

# A NEW ENTERTAINER OF SOCIETY:

A TALK WITH MISS BEATRICE HERFORD.

BY ARCHIBALD CROMWELL.



ON a sunny afternoon in the summer of 1895 I was present at the first entertainment given by Miss Beatrice Herford. The Salle Erard was crowded with notable people, and if an explosion had by any

misfortune taken place there, London would have been robbed of its cleverest and most delightful inhabitants, and the gaiety of nations have been eclipsed. One saw on every side the faces of celebrities in the world of literature, art, the drama and music. Mr. William Archer and Mr. George Bernard Shaw were among the critics, Mr. and Mrs. George Henschel among the musicians, Mr. Zangwill and many another *littérateur*—all drawn by the promise of a novel variation on the hackneyed recital. And I make bold to declare that before ten minutes had passed Miss Herford had made everyone in the brilliant audience feel glad to be there.

Without any of the usual aids to a recital in the form of properties or scenery or

costume, this charming young lady caused a continuous ripple of laughter such as I have never heard before. Commencing with the character-sketch of an irrepressible American book-cavasser, Miss Herford was at the primary disadvantage of imitating a character which is almost unknown in England—the young lady who makes insinuating visits in order to obtain subscribers for some volume of pictures. But every gesture, every “aside,” during the rapid monologue soon succeeded in portraying to the life the importunate book-agent. A burst of applause followed, and then the programme was interspersed with a delightful song by Mrs. Henschel. In a minute or two Miss Herford

was back on the platform, and was giving her marvellously clever sketch, “The Tram Baby.” It transported one immediately into a tram filled with the usual passengers—the irate old gentleman, the inquisitive child, the talkative woman—all imitated with realistic humour.

And so the afternoon passed, and we felt that we were gaining a new society entertainer whose powers of mimicry were as original as they were amusing.

Since then Miss Beatrice Herford—who is a daughter of Dr. Brooke Herford, a highly esteemed Unitarian minister at Hampstead—has



From a photo by]

MISS BEATRICE HERFORD.

[Pack, New York.



gone from success to triumph. She has quite recently had a tour in the United States, where the Herford family resided for several years. And now she is once more in her artistic home on the breezy heights of Hampstead, where I had the pleasure of chatting with her about her work. First of all, I thought it well to ask whether she was an American, as so many people have believed.

"Oh no," said Miss Herford, "though, from the fact that I spent my early years in Boston, my accent would seem to suggest that I was a citizen of the States. But I

don't give a pathetic poem, like other entertainers, just to vary the programme. But I cannot do it. These character-sketches are the only things that interest me enough for me to imagine they will interest others."

"By the way, how many character-sketches have you in your repertoire?"

"About eight altogether. Not many, is it? There is 'The Tram Baby'—that always goes well with any audience—and 'The Book-Agent,' 'The Shop-Girl,' 'An English Lady Packing,' and three or four others. I am very busy just now working

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THE POSTER USED BY MISS HERFORD ON HER AMERICAN TOUR.

was born in England, and so was my father. So it was appropriate that I should make my *début* in London, was it not?"

"Have you always been fond of mimicry?"

"Yes, ever since I was a child I loved to be someone else. It did not matter much whether I was a beggar-woman or a grand lady, so long as I was not myself. And when I am impersonating anybody I cease to be myself—so much so that often I am most astonished at what my lips say. To merely recite a piece has not the smallest attraction for me. People have often asked me why I

up some fresh monologues, but it is not easy to find subjects big enough to make a sketch. There are plenty of funny little scenes in daily life which don't last long enough to be worth a whole sketch, you see."

"Don't you feel the need of properties, Miss Herford?"

"Well, if I had to have properties I should be trammelled by them rather than helped. My monologues leave so much to the imagination, and that is a good way of creating a sense of humour. I should cease to amuse people, I'm afraid, if I were dressed



in character and had all sorts of properties distracting the attention. Of course it is all the harder work for me to supply the absence of these aids, but in the end the result is far funnier. I love to see a fashionable audience first gaze at me with astonishment, thinking that I must be mad to talk and act so ; then gradually realise that I'm imitating the very things that they have seen every day of their lives ; and finally, unbend from all the stiffness of society ways, and laugh. Oh, I often think that I get the most amusement out of my entertainments just watching my audience. Some people are naturally more responsive than others, they see what you mean immediately, and then one's work is made light and pleasant. Only once I think I faced an absolutely impervious audience in England. No, I won't tell you where it was, for it wouldn't be kind. They looked at me just as if they were wondering whether I had escaped from an asylum ; there was hardly a laugh to break the strain, and I was glad when it was over."

"Do you find that we understand American types of character, such, for instance, as your amusing book-agent ?"

"Oh yes—though people often miss the humour of it, and only think of how troublesome it would be. People often come to me after I have given it, and say, 'Oh, how tiresome it must be! I'm glad we don't have book-agents in England.' But I fancy that writers like Mary E. Wilkins have made known to English people a good many American characteristics. It is a greater novelty too for my audiences to be introduced to new types than to have familiar English types impersonated. Did you hear that true criticism of Mary Wilkins' stories which one of her own people said?—'Those ain't stories, they're just folks.' Well that is just what my monologues aspire to be."

"Where did you make your best success during your American tour ?"

"In the Broadway Theatre, New York, I think. It was on the occasion of the great performance on behalf of the Actors' Benefit Fund, and a very long programme was arranged, with most of the eminent New York actors and actresses taking part. There was Julia Marlowe, John Drew, Olga Nethersole, May Irwin—do you know her ? She makes me laugh more than anyone since Rosina Vokes—and ever so many others, whose names I don't remember. Marshall P. Wilder, whom you've heard over here, told his stories, and I gave a monologue. The Broadway is the biggest

theatre in the city, so I wondered if my voice would be heard. But people who sat in different parts of the house said they heard me very well, I'm glad to say."

"Do you like theatres for your work ?"

"Yes, I think the broad stage suits me better than a narrow platform or a corner in a drawing-room. I get room to move, and don't feel cramped, which is more than is usually the case with a drawing-room performance. Since I returned from the States I have given sketches at the Prince of Wales's Theatre and the St. James's Theatre, and in both cases I enjoyed it. You get a more varied audience I fancy than at a recital, for all sorts of people go to the theatre."

"How long were your programmes in America ?"

"Usually I gave three or four sketches, and we had music in the intervals, but the whole entertainment only lasted about one hour and a half. It's a favourite theory of mine that as a rule our programmes of concerts and entertainments are far too long."

"People in London expect a ballad concert to last three hours, Miss Herford. And if it doesn't, they extend it on their own account by encores."

"Yes, and go away tired and headachy, vowing they won't ever go to a concert again—till the next time. Well, they don't get long programmes from me, for one thing because I could not stand the strain much longer than an hour. And I have a suspicion that all of us appreciate most what is not prolonged. If my brief programmes set the example in this direction I shall consider myself a benefactor of the public."

"I suppose you have had all manner of eminent people in your audiences ?"

"Well, I have certainly had several kind appreciators among both British and American authors. Mr. William Archer, Mr. Zangwill, Mr. George Bernard Shaw, Mr. F. Anstey, Mrs. Humphry Ward, Mrs. Hodgson Burnett, are some of the names that occur to me at once ; while of American authors, I cannot be too grateful to Mr. Henry James, Mr. William Dean Howells, Mr. Frank R. Stockton and Mr. Gilder, for all their encouragement. The popularity of my brother, Oliver Herford, helped me a good deal in the States, for he is such a general favourite. But wherever I went people seemed glad to see me, and that made my visit delightful. I am hoping to go again to America after the London season is over. My last tour was confined to New York, Boston, and



places in the neighbourhood, but the next time I shall go to Chicago and further afield."

"Are there many entertainers who adopt your methods?"

"I have not heard of them either in this country or in America. Of course there are ever so many reciters and artists who give musical sketches, but people seem to be rather tired of them."

"Why don't you add music to your other accomplishments, Miss Herford?"

"I want to do so.

When I was in New York I took lessons in singing, and I am very anxious to continue. For one thing, it is such an immense help for speaking, and then later I may be able to introduce some singing into my entertainments. It would make me independent of outside help, and also be a relief to me. You see, Corney Grain, whom I often heard and admired greatly, had a wonderful advantage over most entertainers by his ability to play and sing so cleverly. And the same applies to Mr. George Grossmith, who, I must not forget to say, has been very generous in his appreciation of my monologues. I was his substitute the other day at the Prince of Wales's Theatre."

"Are you very nervous?"

"Not a bit, I'm thankful to say. I just

go on to the platform and begin. It is such a comfort not to suffer from stage-fright, which must be truly awful, judging from what people tell me. Once or twice my memory has deserted me for a minute or two, but it is easier in monologues than in recitations to supply omissions on the spur of the moment."

"Have you had any funny incidents at your entertainments?"

"Yes, of course; people often say amusing things to one. A lady came up to me in London once and said, 'I'm so interested in your work, for I'm just teaching a little girl to recite.' 'Oh yes,' I said. 'Is she going to be a professional reciter?' 'Oh no,' she exclaimed; 'she's just a private child!'

"There was once a small child, 'a private child,' I suppose, who screamed with disappointment when she discovered, after I had finished giving 'The Tram Baby,' that there was no baby at all!"

I am quite sure this was the only individual who was disappointed with Miss Herford's monologues, which are the most mirth-provoking and enjoyable entertainments possible. All who have heard this accomplished young lady once want to hear her again; all who have never heard her should take the earliest opportunity.



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