# THE PASSING SHOW

WILLA CATHER

She has been with us again, that remarkable woman, Minnie Maddern Fiske, more remarkable, more hopeful, more different from all other players than ever. She appeared here this season in her two new plays, "A Bit of Old Chelsea," and "Love Will Find a Way." The first is a one act piece. The curtain rises on a sculptor's studio in London. The sculptor is on his knees before the grate in the twilight, burning old letters, singing "Oft in the Stilly Night" as he sorts and tears. From his comments on the letters and love tokens you gather that he is a susceptible young man, that he has been in love and has been loved a great many times. Women like him, on long or short acquaintance; it is very necessary that one should know that. The sculptor is about to be married, and he is making a burnt offering of these letters to the "real thing," found at last after so many mistakes. When the last piece of note paper has fluttered into the flames, he gets up and looks out of the window. The stage settings in this piece are very effective. The window is a huge one, such as you see in studios, and outside of it wintry London, a cold clear sky with an indefinable effect of distance in it, the tall stone buildings that look like steel in the hard white light of the electrics, and swinging in the storm the lights themselves, the "iron lillies of the Strand," as Mr. Le Gallienne calls them. It is a wonderful bit of scenic painting with its effect of vastness cold. It is like Broadway on a winter night when you are a stranger there. As the young man looks out into the street he notices a woman lying there and dashes out to help her. In a moment he returns, bearing in his arms a frail little figure that we all know so well, and of which we are all a little afraid, despite its seeming fragility. He places her in a chair before the fire, and when the heat revives her, she asks for her hat and her flowers, for she is a flower girl. The obliging artist dashes out again and returns with a big basket and a hat—Oh, such a hat, such a pathetic, bedraggled little hat. Knowing people tell me that in London flower girls actually do wear just such hats, which has strengthened my determination to go there. The sculptor and Minnie have tea very comfortably together and she tells him very simply and naturally what a bad day it has been for her and how poorly the flowers sold, and how she lives in some awful court or other with her mother. She feels strangely happy and comfortable in this warm, bright room, and she likes being waited on by this handsome young gentleman, the like of whom she has never spoken to before. When the tea is over they discover that it is two o'clock in the morning and she can't afford a cab, and one of the artist's friends has stolen his hat. She calmly proposes to just stay there all night, says she'll sleep in a corner or any old place The astonished artists assents and remarks that he'll seek shelter with one of his friends. Minnie says she'll go home alone if he does, she'll not be for turning anybody out, and she can't see why she will disturb him at all. Finally he lets down a sort of elevated bunk from the wall and Minnie ascends to it by means of a stepladder and the artist lies down to sleep on his sofa. Just as they are comfortably settled down to sleep the artist's friends, [illegible] painters, very much intoxicated, burst in on him and a veritable bedlam follows. One of them puts on Minnie's absurd hat and starts to go up the step ladder. The artist snatches the hat and tosses it up to the girl and knocks the painter down. During the scuffle which ensues the girl sits up in the bunk, calmly smoothing out the feathers of her absurd hat. Where, O where, Mrs. Fisk, are the usual cheap affections of surprise and terror which stage ladies assume witnessing a fight? She knows well enough, that knowing lady, that girls who are brought up in the slums of London see too much fighting to be astonished at it. After the painter's have been ejected she thanks the young man and lies down to sleep. But sleep doesn't come so readily to the poor artist, tossing about down there on his sofa. So he lifts up his voice and in that stillness broken only by the roar of London without, he tells her of his sweetheart, whom he is soon te marry, of her charms and her goodness. Minnie draws the covers up to her chin and lies very straight and very still, clutching the side of the trunk with her hand. She stands it pretty well, she does, but finally she interrupts his raptures. "O yes, she's your girl, that's what you mean. I suppose she don't swear?"

"Swear! who? Millicent?"

"O you needn't be so shocked. She would swear just as bad as I do if she'd been brought up in our court and hadn't been always tied up in white paper to keep her clean."

The artist drops off to sleep, but Minnie doesn't. She lies there stiff and still, thinking, thinking. You can hear her think. Thinking that this is no place for her, that there is a distance between her and all these beautiful things that she can never cross, that this man is for girls who were not brought up in courts and who never felt the world's rough hand. Presently the young man mutters his sweetheart's name in his sleep. Then the girl gets right up without a word. She comes down the ladder and puts on that pathetic little hat and straps her flower basket over her shoulders. She takes up the artist's great coat and gently throws it over him. She pauses a moment and takes a bunch of flowers from her basket.

"He was awful kind to me, but it aint like me to stay where I'm not wanted. There are the best I've got; flowers don't last long here in London." She lays them on his pillow and then goes out of the door, without turning to look back, without any effort at theatric effect, just as quiet and hopelessly as though hundreds of eyes were not watching her; goes out into that big wintry, pitiless London you can see through the window there, that London where indeed flowers do not last long, and all your sympathy and all your imagination goes out of that door with her.

I wonder where we have another actress who could play this unpretentious little piece in so untheatric a manner, who could make one know what it feels like to be a flower girl. You see that penetrating intellect of hers is like a search light, she has only to turn it upon a character to master it. She materializes mental and emotional conditions before your eyes, and when all is done, her modernness is the compelling power in her acting. She throws aside all traditions, traditions of elocution and all stage business and the lofty manners of the tragedy queens. She comes down by your side, into the pulsing complex life of the present. She has that ardent sympathy which is the very root of all [illegible] art—and, in another form, of [illegible]tic art, for that matter.

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In "Love Will Find a Way," she impersonates a lame girl, rich, well educated, surrounded by every luxury—but lonely. Like all of Mrs. Fiske's characters [illegible] a psychological study, a study of the warping effect of a physical [illegible] upon the mind." The first act [illegible] Madeline in the bosom of her [illegible] family in which she is tolerated, pitied, indulged, everything but loved, and it is for love that she is starving, it is of pity that she is dying. Her gay and beautiful sister, wishing to be agreeable, tells her that she has bought some new waltzes and wouldn't she like to hear them?

"O yes," replies Madeline with asperity, "waltzing is my favorite pastime."

Later the family conversation turns upon marriage and Madeline remarks that she has been thinking of marrying herself, lately. Her father breaks out in indulgent laughter. "You marry, Madeline, you?"

"Yes I, why not I? Is this," throwing her crutch passionately against her breast, "is this always to come between me and everything that fills a woman's life?"

This is about the usual temperature of Madeline's relations with her family. They irritate her at every turn and she is in the habit of being irritated and is continually looking for injuries. They don't love her and she knows it. She can only remember one being who has ever loved her, the physician who has always tended her, who brought her through all her childish illnesses, who has exhausted every resource of medicine to cure her lameness, and who, failing in that, by his very devotion, has kept life struggling in her frail little body. She says to him: "Do you know you are the only friend I have ever had in all my life? When I was a little child I used to lie tossing in my suffering and listening for the sound of your horses hoofs, and the hours seemed O, so long! and I used to be so jealous, so afraid that you might like one of your other patients better than me. And when I went abroad I was almost glad that the great doctors there could not cure me. It would have broken my heart if they had succeeded where you had failed, But now, now I am a woman, and if you cannot cure me, can you not at least kill me? I have borne this humiliation too long."

The physician is admirably played by Mr. Frederick de Belleville. He tells her as he has often told her before, that her affliction is purely a nervous one, that a great nervous shock, a supreme effort of will, even, would cure her lameness. She recalls to him the time when a tenement house in which she was doing charity work caught fire and she was unable to escape even to save her life and a young painter had rescued her and carried her out, and this young painter, she tells him, she is going to marry. He is poor and cares for nothing but his work. He had a wife once whom he loved, but she deserted him because of his poverty and afterwards died. She will furnish him money to go abroad and study and then he will come back and marry her and she will go out of this house that she hates and live her own life. It is to be simply a business transaction. She proposes to buy her husband and her liberty as she has always bought what she wanted and the doctor, who loves her, can say nothing.

The second act opens a year later upon the preparations for Madeline's wedding. She comes in in her bridal dress, with her crutch. She is manifestly unhappy. She calls the doctor, who is never far to call, and in an incoherent fashion imparts to him her grief. She went into this matrimonial bargain coldly, with a clear conscience. But something has happened, something has wakened up, has been born in her. She has suffered and hoped and dreamed and wept over the painter's formal letters, she loves this man and he does not love her.

The doctor springs to his feet and declares he will stop this infamous marriage. But she cries, "You will not, you dare not! In all the great things of life I have been thwarted, and you shall not take this from me! If it makes me the most wretched being in the world, it will at least make me a woman."

When she is left alone, she sits staring at the footlights, thinking and again you hear her think.

Then a woman steals in through the bay window and kneels beside her, begging for help and pity. She is Leslie, the painter's wife, who, after the manner of stage wives, did not die, and has found that she cannot live without him. In one of those moments of absolutely transfiguring power which comes to her at will, Mrs. Fiske drives the woman out into the night and the storm, shrieking: "You shall not thwart me now, nothing shall thwart me now." Then, as she sits there gasping, panting, muttering like a mad woman, she does one of those little things that lend such awful verity to her work, just takes her handkerchief and with a quick, desperate gesture wipes her throat and hands. And, I assure you, every being in the house feels the cold moisture that had gathered on her flesh. Leslie goes out and falls in a faint in the snowy road. The sound of sleigh bells announces that the wedding guests are approaching and the woman will be run over. Madeline screams again and again for help; "Father, Harry, that woman will be run over! She is lying in the road!" but no one hears her. She looks for her crutch but someone has mislaid it. She tries to stand but falls like a broken thing. She drags herself on her knees to the window and shouts and shouts, but no one answers and the jingle of the bells sounds nearer and nearer. Then, in that moment of desperation she rises, she stands, she walks, Out of the window, out into the snow. And it is as though the days of the biblical miracles were come again. I remember in Kipling's story when Mulvaney is telling how Love o' Women, when he is almost dead, walks up to the porch to die in his wife's arms, he says "the Power uphilt him." And it is just so when Madeline goes out of that window. The illusion is complete and you feel that you have seen the dead arise and walk.

In the last act, which occurs later the same night, Madeline sends the painter and Leslie away together. The house is dark, the family are in bed, she sits by the window watching the re united lovers go their way: "Over the snow through the moonlight, out of my life." She sends for the doctor, who knows nothing of the events of the night, and tells him that she has sent the artist away.

"He would never have a lame woman, that is all," she says. Mr. de Belleville rises to a height he has not often touched in his life when he says simply, but with all the heart in him, "Madeline, I would give my life to make you walk."

She rises smiling, and walks across the stage to his arms.

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