

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure
Harold Child
Excerpt
[More information](#)

A POOR PLAYER

This deplorable tale begins fitly in a drink-shop. It was during Mr Parable's second dock glass of port from the wood at a bar near the Law Courts that I knew I could bear it no longer. There he sat, on the high stool; there was his ruffled top-hat, his seedy frock-coat and black trousers, his red face with the bulbous nose, his grey hair dribbling over his collar; and there he would sit, drinking at my expense, until he should choose to get down and go out into the cold December morning and back to the Courts. Lawyering had been all very well in Thornbury. The work there had been mostly reading Blackstone and drawing abstracts of title

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in the sunny back room over the garden, or driving about with one of the partners—perhaps to have a look at a danger spot in the sea wall that kept the Severn out of the wharf (we were Commissioners of Sewers), or visiting farmers who wanted mortgages, or old friends of my family who wanted to make wills or draw marriage settlements. I was at home there, in my own country; and there were horses to ride, and lawn tennis, and picnics, and skating at Tortworth, and the two hundred acres of rough shooting at Earthcott that one of my uncles had lent me, and dancing, and private theatricals. But in London, during the year I was to spend at “Agents” before I could go back to practise at Thornbury, lawyering meant trapesing round with Mr Parable from court to court and from Master to Master, overhearing him doing unintelligible things about cases of which I knew not even the matter, with only this for certain in a shifting world, that some time between eleven o’clock and noon Mr Parable would drink two dock glasses of port from the wood, to be paid for out of my exiguous pocket-money, and that in return he would take jolly good care that I, an articulated clerk and some day to be a solicitor, should learn nothing that he, a clerk for life, could prevent my learning.

I still think there was some excuse for my revolt. The very dear sister in whose house I was living was on the point of leaving London for California,

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure
Harold Child
Excerpt
[More information](#)

and I should be all alone. I must have been very young for my age, and restless and impatient. I had, after all, been at Winchester and Brasenose, and had known a life which made even Thornbury seem narrow and obscure. And a way of escape was open.

There had been private theatricals in London, or rather in Hampstead, as well as at Thornbury. Every evening for a fortnight I had travelled by bus and train—and in 1894!—all the way from West Kensington to Swiss Cottage to rehearse. That looks like a devotion to the art of acting which I did not feel. I cannot remember what my part was; I cannot remember even what the play was (I foresee, indeed, that all I forget will mercifully shorten this book). I remember nothing so clearly as an enchanting little dark-haired child who danced. Her name was Marie Sharlach. She had already appeared in pantomime at York, and as Marie Dainton she was soon to become famous in variety and musical comedy. Thirty years and more must have come between that first meeting and the evening on which, after delighting in her special brand of imitations, I sat in her dressing-room at the Alhambra recalling the friends who had brought us into the same performance.

Those theatricals in Hampstead deserve to be clearer in my memory than they are, because they were the turning-point. At Oxford one of my best friends had been George Bancroft, now Clerk of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Assize for the Midland Circuit, but also the “George Pleydell” who wrote *The Ware Case*, the son of Squire and Marie Bancroft. He had taken me to stay with him in their house in Berkeley Square. I had won Mrs Bancroft’s heart by getting a bone out of the throat of her King Charles spaniel. I had sat in silent adoration while Forbes-Robertson talked to her—the very Forbes-Robertson whom, when I was only thirteen, I had seen play Claudio in Irving’s production of *Much Ado*.

I had been sharply told by the great G. W. Smalley (not yet on *The Times*, but London Correspondent of *The New York Tribune*) not to talk nonsense about having no time to do something or other—of course one had time for everything one really wanted to do (and I know now that he was right). And I had been present when Mrs Kendal paid a Sunday afternoon call which I learned afterwards was something in the nature of a reconciliation after a long estrangement—the blame of which, I could swear, never lay on generous, warm-hearted Mrs Bancroft. That reconciliation, unhappily, only led to new trouble; but on one side, at least, it was sincere. It was not till many years later that I got to know my dear and honoured old friend Sir Squire Bancroft; but I had begun to make acquaintance with theatre people. And George had confided in me about his very early and faithful love-affair with the elder

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

daughter of Mr and Mrs John Hare; and one night at Oxford I had tied a very long string to my hat-box and lowered it out of my top-floor window to George, who was waiting in Brasenose Lane; he had taken it to his digs in St Giles's for the night; next morning I had met it and him at the station (one could not be seen in London in those days without a top-hat) and slipped away with him to "town", where I spent a happy day at the Hares' house in Park Crescent, and made the acquaintance of Miss Hare and her sister—and her mother. I still think that Lady Hare was the most beautiful woman I ever saw; and, all these years after, I can see her as I saw her one spring afternoon in the Regent's Park, wearing a new set of chinchilla furs and knocking George du Maurier's Duchess of Towers edgeways by having (as we called it then) a very sweet expression as well as her stately beauty. The end of the top-hat story is that I came back from London in the evening and walked into College past the porter as innocently as if I had just been out for a stroll.

All this had a bearing on my future. During a long and lovely holiday on Loch Lomond with George and Effie, now married, I had confided to my host my restlessness and dissatisfaction and my vague notions of going on the stage. He came to see those private theatricals in Hampstead. He told me that I was "much the best". It was not a glowing tribute to my genius, and goodness only

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

knows how bad he thought the rest of us were, but it served. He spoke to John Hare about me. Hare was just going to produce at his Garrick Theatre a new play by Sydney Grundy. There were Guests in it (Grundy was great on Guests). Hare offered me a Guest. I accepted. I was an Actor. And I think I had hardly attended a rehearsal before I went to a dance given by Miss Ethel Walker and her friend Miss Christian, and told all my partners that I was an Actor. Among those sufferers was one whose name may still be of interest to old pupils of Fred Brown at the Slade School—Winifred Matthews, a girl of genius who died young.

I had wanted to break away; and I had broken away. Never, even in the days when I was “much the best”—at Thornbury, no doubt, as well as at Hampstead—was I stage-struck. I never felt that acting was the only thing worth doing; I never thought I was a genius; I had no ambition to play Hamlet and be famous. I wanted to be quit of Mr Parable and the law; and the stage was the only career in which I could hope to earn my keep while I learnt my business (in the end I did neither). That was my own point of view. But the point of view most obvious to me now is not my own but my poor father’s. I was throwing up a certain career, with a partnership and a fine though rather gloomy old Gloucestershire stone house awaiting me, not to mention the duty of keeping the family

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

supplied with a lawyer, as it had been for two generations. My father begged me at least to finish my articles, so as to have something to fall back on. Not I! I was an Actor. And if at any time I happened to be out of an engagement, could I not “write”? At the outset, he was inclined to blame it all on John Hare, who, he imagined, had been so struck with my acting that he had lured me into Babylon. He soon had reason to change that opinion. Moreover, after he had come up to London to see *The Sign of the Cross*, he thought that the stage might do some good in the world after all. And years later, when he came back from America in the same ship as the Hares, he surrendered, like everyone else, to the charm of the great little Sir John and the beauty of Lady Hare. Writing reminiscences has at least one good end: it enables a man to put on record the kindness and the forbearance that have followed him all the days of his life. My father’s kindness and forbearance were proof even against my abominable rudeness. My salary was to be 30s. a week. He would see to it that I did not starve—and when I very nearly did it was not his fault.

So here I was, in December 1894, an Actor. What is more, I had a Part. It was a jewel, two words long. It was “Poor Delamere!” I had to come on O.P. with Miss Lydia Rachel (something higher than a Guest) on my arm, sit down for a moment, say “Poor Delamere!”, get up, and exit

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

on the prompt side. From beginning to end I never found out who Delamere was, nor why he was to be pitied. But in order to come on, sit down, get up, say "Poor Delamere!", and go off again, I attended rehearsals at the Garrick Theatre day after day for three weeks. Most of the time was taken up with waiting about, but I felt very busy and important. I went into the theatre by the Stage Door, wishing that it was in the street and not hidden away at the end of the long passage. Hanging about the Garrick Theatre among other Actors was much more exciting than hanging about the Law Courts with Mr Parable. Not that I learned much more about my new work than I had learned about the old. There were the great ones to watch—John Hare himself, Brandon Thomas, Arthur Bouchier; Eleanor Calhoun (does anybody remember that very clever American actress now?); Kate Rorke, ineffably sweet; Kate Phillips, very hearty and downright, and a lovely little old white-haired jewel of a lady, Agnes Robertson, the widow of the first Dion Boucicault. There they all were, but all very shadowy and remote, as dim as the recesses of the white-sheeted theatre lit only by the T-piece. Hare himself once found fault with the fall of my coat-tails when I sat down; but that was the only notice that he took of me. It was the assistant stage-manager who rehearsed the Guests; and perhaps that was why I never found out who Delamere was. It did not

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

seem to matter much. Life was too full of other things, and there was some very agreeable company among the people on my level.

A link between the great ones and ourselves was Charles Rock. When I was in my 'teens, I had seen him in the "fit-ups", in a pantomime at the Corn Exchange in Cirencester. I had never forgotten the stoic indifference with which, Dunderbary-whiskered under an opera hat, he had gone on intoning "Every night, half-past eight, Somebody knocking at the garden gate", while two other characters belaboured his back with split rods exceeding noisily. I had remembered his name, his face, his voice. And when I timidly told him so, he was not offended. He was proud to be remembered. He would yarn long about his early struggles (in *Who's Who in the Theatre*, he called them, with the proper theatrical touch, "varied experience"). He overflowed with stories, to which we novices listened with dutiful laughter, and after coming to know Glasgow pretty well I still think that his assumed Glasgow accent was the most Glaswegian noise I ever heard. Then there was a very graceful, rather pleasant, but not very certain-tempered young man who afterwards became so famous that a brand of cigarette was named after him—Gerald du Maurier. There was a very grand gentleman, who used to infuriate Charles Rock by complaining how the theatre interfered with his dinner engagements.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61888-6 - A Poor Player: The Story of a Failure

Harold Child

Excerpt

[More information](#)

And there was Kate Rorke's brother, Edwin. With Edwin Rorke—dear dreamy, pious, poet *manqué*—I made friends. We used to go to the Monico and sit drinking a very little beer and talking an enormous deal of talk, till we were turned out. He was the only one who could bring back to me the feeling of the night-long talks at Oxford. But I do not think it was he who witnessed one of the bitterest disappointments I have ever known. During rehearsals I went one day to lunch at the white-painted St George's restaurant in St Martin's Lane. I was famished. I ordered ham sandwiches. The waitress never warned me. She brought them. They were made of nuts, or tomatoes, or something equally revolting.

On 29 December 1894 (so the books of reference tell me), *Slaves of the Ring* was produced. "What will be the end?" asked one of the characters just before the last curtain was to fall; and Brandon Thomas replied in sepulchral tones, "There will not be an end". But there was; and it came in a fortnight. It was a feeble play, and my "Poor Delamere!" had not been enough to save it, although I had worked hard to give it dramatic intensity by a more or less "character" make-up, with a low collar (in evening dress) and pince-nez. We had felt the end coming, and one bitter night, when I reached the theatre in rather too good spirits after dining with Fred Bashford, the jovial soldier who had married one of Lady Bancroft's