

## I

EARLIEST RECOLLECTIONS OF  
HENRY IRVING

*Earliest Recollection, Dublin, 1867—Captain Absolute—  
Impersonation—Distinction—Local Criticism—“Two  
Roses,” Dublin, 1871—The Archetype of Digby Grant—  
Chevalier Wikoff*

## I

THE first time I ever saw Henry Irving was at the Theatre Royal, Dublin, on the evening of Wednesday, August 28, 1867. Miss Herbert had brought the St. James's Company on tour, playing some of the Old Comedies and Miss Braddon's new drama founded on her successful novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*. The piece chosen for this particular night was *The Rivals* in which Irving played Captain Absolute.

Forty years ago provincial playgoers did not have much opportunity of seeing great acting, except in the star parts. It was the day of the Stock Companies, when the chief theatres everywhere had *good* actors who played for the whole season, each in his or her established class; but notable excellence was not to be expected at the salaries then possible to even the most enterprising management. The “business” — the term still

applied to the minor incidents of acting, as well as to the disposition of the various characters and the entrances and exits—was, of necessity, of a formal and traditional kind. There was no time for the exhaustive rehearsal of minor details to which actors are in these days accustomed. When the bill was changed five or six times a week it was only possible, even at the longest rehearsal, to get through the standard outline of action, and the perfection of the cues—in fact those conditions of the interdependence of the actors and mechanics on which the structural excellence of the play depends. Moreover, the system by which great actors appeared as “stars” supported by only one or two players of their own bringing, made it necessary that there should be in the higher order of theatres some kind of standard way of regulating the action of the plays in vogue. It was a matter of considerable interest to me to see, when some fourteen years later Edwin Booth came to play at the Lyceum, that he sent his “dresser” to represent him at the earlier rehearsals so as to point out to the stage management the disposition of the characters and general arrangement of matured action to which he was accustomed. I only mention this here to illustrate the conditions of stage work at an earlier period.

This adherence to standard “business” was so strict, though unwritten, a rule that no one actor could venture to break it. To do so without preparation would have been to at least endanger the success of the play; and “preparation” was the prerogative of the management, not of the individual player. Even Henry Irving, though he

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had been, as well as a player, the Stage Manager of the St. James's Company and could so carry out his ideas partially, could not have altered the broad lines of the play established by nearly a century of usage.

As a matter of fact *The Rivals* had not been one of Miss Herbert's productions at the St. James's, and so it did not come within the scope of his stage management at all.

Irving had played the part of Captain Absolute in the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, during the three years of his engagement there, 1856-59, where he had learned the traditional usage. Thus the only possibility open to him, as to any actor with regard to an established Comedy, was to improve on the traditional method of acting it within the established lines of movement; in fact, to impersonate the character to better advantage.

On this particular occasion the play as an entity had an advantage not always enjoyed in provincial theatres. It was performed by a Company of Comedians, several of whom had acted together for a considerable time. The lines of the play being absolutely conventional did not leave any special impress on the mind; one can only recall the actors and the acting.

To this day I can remember the playing of Henry Irving as Captain Absolute, which was different from any performance of the same part which I had seen. What I saw, to my amazement and delight, was a patrician figure as real as the persons of one's dreams, and endowed with the same poetic grace. A young soldier, handsome, distinguished, self-dependent; compact of grace and

slumbrous energy. A man of quality who stood out from his surroundings on the stage as a being of another social world. A figure full of dash and fine irony, and whose ridicule seemed to *bite*; buoyant with the joy of life; self-conscious; an inoffensive egoist even in his love-making; of supreme and unsurpassable insolence, veiled and shrouded in his fine quality of manner. Such a figure as could only be possible in an age when the answer to insolence was a sword-thrust; when only those dare be insolent who could depend to the last on the heart and brain and arm behind the blade. The scenes which stand out most vividly are the following: His interview with Mrs. Malaprop in which she sets him to read his own intercepted letter to Lydia wherein he speaks of the old lady herself as “the old weather-beaten she-dragon.” The manner with which he went back again and again, with excuses exemplified by action rather than speech, to the offensive words—losing his place in the letter and going back to find it—seeming to try to recover the sequence of thought—innocently trying to fit the words to the subject—was simply a triumph of well-bred, easy insolence. Again when Captain Absolute makes repentant obedience to his father’s will his negative air of content as to the excellences or otherwise of his suggested wife was inimitable. And the shocked appearance, manner and speech of his hypocritical submission: “Not to please your father, sir?” was as enlightening to the audience as it was convincing to Sir Anthony. Again the scene in the Fourth Act when in the presence of his father and Mrs. Malaprop he has to

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make love to Lydia in his own person, was on the actor's part a masterpiece of emotion—the sort of thing to make an author grateful. There was no mistaking the emotions which came so fast, treading on each other's heels: his mental perturbation; his sense of the ludicrous situation in which he found himself; his hurried, feeble, ill-concealed efforts to find a way out of the difficulty. And through them all the sincerity of his real affection for Lydia which actually shone, coming straight and convincingly to the hearts of the audience.

But these scenes were all of acting a part. The reality of his character was in the scene of Sir Lucius O'Trigger's quarrel with him. Here he was real. Man to man the grace and truth of his character and bearing were based on no purpose or afterthought. Before a man his manhood was sincere; before a gallant gentleman his gallantry was without flaw, and, as the dramatist intended, outshone even the chivalry of that perfect gentleman Sir Lucius O'Trigger.

The acting of Henry Irving is, after nearly forty years, so vivid in my memory that I can recall his movements, his expressions, the tones of his voice.

And yet the manner in which his acting in the new and perfect method was received in the local press may afford an object-lesson of what the pioneer of high art has, like any other pioneer, to endure.

During the two weeks' visit to Dublin the repertoire comprised, as well as *The Rivals*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Belle's Stratagem*, *The Road to Ruin*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, and *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Of these other plays I can say nothing, for I did not see them. Lately, however, on looking over the newspapers I found hardly a word of even judicious comment; praise there was not. According to the local journalistic record his Joseph Surface was “lachrymose, coarse, pointless and ineffective. Nothing could be more ludicrously deficient of dramatic power than his acting in the passage with Lady Teazle in the screen scene. The want of harmony between the actual words and gesture, emphasis and expression, was painfully palpable.”

And yet to those who can read between the lines and gather truth where truth—though not perhaps the same truth—is meant, this very criticism shows how well he played the hypocrite who meant one thing whilst conveying the idea of another. Were Joseph’s acts and tones and words all in perfect harmony he would seem to an audience not a hypocrite but a reality.

Another critic considered him “stiff and constrained, and occasionally left the audience under the impression that they were witnessing the playing of an amateur.”

The only mention of his Young Marlow was in one paper that it was “carefully represented by Mr. Irving”; and in another that it was “insipid and pointless.”

Of young Dornton in *The Road to Ruin* there was one passing word of praise as an “able impersonation.” But of *The Rivals* I could find no criticism whatever in any of the Dublin papers when more than thirty-eight years after seeing the play I searched them hoping to find some con-

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firmation of my vivid recollection of Henry Irving’s brilliant acting. The following only, in small type, I found in the *Irish Times* more than a week after the play had been given :

“Of those who support Miss Herbert, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Matthews are, undoubtedly, the best. Mr. Stoye is full of broad comedy, but now and then he is not true to nature. Mr. Irving and Mr. Gaston Murray are painstaking and respectable artists.”

It is good to think that the great player who, as the representative actor of his nation—of the world—for over a quarter of a century was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey to the grief of at least two Continents, had after eleven years of arduous and self-sacrificing work during which he had played over five hundred different characters and had even then begun quite a new school of acting, been considered by at least one writer for the press “a painstaking and respectable artist.”

## II

I did not see Henry Irving again till May 1871, when with the Vaudeville Company he played for a fortnight at the Theatre Royal Albery’s Comedy, *Two Roses*. Looking back to that time the best testimony I can bear to the fact that the performance interested me is that I went to see it three times. The company was certainly an excellent one. In addition to Henry Irving it contained H. J. Montague, George Honey, Louise Claire, and Amy Fawsitt.

Well do I remember the delight of that per-

formance of Digby Grant and how well it foiled the other characters of the play.

Amongst them all it stood out star-like. An inimitable character which Irving impersonated in a manner so complete that to this day I have been unable to get it out of my mind as a reality. Indeed it was a reality though at that time I did not know it. Years afterwards I met the original at the house of the late Mr. James McHenry—a villa in a little park off Addison Road.

This archetype was the late Chevalier Wikoff, of whom in the course of a friendship of years I had heard much from McHenry, who well remembered him in his early days in Philadelphia, in which city Wikoff was born. In his youth he had been a very big, handsome man; in the days when men wore cloaks used to pass down Chestnut Street or Locust Street with a sublime swagger. He was a great friend of Edwin Forrest the actor, and a great “ladies’ man.” He had been a friend and lover of the celebrated dancer Fanny Elsler, who was so big and yet so agile that, as my father described to me, when she bounded in on the stage seeming to light from the wings to the footlights in a single leap, the house seemed to shake. Wikoff was a pretty hard man, and as cunning as men are made. When I knew him he was an old man, but he fortified the deficiencies of age with artfulness. He was then a little hard of hearing; but he simulated complete deafness, and there was little said within a reasonable distance that he did not hear. For many years he had lived in Europe chiefly in London and Paris. There was one trait in his character which even his intimate friends did not





HENRY IRVING AS DIGBY GRANT IN "TWO ROSES"  
*Drawing made in his dressing-room by Fred Barnard, 1870*

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Bram Stoker

Excerpt

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## CHEVALIER WIKOFF

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suspect. Every year right up to the end of his long life he disappeared from London at a certain date. He was making his pilgrimage to Paris where on a given day he laid some flowers on a little grave long after the child's mother, the dancer, had died. Wikoff was a trusted agent of the Bonaparte's and he held strange secrets of that adventurous family. He it was, so McHenry told me, who had brought in secret from France to England the last treasures of the Imperial house after the *débâcle* following Sedan.

This was the person whom Irving had selected as the archetype of Digby Grant. Long before, he had met him at McHenry's; with that "seeing eye" of his had marked his personality down for use; and with that marvellous memory which, in my long experience of him never failed him, was able to reproduce with the exactness of a "Chinese copy" every jot and tittle appertaining to the man, without and within. His tall gaunt, slightly stooping figure; his scanty hair artfully arranged to cover the ravages of time; the cunning, inquisitive eyes; the mechanical turning of the head which becomes the habit of the deaf. The veiled voice which can do everything but express truth—even under stress of sudden emotion. Years after *Two Roses* had had its run at the Vaudeville and elsewhere I went to see Wikoff when he was ill in a humble lodging. In answer to my knuckle-tap he opened the door himself. For an instant I was startled out of my self-possession, for in front of me stood the veritable Digby Grant. I had met him already a good many times, but always in the recognised costume of

morning or evening. Now I saw him as Irving had represented him; but I do not think he had ever seen him as I saw him at that moment. I believe that the costume in which he appeared in that play was the result of the actor's inductive ratiocination. He had studied the individuality so thoroughly, and was so familiar with not only his apparent characteristics but with those secret manifestations which are in their very secrecy subtle indicators of individuality grafted on type, that he had re-created him—just as Cuvier or Owen could from a single bone reconstruct giant reptiles of the Palæozoic age. There was the bizarre dressing-jacket, frayed at edge and cuff; with ragged frogs and stray buttons. There the three days' beard, white at root and raven black at point. There the flamboyant smoking-cap with yellow tassel which marks that epoch in the history of ridiculous dress out of which in sheer revulsion of artistic feeling came the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Irving had asked me to bring with me to Wikoff some grapes and other creature comforts for which the poor old man was, I believe, genuinely grateful; but in the course of our chat he told me that Irving had "taken him off" for "that fellow in the *Two Roses*." It was strange how the name of that play was so often given wrong; most people spoke of it and wrote of it as *The Two Roses*; I have known even Irving himself to make the mistake! Wikoff did not seem displeased at the duplication of his identity. To me he conveyed the idea of being in some degree proud of it.

This wonderful creation in the play "took the town," as the phrase is, and for some time the