

THE PASSING SHOW

WILLA CATHER

An hour with Minnie Maddern Fiske—that is an hour to be singled from among the rest, an hour touched with high lights and standing out boldly in the long calendar of hours so gray and so like each other. It is an hour spent in a powerhouse where great forces are generated, an hour that leaves one humbled and exhausted, rather glad to descend into the street and mingle again with the common, lazy-going world, to chat with the newsboy on the corner and to discuss the weather with the street car conductor. For the most of us cannot live at white heat all the time, and a very little of that atmosphere, so sur-charged with electric forces, in which genius lives, makes our breath come hard and reminds us that we are of the earth.

I found her very pale and weary looking, but that did not last for long. A little conversation on the one thing on earth or in heaven that matters to her, and the color glowed in her cheeks as in live coals when you blow upon them. She was attired in some sort of a loose pink arrangement that caught and accentuated the colors in that wonderful Titian hair of hers. She was seated at her breakfast table, where a place was waiting for me, and she had a volume of Browning in her hand, reading while she waited. I really think I made a feeble Browning joke, but I am not sure. The furniture swayed around the room in a rather suspicious manner and on the whole it was a rather trying moment. Apropos of Browning she remarked: "He seems to me the most modern and fullgrown of poets. So many of the others are boys, carried away by their own emotions and enamoured of boyish fancies. But he has attained his majority, the manhood of poetry. Play Browning? O no, that would be midsummer madness. The Queen in "Two in a Balcony" is my favorite part, but I shall never play it in public. We are not so very unlike, that queen and I."

The whole secret of talking to artists, whether it be a professional interview or otherwise, is to enter completely into their mood, not to ask them to come to yours; for the moment to make their gods your gods, and to make their life the most important thing on earth to you. If you ask questions you are doomed, moreover, that is impertinent. But if you can stir a little of that enthusiasm by which they live, fan a little that fire which makes them great, then you no longer feel like an intruder, the hour becomes worth many hours of our comatose existence, and the day is made memorable.

I saw that, as she spoke, she glanced again at the volume in her hand and half opened it. I knew that moment was mine. By the grace of heaven I remembered the first few lines of one of the Queen's speeches to Constance:

"O to live with a thousand
beating hearts
Around you, serviceable hands
Professing they've no care
but for your cause,
And you the marble statue
all the time."

There she caught up the lines and finished them. When she concluded, her eyes were as bright as the Queen's, her cheeks as hot, that fragile, drooping little figure which lounged back in the arm chair a moment before, was erect and tense, her fingers trembled as she swept the hair back from her forehead, and I was to have an hour, not with the tired woman, but with the artist. The brilliancy, the richness of the experience I cannot even suggest. I can repeat some of her words, but the personal element is lost. The breakfast was a

name, nothing more. She sat beside the table rolling the bread crumbs up into little balls and stacking them up like reserve ammunition, and talked on and on in that hard, dry staccato which can outmatch in its wonderful effects the most sonorous elocution. "Of course no one can act who hasn't lived tremendously; and yet people who act well can't afford to spend much time living. But the little of life we get we take very hard, we have hungry palates and our taste is keen. The mere suggestion of an experience is enough to make us realize it fully. This faculty makes sad havoc of our lives sometimes—but that doesn't matter. In fact, the work is all that does matter. I think that we often live again moments of our own lives on the stage, experiences wholly different from that which we portray, but alike in kind. One has perhaps at sometime accidentally hurt an animal, and then one knows how it would feel to kill a man, the nausea, the physical revulsion which would follow. Yes, I think we feed our art with everything in our lives. Other things come in for a moment and we pursue them and clutch at them, but in the end we come back, always back, and in one way and another our experience colors and enriches our work. You see the work is all, or it is nothing. One gives body and brain and soul, or one is a dilettante. And then there is another thing; it sounds rather absurd, but I believe that to play well one must have suffered. Sometimes I think that it was sorrow which first called any art into being. Such a statement savors of sentimentality when it is made boldly, but I believe that the trouble with the work of half our young players is that life has been too easy for them."

The talk drifted to the new play which Mrs. Fiske is to bring out next year, the dramatization of Thackeray's "Vanity Fair." The adaptation is by Langdon Mitchell, son of Dr. S. Wier Mitchell, of Philadelphia, the Hugh Wynne man. Mrs. Fiske is already studying her part—need I say that it is "Becky Sharp?"—and will be hard at it all summer. In October she will put the piece on in New York, afterward taking it to Chicago and Boston only. The following summer she will go abroad to remain one or perhaps two seasons. The production will be sumptuously staged and the cast will include thirty five people. The scenario calls for five acts, the first is laid in the home of Mrs. Crawley, the second at the ball in Brussels closing under the cloud of the impending battle. The third and fourth acts take place in the Curzon street house after Becky's marriage with Rawden Crawley, the fifth is concerned with Becky's life in Pumpernickle, after the fall of her fortunes.

"The second act," said Mrs. Fiske "is one of the strongest. The scene in which Becky, who is quite without irresistible personal charms, makes herself irresistible to George by sheer force of will, seduces him by intellect, as it were, is a very great opportunity. Throughout the whole novel, Thackeray never allows you to lose your respect for Becky's intelligence for a moment. In a sneaking sort of way, you even like her, at least I do. This regard is just what I shall try to keep for her. In the old English comedies you are made to sympathize with women who are neither virtuous nor sentimentally naughty, who never deceived themselves or called their vices by petty names. The same thing can be done to day. She was a woman possessed of power, and force is force, it tells, it moves, it commands irrespective of morality, just as electricity does."

The hour had passed, and several of them, and I rose to go looking long at that strange little wisp of a woman with the Titian hair, the compressed lips, the searching eyes, and the bright spot burning on either cheek, upon whose frail shoulders the hope of our stage so largely rests. And the old question came back to me, how long can so slight a body endure the friction of a mind so

great and so incessantly active. When one thinks of the red blood that is wasted all over the world every day, of the health and strength and strength that are squandered, one protests at the injustice of it. Ah well, "Other heights in other lives, God willing," when I have been for a little while with minds like that, then I know that somewhere, sometime there is a resurrection and a life, that nothing can destroy or entirely disintegrate a personality so unique, so dominating, so pregnant with power.

What a strange figure she is among our gay MUMMERS and MASQUERS, that pale, fragile little one with the thin nervous lips, and eyes fixed always upon the distance. And life has never been easy for her. No player ever reserved a harder novitiate. She began life on the stage; she has never known anything else. Her cradle was one of the theatre trunks in her mother's dressing room, and the trunk lid was propped up to keep the light out of her eyes. But that was not for long, she loved that fierce light even as a baby, and could stare at it without blinking. She was not an easy child to take care of, and as she was more contented at the theatre than at the hotel, her mother always took her along. The play ground she loved best was that dusty green carpet behind the footlights. The hard pitiless light of the calcium was the sunlight of her childhood, and in it she shot up as pale and slender as a cellar grown plant, and this world grew to be very real to her; the painted skies and seas and the canvas trees were to her what the real skies and woods are to other children, and she learned to think and dream and live with them. So from the first the unreal was reality to her, and the life of the imagination her only life. All her most acute needs and desires and experiences were those of the imagination.

When she was but seven years old she was already going with her father's company, a poor, bedraggled little company of strolling players, wandering from town to town across the prairies of the blizzard swept west, performing on tables lashed together in tavern dining rooms, often stranded and without money for days together. The child danced the highland fling, brought up the rear of the Amazon march, played the Duke of York in "Richard III.," played in "Ten Nights in a Bar Room," in short went through the whole repertoire of irksome duties attendant on the lower walks of the profession she leads today.

When she was ten she was doing the child prodigy with Barry Sullivan in New Orleans, and a sad time of it the poor fellow had with her. It took the most persistent coaxing to make her learn her lines, as she always insisted that she could improvise something quite as good, and held the text of the playwright in utter contempt. Even in Shakesperian plays she frequently improvised in blank verse to the astonishment of the audience and the utter confounding of her fellow players. One night she was cast for the apparition which bids Macbeth be "lion-mettled," and the appearance of this funny little ghost in a white night-gown sent the audience into a convulsion of laughter.

Then came the long, hard, hopeless year of wandering about the frontier, starving in cheap melo dramas, living at cheap hotels, in the companionship of cheap people. She played only soubrette parts and shedid not play them remarkably well. She was poor, unknown, unnoticed, unattractive. "Teas of the d'Ubervilles" had not been written then, Ibsen had not been translated into English. What noble faith, what miracle of hope supported her in a struggle which seemed so hopeless? When she was fifteen she was married to Legrand White, an xylophone soloist she met somewhere in the west. It seems that the Fates have a sense of humor after all.

Her New York debut was no more successful than her western starving ventures. She appeared in a soubrette part in a wretched play, "Foggy's Ferry," and played it indifferently. Then she married Harrison Gray Fiske, editor of the Dramatic Mirror, and weary, disheartened, disgusted, she left the stage, saying that she was leaving it forever. Then came nearly six years of retirement, recuperation, ceaseless and tireless study. It was during those years that she found herself, found within her own breast the power she had thirsted and starved for. When she came back upon us, it was like the coming of a storm. So great a reputation was never built so quickly. Since then her career, covering less than five years, has been one of constant triumph, her talent the most conspicuous and the most hopeful on the American stage. Who has a better right to say that to be great, one must have suffered?

PITTSBURG, PA.

CLUBS.

[LOUISA L. RICKETS.]

WHAT CAN THE LIBRARY DO FOR THE WOMAN'S CLUB?

As libraries in different places vary so much in the ground covered by their work, and in their resources and interests, it has seemed best to confine the discussion to some of the problems we have been trying to solve in Omaha.

For while visiting in and near Chicago recently it was impressed upon me that each library has after all questions peculiar to itself that must be worked out according to local conditions, for instance, I saw in two libraries—separated by only twenty-five miles of suburban railway—two entirely different systems, each operating to all appearances successful in its own field. Neither of them could be possible in the similar institutions of our own state. And since it is in the interests of our own libraries and clubs that we are working, let us without any appearance of vanity, relate our experiences in the effort to bring the two into close and mutually helpful relation. In bringing about this result, it is of primary importance that the public library be made the workshop, not alone of the Woman's club, but of every study and debating club, literary society and university extension class in the community. To accomplish this is not easy, tho' it may reasonably seem so. For the library which is fortunate enough to have a lecture room or large committee room, the difficulty is not so great. Clubs of varying interests may then be invited to make the library a meeting place and when once the reading public has formed the habit of coming in at her doors, the librarian has it in her power to make the atmosphere of intelligent helpfulness felt and appreciated.

The taxpayer (and his name is legion) who has never been inside the building before is called to attend a meeting in the lecture room. He arrives ten minutes too early and drifting into the circulating department nonchalantly inquiring about the rules for borrowing books, remarking that he would sometimes like to read up a little when he has to give a talk before a club or something of that sort, but then he never "happens" to have a card to use. The quick-witted attendant will see her opportunity and assure him that she will gladly lay any number of books before him for consultation in the reference room at any time. This is a new idea to your "First Citizen;" and the next morning his daughter will come in and ask if you have "any books on music," she is to read a paper before the musical department of the club and "Papa said why didn't she go to the library and see if she could get any help there." She, and more especially her mother, who comes next week for something on Alaskan missions, must have everything made easy for them the first time—they will dislike the formality of looking through catalogs and indices, signing the insinuating reference slip, and waiting in turn at the desk. But remember, they are forming the insidious "library habit," and before long the bright young woman and her mother will become accustomed to the rules and learn to help themselves.

It is a beginning of mutual benefit for the librarian to join local clubs, where it is possible, and so to come into personal contact with the townspeople. If, in her relations with these clubs, she displays proper willingness, she will inevitably be chosen chairman of the committee for suggesting courses of study and preparing outlines, and lo! another opportunity. She calls in the members of her committee and opens to them new possibilities by showing them her tools and how to use them. For of course our model librarian, or reference attendant as the case may be, is well equipped with bibliographies, best book lists, handbooks of history, literature and art, as well as outlines and club programs filed in previous years, and reading lists clipped from periodicals. By biographies I mean rather the helpful notes and essays that appear frequently in library bulletins, than more exhaustive and pretentious works of that kind. At this point the matter enters her peculiar province of helpfulness. With her thorough knowledge of the material required by the club for its course of study, she glances over the amount of material already on her shelves, and, making a careful study of the lists I have mentioned, orders at once the books

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