MR. GEORGE GROSSMITH.

BY FRANK BANFIELD.

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(From a photograph by the Notman Photo. Co., Boston, U.S.A.)

QUITE close to the Baker Street Station of the Underground Railway lies Dorset Square. Quiet, sedate, around its railed-in grass and trees, with its substantial old houses, it reminded me at once of the quadrangular spaces sacred to the respectability of Bloomsbury. In point of age, as well as character, it is, I imagine, very much on a footing of equality with the oases which lie near Woburn-place. In summer time, when the leafage is on the trees, and the flowers show through the railings of the great central enclosure, it has, doubtless, its own external charm ; in winter, it has no points which call for special notice, much less for rhapsody.

The corner house on the western side of the square is the home of the famous actor and entertainer, and is one of the largest, having quite a considerable depth running back along Melcombe-place. As I walked briskly towards it, I was conscious of a certain feeling of depression in face of my task. Mr. George Grossmith is not a stranger to the British public, reading or theatre-going. I was not going to lift the veil from the personality of a human novelty. Thousands of audiences have watched, admired, enjoyed Mr. Grossmith at the Savoy, as the exponent on the stage of characters which are household words from Melbourne to Quebec, from Cape Town to Quettah. As a popular entertainer he has been a familiar figure in the drawing-rooms of the great, and has in recent years made not only our own provincial towns, but most urban centres of the United States and Canada the brighter for much innocent merriment. In a word, he is the friend of an immense number of people. And then, worse luck, I reflected, he has been "done" before, and that very well, too! And so musing, I

suddenly found myself at the front door, and pressed the electric button.

I was admitted into a roomy hall, and then mounting a broad staircase and passing along the landing, lined all the way, both of them, from floor to cornice with framed old prints, mostly theatrical in their subjects, I was shown into the drawing-room, whose tall windows look down both upon Dorset-square and Melcombe-place. I had scarcely time to take stock of the many sea-pieces in water-colours which adorned the walls, when Mr. Grossmith entered, upright, slim, alert, smoking—the *debonair* cigarette in his left hand.

"Come down to my own room," said he, after we had shaken hands.

And then in a minute more we were seated cosily in easy chairs, with a roaring fire on one side of us and a broad leather-covered desk-table on the other, in that "den," where the author-actor-entertainer has had so many happy thoughts, and worked out so many fortunate inspirations. The walls were crowded with autographed portraits, the friendly gifts of celebrities. Amongst the rest was one of Lord Charles Beresford, while another great naval man, Admiral Sir Joseph Porter, K.C.B., made his pictorial presence felt. And the sunlight, which came in from the south, fell on what pleased me well, a good-looking white and black fox-terrier, at home on the best part of the roomy couch behind his master's chair, and wearing just that critical self-possessed air which is only possible where the dog and master are friends. Long before Mr. Grossmith caressed half absently the companion of his most retired hours, I recognised the dog-lover. It is not the master in these cases who betrays the tender relationship, but the manner of the other. And besides this, there was yet a second yellow-haired spaniel, whom we subsequently met romping in the hall.

Why, I can scarcely say, but dogs suggested hobbies. I have heard, of course, of the steam-engine which goes careering around on rails laid in the basement of 28, Dorset Square, where the distinguished entertainer hardened himself for the trials of continuous railway travelling, which has latterly proved rather too much for his strength. I had seen the old prints on the staircase and on the landing.

"And you are a collector, Mr. Grossmith?" I said tentatively, knocking the ash off the cigarette which had been given me on the edge of the adjacent tiny tray. "Can you tell me anything quite fresh about that?"

"Well," said he, "I go in for pianos—old pianos—a good deal. I've got a hundred-year-old Broadwood upstairs, marked 1796, and a Zumpé, marked 1770. I like that sort of thing. In fact, I'm very fond of old pianos. Lots of people have spinets and harpsichords, but they haven't got old pianos. You see, pianos are comparatively modern, so people haven't collected them yet."

And there is one good reason why Mr. Grossmith should hold pianos in special regard. They are to him very much what the lyre was to Timotheus, the wild harp to Moore's minstrel boy. One travels with him for all his provincial entertainments, and the railway charges used to form a considerable item in his personal expenses on tour, forty pounds a week, he told me, till Messrs. Brinsmead, who provided his piano, took this financial burden off his hands.

"By the bye," said Mr. Grossmith thoughtfully, "I'm going to write a book called, 'Piano and I,' which Arrowsmith will bring out in the autumn. It's a book that dates really from the time I left the Savoy, and deals with this extraordinary tour I've done all over Great Britain, Canada, and America."

"But you went in for this sort of thing long before you went to the Savoy?"

"Yes, of course, as you have read in my book, 'The Society Clown,' published by Arrowsmith six years ago. Forty thousand copies of that book were sold in the first month; ten thousand ran off the first day. Before I went on the stage, Corney Grain and I began in the same year to work on the model of John Parry: sitting down at a piano, as you see, and telling a story." Here he indicated a portrait on the opposite wall.

On the landing Mr. Grossmith subsequently showed me a large double caricature by Ape of himself and Corney Grain. Below the figures, in the autograph of each of the entertainers, is written:—

"It's just like Dick,"

(Signed) George Grossmith.

and

"I think it's very like George."

(Signed) R. Corney Grain.

A pleasant memento of their friendly rivalry and the amiable chaff which enlivened and characterised their *camaraderie!*

What I may call the post-Savoy period of Mr. Grossmith's career as entertainer has been not only a conspicuous, but a progressive, triumph. On this point, his steady advance in the popular esteem, he is justly not a little proud.

"During the seven years," said he, "that I've been moving, I've written and composed seven entertainments of two hours' duration, and I can conscientiously say I've never had any entertainment go so well as the last one."

"Where was that?"

"At Birmingham, on Saturday. To-night, Monday, I'm at Reading. This I have been doing every night since last August except a fortnight at Christmas."

"You keep pretty hard at it," said I, "don't you?"

"I have been doing that, but I find my health is giving way with the strain, and I shall be obliged to give it up. It's a very hard case, seeing I've been beating my own record. This very season I took close upon five hundred pounds in the course of three nights at Dublin, and my third recital in Edinburgh brought in considerably more than two hundred pounds. My *matinée* at Torquay, last Saturday week, was considerably over a hundred and thirty pounds. Last Monday, at Cardiff, I had considerably over two thousand people in the hall."

Of course, this is not all nett profit, as the local people who own the hall or building in which the entertainment takes place receive a portion of the receipts, varying in amount from a third to two-fifths. Of the balance, Mr. Grossmith's agent takes ten per cent. He handed me an account, showing what he received for ten of his most recent entertainments which, geographically considered, ranged from Belfast to Penzance. The total was, after deduction of the various two-fifths and one-thirds, £506 19s. 4d., which, when the agent's fee of ten per cent., amounting

DRAWING-ROOM IN MR. GROSSMITH'S HOUSE.

to £50 13s. 4d., is taken from it, leaves £456 6s.

"That's the sort of thing," remarked Mr. Grossmith, with a certain natural complacency, as I handed him back the bill, "I'm doing in the seventh year. And yet people ask me why I left the Savoy, and I can never persuade them nor the Inland Revenue Commissioners that the largest salary I drew there was thirty-eight guineas a week."

Though Mr. Grossmith does not look very robust, there was absolutely nothing of the invalid in his aspect as he sat quietly, self-contained and erect, in the armchair opposite me. And yet there was a certain nervous unrest in the slim fingers, which were in constant

movement, more especially so when he pulled himself together to recall an experience or to consider the propriety of answering this or that question. Some people, I think, betray their preoccupation by the motion of their finger-tips, and Mr. Grossmith is one of them. But men vary in this way; they unconsciously and unintentionally reveal their moods of mind. For example, one of the biggest liars I ever met always parted his lips moistly over two long rows of glittering teeth when he was caught in some specially bold mendacity. To return to the point, my host did not look an invalid, for all his delicately-wrought frame and finely-strung temperament, and I kept wondering at the statement about his failing health.

"And where," said I suddenly, "do you find the strain come in, which is going to put a stop to your provincial touring?"

"I can't stand the perpetual travelling," he replied, "the rattle of trains—though, of course, I always travel first class now. Then I can't get over the constant strange beds—I'm awake all night."

"What you want is a change of air and a good rest, and then you will be all right probably."

But Mr. Grossmith evidently does not think that the three weeks' holiday he was about to take when I saw him, would restore his vigour sufficiently to enable him to regard any further touring with complacency.

"Indeed," said he, "I have cancelled my American engagement, and, after my Easter tour, I shall settle down permanently in London. I've not quite made up my mind, however, whether I shall go on the stage or open an entertainment of my own here. I've had the offer of a nice hall to be built for me."

"Not for yourself, as sole performer, of course?"

"No; I shall have a talented little company, don't you know."

Here we fell into a discussion on collaboration, and Mr. Grossmith has collaborated a good deal—pretty well all his life, in fact, with the exception of these last seven touring years. As an author he collaborated with his brother Weedon, artist and actor-manager, in the production of *The Diary of a Nobody*, which appeared originally in *Punch*. As a musical composer, he has collaborated with Mr. W. S. Gilbert.

"I never enjoyed anything so much as that," said Mr. Grossmith. "It was one of the happiest times I've had in my life, working and composing with Gilbert."

This memorable and pleasant passage in his career occurred just after the famous breach between Sir Arthur Sullivan and Mr. W. S. Gilbert. As everybody knows, the rupture roused a feeling of dismay in the musical world. It was as if a great mine of honest human merriment had been permanently "shut down." Sir Arthur Sullivan, to mitigate the panic, at once turned to Mr. Sidney Grundy for a librettist, and Mr. W. S. Gilbert to Mr. Alfred Cellier, and after his death to Mr. Grossmith for a composer; but mankind was almost unanimous in not allowing its anxieties to be composed. It was a case of Gilbert and Sullivan *aut nihil*. As for the new arrangement of partners, they had sadly to confess at the end: "We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced." It was his collaboration with Mr. Gilbert in *Haste to the Wedding* to which my host had alluded as holding precedence among his halcyon memories.

"Perhaps your readers," said Mr. Grossmith, "would like to see how I write my scores?"

I ventured to take upon myself the responsibility of answering in the affirmative on behalf of the readers.

He opened a drawer in the desk before him, but could not find what he wanted. At last he discovered *Haste to the Wedding*, quite a portly roll of MS., in the desk which stood against the tall window looking out on Melcombe-place. The "den" stands at the back of the dining-room, which lies to the left of the hall at entering. Mr. Grossmith was puzzled to find a characteristic page, but at last he succeeded, and then he paused, wondering how he should separate it from the rest.

"You can tear it out," said I. "It can be easily pasted in again."

Magnanimously, though with a slight sigh, he tore out the page, one side of which is here given.

"There's a tremendous lot of work in that," he went on, turning over the pages of the MS., pausing now and then to hum a bar as he bent forward over it. "I wish it had been a success. I still think it would be, with a little alteration. You know," he repeated again with emphasis, "there's nothing more lovely than writing for an orchestra. It's the greatest pleasure in the world."

"And to what do you attribute the failure of *Haste to the Wedding*?"

"It was produced at a time of prejudice. Firstly during the last election at which Mr. Gladstone was returned Premier, then just as people, after the quarrel of Gilbert and Sullivan, condemned Grundy's librettos to Sullivan's music, so they condemned the simple tunes I set to Gilbert's farce. They expected grand opera, don't you know. So subsequently they slated Dr. Osmund Carr's music to *His Excellency*."

The introduction !

The rumpling of the hair !!

The minuet in G !!!

The usual Encore !!!

The Paderewski Craze. 1894

(From photographs of Mr. Grossmith by Mr. Alfred Ellis, Upper Baker Street, W.)

"They won't allow Gilbert and Sullivan to work apart from each other. Which reminds me, by the bye, of the verse—

"How terribly strange it is. How odd it seems to be,
Whatever is done by him is also done by me."

Our conversation now drifted to the subject of Mr. Grossmith's American tours. I asked him if his being an Englishman militated against his popularity with his audiences across the Atlantic.

"Quite the contrary," he replied. "I've taken three hundred and thirty pounds at one entertainment in America, though, as a rule, the halls are not so large as they are here. Still, on the occasion of my first tour out there, for the first few months I lost money and played to empty houses. My second tour of four months was a wonderful success. I wrote an entertainment specially for them, called *How I Discovered America*. It was for that, too, that I composed *Baby on the Shore*, an imitation, you know, of American quartette parties."

Here I put it to Mr. Grossmith whether the average American had a stronger sense of humour than the average Englishman. In my own experience, one of the quickest persons to detect the humorous intent latent in an apparently innocent remark is the West Indian negro. Commenting on the density of our own people to anything except the hall-marked joke, their frequent unwillingness to laugh or admire where humour or wit is concerned, unless they are quite sure that the best and highest authorities have passed the quip or the story, I asked Mr. Grossmith how he found the Americans in the matter of spontaneous and natural appreciation of the artistically good.

"The Americans," said he, "are the most wonderful audiences—so quick, so enthusiastic. I found they grasped my points on the instant, and compared very favourably in this respect with an English audience."

"And the American has a stronger sense of humour, then?"

"Yes, on the whole, I think so."

"Can't you give me an original anecdote out of your own experience, something that's never seen the light before?"

"I'll try," said Mr. Grossmith, and his lithe fingers moved nervously on his crossed knees as he composed his head to an attitude which suggested that the contents of many brain-cells were being ransacked for anecdotic matter.

At last I knew the lightning swift work of selection was at an end.

"Yes, there was one rather funny thing," said he. "A New York gentleman was chaffing me about my pronunciation of certain words, and I was very much amused at it. So I said to him—

"'It's our language, you know. We invented it before you were discovered.'

"He was a bit abashed at first. Then he said—

"'That so! Wall, I think it's about time you learned to speak it.'"

"The great quality of their humour is its dryness?"

"It's their form of humour," returned Mr. Grossmith. "It's very difficult to score off an American, and you can't play a practical joke on one at all."

"And you have a weakness that way, like Mr. Toole?"

"Yes, I'm rather fond of practical joking. I've often gone, when I've had a friend with me, into some old City bank, like the Bank of England, for example—staid old place, you know. We've marched up to the counter and I've said quite calmly to the old gentleman behind it: 'Can't I have a brandy and soda and some sandwiches?' They've always been most polite and taken it seriously, saying: 'We don't keep brandy and soda and sandwiches here.' 'But you have them ordered in from outside?' 'Yes, but that, of course, is for ourselves,' and so on, all quite gravely and without the suspicion of a smile, not the slightest quiver of the muscles of the countenance to indicate a sense that a practical joke was fooling around."

"And in America you would have fared differently?"

"Rather. I went once to the State House in Hartford, Massachusetts. There was a man standing at the entrance, an official with a band round his hat; so I stepped up to him and said, 'Can you tell me if this hotel is conducted on the European plan?' He simply looked at me and calmly said—

"'Any more?'

"Then there was a moment's awkward pause, and I had to walk out."

In this connection I am reminded of a passage in Mr. Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody*, where, under date May 26, Mr. Pooter, senior, writes: "Left the shirts to be repaired at Trillips's. I said to him, 'I'm 'fraid they are *frayed*.' He said, without a smile, 'They're bound to do that, sir.' Some people seem to be quite destitute of a sense of humour."

It is in the making palpable to his audiences the ludicrous side of episodes like the above that Mr. Grossmith owes some measure of his success. Then he is a sharp observer of the small absurdities and weaknesses of ordinary social life. For instance, he has

observed that people who come ostensibly to see a display of wedding presents are most concerned to find out the place in the array of their own contribution to the stock. "Where's ours?" they say, and this triviality Mr. Grossmith has been able to make effective play with. So, again, a lady damages some piece of furniture belonging to someone else, and hastily endeavours to hide the devastation she has wrought; just as the husband slips a plate over the spilled sauce, so that the coming rebuke for the damaged table-cloth may be delayed as long as possible. This last was my own contribution to Mr. Grossmith's enormous store of social notes.

"I never write about anything I don't understand," said he, "and that's why people recognise my sketches. And then I always try to be absolutely up to date in everything. That's the only way for an entertainment to succeed."

Moreover, Mr. Grossmith carefully eschews everything that is not of good report. No witticism, no allusion which smacks in the slightest degree of what the French call *saleté* is permitted to enter and taint the atmosphere of his entertainments. The immense importance of this very proper strictness on the part of Mr. Grossmith is well illustrated by the following amusing anecdote of his early "sketch" days, which he gave me—

"A gentleman wrote to me for the purpose of engaging me, and, rightly or wrongly, asked me if my sketches were quite *comme il faut*, as he had several young daughters. I was so immensely tickled by this, that, also rightly or wrongly, I replied that my entertainments *were* as they should be; for I was recently married, and hoped myself to have several young daughters. He wrote thanking me for this assurance, and I was to consider myself accordingly engaged."

Mr. Grossmith's gifts as an entertainer are unquestionably hereditary; at least, he shares

"ACME" P&W. (24.)

FACSIMILE REPRODUCTION OF A PAGE OF MR. GROSSMITH'S MANUSCRIPT SCORE OF "HASTE TO THE WEDDING."

MR. GROSSMITH'S STUDY.

them in a measure with other members of his family. His father, the first Mr. George Grossmith, added to his emoluments as reporter at Bow Street by giving public entertainments similar to those which have won for his son a wider fame. Then, Mr. George Grossmith the third is already walking with success, more or less in his father's footsteps, while it is almost unnecessary to allude to the cognate distinction won by my host's brother, Mr. Weedon Grossmith. But there is another member of this remarkable family, with whose name the public is less familiar.

When we had left the "den," and I was accompanying Mr. Grossmith over the house, he stopped suddenly in front of a coloured print of a boy seated, and dressed in the mode of the third decade of this century.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"That," said he, "is my uncle, Mr. William Grossmith. He gave entertainments when a child between seven and eight years old, in 1825, and he continued at it for two or three years, but the strain upon him must have been too great for a mere child to bear, and he never recalled the incidents of that experience with either pride or pleasure."

And so we came to the drawing-room, where were the 1796 Broadwood and the 1770 Zumpé.

On the latter, a very tiny, queer-looking little instrument, Mr. Grossmith played a bar or two. It was not remarkably tuneful.

"An old piano is not like an old violin," I said. "It doesn't improve with the passage of time."

"No," said he, "it does not; and this one is a little out of tune, though, even now, ladies occasionally play gavottes on it. But here is the Broadwood, and you see, in perfect state of repair, though its notes, no more than those of the Zumpé, are improved by time."

In the large recess of the drawing-room, where the southern light falls, stood on a platform a magnificent grand piano, a gift to the entertainer from Messrs. Brinsmead, from which the skilled fingers of Mr. Grossmith sent rolling forth a burst of sonorous melody.

Behind the drawing-room, and opening out of it, is a large and lofty apartment with a parquet floor laid down by Mr. Grossmith. This serves as a ball-room, and here is another piano. In fact, I was informed that there were pianos all over the house. So that Mr. Grossmith takes his *rôle* of piano collector very seriously.

Of course, Mr. Grossmith has a non-professional social life, when he sinks his public character in that of the ordinary English gentleman. There are some people, however, who are obtuse to what should be obvious enough to men of sense. Mr. Grossmith is well able to deal with the snobbish vulgarity which fails to understand that the great *artiste* becomes on occasion the private person and the distinguished guest. Once, for example, a wealthy hatter, with whom Mr. Grossmith had some slight acquaintance, came up to him at a Mansion House ball, and said—

"Hulloa! Mr. Grossmith, what are you doing here? Are you going to give us any of your little funniments—eh?"

"No," replied Mr. Grossmith. "Are you going to sell any of your hats?"