CHAPTER 1

Madame Anderson's Grand Appearance

At precisely 7:45 p.m. December 16, 1878, "Captain" Alexander Samuells led "Madame" Ada Anderson into Brooklyn's Mozart Garden and across the tan-bark covered oval track. An 18-inch high railing circled the outer edge. Several hundred chairs filled the infield. Since opening the previous August, Mozart Garden had proven a financial success, becoming one of the big attractions in Brooklyn's vibrant Fulton St. entertainment district. AR, as Samuells was called, had ensured that his next event would keep it that way. Newly installed gas lamps illuminated the arena, their smoke rising to the ceiling, which was designed to resemble the sky. Madame tried to ignore the upgrades. She'd only performed indoors once before, and it had resulted in failure and humiliation, nearly ending her career. She vowed to never perform indoors again. But circumstances forced her to renege on that plan.

She averted her eyes and quickly refocused to the painted landscape adorning the stage, located on the Garden's wide east wall where a brass band awaited the cue that would begin a four-hour concert.

At 7:50 they began playing a medley of popular numbers, "Pretty as a Picture," "Way Down Upon the Swanee River," and an almost comical selection in light of the evening's headlining act, "Don't Get Weary."

The music brought the moment home, uplifting her spirits. Her heart pounded. Thrilled by all the attention, she almost basked in the moment. She had embraced the stage even before she left home at age 16 to pursue an acting career. But nearly 20 years later she had enjoyed little more than marginal success. She had to travel across the Atlantic Ocean to hopefully achieve her lifelong goal, the one she had fantasized about since growing up in Lambeth, England.

Now she faced her big moment.

Performing on stage in America.

It didn't seem possible.

At 7:55, Madame and AR took the stage near the band. Two minutes later a warning bell would sound, signaling that she had three minutes before commencing her quest.

The arena was half-filled with 400 or so patrons consisting of local politicians, theatrical luminaries, followers of pedestrianism, a handful of "sporting men," who, sensing a potentially big payday, gave favorable odds to most anyone who would take a bet against her.

AR could feel the excitement, too. While Mozart Garden often featured headliners, it had fallen short of his high expectations. AR didn't build the structure merely to dominate Brooklyn's nightlife. He'd set his sights on challenging the popularity of the theatre-rich area of New York. He specifically stated in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* that Mozart would challenge the open air of Gilmore's Garden. In late 1877, Gilmore's completed a remarkable run of six weeks with PT Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth. In no way could Mozart compete with such a spectacle, but AR would hear nothing of it. He believed in Brooklyn, in his arena, and most of all, in himself. He had a marvelous eye for talent, but headlining an unknown, unproven female attraction could sink him and his new arena. His motives went beyond a potentially big payday. He saw this as an opportunity to finally top William Vanderbilt, the owner of Gilmore's. Vanderbilt turned down Anderson's request to perform there. Vanderbilt, by virtue of being the oldest son of transportation magnate Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, inherited virtually all of his father's incredible fortune of more than $100 million. He had more money than many governments, but he, like AR, felt an attraction to the glamorous world of show business. AR's wealth had peaked at $250,000, with most earnings coming from an oyster bar and popular billiards hall. No matter how great his success, however, he could never approach his rival in money or name recognition.

He hoped that Madame Anderson could at least temporarily narrow the financial and popularity chasm between the two.

She smiled at the large number of women seated throughout Mozart Garden. Brooklyn residents were seeing this woman for the first time. So much had been written and discussed about her since she and her entourage arrived on the steamship *Ethiopia* the previous October. To some she was a curiosity, to others a fraud. For the hardcore aficionados, she represented a hope of reinvigorating a sport that was clearly dying.

Madame Anderson was a pedestrienne, a professional female endurance walker.

She stood but five-foot-one, with grayish-blue eyes, a short nose, and a low forehead with straight eyebrows. But her most striking characteristic was

her muscular build, a "chiseled physique" of about 140 pounds. One paper commented, "She should have been born a man."

She had heard that criticism during her entire 20-year acting career in her native Britain, so she did her best to project a softer, more feminine image. She wore a red and white striped tunic, and pink tights. A blue and scarlet cap trimmed with white lace and a dainty feather covered her dark hair, which cascaded down her back in a braid. She held a riding crop in her hand, a typical accessory for the era's female walkers. She hoped colorful outfits and frequent costume changes would keep women talking and coming to see her perform. Her efforts seemed to be working. The *New York Herald* would report, "There is nothing unwomanly about her appearance."

The only exception to her feminine persona was a stout pair of boot-like laced walking shoes she had worn for the many European endurance walking exploits.

AR announced some of her walking feats to the attentive crowd: one-thousand half-miles walked in 1,000 half hours at Cymbrian Gardens, an accomplishment that took just under three weeks to finish; 1,008 miles in 672 hours, a full four-week trek. That walk beat the performance of endurance walking standard-bearer Captain Barclay Allardice at Newmarket in 1809. It put Madame Anderson among the top walkers of any generation, male or female.

But it also proved a brutal physical ordeal. Afterward, her feet were so swollen attendants bathed them in turpentine and wrapped them in raw beef.

AR said completing the task was less about remuneration and more about the promotion and encouragement of physical health among women and children. The advancements of the Industrial Revolution, which had provided an improved lifestyle and conveniences for millions, had a downside: The more convenient and sedentary lifestyle was devastating Americans' health.

He further stated that for the month to come, she would subsist only on "rare beefsteak, roast beef and mutton, a little beef tea, and port wine and champagne, and would take no pork or veal."

After finishing his introduction, AR made a formal proclamation about her goal at Mozart Garden: to walk 2,700 quarter miles in 2,700 quarter hours around the track that measured 188.57 feet. She would need seven laps to the quarter mile. If successful, she would total 18,900 laps, 37,800 turns, 675 miles, approximately the distance between Chicago and Baltimore. She would finish at 11:00 p.m., January 14, 1879, 28 days, three hours from now.

The Brooklyn surveyor's certification was critical to the event's success.

Both men's and women's pedestrian tournaments were fraught with frauds, con artists and unprofessional behavior. In lesser contests, track distances were estimated or allowances made for unusual circumstances. One promoter, upon "discovering" post-event that his square-shaped track measured short, justified the discrepancy by claiming the athlete received lap credits for "having to negotiate so many ninety degree turns."

A 12 x 28 foot tent stood 28 feet outside the track (which could be used for official distance, if needed) would be her temporary home for the next four weeks.

Along the way she would be monitored by doctors, nurses and other assistants, most notably a woman named Elizabeth Sparrow, who helped Madame with most of her successful walks in Europe.

AR had enlisted Mike Henry, Brooklyn's highly respected sports promoter, to maintain order. Henry had a strong athletic background, especially in baseball and boxing. His name and presence brought much needed credibility to the event. No legitimate sporting event in Brooklyn happened without his blessing. His six-foot, four-inch frame commanded respect, which served him well when he worked as a jailer. AR and J. W. Webb, Madame Anderson's agent, were listed as meet co-directors. Architect and race starter Fred Coles would act as supervisor to timekeepers Charles "C.B." Hazelton and George W. Force. Judges would record distances and verify every quarter mile with each signing his own log book.

As independent insurance of what she called her "honest work," reporters from the *New York Times, Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the *New York Herald* would each take an eight-hour shift, recording times and distances until she finished or couldn't continue.

* * *

AR drew wild cheers as he concluded with his prediction that Madame Anderson would complete her journey.

After the applause died down, AR stepped back and motioned with a sweep of his arm. On cue, the pedestrienne stepped forward, smiling confidently.

In her English accent, she promised that for the next four weeks she would give all her strength and "nervous force" to complete her task. But she warned that her brain, heart or circulatory system could break down because of physical strain due to stress or lack of sleep.

Fans of pedestrianism were aware of the suffering. Papers often reported in graphic detail about the last stages of a grueling six-day "go as you please" format, in which the women managed their own walking, sleeping and breaks for nearly a week. Late in those contests they often doubled over with stomach cramps, experienced strange dreams, and had trouble keeping down even the most agreeable types of food. Opiates were often administered to calm them. They frequently dragged themselves around the track to complete a few extra laps.

The reports attracted both critics and followers to the sport. And while everyone knew about the hardships, this was probably the first time a pedestrienne had been so specific and public about her upcoming physical trials.

Hoping to create a family atmosphere, Anderson encouraged gentlemen to bring their wives, mothers, sisters and daughters to see her at any time of the day or night, and to lend their moral support.

AR had taken it a step further, establishing separate entries–a more accessible door on Smith Street reserved for families, and one on Fulton Street, near the alley, for gamblers and prostitutes. He hoped the latter would stay outside to solicit business.

Concluding her speech, Madame implored the audience to withhold their applause until they saw whether she deserved it at the finish.

"If I fall helpless, or may be dead on the track," she added, "then I shall lose my money."

She was already winning converts. She captivated Brooklynites with her pluck. They admired her confidence and her show business persona.

The feeling, or at least the hope, was that she would make history.

At 8:00 p.m., Coles, the starter, checked the timers for an OK, then turned to the pedestrienne and shouted, "Go!" To generous applause, she was off. For the next four weeks, including Christmas and New Year's Day, the Mozart Garden track would be her world, the privacy tent her only refuge.

Along the way she would battle fatigue, cold, hunger, thirst, blisters, and crude but somewhat effective methods of medical treatment. Arnica, an herb and a member of the sunflower family, would reduce inflammation in swollen, stiff joints; opiates would calm her nerves; whiskey poured in her shoes would soften toughened feet; the application of leeches "cured" bruises and a variety of other ailments. She would fight the choking fumes emitted by the inefficient gas lamps that illuminated the building, made worse by the many male patrons who ignored the 'No Smoking' signs scattered throughout Mozart Garden.

But her most predictable and consistent enemy would be long hours of late-night monotony, when the bands didn't play and the venue sat virtually empty and silent, and the pedestrienne had to battle loneliness with only a handful of spectators and the weary officials, and the endless crunch, crunch, crunch of her tiny feet on the tan-bark track to keep her company.

The resulting "sleepy spells" that many predicted would doom Madame Anderson could strike with little notice. They might last for hours, causing her to shuffle like an old arthritic woman, kicking up dust and wearing out her shoes as she dragged her feet. Or, she would stagger around the track, eyes locked shut, trapped in a stupor, standing for several seconds as if gathering all her mental and physical strength before the next agonizing, hobbling step.

"Sleepy spells" were the six-day walker's number one nemesis.

For the next four weeks, she wouldn't get more than 10 minutes' continuous rest.

If she survived.

"Even babies don't break up their sleep in such small increments," the *New York Times* reported on December 18. "Such tests are alike useless and unattractive."

No one in America, not the great pedestrienne rivals May Marshall or Bertha von Hillern, nor the still undefeated Daniel O'Leary, had ever attempted such an endurance contest.

And gamblers were offering one-hundred-to-one odds that Madame Anderson wouldn't either.

CHAPTER 2

Captain Barclay

Endurance walking and running charmed and entranced Europeans since the late 17th century.

In those days, endurance walking generated great excitement. In a world without vehicles, or much in the way of organized athletics, a good endurance walking contest proved a welcome distraction from a life focused on little more than the grind of daily survival.

Church socials and county fairs held competitions for men, who earned prizes for catching a greased pig or climbing a greasy pole for a flitch of bacon. Other contests included wrestling, cudgeling, sack hops and donkey races.

Women's activities included races of about a half mile, with fields limited to two or three younger competitors, at a time when society considered 35 as old. The women struggled to run in the long, heavy and sleeved dresses, but more comfortable clothing would have offended the Puritan social protocol. Even minimal liberties drew cries of indecency.

Winners earned a leg of mutton, aprons for younger competitors, or a pound of tea for older women.

But the most popular competitions were called 'smock races.' Before the race, the smock, homemade and taking days or weeks to sew, would be placed on a high tree branch or post for all to see.

Men's and women's cricket matches played host to more lascivious and infrequently held occasional races. They attracted a less sophisticated crowd. Many featured competition among 'gypsy women.' At least one cricket match invited women to run "in drawers only."

By the early 19th century, races could last for several hours and competitors' ages ranged from eight to 70. Formats included solo efforts against the clock, each other, and occasionally against men. One woman reportedly walked 50 miles in eight-and-a-half hours. Another, who worked as a door-to-door bookseller, attempted 50 miles a day for

20 consecutive days, but quit after just seven. Some had big money waged on them, as much as 50-100 pounds, and gamblers would attempt to sabotage the walker to win a bet.

Locals took up a small collection, as most long-distance walkers barely had enough to eat. By the 1820s, the county fairs, long a host for many contests, had pretty much died out. Due to its increasing association with immoral behavior, both real and imagined, women's endurance walking lost respectability with the public. Contests were either not held or conducted outside the public's consciousness.

While the women fell into disfavor, the men, long-engaged in more grueling activities, found someone who made the genteel sport more attractive to them. Over the next few years he would, with style, persona and charisma, essentially create the sport of professional pedestrianism. For decades men and at least one woman tried to equal his accomplishments. If not for him, it's unlikely pedestrianism would have achieved international fame.

His name was Robert Barclay Allardice, popularly known as Captain Barclay.

Born in 1777 to an ancient Scottish family distantly related to the Barclay banking empire, the Allardice family earned renown for performing remarkable feats of strength–uprooting trees with their bare hands, wrestling bulls, and carrying large sacks of flour with their teeth. As a teen Robert won a 100-guinea wager when he walked six miles inside an hour. By the age of 20, he won bets by lifting a 250-pound man with one hand.

But he would earn his greatest fame as an endurance walker.

Thanks to him, pedestrianism grew in popularity in Great Britain through the 19th century, with top athletes earning significant money by walking hundreds of miles in just a few days. Local newspapers sometimes covered their exploits. Even then, sports provided a form of escapism for the average worker, who could fantasize about a lifestyle that included money and fame.

In 1813, Walter Thom wrote in his book *Pedestrianism*, that Captain Barclay didn't adhere to any specific training regimen, and he had a reputation for robust eating and drinking. But his training methods, which included purging, sweating and eating meat, proved popular with pedestrians throughout much of the century. Thom credited Barclay's strength to his walking style that included bending the body forward, thereby throwing the weight on his knees, and taking short efficient steps where the feet barely broke contact with the ground.

Captain Barclay knew how to capitalize on gambler's greed, occasionally engaging in what would later be called "gamesmanship."

In 1801, he wagered 1,000 guineas he could walk 90 miles in 21 hours, but lost when he claimed to have caught a cold. He doubled the bet, and lost again. He won only after raising the stakes to 5,000 guineas. Over the next several years, he amazed locals and fattened his wallet with remarkable achievements in pedestrianism. In 1802, he walked 64 miles in 10 hours; three years later, he covered 72 miles in less than a day. In 1808, starting at 5:00 a.m., he walked 30 miles for grouse hunting, 60 miles home in 11 hours, then dined and hiked 16 miles to a ball. He returned home by 7:00 a.m. and spent the next day shooting, having traveled 130 miles and going without sleep for two days.

Rejecting traditional walking garb, he frequently wore a top hat, cravat, woolen suit, lambs' wool socks and thick-soled shoes.

But Captain Barclay elevated pedestrianism and his own legacy in 1809 with a trek almost everyone thought impossible. From June 1 to July 12, in Newmarket Heath, a town located about 100 miles north of London, Captain Barclay started a journey of 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours, or one mile every hour for six weeks.

He marked off a ½-mile smooth stretch on Norwich Road. Gas lamps, a new technology, were set up 100 yards apart on either side of the path. The illumination not only helped him see, but also offered him protection from gamblers intent on sabotaging him at night. He also carried pistols in his belt, and he hired a former boxer as a bodyguard.

Captain Barclay's times slowed from 15 minutes in the walk's early days to 21 minutes as he neared the end. Before mile 607, he stood while sleeping. To wake him, an assistant took a cane and beat him around the head and shoulders. In addition to rousing him, the whipping resulted in the captain letting loose with a torrid of cursing. His exhaustion nearly incapacitated him as he neared the finish, so officials fired pistols near his ears to keep him awake.

On the last day, thousands jammed into Newmarket, Cambridge, and every other nearby town and village, to see the finish. The crowd included farmers, tinkers, maids and pickpockets, the latter of whom enjoyed such well-attended events. Throughout the vicinity, all beds were filled, and no horse or other form of transportation could be had. As Captain Barclay completed his last mile, his bodyguard led the crowd of more than 10,000 in wild cheers.

Newmarket church bells rang, and reporters sent detailed accounts to their papers. Barclay had become a national hero, setting a record that would become the standard for long-distance walkers.

He had invented the sport of professional pedestrianism.

At a time when a farmer took home 50 guineas a year, Captain Barclay reportedly earned 16,000. Rumors circulated that aggregate bets totaled 100,000 pounds, the equivalent to 5 million pounds and $8 million in modern US dollars.

Although a successful athlete, he still wanted to expand his sphere of influence.

He sponsored boxer Tom Cribb, the bare-knuckles champion of the World in 1807 and 1809. Captain Barclay also earned fame as an excellent marksman and successful gambler. In his 50s, he started the "Defence" stagecoach line, one of the most efficient and reliable that Scotland had ever seen. He occasionally drove the London mail coach to Aberdeen single-handed, requiring him to drive for nearly three days and nights.

A horse kick killed Captain Barclay Allardice, and on May 8, 1854, he died of paralysis. But he saw his pedestrian accomplishments influence Britain and the athletic world for generations. Because of him, people constantly tested the physical and mental limits of human endurance.

* * *

In 1815, six years after Captain Barclay's celebrated walk, a reporter for Swansea's *Cambrian* newspaper wrote, "A whole race of 50-mile-a-day men has emerged, and soon every county will have to boast of its own pedestrian champion. What was before the disease of an individual has become an epidemic; and where it will end I know not."

By then, top walkers made small fortunes. Some prize money came from fanatics (the source of the term fan) who paid to see the athletes. Others earned money from sponsors, who would put up substantial sums as part of an athletic prize for the prestige of having their names associated with a big-time performer.

But not all walkers enjoyed positive relationships with the public.

Due to his job, pedestrian George Wilson found it necessary to make the journey from Newcastle on Tyne to London and back about six times a year, a total of 550 miles round trip. He experienced less success in business. While in debtors' prison in 1813, he staked his watch against the 61 shillings he owed that he could walk 50 miles inside of 12 hours in the prison yard, a space measuring 33 feet by 25.5 feet. He covered the 10,300 circuits with five minutes to spare. On another occasion, police arrested him for walking on Sunday. Still, he proved a successful pedestrian putting on exhibitions in Chelsea, Norwich, Manchester, and other towns. In 1819, at the age of 53, he covered 1,000 miles in 18 days.

A Wilson contemporary, Josiah Eaton, between Boxing Day 1815 and December 5, 1816, twice beat Captain Barclay's record when he

walked 1,100 miles in 1,100 hours, the second with the added requirement that he limit his rest time by commencing each mile within twenty minutes after each hour. By contrast, Barclay would walk two miles in succession, starting one near the end of one hour, then immediately begin the next one. His strategy gave him longer breaks, while still meeting the parameters of both time and distance.

In 1817, at the age of 47, Eaton took on a man for a walk of 2,000 miles in 42 days on west London's Wormwood Scrubs, an open area used as cavalry training. Eaton trailed early, but eventually he prevailed. Later that year, he walked 51 miles from Colchester to London each day for 20 straight days, totaling 1,020 miles.

In 1838, a pedestrian named Harriss, in front of a crowd estimated at between five and six thousand, completed a walk of 1,750 miles in 1,000 hours. The *London Times* reported on December 4, 1838, that "His feet were badly blistered, and he has at intervals suffered considerable pain in his limbs . . ." Afterward, the pedestrian said he looked forward to six or seven days off, because he learned from 14 years' experience that after any pedestrian undertaking, the rest time resulted in more excruciating pain than during the actual performance.

He made 200 sovereigns for his efforts.

By mid-century, even a few women had taken up pedestrianism.

In 1851, hoping to get a glimpse at "the world," an 84-year-old Cornish fishwoman, Mary Callinack, attracted the attention of Queen Victoria when she walked the 300 miles from Penzance to London's Hyde Park to see the Great Exhibition, the precursor to the World's Fair.

On September 17, 1864, 31-year-old Emma Sharp of Laisterdyke, wearing men's clothes described by the *Bradford Observer* as "a red and black checked coat and inexpressibles [presumably a more acceptable term than the sexually explicit "trousers"], and completing her ensemble with a straw hat adorned with a white feather," covered 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours, walking two miles at a time, then recovering for 90 minutes in the nearby Quarry Gap Hotel. She followed that schedule until October 29, when the *Observer* said she completed her task to the "accompaniment of a grand gala, a brass band, a fireworks display, a cannon firing, and roasting of a sheep." She finished with armed escorts and carrying a pistol after someone, probably a person who had a significant wager on her failing, threw hot cinders on her path.

John, her husband, reportedly spent much of the time in a pub because, "he didn't like fact she had drawn so much attention to herself."

He also might have objected to the outfits she wore, or to the harassment he might have gotten from friends and co-workers for the money she made, likely around 1,000 guineas.

CHAPTER 3

Ada Nymand

Approximately 150 miles east of its genesis near Kemble, England, the River Thames flows past south London, curving into an upside down L as it forms the northwest and north border of the borough of Lambeth. In the middle of the 19th century, one could see nearly a half-dozen theatres along that three-quarter mile stretch of Lambeth Beach. A handful more were scattered about a half-mile inland. Within that narrow area, residents of North Lambeth and surrounding boroughs could, for not much money, enjoy a variety of evening and weekend entertainment from Shakespeare to pantomimes to low comedy.

That must have proved an exciting world for Ada Nymand.

Born on February 10, 1843, she developed a strong work ethic and adventurous spirit; Ada dared to dream. She had excellent timing. Queen Victoria had been crowned in 1837. During her 60-year reign, England enjoyed marvelous growth thanks in large part to the Industrial Revolution and many of Her Majesty's reforms. Consequently, the lifestyle of most Brits rose dramatically.

Most of Ada's life in Britain remains a mystery. Her mother was a British-born homemaker. Her German-Jewish father, Gustavus Nymand, worked as a milliner, a job that paid 28-30 shillings a week. In 1851, farm workers earned half that. Officials of the era calculated poverty at 18 shillings a week.

Without elaborating, Ada would later say, "I inherited courage from one parent and insensibility from the other."

Many Brits wore hats in Victorian England. Hats indicated status. Boys and working men wore cloth caps. Artists preferred floppy hats. Beachgoers donned straw hats. Society conscious women wore hats at social gatherings.

Although her father earned a comfortable living, the Nymands' daughter didn't fully embrace the middle-class lifestyle that appealed to so many in the mid-1850s.

Despite society's then stigma against actors, Ada dreamed of headlining a major play. Each day as she left her home on Blackfriar's Road and walked past popular night spots such as Astley's Amphitheatre and the Surrey Theatre, she would look up at the featured players and ask, "What shall I do to get my name up there?"

She sought a bigger stage than Lambeth, one dominated by famous actresses who wooed packed houses and demonstrated power and grace. Ada wanted to see the audience's eyes follow her as she sashayed across the stage, the object of desire like such performers as Laura Keene and Madame Vestras.

By her mid-teens the restless teen could no longer remain in the confines of Lambeth.

Ada Nymand left home to pursue the stage.

She joined the many others who sought fame. Most found it elusive. Only a handful would reach the London stage, and precious few of those would reach their goals. Getting there meant facing years of hardship. Sir Henry Irving, the first actor to be knighted, toiled for 15 years before finally establishing himself as a star in 1871.

Ada not only battled long odds in achieving stardom, but also the Victorian contempt for the acting profession.

Newspapers often interchanged the terms 'actress' and 'prostitute.'

A performer in the play, "Through the Stage Door" said, "Women who can't advertise any other way go on stage."

In the 1838 production of "Prostitutes of London," this exchange took place: "Is not a theatre a brothel?"

"The two," came the response, "are linked together by mutual interests and mutual pursuits; their morals are identically the same."

Toward that end Ada, like so many in her situation, probably took a stage name, which prevented bringing shame upon their families.

But Ada soon found battling the public's opinion of acting couldn't compare to the struggles from within.

Those political wars and posturing for positions and choice roles must have disappointed and alienated star-struck Ada, who, like the other naïve aspirants, found the profession more brutal and unforgiving than they could have imagined. Too many hopefuls and a shortage of parts meant an overflow of actresses, almost all lacking experience, but still hoping for the chance to perform and get their names on the marquees. Only a few, such as Ellen Terry and Laura Keene, survived the intense competition. Terry became one of the world's most renowned actresses, frequently playing Shakespeare during a career that extended into silent movies. Keane went international, becoming one of the first women theatrical managers in history. She achieved her greatest fame on April 14,

1865, when performing "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. That night she managed to work her way into President Lincoln's private box, and rested the dying president's bloody head on her lap.

But they represented a minority. Irene Vanbrugh described the plight of actresses as, "one long fight … there are others, many others, in the field if she stops fighting for one single moment. She will be tramped under foot, 'for every actress life is a lone battle ….'"

Another said, "The life of a Victorian actress is, 'a state of war without bloodshed.'"

Even making it big didn't guarantee long-term success in the unstable world. Despite writing melodramas for several theatres, including Surrey, Adelphi and Olympic, Charles Somerset found himself producing two-act dramas for the miserly rate of 25 shillings. Later, he stood in front of the Mansion House (the official residence of the Lord Mayor of London) with a label round his neck declaring, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am starving."

But one could minimize the agonizing years of trials through connections. Both Terry and Keene had relatives in show business. Unfortunately, Ada had no such advantage. She would rely on work ethic, which was probably her greatest asset. Even as a child she reportedly could physically accomplish in a few hours what grown men needed two days to do. A young Ada believed she could "pull the house down and put it back up again."

Ada likely spent the years after leaving Lambeth traveling through small towns in low-rung theatrical companies, such as penny gaffs or 'box theatres,' where the troupe set up a makeshift stage wherever they found space and a small audience. The group's productions were spontaneous, haphazard and unscripted, the latter not usually a big issue, since many of the actors couldn't read. Audiences, out of frustration with their own lives or poor quality of the productions, often responded by throwing rotten vegetables at the performers.

On top of a typical 16-hour workday, actors rehearsed for no pay. If they missed a performance, if the play failed to make money, or if an unscrupulous manager ran off with the meager profits, they were left with nothing.

However, they did get numerous opportunities to develop a variety of skills that hopefully would take them to the London theatres, especially the hallowed West End.

Ada appeared to have made it to a major stage, but she likely didn't stay long, or ever headline or land a major part. In all of her British news-

paper interviews, no mention was ever made of her having a theatrical background. It seemed she remained an unknown hopeful, one of the scores whose name never graced a marquee. She mostly traveled and performed with provincial shows, and while a step up from the box theatres, the constant traveling and endless days hardly fulfilled her dream.

For 15 years Ada Nymand battled to "make a name." She likely fought ostracism from her parents and a public that, especially when she started, identified her with being a prostitute. With no connections and limited talent, she still thought it possible to overcome those liabilities with enormous focus and strong will.

But she suffered from one other shortcoming, and that alone probably doomed her career even before it started.

In addition to connections and talent, Keene, Terry and the other top actresses could lay claim to another asset, one that no amount of work or training could teach or develop. The headliners made strong first impressions with high cheekbones, thin, well-defined faces, flowing hair, tantalizing smiles, and figures that almost created a scandal when they wore form-fitting designer dresses.

Despite a slow growing respectability of actresses, couch politics could still make or break their careers, and success meant possessing the tools that attracted men. One actress said that on two occasions she lost a part to a manager's mistress.

Unfortunately, Ada's features included a stocky body, square jaw and wide nose that seemed to set her eyes too far apart. No one in the press gave Ada Nymand credit for even possessing moderate good looks.

As Ada passed 30, she not only battled more with the attractive actresses, but younger ones, some by a decade or more.

The stage no longer held her future. It represented failed dreams, and in some ways a shattered life. Her ability to outwork most of her fellow performers might mask a lack of star-quality talent, but it couldn't overcome the awkward way she filled out a dress.

She would never star on a stage, never feel the audience following her every move, never bring down the house with a stunning scene, never experience the glow of a standing ovation. Those magic moments of connecting with a crowd would forever be reserved for some other actress. So, around 1875, Ada left the stage. She married for the first time, to a man named Anderson, and the couple began their lives as a theatrical management team.

Now she dealt with the boring side of books, fighting with managers, working with temperamental performers, and innumerable other tedious behind-the-scenes tasks that rarely elicited a 'thank you' much less a public's acknowledgment.

She and her husband managed a theatre in Cardiff. For the next year, they learned the skills necessary to run a successful theatre. By virtually all accounts, the couple made a go of it.

Then tragedy struck. The next year, Ada's husband died. In her mid-30s, she found herself alone. Within months she'd be nearly bankrupt.

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