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AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER OF
HENRY JAMES

By HERBERT S. MICHAELS

IN the Henry James Collection presented to the Colby College Library by Mr. H. Bacon Collamore, there is an autograph letter from the novelist which has apparently not yet been published. This letter was written by James to Miss Marion Terry, the actress who played the female lead in his play *Guy Domville*, produced in St. James's Theatre, London, on January 5, 1895.

Although the letter is undated, it gives internal evidence of having been written during the period of rehearsal, which began early in December, 1894. George Alexander, the London matinee idol who was the play's manager as well as its hero, first read the play to the cast on Friday, December 7, 1894. Since James speaks of a rehearsal "a couple of nights ago," the letter could not have been written on Saturday the eighth, but must have been composed on either December 15, 22, or 29. The tone of the letter makes December 29 the most likely date.

Reform Club, Pall Mall [London]. S.W.
Saturday noon

Dear Miss Terry,

I don't want to worry you—on the contrary; so this is only a mere word on the chance I didn't say a couple of nights ago *distinctly* enough that your business of the end of Act I—your going and leaning your face against the pillar of the porch—couldn't possibly be improved. Please believe from me that it is perfectly beautiful and *right*—like, indeed, your whole performance, which will do you great honour. Rest quiet, this weary day, at least about *that*.

Yours most truly,

HENRY JAMES.

Miss Terry played the rôle of Mrs. Peverel, a young widow secretly in love with Guy Domville, who has announced his intention to enter a monastery. The stage business to which James refers occurs when Mrs. Peverel learns that her beloved Guy will not take religious vows

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after all, and will therefore be free to consider marrying her. But she is stunned by the subsequent discovery that he is leaving for an arranged marriage with a distant relative, and she wistfully watches him depart.

There is an ironic note in James's prediction that Miss Terry's performance would do her "great honour," for, although she was universally lauded for her performance, the play received a reception that was nearly tragic. The first night's condemnation was due partly, it seems, to certain weaknesses in the drama; but there is also a possibility that the play was the victim of organized hoodlumism whose origin and causes have never been explained.

James was so uneasy on the opening night that he could not bear to attend the performance of his own work; instead he went to the Haymarket Theatre to see Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. The first act of James's play, meanwhile, was receiving warm approval, but the second act nearly collapsed in a chaos of derision from the audience.¹ The reason for their jeers is clear. Persuaded that he must abandon his priestly intentions and marry, because he is the last male of his ancient line, Guy Domville undergoes a sudden change of character. At the end of the first act he is a saint; at the beginning of the second act, after the lapse of only three months, he has become a foppish pseudo-sophisticate. This bewildering and unbelievable transformation shook the mood of the audience badly. And when a lady of the cast appeared in an authentic but ridiculous-looking eighteenth-century costume, with a hat topped by a shapeless mass of velvet about half a foot high, there were derisive howls from the audience.

Henry James entered the theatre as the play was in its closing moments. What happened next is well described in a United Press dispatch printed in the *New York Times*

¹ See Leon Edel, ed., *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, Philadelphia and New York, 1949, page 474.

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(January 6, 1895; 5:2) the day after the opening of the play:

In response to calls, Mr. Alexander led Mr. James to the footlights. They were received with tumultuous hooting, groaning, and hissing, which quite drowned the slight applause. They faced the din for two or three minutes—Mr. James gazing with scornful coolness at the turbulent throng.

There is at least a possibility that some of this turmoil was not spontaneous. Some observers believed that an organized and coached band of ruffians was sent to the theatre expressly to ruin the opening night, for what reasons, nobody knows. A person identified only as “correspondent A” wrote to a member of the staff of the *New York Daily Tribune*:

There were some twenty men or more in the gallery and as many in the upper boxes—the veriest roughs. . . . Each set had a leader at whose signal they began to hoot, etc. I watched them the whole evening and even before the evening was over it was clear that the row was prearranged, and organized, and with considerable skill.²

Reviewers, for the most part, commended the play. The distinguished London critic William Archer was quoted by the *New York Times* (January 27, 1895; 14:4) as follows: “The first act is a masterly and exquisite piece of emotional comedy, and the whole play is exceedingly curious and interesting.” Clement Scott said in the *Illustrated London News* (January 12, 1895; 35:2): “For my own part, I could go and see the play again and again, for the sake of the beauty of the subject, the depth and originality of the treatment of it, the delicacy and grace of the dialogue and the charming acting.” George Bernard Shaw, though critical of the second act, thought the play had “rare charm

² *Tribune*, January 29, 1895 (21:1). Compare this report, however, with the opinion of critic William Archer, as indirectly quoted by the *New York Times* of January 27, 1895 (14:4): “No particular reason has been found for the brutality of the mob, except by a few hotheaded persons who insist that it was the result of a conspiracy to injure Mr. James because he is an American.”

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of speech" and was "a story of fine sentiment and delicate manners, with an entirely worthy and touching ending."³

Despite these and other laudatory remarks, and despite the fact that the play ran successfully for five weeks, James never forgot the shock of the first night. Discussing the experience four days later in a letter to his brother William, Henry described himself as "weary, bruised, sickened, disgusted." On February 2, 1895, he wrote to his brother again, expressing relief at the prospect of the ending of the "troubled little life" of his play, which had given him the "horriddest" four weeks of his existence.

One thing, however, is clear. James's belief, as expressed in the Colby letter, that Miss Terry's "whole performance" was "perfectly beautiful and right" is borne out by the judgment of the critics. In the *Illustrated London Magazine* Clement Scott called Marion Terry "one of the sweetest and most womanly actresses of our time"; and in the *Saturday Review* George Bernard Shaw pronounced her "altogether charming." He thought that "every movement, every tone, harmonized perfectly with the dainty grace and feeling of her lines."



A TALK WITH GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

By CARL J. WEBER

THE January issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* carried on its outside cover a portrait of George Bernard Shaw and on its inside pages a report by Vincent Sheean of the last visit he had paid to Shaw before his death on November 3, 1950. This is only one of an impressive series of articles which have been published in all sorts of magazines and newspapers since last November—articles indicative of the deep impression which the dramatist had made on his generation, nay, on *many* generations; for he was more than ninety-four years old when he died, and his long ca-

³ *Saturday Review*, LXXIX (January 12, 1895), 44.