SECOND THOUGHTS ON FIRST NIGHTS

When Barrie Was a Promising Playwright

WHEN George Arliss returned to town last Monday evening, it was to appear in the central rôle of a pretty, time-worn comedy by J. M. Barrie, the first of his plays to be shown to us, and it was shown to us a quarter of a century ago. For it was toward the close of 1892 that "The Professor's Love Story" was presented "for the first time on any stage," at the old Star Theatre, which stood down at Thirteenth Street and Broadway. How really long ago that was may best be suggested by turning to the yellowed files of THE TIMES and noting in the headlines of its review of the play the discerning description of Barrie as "a dramatist of rare promise."

For "The Professor's Love Story" was timidly and laboriously contrived when the gentle Scot, a man of 30, was a newcomer among the playwrights. Several times he had turned from the "Auld Licht Idyls" and the first chronicles of Thrums to try his hand at writing for the theatre, but the results had not been encouraging and he had no great reputation of any sort when he finished his romance of Professor Goodwillie and set forth on his round of the actor-managers of the day. He had just emerged from what he likes to call his younger and happiest days, when whatever he got out of life he got by writing. Then a new chair or a new etching meant a new article to pay for it, and when the coveted thing arrived the piece that had made it possible was promptly pasted on the back. Barrie's name was no open sesame in those days, and had England been at war then he could not, out of his own pocket, have supported a single cot, let alone a complete hospital, in France. But that's telling.

With "The Professor's Love Story" under his arm, he went first to Irving, who was kind and let him read the play aloud. And though Irving did not seem possessed to accept it, he did pave the way to John Hare with a letter of introduction. Hare was more forbidding and insisted on reading to himself the manuscript which was engrossed in a mystical handwriting that only Peter Pan and Tinker Bell could have deciphered. Furthermore, on the plea that it made him nervous, Hare would not keep the agitated playwright at hand as an interpreter, but sternly banished him to the anteroom to await the verdict. He did not have to wait long, for the verdict came almost immediately. It came in the form of groans, roars and imprecations from within, and there the startled Barrie found that the great Mr. Hare, utterly baffled by the handwriting, had sought relief for his emotions by hurling the script to the floor and leaping up and down upon it. After this depressing incident, Barrie had a fairer transcript of his comedy prepared, and took it to E. S. Willard. In the bottom of one of Willard's cavernous trunks, along with many other scripts by other men, it then set forth for America.

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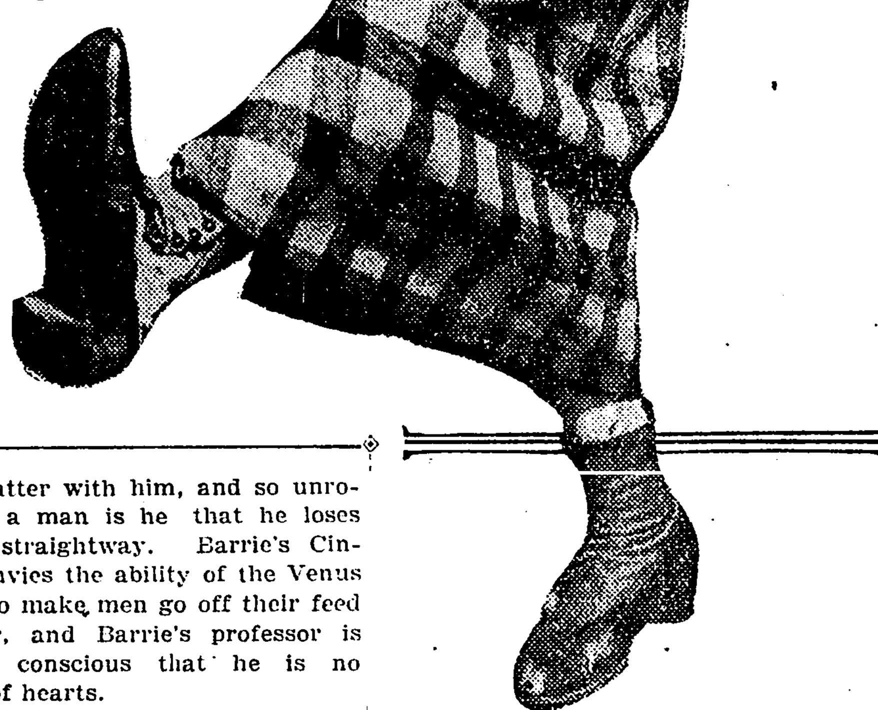
WILLARD, in the first four seasons of the nineties, played only in the United States, and it was in the last week of an engagement at the Star in December, 1892, that he produced "The Professor's Love Story." On the spur of the moment, and with no more than six rehearsals, it was pitched on in place of Tennyson's "The Cup." Willard, of course, was Professor Goodwillie. The Lucy was Marie Burroughs and Lady Gilding was a young and lustrous beauty name Maxine Elliott. By that time every one, even in America, had read or was reading Barrie's most celebrated novel, "The Little Minister," and an eager audience awaited his first play to reach New York. The sale was large though it was that nightmare of the managers' existence, the week before Christmas, in the days before the "Do your shopping early" slogan had taken the fine frenzy out of the season. The success on the first night was unmistakable, and, during the curtain speech, there was thunderous applause when Mr. Willard asked if he might cable to the author in England that his play had won the day.

If such a message was ever sent it must have gone astray, for the first tidings Barrie had of his play's reception, or, indeed, of its having been produced at all, came in the form of a friendly and exploratory note from a stranger in New York, one Charles Frohman, who felicitated him on "The Professor's Love Story," and inclosed, by way of introduction, the picture of a young and extremely insignificant actress, of whom he had hopes and for whom, he hoped, Mr. Barrie would some day write a play. That note was the beginning of the memorable friendship between Frohman and Barrie, and the picture was a photograph of Maude Adams. It was Barrie's first glimpse of the woman who, in the years that lay ahead, was to interpret for America, was to *be* for America, his Phoebe Throssell, his Leonora, his Maggie Wylie, his Babbie, and his Peter Pan. It was the beginning of the story that reached its finest chapter last December in the production at the Empire of "A Kiss for Cinderella." That picture, which is reproduced here today, still stands on the mantel shelf in Mr. Bodie's—no, in Mr. Barrie's—study at 3 Adelphi Terrace, sharing that small altar with a portrait of Margaret Ogilvie, the original manuscript of Henley's "Invictus," and an unconscionable number of pipes. Finding the picture there one afternoon, John D. Williams came upon its story, and that is how it happens to be set forth here—for the first time on any page.



A Sample of Barrie's Handwriting Submitted as Exhibit A in Hare's Defense.

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SO it was a quarter of a century ago that "The Professor's Love Story" was first played here. That is a long time in the theatre, where the sands in the glass run quickly. The mere numbering of the years scarcely tells the story. But think. "The Professor's Love Story" was written before "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray." It was written for a theatre that had just begun to know Wilde and had never even heard of Shaw. The first of Shaw's plays, "Widowers' Houses," was being grimly and heroically staged by the Stage Society in London the same month that brought "The Professor's Love Story" to the footlights in America.

Or you can get another perspective on the lapse of time if you will consider what you might have seen in New York that December night had you not chosen rather to welcome at the Star the new "dramatist of rare promise." You might have gone to Daly's to see Ada Rehan as heavenly Rosalind, or to the Standard, where Charles Frohman was presenting his now star, John Drew, in "The Masked Ball," a comedy in which Miss Adams, in a tipsy scene, was winning her first New York success. Minna Gale-Haynes and Eben Plympton were at another theatre playing "The Hunchback" for dear life, and down at the Union Square Mrs. Potter and Kyrle Bellew were giving Zola's "Therese" if it killed them. You could have seen Nat Goodwin in "A Gilded Fool" or Neil Burgess in "The County Fair," petticoats, race track and all. Perhaps Daniel Frohman would have beguiled you to his cherished Lyceum to see poor Georgia Cayvan and the rest in Sardou's "Américans Abroad." You might have preferred Bronson Howard's "Aristocracy." Probably you had already seen "A Trip to Chinatown." It had passed its four hundredth performance. Then Ned Harrigan and Annie Yeamans (as Cordelia Mulligan) were at Harrigan's in "The Mulligan Guards' Ball." There was no end of pleasant music to be heard, what with Marie Tempest in "The Fencing Master" and the Bostonians in "Robin Hood." But perhaps "The Black Crook" was more in your line. Or you might have chosen to drop up to Tony Pastor's to hear Bonnie Thornton sing "Annie Rooney." Probably you knew enough not to go to any of these, but to save your money for the month ahead, when there was coming to the old Fifth Avenue for her first appearance in America an Italian actress named Eleanora Duse.

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BUT, after all, to realize how many years have slipped away since "The Professor's Love Story" was written you need only watch its unfolding on the stage of the Knickerbocker. True, it has recently been brushed up, for Barrie had a notion that Miss Adams might care to play it, and so it was in readiness, for its present use by Mr. Arliss here and in England by H. B. Irving, who has been giving it all Winter. It has been freshened a bit here and there. Certain subtleties are now suffered to make their own way without fingerposts. Of course, the asides have been whisked out. But "The Professor's Love Story" remains, for all these changes, a comedy written by Barrie before he learned how (or found the courage) just to "play himself" in the theatre. Just as Wilde, sauntering through the stage door for the first time, unconsciously felt called upon to behave like other playwrights, (Sardou in particular,) so it did not occur to Barrie to let his fancy play over his own materials, to let his humor and pathos find expression in any other patterns than the conventional ones of the day, when the theatre was still fragrant with "Sweet Lavender." Groping his way in the unaccustomed darkness back stage, it was natural enough for him to try first to use the properties accumulated there. "The Importance of Being Earnest" was not Wilde's first play, nor his second, and in the same way Barrie, unlike Dunsany and Chesterton, did not immediately set to work to create his own properties, his own devices, his own idiom.

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IN the present revival George Arliss does exceedingly well as Professor Goodwillie. Barrie's professor is an absentminded and ungainly scientist who falls in love with his fair young secretary and thinks his complaint is lumbago. In time he finds out what is the matter with him, and so unromantical a man is he that he loses courage straightway. Barrie's Cinderella envies the ability of the Venus de Milo to make men go off their feed and roar, and Barrie's professor is wistfully conscious that he is no breaker of hearts.

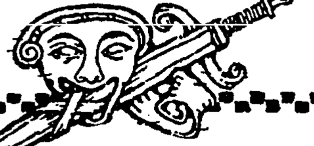
"I was always very plain," he confesses gloomily. "It doesn't matter now, but it used to depress me when I suddenly saw my face in a looking glass. I would have had quite a different youth if there had been no looking glasses. I wish I was a pirate. They ran away with the ladies they loved, threw them over their shoulders and made off with them. Very wrong—very pleasant. I have heard there are seventy-seven good ways of making love, and I don't know one of them, Miss Lucy. It's what ought to be put on my tombstone. He didn't know one of them."

The present company is excellent, except for one or two lamentable weak spots. Very pleasing are Jeanne Eagels as Lucy, a newcomer from England; Ethel Dane, as the Dowager Lady Gilding, and Malcolm Morely as Pete.

Mr. Arliss is scarcely the ideal choice for the Professor. He plays with fine artifice, but little glow. It is partly our mental habit that unsuits him for the part. You cannot help finding him always a little cold, a little hard, a little sinister, if you have seen him play the Devil, Ulric Brendel in "Rosmersholm," Raoul Berton in "Leah Kleschna," Disraeli, Paganini, the Marquis of Steyne, and, in "The Darling of the Gods," that fearful figure, Zakkuri. A long succession of such rôles affects not only the player, but the playgoer. To be sure, Mr. Arliss stepped aside for a time to enact the gentle Septimus, but for the most part in our theatre he has played the Devil. That may be one reason why he is not so winning and warm a Professor as can be imagined—as Willard probably was. Some of us would give a good deal to see George Arliss play Wolsey one of these fine days, but one or two happier choices for Goodwillie will keep coming to mind. There is O. P. Heggie, for instance. Or William Gillette.

ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT.

Mary Pickford *on the* Strand Screen *in* "The Poor Little Rich Girl"



Maude Fulton, *(late of Rock and Fulton) in* "The Brat," *the forthcoming comedy from her own pen*

Sylvia *in* "The Harp of Life" Laurette Taylor, *the first play of whose season has already run 100 performances*

Mary Young, *who comes to the Garrick from the Castle Square in Boston to appear in E. H. Sothern's play,* "Stranger Than Fiction"

Nell in "The Lost Paradise."
The picture which introduced Maude Adams to Barrie.

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