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CAREER OF BEERBOHM TREE

By T. P. O'Connor

The first time I remember meeting Beerbohm Tree was nearly forty years ago; he was just beginning to be known as an eccentric comedian with special mannerisms and some promise; belonged to the class, then rarer than now, who were supposed to have wandered rather wantonly and provocatively from the life of the leisured gentleman or busy man of business on to the stage crowded with figures, earning tardy recognition, and uncertain pay, after years spent in going through the mill. He might prove a success; it was thought more likely that he would end in the disaster common to most amateurs.

Even then the peculiarities that are now known to the world, partly natural, partly affected, revealed themselves. At the time he was very slim, which added an appearance of greater height, even to his great height. His hair, red blond, which was very long and brushed back from his forehead and descending far to his neck, together with the light, blue, dreamy eyes, gave him an especially German look—he might have been taken for a male edition of the Rhine maidens of Wagner. He had also a slight guttural accent which clung to him all his days; the suspicion of a lisp; above all he had that air of abstraction which was then associated with the German race. His manner in conversation was just like his appearance. He would speak with some eagerness; then relapse into silence; his eyes took a far away look; and the expression of the face, so remote and unreachable, seemed at times almost stupid.

My first impression of him then was of an eccentric character; he suggested doubt as to whether he was merely a visionary poseur, or an exceptional character destined to an exceptional career. No one realised in later years better than I did how far he realised the second and not the first of my forecasts. But though he arrived fairly quickly, he did not arrive without a hard struggle. For some years he was known simply as an eccentric comedian. When I saw him he was playing under Charles Wyndham in a play known, I believe, as "Where's the Cat?" a farcical adaptation of the usual type of Palais Royal play. The next I remember of him is as a pseudo Prince in the "Glass of Fashion," a clever satire on contemporary morals, by Sydney Grundy, produced by Mr. Shine—veteran and evergreen, whom I saw, after many years in New York, the other day. The performance of "Tree stood out; with his tall, lean person in black, his pretentious air of reverie, his broken English, his soothing manner. One of Tree's last successes in this line of acting was as the original Mr. Spalding, the curate in the famous "Private Secretary"; the part which led on more than one actor to fame. More or less obscure—at least in comparison with the other bigger things he afterwards achieved, as these parts were—Beerbohm Tree never from the first moment, when he jumped from an office in the city to the stage, failed to strike the imagination of a Londoner as a personality. Indeed, take his whole career from the opening to the close, it was a triumph of personality.

His chance came when he was able to become the lessee of the Haymarket Theatre. It is a theatre with a long and glorious history. Sir Squire and Lady Bancroft left it after several years with a large fortune doubled. For some time Tree carried it on with the varying fortunes of most theatrical enterprises, now choosing a piece of conspicuous want of merit—after the fashion of even the most experienced actor managers; now falling upon some prize that advanced both his fame and his fortune. One of his great successes was the "Red Lamp"; a story of Russian life with the perennial conflict of the epoch between the Nihilist and the police. Tree took for this part the head of police. As he came upon the stage, made up as an old man with eyes that seemed to be everywhere, with cunning in every line of the old wrinkled evil face, with a senile and yet furtive step, there was a buzz of admiration throughout the house; never had an actor more successfully disguised his own personality, though he never thoroughly lost himself in a part. The play has several fine scenes; I remember well one when the old police agent finds himself in a room with one of the chief conspirators; there is a little machine against the wall; it has to be turned and the infernal, explosive machine, which is underneath, will be set loose; and every body, Nihilist and police agent and the gendarmes that accompany him, will be blown into fragments. That performance established the position of Tree as the "character" actor,

which he was when at his best; and indeed, as an actor, he was truly great.

A man less restless, less ambitious, would have been satisfied with such a theatre as the Haymarket; but the ambition of Tree was never sated; his restlessness never knew tranquillity, his vivid and inventive imagination never was still. So he built himself, opposite the old theatre, a gorgeous new theatre, very spacious, very ornate; with tremendous stage, grandiose, in short, as his own vivid thought. He began badly; but in time he conquered until in the end his magnificent theatre had a regular following; so that he was always secure of a great audience, even if the play did not take of a moderate run. In this theatre he had at last free rein for his ambitious projects; he carried them out with the lavishness of a man possessed by his own gorgeous dreams. It was then that he began that monopoly in the production of Shakespeare's plays—the haunting and usually ruinous dream of all great actor managers. Tree was the first London manager, since the days of Garrick, that made Shakespeare pay; and yet he took every step to prevent Shakespeare paying. That reckless imagination of his made him grandiose, not merely in the magnificence of his conceptions, but in his almost wanton extravagance of expenditure. A muff, for instance, was worn by a lady in his adaptation of Tolstoy's "Resurrection"; she did not appear for more than a few moments in three scenes; really had little or nothing to do; but Tree insisted that she should have a muff of real sable; it cost four hundred dollars; a more practical and less imaginative manager would have bestowed an imitation muff which, from the stage, would have looked quite as well for ten dollars.

Severe critics often maintained that the productions were overlaid by the gorgeous scenery; there was some truth in the charge; but on the other hand, nobody who ever saw Tree's production of "Midsummer Night's Dream" will ever forget so intoxicating a production of Shakespeare; where even the boldest poetry of the greatest of dramatists found some addition to its imaginative appeal in the gorgeous and daring devices of the manager at once of genius and of reckless and daring expenditure and inexhaustible fertility of new devices and new settings. There were things in such a production that revealed in Tree all the inspiration of a truly poetic mind.

Let me utilise the space left to me by attempting a portrait in his intimate life of this very remarkable man. He has died before his time; but he has died after he had lived as much as the six lives of the ordinary man. His vitality was as boundless as his imagination. He worked tremendously; but he enjoyed himself as tremendously; he brought to life the same insatiable and eager curiosity in his middle age as in his youth. He went everywhere; for he was welcome everywhere; you were sure to find him at every big function. He was a man of the club; often after a hard night's work he would sit up till the early morning; talking incessantly when he was in the mood; witty, paradoxical, half with conscious pose, half with the eternal simplicity of the child of imagination that never grasped realities. The large, blue, Teutonic eyes had always the open look of the child still looking out on the world with the wondering simplicity of its first gaze on a new, strange world. Thus he never grew old; he was enthusiastic, spendthrift of his health and his money, reckless indeed, unconscious of expenditures, of risks, of rises and falls of fortune. The inner world of his artistic soul was so thickly peopled with visions of projects, so swarming with multitudes of thoughts, that he sometimes seemed an incorrigible dreamer, whom nothing had ever brought to the real and rude awakening of life's realities. He summed up this side of himself well once when he said to me that though many respectable and otherwise voracious people had told him that two and two made four, he had never believed them; he always felt they made five.

These were among the many qualities that made him so loved. I never knew an actor with so many friends. He deserved the friendship, for his nature was generous, sweet, inexhaustible in its good will to human beings. Over and over again I asked him for the free use of his theatre for some charity or for some individual of his profession, who had fallen on evil days; he never once refused me. The same he did to others. He could not be unkind. I heard Sir Edward Carson, who had once been his counsel in a case of big money, tell that Tree refused to allow a question to be put to an actress who was suing him—a question on which perhaps the whole fate of the case hung—because it would cause the lady pain; he pre-

ferred to lose his money to hurting a woman's feelings. I was at a little dinner which he gave before he started out for his long recent visit to America; I said my strong and sincere conviction was that the British stage had never produced a man so disinterested. He loved his art; he thought of it, he dreamed of it; it was never absent from his inner mind. Pecuniary results he had to count; for he had a wife and several children; but they were thought of only because they had to be thought of; at bottom his whole being was possessed by the feverish, inexhaustible desire to bring theatrical productions to the highest point that money and invention and a soaring imagination could reach. He will make a big void in the life of London for he seemed to pervade it all; he will make a bigger void in the large circle of friends who loved him as he deserved to be loved.

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NORMAL TRAINED TEACHER WANTED for C. S. S. No. 4, Westmeath, (La. Passe). Duties to begin Sept. 3rd, 1917. One capable of teaching French and English. Apply stating salary and experience to W. C. Gervais, Sec. Treas., C. S. S. No. 4, Westmeath, La. Passe, Ont. 2022-1

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