You would then understand that I was serious when I told you, what you really wanted was singing lessons. *Voice production*, my dear. And your speaking voice is excellent. You used it well upon the whole, yesterday. A little careless, I thought—a mistake sometimes, in the emphasis. But what is pantomime dialogue! I will come again, if you like me to see you, and you will do all that better. For agility in dancing, for vivacity in action, you seemed as good as it is possible to be. And you take in every point—even yesterday I noticed, you believed in every bit of the story. To do so, and to live in it, is the foundation of an actress. Yes, with your intelligence, with your alertness, your quick life, actress just as much as dancer you may very well be.

You come to Westminster, next week, any morning except Wednesday. I must make one more drawing of you. Not a pastel this time. I have long since done with the pastels of you. They are good as far as they go. Your colour and your dress, your movement and your pose, they record not at all unhappily. But I want a careful drawing—a drawing in line—and shall make it perhaps in pencil; perhaps even in silver-point. You are such a strange, variable child, you see—there is not one subject in you, but a hundred; and I shall not be contented till I have, somewhere else than in my memory, the



eyebrow's line, the delicate low forehead, the fine nose, half Greek (and it gains so in character as you throw your mind into your work)—all that and the curve of the open nostril. This moment, they are at my fingers' ends. And your grave sweetness!

Frank, is it not? Yet I am not a foolish person, making up to you. I am not a vulgar flatterer of the first prettiness in the street. You know how much I am an artist—heart and soul, my dear—by which I mean that unlike too many of my brethren, I am not only a painter.

Your 'notices' are good, I see. Very good. I congratulate you. The time is coming perhaps when you will *patronise* me—when you will even be so very great that you will quite 'cut' me. 'No, no,' I hear you say—indeed you said it when I saw you last—'No, no, Mr. Ashton, I should never do *that*.' You say it with your voice—and with your steady eyes you say it even more.

Until next week, then!

I am sincerely yours,

CLEMENT ASHTON.

THE WALK, HOXTON :  
10th February.

DEAR MR. ASHTON.

Mother says, How long since we have seen you! You said you would come again to our Panto. Since that, remember, I have been twice to Westminster, to sit to you. They are going to publish one of the drawings, are they? You will put my name to it, won't you?

Saturday is my last night. Mother says, Can you come then? I shall have all my admirers. And the boys in the gallery—though you say I sing so badly—all the boys in the gallery taking up my song. After Saturday, I am booked for the Halls.

Yesterday I was taken a long drive to Hagley Wood. It is near Barnet. I have had a great deal of attention here.

I am yours very sincerely,

NANCY NANSON.

*P.S.* Mr. Ashton, I allow you to say anything. Be sure and tell me what you think, if you come Saturday.

THE STUDIOS, WESTMINSTER :  
Sunday, 16th Feb.:

MY DEAR NANCY :

Yes, you allow me to say any thing—for a lifetime divides us—and because I am a friend of yours I shall say the bare hard truth. I saw you



yesterday, as you know, for you espied me from the stage. From the point of view of a theatrical success, the thing was quite undoubted. You were a mass of nerves. You came across the house to us. The footlights ceased to be. Your effect was extraordinary. Shylock's 'How much more elder art thou than thy years!'—the thing he said to Portia—is a question which may be put, no doubt, with reasonableness, to many little ladies at the theatre. There is nothing like the theatre for ageing you. You, Nancy, are now, not five months, but two years older than you were last autumn. At first I was afraid of it, physically. That last time that you came to me, to the studio, your face was quite drawn: not only its expressions, its very lines, had aged. You were pale; you were worn. And sixteen!

But yesterday that was all right, again; and, Nancy, it was the deeper *You* that had altered. I—I was always an idealist, remember, and so you will forgive me. I go down to the grave, when my time comes, poet, after all, far more than craftsman. Those changes, more or less, that I notice in you—those changes not for the better, I mean—I was never blind to the possibility of them. Idealist though I am, I foresaw them—I foresaw them, with forebodings.

There was my first long letter to you. It will be well, perhaps, that I should not say anything more in detail. But read that again—the last part of it, I mean—and be warned.

But no—the detail shan't be spared you, though what it really comes to—I tell it you from my heart, and you will keep this letter to yourself—all that it really comes to is that you will be 'spoilt.' 'Spoilt' or 'ruined.' You are so sensible in many things. Clever I don't know that you are, except in your profession. It all runs into that one channel with you. Quickness of 'study,' closeness of observation, immediate faultless power of mimicry, vivacity, agility in the dance—all *that* we know; and then at home your sensitiveness, your quickness, and your helpful tact. But as to books, as to pictures, as to music beyond your showy music of the theatre, as to the things that happen in the world, and that interest people—these things are all nothing to you. Who can wonder! Your whole little eager heart is in your work. Your work is your play too—and the whole of your play. But a thirst for admiration, my dear, and vanity, vanity! Will you split, like the others, on that rock?

Last night, your face had new expressions. There were things I never saw in it, before. In that palace-scene, the slim young thing—how queenly you were, in the white silk, spangled with silver: how queenly, and withal a little contemptuous, a little scornful! I watched you, Nancy, with a keenness



horribly inconvenient for you—or the scornful look, the bored look, the *blasé* look (I have said the worst that I can say) would have passed perhaps unperceived. They were there.

Again, you acted to the house too much. I am not finding fault with you technically for that,—though you did, I think, overdo it. I am talking to the girl, and not to the stage character. There was one look at the Boxes : at a private Box rather—but I spare you.

Who the dickens are the people who have had this influence upon you?—hour by hour ; drop by drop, I suppose : here a little and there a little—in the life I begin to hate for you. . . . But it is no use hating it. I suppose that I could take you from it, if I liked. I have the money to—no overwhelming claims on me. But you would leave all this unwillingly : and, in the end, *ought* you to leave it?

My dear Nancy, I will spare you any more. But read much more than I have actually written. Imagine yourself talked to, very gravely : fancy yourself receiving a *good long, serious* talking to. Think ! Think ! I have finished.

My dear child, you are a good girl at heart, you know—and such an eager little fiery one—when you are not grave and sober. The stuff is in you out of which they make Sisters of Charity. The stuff is in you out of which—  
But No ! Why?

I am your old and fatherly, your *grand*-fatherly friend,  
if you prefer it—

CLEMENT ASHTON.

*Tuesday, Feb. 18th.*

MY DEAR MR. ASHTON.

I cried so much when I got your letter. For you have been very kind to me. I suppose I deserved it.

NANCY.

GREAT CORAM STREET,  
*Thursday, Feb. 20th.*

DEAR MR. ASHTON,

We have moved. Until I get into a burlesque at Easter, I am working two of the Halls. On Monday I have a new song at the Metropolitan—the 'Met'—Edgware Road, nine o'clock. New dresses, and I do a new dance. Also at Gatti's, Westminster Bridge Road, at 10.15.

Sincerely yours and gratefully,

NANCY NANSON.



GREAT CORAM STREET,  
*Tuesday, Feb. 25.*

THE engagement only lasts a week, Mr. Ashton. Am I not going to be a favourite, then? I have tried for that music-hall kept by that faddy lady, the philanthropist. She is very *severe*. Why, she won't let you take up your skirts, even. I say, and *Mother* says, she ought to keep a *chapel*—not a music-hall.

In haste,  
 NANCY.

GREAT CORAM STREET.

You were always kind to me. *Mother* is wild. And you, *you will never forgive me*.

From  
 NANCY.

WESTMINSTER,  
*18th April.*

MY DEAR NANCY.

At least I hurried to make the matter smother for you at home, though, sooner or later that would have been effected anyhow; for you and your mother are at one, generally. She is really fond of you, and you of her. I have not done much for you.

And now what *can* I do? My business—if I have any—is to wait. 'Did I,' I ask myself, 'lose any opportunity of action?' Could I have stepped in, to stop you? Nancy, I talk brutally, though I would not know, with definiteness, any detail—but the valuation set by me on mere physical chastity—were it that that was in question—might be perhaps three half-pence. One friend at all events you have, between whom and yourself no mad outrageous freak of yours, raises insuperable barriers. And you feel that. Then why was I concerned for your Future, months ago? The deterioration, the slow change in you, that must be coming or have come; the undermining and deterioration, it may be—I say, that is the deep injury—but the very words draw round you like a curse. I haven't the heart left to sketch in words a sure decline. And, if I had, why should I overdo it?

Was it done by you for gain, for sudden greed, for ambition, for vanity?



Answer yourself—not me. If it had been done for love—well then at all events I might have thought of your Future differently. Nancy, I must make excuses for you—excuses in any case. Once in your short life at least, you have been near to want—that winter you and your Mother came out into the Strand, from the empty treasury of a bogus management, with sixpence in your pockets, instead of a salary. Yes, sixpence it was—that was your salary. You told me so yourself. And your voice ‘went’ in that cruel winter weather, as the little figure, with its slender grace, slid through the fog and blackened rain and reeking river mists of December in London. After that, Money, which seems to some people a small thing in the distance—so sure, so unimportant—must have loomed large and of *immense* importance, in the near foreground, to you. Again, of course, we have our moods. We may be taken unawares. Judgment goes—principle. All your life, Nancy—with only trivial exceptions, after all—your life is good to this hour. And in all our lives, every day has its own difficulties: every hour is a choice. Good and diligent, and sweet and bright, wise too and helpful—week after week, month after month, you answer to your helm: and then there comes one hour which leaves you rudderless. I should be hard on you indeed, if I remembered only that hour—if I forgot the ninety and nine. My dear Nancy, I am *not* hard on you!

It is late at night when I write this. And, in my thoughts, you have been with me the whole of the day. The story can’t be an unusual story—and I am a man of the world, or ought to be. No, the story can’t be an ‘unusual story’: but the girl is an unusual girl.

Well, you must live it down, my dear—must have done with it—must forget it. But then there is the deterioration—*some* deterioration at least—that made the thing possible. And what more may be possible—mend and patch and cobble as we will?

All day you have been in my thoughts. When I was setting my palette in the morning: arranging the light: screwing up the easel, waiting for the sitter, who was late—they are always late—I thought ‘She has made a mess of it—poor little Nancy—foolish minx!’ I was very silent with my sitter. I was scarcely even polite. She noticed it; and it affected her. The sitting was a failure. I bowed the lady out. Nancy Nanson in my thoughts. The luncheon table was all wrong: not a thing as it ought to have been. ‘Nancy Nanson, at the Devil, poor girl!’ A walk in the streets, afterwards. The omnibuses rattling past me in Victoria Street. ‘Nancy Nanson—is it all up with her?’ Nothing else. The bell of Christ Church, Westminster, a tinkle for Evensong. The day goes on, then! ‘Nancy Nanson!’ Afterwards,



in the quiet of St. James's Park, near Birdcage Walk, the clear sound of the bugle—the recall to barracks. 'Nancy Nanson!' And then, the space of the Park water, calm, as I saw it from the foot-bridge, by the five poplars—and the April evening sky, clear and serene. 'Nancy Nanson at the Devil! Poor girl! The Devil perhaps. The dear and clever irresponsible child!'

Nancy, I've no more blame for you. The vials of my anger are poured out. Months ago I said 'I shall always be your friend.' 'Go the straight way!' I said. And I believed you would. What a collapse if I must say to you, to-night, only this word—the very sound of it, connected with you, is vulgar and repulsive—'If you should get into any scrape, you know, and I can help you, come to me. I *will* help you. Right and left I will help you. I will see you through.' . . .

But only to say—*that!*

Nancy!—with deep regard and real affection,

CLEMENT ASHTON.

*Post-script.* But I can't end like this. Just when you want to be reproached the least, some of my sentences sound hard. Be hopeful! For, as it seems to me, whatever happened, the quite irreparable has *not* happened. Surely, surely, you can forget, for ever, one mad hour! And, from whatever point, you can begin 'the journey homeward'—to yourself. You can be the real You again; the real Nancy—your very characteristic, the perfection of the contrast between the wildness of the theatre and your happy quietude.

So at home I must think of you. With that golden wig, that adds—piquantly perhaps and yet abominably—to your years, the maddening dancer is put off. The brown-haired child, in the plain dress, is in her place—the short brown hair, the quiet eyes, the tender, sensitive mouth. Your lodging-house parlour is ornamented with a play-bill, and photographs are stuck about the mantelpiece—Miss Marie Dainton, is it? and your uncle, the plumber; and, again, a celebrity of the Halls; and somebody else, who was nice to you, a year ago, at Weymouth; some comrade you were fond of: 'She's a dear girl,' you said. In the lodging-house parlour your mother sits beside the fire-place, combing out the golden wig, after its last night's service. The kettle, in preparation for tea-time, not far off, is at the side of the fire. It begins to sing. You, Nancy, sit beyond the table, on a cane-bottomed chair; with your knees crossed—as I saw you that first time I called on you in London—your hands, so young, so nervous, and so highly bred, smooth out upon your lap a bit of wool-work that you—whose instinct is to please and to be pleasant—



are doing for your landlady. And, in the glow of the fender, lies curled up, warm and sleeping, that gray kitten rescued from misery, four days before, by you: won to you by your magnetism, or your kindness—they are both the same. In the morning, when your mother leaves your bed—leaves the tired child, worn out by the theatre, to an hour's extra resting—the soft gray thing, that you bewitched and cared for, creeps to your side—is happy.

Did they ever teach you, at your school, I wonder, verses of Wordsworth on the stock-dove? What did the stock-dove sing?

He sang of love with quiet blending,  
Slow to begin, and never ending;  
Of serious faith, and inward glee.  
That was the song—the song for me!

Nancy!—the spirit of the stock-dove's song lies in the deepest heart of Nancy Nanson.

C. A.

[There was reason to apprehend that the Correspondence closed with this letter. One other note, however—in the round hand of Miss Nanson—has been discovered, and is therefore appended.]

GREAT CORAM STREET.

Thank you so very, *very* much—and for not asking any exact questions, too. I was a fool. Some one behaved badly to me. No doubt I 'compromised' myself. I was on deep waters. But I did *not* go under. No, Mr. Ashton.

You *have* been rather cross with me—but I was *very* troublesome. You understand the curious mixture that signs herself—and is—

Your grateful

NANCY.

FREDERICK WEDMORE.