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MR. GEORGE GROSSMITH.
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[Alfred Ellis.]

GEORGE GROSSMITH TO AN AUDIENCE OF ONE.

BY JOHN HYDE.

Illustrated from Photographs.



THE editor had long wished to present the world with the accompanying interview. A large section of his readers had long desired it, but fate seemed to be against the undertaking.

At length, however, the favourable moment occurred and Mr. Grossmith's kind letter of consent lay on the Special Commissioner's table. Everything promised well for the long-expected meeting, for Mr. Grossmith is the most tempting subject for an interview, and further, the great entertainer had been good enough to give special augury of success. "I shall do my best," he cordially wrote in reply to the editorial request, "for a magazine which is a continual source of delight to me."

The kindness and consideration with which that promise was fulfilled will live among my pleasantest memories.

I had time just to note the evidences, literary, musical and pictorial, of Mr. Grossmith's catholic artistic taste which abound in the drawing-room at Dorset Square when a light step sounded outside, the door opened, and the master of the house advanced with brisk cheeriness to bid me welcome.

"Well, now," he exclaimed with a comical affectation of despair, "what are you going to bully me about?"

"For this occasion only," I replied, "I do not propose to bully you at all. Indeed I propose to conduct the operation with the greatest humanity."

"In that case narcotics will be allowed. You smoke, of course. Won't you have a cigarette?" And borne upon the smoke, our light discourse drifted pleasantly along.

"We shall avoid the conventional where-were-you-born? and what-is-your-favourite-pie? style of interview," I remarked, "and we'll just talk of whatever comes in course. But first I must be a little bit personal when I express a hope that your recent rest has quite restored you."

"I'm glad to be able to answer yes. I had rather an unfortunate time as regards health, however," Mr. Grossmith replied, "and rest was a necessity. I trifled with my illness far

too long, and, as you know, reappeared at the Savoy only to have to withdraw, my voice having completely gone. Everything seemed to make for misfortune. The piece had been disappointingly cut about during rehearsal, enthusiasm was not easy to get up, my cold kept getting worse and worse, and so—but no matter, that's over, and I'm happily back to work again in the line I count peculiarly my own."

"You prefer the rôle of independent entertainer to that of the actor?"

"Infinitely, and I've always done so. Between ourselves too, it's more satisfactory in certain important considerations. Some people imagine that I get about £10 a night perhaps for an entertainment. I have taken as much as £370. And yet people will cry, 'Why did you leave the stage?' Not but that," continued Mr. Grossmith, "I enjoy pleasant memories of my long connection with Gilbert and Sullivan opera and the many parts Fate ordained that I should create.

"You are not to ask me about my favourite this or that, you say, but I'll tell you, since you're so pressing, that my kindest feelings lie towards John Wellington Wells in the 'Sorcerer.' Perhaps I like it best because it was the first—I don't know. Next to that I think I like Ko-ko in the 'Mikado.' As regards pure music, I consider 'Princess Ida' the prettiest. But really they're all wonderful; and what other light operatic composition, even the best, will come within miles of Gilbert and Sullivan's least successful effort?"

"You're at work on new sketches, I believe, Mr. Grossmith?"

"Yes. There's one, 'The Tide of Fashion,' and another about a youngster home from Eton for the holidays. He's been a fag, and when he gets home takes it out of his little brother. Then his big brother comes home from Cambridge and takes it out of him; the smallest youngster takes it out of the dog, and the dog takes it out of the cat, and so on."

"You must spend a great deal of labour on your sketches?"

"I have to do so more and more every

day. At first the musical sketch was hung round a few songs. That will not do now. You must get them absolutely consistent and work them up like a libretto. Then, too, I always strive to hit some note familiar to my audience, and yet sufficiently out of the way to be amusing. For instance, in my 'Tour to Switzerland,' if I'd described actual experiences of my actual tour there would have been amusing incident, no doubt, but not the fun a general audience understands or appreciates best. So I took the line of supposing that I was most anxious to see on my journey, not the Righi, or the Matterhorn, or

ought to tell you what a pleasure my provincial tours are to me. The audiences are a continual delight, and the provincial press outdoes itself in kindness. Perhaps the prettiest compliment I ever received was paid me by the *Scotsman*, which said that an Edinburgh season without a visit from Mr. Grossmith was like a summer without a rose."

"You don't find the Scotch people lacking in appreciation of humour, then?"

"They are among my most sympathetic hearers," Mr. Grossmith admitted, and that testimony from him should go far to explode

the ancient libel about the surgical operation that is said to be necessary to lodge a joke in a Scotsman's head.

"You must have innumerable good stories about your country audiences?"

"Oh yes; but I keep them strictly for my book. However I'll sacrifice one. A country girl from one of the English counties who had been to hear me gave the following account of the effect on her and her party: 'We laafed an' laafed, an' all the way hoam; we laafed an' laafed an' laafed, an' when we was taakin' supper; we laafed an' laafed an' laafed, and all the time we none of us knawed whaat we'd been laafin' aat!'"

Turning from more personal conversation, Mr. Grossmith rose and began

to show me his great store of interesting mementoes, each one of which has a history. I noticed on the mantelpiece a signed portrait of Adelina Patti, of whose lavish generosity to her guests at Craig-y-nos Mr. Grossmith cherishes a remembrance in the shape of a diamond and sapphire horse-shoe pin. "The gift was so unexpected," he confessed; "but that only added to the charm. It is Madame Patti's custom to give all her guests costly and beautiful souvenirs." We talked of Madame Patti as artist and wonderful woman for a little, then Mr. Grossmith led the way to the inner drawing-room, where he wished to show me a souvenir of another



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AS POOH-BAH IN THE "MIKADO."

[Barraud.

the Jungfrau, or Mont Blanc, or Chamounix, but something we'd all heard about far earlier than these—the merry Swiss boy. Well, search where I would I could not in all Switzerland find that merry Swiss boy. So I came home dejected, and lo! at the nearest street corner in London, playing on his infernal instrument, I discover the very youth I have been seeking. So the moral is that you shouldn't go abroad to look for the merry Swiss boy —"

"Because, unlike yourself, Mr. Grossmith," I suggested, "he never performs out of London!"

"That reminds me," said my host, "that I

comrade in harmony. On the piano (itself Mr. John Brinsmead's gift to Mr. Grossmith) stood a long white frame containing a portrait of Signor Tosti, with some accompanying bars of music in that eminent composer's well-known beautiful ms. It was a snatch of song, the words of which, written in red, were as follows:—

Where was it first I saw your face,
Dear George?—supply a clue.
But though I can't recall the place,
I've not forgotten you.

"That," Mr. Grossmith remarked, "was one of Tosti's Christmas cards sent to me. I don't know," my kind host continued, "if you're interested in old pianos. Ah, you are! Well it won't bore you then if I ride one of my little hobbies for a time. Here"—and Mr. Grossmith opened a tiny little instrument which stood at hand—"is a very early example of the piano proper. It looks like a spinet, but it is a piano; of course you know the difference?"

It is not every day one is examined in music by Mr. Grossmith, so I replied with academic precision: "In the spinet the strings are plucked with jacks of quill; in the piano they are struck with a hammer."

"Exactly," said the examiner as he ran his practised fingers lovingly up and down the ancient keyboard of the somewhat thin-voiced instrument. "Look closer," he added, "and you will see the date is 1770, the maker's name is Zumpe. By-the-by this piano was lent to the Musical Exhibition at the Aquarium some time ago, and curiously

enough was placed alongside another Zumpe of the same age. Someone remarked that the reunion of the two poor old things after so many years—more than a century since they had left Zumpe's workshop—was quite romantic.

"Yonder again," Mr. Grossmith went on, "is an early Broadwood grand." He pointed to a beautiful old-fashioned thin-legged instrument in a charming case of inlaid wood-work. "When it is in tune Mr. Lionel Monckton often comes along and delights us

with a selection of old-English airs. On the old-fashioned instrument they have a peculiar appropriateness and charm. Indeed on this old piano that old music seems capable of better interpretation than on more modern instruments."

A photograph of Lord Wolseley, which stood close at hand, moved Mr. Grossmith to an interesting anecdote.

"When I was playing Major-General Stanley in the 'Pirates of Penzance,' he confessed, "it was remarked that in my make-up for the part I closely resembled Lord Wolseley. His lordship was so interested in the likeness that he wrote asking me to exchange

photographs with him, and that is the copy he sent me in return for mine."

"So that in yet another sense, which the WINDSOR will now make generally known, Mr. Grossmith," I replied, "you were the very model of a modern major-general."

From the photograph we passed to Mr. Grossmith's collection of pictures. In water-colours it is particularly strong.

"I have had curious good fortune with



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[Alfred Ellis.

AN IMITATION OF MR. BEERBOHM TREE.

my pictures," my host remarked. "They have always increased in value. When I acquired early works of any artist he was



From a photo by]

[Barraud.

AS ROBIN OAKAPPLE IN "RUDDIGORE."

sure to become famous. And sometimes accident yet further enhanced the value of a work by someone already noted. Look at that fine water-colour of W. L. Wyllie, for example. He asked me to exchange courtesies with him, and this was his gift to me. You see what it is—the old Chain Pier at Brighton. So that the picture, besides being a treasure as Wyllie's work, has a special 'subject' interest, for the famous old chain pier is now only a memory. That beautiful work of Frank Brangwyn again is, I think, a great favourite in this room. I cannot bring myself to think he has ever done anything better.

"My father too was lucky in this way," Mr. Grossmith continued, crossing the room and taking down a small oil-painting from the wall. This picture, which belonged to him, is an early Noel Paton, and yonder is a little picture which may or may not possess merit, but is certainly very interesting as the work of Charles Mathews."

As interviewer, my work had become delightfully easy, for Mr. Grossmith was proving his versatility on yet another count. He was interviewing himself so admirably that I had no need to interrupt the good work. But then, of course, he began life as a journalist.

The house is so rich in pictures that we had to make the grand tour. On the staircase my host paused to show me a quaint coloured print of an intelligent looking young gentleman in a large hat, a frill, and nankeen trousers—at least if they were not nankeen they ought to have been, considering the period at which the youth flourished.

"That," said Mr. Grossmith, "is my uncle, W. R. Grossmith, who at the age of six was giving a two hours' entertainment. That was about 1823."

"Ah," I said, as reminiscences of my host's book, "A Society Clown," came to mind, "the junior Roscius?"

"The *young* Roscius, I think," Mr. Grossmith corrected. "These little pictures round the portrait show him in all his characters. He was great on Shakspeare, and essayed selections even from 'Richard the Third' with success. If you come upstairs I'll show you some of his old bills."

In due course my companion produced an ancient bill which announced the appearance of "Master Grossmith, now ten years old."

"That 'now ten years old,'" I remarked, "is deeply significant of a yet earlier fame."



From a photo by]

[Barraud.

AS ROBIN OAKAPPLE IN "RUDDIGORE" (Second Act).

"Yes," Mr. Grossmith asserted, "and perhaps there is more in it than meets the eye. I have been told," he added with a twinkle,

"that Master Grossmith was at the time of this particular bill *more* than ten years old. They did those things then."

"Was he the first of your family in whom the histrionic talent showed itself?"

"I believe so," Mr. Grossmith replied as we turned to examine the pictures in the room to which we had come. On the walls hung a collection of remarkable interest—the dealings of the comic press with Mr. Grossmith. Amid the clever work of Furniss, Bryan, and many others, Mr. Grossmith treasures a cartoon from the Glasgow *Bailie*, of less artistic merit, but still creditable for the jest in its title.

He pointed to the words, "The Harmonious Grossmith."

We descended to the study, where the walls are covered with photographs of "G. G." in all the many parts he has played. Many of these he has kindly lent for reproduction in the present article. The best he considers that of the Lord Chancellor in "Iolanthe," a photograph which enjoyed a record sale.

For a little we discussed parts.

"Yes, I liked Jack Point in the 'Yeoman of the Guard,'" he admitted, "for the touch of pathos it contained."

"And your latest Gilbertian creation, Governor Griffenfeld, how did that lie to your hand, Mr. Grossmith?"

"I felt that the part lacked something. You see I was supposed to be an arrant practical joker, but as a matter of fact I played no jokes. It's true I set the soldiers dancing, but in effect I did nothing; they worked out the joke."

"But the butter-slide on the Syndic's doorstep—how about that?" I queried.

"Well in a way I did play that joke, but it was done 'off,' and then after all it was the Syndic who took the most active part in it."

"That is true, as his sore bones testified," I was forced to admit. So we agreed to

rank Governor Griffenfeld among the great possibilities of this world. While we were in the study it would have been less than appropriate had one omitted to turn the conversation upon Mr. Grossmith's methods of composition.

My host produced a multitude of little well-worn notebooks filled with notes, musical and otherwise.

"Here," he said, "I jot down anything that occurs to me—an air or a scrap of verse, or it may be a simple phrase that promises to develop. Ideas occur to me anywhere and at any time. Often a musical idea has come

to me in the train. I elaborate and correct afterwards, bringing the thing into proper musical form."

Mr. Grossmith next showed me his father's portrait, his brother Weedon's pictures, and in the hall itself we lingered over a unique collection of views of the London theatres. One of old Covent Garden is interesting as the joint work of Rowlandson and Pugin, the former having added the figures to the architectural detail of the latter. "Look on the opposite wall," Mr. Grossmith said, "there are some splendid examples of tinselling." It cost some money to get all the proper embossed pieces to finish these pictures, which generally,

as you see, represented some popular actor in a leading romantic or heroic character. Here you'll see an example not quite properly tinselled. The helmet is a bit of plain gold paper, whereas it should have been a stamped and embossed piece. Here again you see every stud on the shield and armour is a metallic bead separately laid on."

Last of all Mr. Grossmith took me (pictorially) to Bow Street and charged me to look well at the drawing. "That," he said with affectionate regard, "is my old court where I used to report in my journalistic days." After this touch of professional nature we parted as brothers of the Press.



From a photo by]

]Elliott & Fry.

AS THE LORD CHANCELLOR IN "IOLANTHE."