

THE YOUNG "OLD LADY" OF MR. BARRIE'S PLAY

ONE might have thought, and undoubtedly many who saw her as Mrs. Dowie in Barrie's "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" did think, that Beryl Mercer must be a woman of middle age, so complete an embodiment of the drab little old charwoman, who acquired a soldier son only to lose him, was she. This natural mistake was an unconscious tribute to the actress's art, for Miss Mercer is only 35 years old. The general excellence of the four characterizations she has given in New York refutes the oft-uttered assertion that English actresses of character parts cannot approach their American cousins. Surely the American stage can boast of no more gifted interpreter of rôles of this type.

It is just possible that the mixture of blood in Miss Mercer's veins is respon-



Beryl Mercer.

sible for her superiority over most of the actresses of the English stage, who excel in interpreting straight rôles rather than character ones. Miss Mercer's father was Spanish; he was Edward Sheppard Mercer, attached to the Spanish Embassy in London in the '80s. At an embassy ball in London he met Beryl Montague, the famous leading woman of the Bancroft Robertson productions of the period, and shortly afterward the two were married and went to Seville, Spain, to live. There Beryl, their first child, was born, in 1882.

The combined heritage of dramatic talent and Spanish temperament asserted itself early in Beryl Mercer's life, and at the age of four she made her first appearance on the stage. Her mother was playing in Eastbourne, England, and when the child actor assigned to the part of Willie Carlyle in "East Lynne" was taken ill the little Mercer girl substituted. She did so extraordinarily well that her parents, not wishing to have a child prodigy on their hands, sent her at once to Jersey College in the Channel Islands.

But the call of the stage was not to be denied, and at the age of ten it was decided that she should adopt a stage career. Within the year she had created the rôle of Shakespeare Jarvis in "The Lights o' London." Her success was instantaneous, and she became the most popular impersonator of boys' rôles in London and the provinces. She was the original Dick, the crippled acrobat, in "The Scarlet Sin," Wally in "The Two Little Vagabonds," and Micah Dow in "The Little Minister."

These engagements had extended over a period of five years, and now Miss Mercer was ready for more mature rôles. Sir Herbert Tree engaged her to play *It, the shadow*, in "The Darling

of the Gods," and after that she was Fuck in Oscar Asche's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Her portrayal of the eery creature was styled by some London critics as the most sprightly and unearthly the London stage had ever seen.

Miss Mercer's subsequent career has been taken up largely with impersonations of just such forlorn old women as Barrie's Mrs. Dowie, but unlike many players who have drifted into this kind of work and have been unable to extract themselves, Miss Mercer adopted it through choice. She had always had the ambition to portray the unfortunate of her sex, and the realization of her ambition came when Lena Ashwell recognized her aptitude and engaged her for the part of Meinke in "The Schulamite." It was in this that Miss Mercer made her American debut in December, 1906, at the Lyric.

Upon her return to London Miss Ashwell gave her a three years' contract and she played an old woman's rôle in "Diana of Dobson's," and to show her versatility Miss Ashwell put on a curtain-raiser, "The Likes o' Me," in which Miss Mercer impersonated a little boy. Her other specialty is one-act plays and her fame at home is grounded partly on her many appearances in these. When "Buntz" was given for eight months at the Haymarket Miss Mercer acted the rôle of an old, gin-sodden woman in "Their Point of View," presented as a curtain-raiser.

"Mother o' Pearl" and "Acid Drops" are other famous thumb-nail sketches in her repertoire. She is known to music hall patrons throughout the British Isles, having played in sketches with Cyril Maude, George Barrett, and others in all of the principal variety theatres.

New York playgoers are indebted to Marie Tempest for the return of Miss Mercer. When she produced "A Lady's Name" an accomplished character actress was needed for the part of Emily, a rôle restricted to one act and thirteen lines but still important, so she sent for Miss Mercer. After that she played a similar part with James Powers in "Somebody's Luggage," and then she joined the English company that appeared here for a brief engagement in "The Lodger" first at the Thirty-ninth Street and afterward at the Bandbox.

The program of Barrie playlets was withdrawn last night after it had earned a good many thousands of dollars for the Stage Woman's War Relief, but undoubtedly the old lady will show her medals and the new word, "Lieutenant," will be heard again in the Fall. They have proved themselves too valuable to be laid aside permanently. When they are revived it would be surprising if there were a new Mrs. Dowie; it would be asking too much of any actress to try to present a more humanly appealing portrait than did Beryl Mercer. Her Mrs. Dowie must have tallied very closely with the gray little figure Sir James saw in his mind's eye.