THE PASSING SHOW

WILLA CATHER

TO JOSEPH JEFFERSON.

VENERABLE SIR:

When recently a man of letters, M. Octave Mirbeau, made an attack upon the profession and person of actors, M. Coquelin, answering him in a courteous manner common among actors, but alas none too common among men of letters, merely recalled the names and profession of Moliere and Shakespere, adding "It is sweet, monsieur, to be insulted in such company." In every country there are certain names, which men whose feeling for the drama is deep and vital evoke in vindication of the art they love. Yours, sir, is one of those names, the very utterance of which renews our loyalty to the theater. Your name can never be spoken or written, can never greet the eye from the printed page without contributing a peculiar lustre to the art which you have so long adorned. There have been other careers in the history of the American stage quite as valuable as yours, but about about your life and work there is a singular fitness and evenness and completeness which give you the authority of a classic master in your own life time. Your career has been one of the beautiful incidents of dramatic history. Future chroniclers will delight to write of it, and many an actor yet unborn will consecrate to you the purest aspirations and find in your name a weapon to refute (combat) the mockery of the world.

I have noticed, sir, that in writing of you, even critics doff their air of licensed superiority, and fall into the language and feeling of the man who pays for his seat and reserves the right to enjoy and admire unconditionally. And, indeed, you seem not to belong to the quibbling world of analytical criticisms and conflicting estimates and hair breadth distinctions, but to the common world of all of us, where the real sun shines and real brooks flow. You have reached out of art into life. You have touched the large world of men who feel more closely than the small world of men who formulate. Your art has given a tangible delight that is quite independent of the intellectual or critical faculties; a beauty which the simplest divine and which the most astute cannot define, which retains the vitality outside the radius of the calcium, and which the backwoodsman can carry back to the hills and find it as real in the sunlight as it seemed to him in the theatre. This, sir, is the art which endures, because it concerns itself w[illegible] men's sympathies, which are change[illegible], rather than with the intellect, wh[illegible] is constantly modified by external c[illegible]ditions, and developing new tastes at the exp[illegible] of old passions. Youre, sir, is the *vox [illegible]umina* of art, the element which survives [illegible] transition of form, revolution of method, [illegible] the decadence of schools, contributi[illegible] actually and measurably to the sum o[illegible] human happiness. And perhaps after [illegible], sir, that is the only thing which give[illegible] art the right to be.

Your growth and development has been, up to a certain point, almost one with that of the American stage. You yourself have esteemed it fortunate to have been born, as it were, into the theater. Whatever may be the merits and talents of actors recruited to the stage from other walks of life, the man who is born an actor may well claim the advantage. For the stage is a world in itself, a world apart, and one to which it is difficult to become acclimated; a world which awakens only when the hum drum world of the every-day is asleep, which is created and supported by the fancies of men, which is every night born anew out of dreamland, like the cloud palaces of the Fata Morgana. And this world has an atmosphere, a perspective, laws of vocalization and motion distinctively its own, with which one can best familiarize himself in childhood. You have told, better than any one else could tell it, how the stage was your first play ground, how its settings and properties, Juliet's balcony, the throne of the stage kings, the tomb of the Capulets, were your first playthings. How the star's dressing room was a sort of throne chamber to you, and how many a time you slipped from your nurse's arms and stole down in your white night gown to behold the elder Booth, or Macready, or Fanny Kemble posing in their robes of state before the mirror. Yet I think, sir, that much of that rich humanity which makes your character seem less a stage creation than people of our own world and guests at our fireside, is due to the influences that came from the world without, and to certain peculiar and trying conditions with which churlish fortune saw fit to hedge about your youth. The life of the strolling player, as you knew it, is now almost a thing of the past. Its hardships, its privations, its reproach, its vagabond wanderings, its jovial acceptance of the chances of sun and rain, its glorious liberty and its touch of veritable, first hand romance, are now become legends. I have often wondered whether those fortunate spectators who tremble before the demoniac fury of Keene's Overreach or the bursts of vindictive hatred of his Richard, bethought them from what strange sources, from what wracking experiences, the actor had distilled such passion and such bitterness: from what weary miles tramped over the frozen slush of winter roads; from what miserable shelters in hayricks and stables whither he and his wife had crept for warmth; from what rope dancing at country fairs, hooted and jeered by rustic bumpkins, from what frenzied debauches in low tap rooms, amongst the most depraved of human kind, Edmond Keene had learned so well to suffer and to hate. And you, sir, found honey, even where he found gall. Like him, you felt the world's rough hand and learned life and art amongst the people, far enough from the pinnacle you were destined one day to grace. When in your autobiography, one of the most engaging and least pretentious works in the literature of the drama, I read of those early Thespian wanderings of yours; of that memorable trip to Chicago by boat, when the shores of the great lakes were dotted with Indian villages, of your playing in flatboats, drifting down the turbid Mississippi, of those barnstorming nights on the prairies of Illinois, of your following the army into Mexico, of all the various extremes of life you tasted and the manful manner in which you mingled among men while yet a boy, then I think with compassion of our young actors whose world lies between Broadway and Fifty-first street; who spend half their lives in theaters and hotels and the other half in the dawdling monotony of a Pullman car. You were never beset by the temptations of premature or cheaply bought success. Poverty made you a man before you became an artist. To your lo[illegible]g and hard apprenticeship, to your slow [illegible]and natural growth, to the stubborn [illegible]ifficulties which confronted you, you owe [illegible] much of that perfect finish, that abili[illegible]y to completely develop the possibilities [illegible]f a past and throw it into a strong relief [illegible]which imparts a singular and final authori[illegible]y to all your impersonations and makes t[illegible]he task of your successor a fearsome one [illegible] indeed. It was a relentless school, sir, i[illegible]n which you acquired your training, wi[illegible]th hunger for a taskmaster, and the har[illegible]dness would have been well nigh fatal to [illegible] a man less resolutely cheerful. Yet it w[illegible]as there you learned your scale of values, [illegible] formed your estimate of things, that cold, [illegible]practical, unerring estimate which has been so potent a factor in your success. It was there, moreover, that you gathered at first hand a knowledge of men as they are, a knowledge not to be acquired in polite society, much less among actors and artists.

We hear much in these days of the "artistic temperament," and, like charity, is made the cloak for many unsightly things. I wonder if one of our temperamental players, who offer temperamental excuses alike to their wives and their tailors and are forever demanding temperamental consideration, had one of these been set down in a barn in Mississippi to amuse the country folks for his dinner and a night's lodging, whether his temperament would have kept his heart light or his heels nimble? Yet I think you learned something in the barn that our dramatic schools have not been able to teach. To have cultivated a timely tolerence for the failures and failings of men; to have valued all men for the potential good in them; not to have been blind and stopped with personal ambition, but alert and awake to every humor, every passion, every beauty, however fleeting, in God's great playhouse; to have been serious without pretentious gravity, to have cheerfully welcomed fair days and foul; to have lived joyfully and kept the inner delight in things alive until one is six-and-seventy, this, it seems to me, bespeaks the true temper of the artist more than do all the exaggerated eccentricities of distorted egotism, so often mistaken for genius.

It is this happy temper which has prolonged your youth for three-quarters of a century and given to your work that exquisite polish, that even serenity, that refinement of grace which our younger comedians would do so well to emulate, which has infused into your creations a mellowness of humor, a gentleness of pathos akin to the modest beauty of the English classics of a hundred years ago.

It is greatly to be wondered at that an actor so perfectly equipped should have been so seemingly dormant in artistic ambition, so satisfied by a few creations, well nigh perfect though they are. Yet strangely mingled with the poetry and humor of your nature there is a vein of hard Yankee practicability. There is no gainsaying that your managerial success limited your artistic growth, that you made the actor subservient to the manager, which, from the professional point of view, is quite as it should be. The enormous financial success of "Rip Van Winkle" checked your career gloriously, but finally. Your ambition went to sleep with Rip upon the mountain top, and though thirty years and more have passed, it has never wakened. You have chosen the placid waters and sheltered harbors. No craving for versatility has ever tempted you into broader highways of dramatic experience. Unlike Mr. Mansfield, that restless spirit "forever roaming with a hungry heart," you have risked nothing and lost nothing. You have been content to concentrate yourself upon a few dramas, all of which were, or have become, classics, and to attain in these almost absolute perfection, you have been singularly lacking in that insatiable, that holy curiosity, usually so impotent a factor in the artistic constitution. You have evinced a kind of classic conservatism and content, as opposed to that feverish thirst of soul which drives men to seek various and multiform expression, which limits your register to a single mellow octave in the vast scale of dramatic passions and experiences. Within these limit we have accepted you with all gratitude and admiration, as one of the noblest geniuses of our time, regretting occasionally, perhaps, that Fortune turned her smiling face upon you quite so early, that one so equipped should have lacked the acute passion for creation, and that having the clue and the sword you did not care to explore the labyrinth.

George Moore somewhere says that to have a personality worth expressing, and to express that personality perfectly is the essence of dramatic art. We all know in what character you have formed your most adequate expression; a character perhaps the greatest which the American stage has yet produced, and which will scarcely outlive you. For almost forty years the public, so fickle and so fond of new toys, has never wavered in its loyalty to "Rip Van Winkle." How few historical creations, sir, have ever really installed themselves in our affections! How few of those reverend cardinal virtues behind the footlights are really dear to us in our heart of hearts. Some amuse us, some we admire; but toward how few do we feel the warmth of a personal affection; yet for nigh upon half a century this improvident, dream drinking Dutchman has been beloved by the whole English-speaking world. Only an actor ripe in judgment, rich in sympathy, gentle by nature and very lovable himself could so have endeared such a character to us. Judged by purely intellectual canons, your impersonation of Bob Acres is doubtless a more remarkable performance. But it is as Rip that future generations of play-goers will know you, Alas! not know you. For what written accounts of your performance can convey to them its dignity and tenderness, the dramatic power of that utterance to Gretchen when, pointing to your child, you say, "You say that I have no part in anyth ng in your house?" the poignant pathos of your farewell to Meenie, or the greatness of that moment in which you go out into the storm and the night? In this tippling vagabond whom even the dogs loved, who squandered his life and fortune and yet possessed more of this world than most of us, in this wayward lover of Old Earth who was so close to her that the trees talked to him, who got so much of the sweetness out of life while other people were doing their duty, you have found expression for all that is best in you, and you assume the character only to ennoble it. Only half awake in this tippling Dutchman are those fresh, child-like perceptions that have made poets of so many of the world's vagabonds. It is on this ground that you meet the character. It is this dominant note of poetry that makes your Rip. Unique among the creations of comedy, this light, fanciful touch th t

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