

This Was Barrymore



Those who knew him best recall The Great Profile as a magnificent actor and a rich, many-faceted personality

by LOUIS L. SNYDER

TO HIS PHYSICIAN, Dr. Hugo Kersten, he was a patient who had drunk too much during his lifetime. To millions of enthralled women he was The Great Profile, the troubadour of love in a prosaic world. To others he was a ham actor with a Rabelaisian sense of humor, a fabulous wit, and a lust for life.

But to his great friend and biographer, Gene Fowler, John Barrymore was all this and much more. He was a genius of the stage, a magnificent actor of artistic integrity, whose spoofing and playful escapades hid a character of rich perception. Vital and wayward, Barrymore hurled himself against the years with fists pounding and eyes blazing. In the words of Fowler, "his prodigious follies, quixotic deeds, intense bursts of labor, together with his disregard of repose, would have felled a god."

Even as a young man, Barrymore was something special. Early press reports of the catastrophic San Francisco earthquake of April, 1906, listed among the missing the 24-year old Barrymore, who was about to embark on an Australian tour. John, very much alive, persuaded a newsman to tag onto the close of a bulletin to New York a message for his worried sister, Ethel.

The young actor reported that he had been thrown out of bed by the quake and had wandered in a slightly dazed condition to the street, where an Army sergeant spotted him and, placing a shovel in his hand, made him work in the ruins for 24 hours. When Ethel dramatically read this fictionalized message to Uncle John Drew and asked if he believed it, that ingenious realist re-

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plied: "Every word. It took an act of God to get him out of bed and the U. S. Army to put him to work!"

John Barrymore's behavior was unpredictable. He regarded theater audiences as necessary evils and had only contempt for the "peasants" who had paid money to see him. On one occasion, during the first act of a play in which he was starring, he became annoyed by repeated outbursts of coughing in the audience. By the time the second act came around, he was prepared for his enemies. When once again the coughing began, he reached inside his coat and extracted a large fish.

"Here, you damned walruses!" he shouted as he threw the fish into the audience. "Get to work on this while we go on with the play!"

On another occasion, during the rehearsal of a new play, he became embroiled in an argument with his leading lady and made some unnecessary remarks about her parentage. Infuriated, she left the stage in a huff.

"Please remember," she shouted, "that I am a lady!"

"Madam," he retorted ungallantly, "I will respect your secret."

He was proud of his family tradition and of the acting genius of his famed brother and sister, but he did not hesitate to pilfer a scene when he appeared with them on stage or screen. As a member of the Theater's Royal Family, he considered himself a man apart from other humans. One day, after ordering several articles in a haberdashery, he was about to leave when the clerk politely asked where the items were to be sent. Barrymore gave the address and turned to leave.

"And your name, please?" called the salesman after him.

The actor turned on his heel, cast a withering glance, and said, "Barrymore."

"Which Barrymore, please?" insisted the clerk.

"Ethel!" Barrymore barked.

It is curious that while John invested in a few great luxuries, such as his yachts, his house, his hobbies, he spent comparatively little on himself in the sense of personal maintenance. He cared not at all for clothes. He didn't own a watch. He wore no rings. He entertained infrequently. He much preferred eating in the kitchen or, if possible, in some friend's kitchen, to sitting in costly fashion at a restaurant table.

Sometimes Barrymore and his friend, Jack Prescott, would prowl about New York City late at night. And occasionally it suited John's whim to put on tails, white tie, and an old opera hat. On one of these nights the two formally attired

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friends found themselves on Tenth Avenue. Barrymore said that years before there had been a place between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues that was "tougher than hell," and thought it would be fun to go there again.

"We finally found a basement dive, the lowest sort of dump," Prescott recalls. "I am positive Barrymore had never seen the place before, and I know I hadn't. We breezed in, stepped to the bar, and John asked for a little brandy. The bartender scornfully scrutinized our silk hats, but said nothing. He reached behind the bar, then put a bottle on the woodwork.

"We probably were there 10 or 15 minutes when John said, 'Don't look now, but I think we are in hot water!' I glanced over my shoulder to see, approaching us slowly, three of the toughest fellows I ever glimpsed. John and I remained standing at the bar, trying to appear detached, when the biggest one of the three reached over between us, to plank down a dirty envelope and a pencil. He said, 'Mr. Barrymore, would ya give us yer autygraph?'

"At this, John let out a great yell. 'Give you my autograph?' he said. 'My God, I'll marry you!'

Barrymore entered his final year of markedly failing health, but got to his feet again and again, with a gameness rarely observed in any man. But finally came the day when he received the last rites of the Catholic Church. What happened next is told by Gene Fowler in his biography, *Good Night, Sweet Prince...*

"I went into his room that night to find a nurse endeavoring to brush his teeth. She looked up from the small basin she was holding beneath the patient's chin and said, 'He simply won't open his lips to let me brush his teeth.'

" 'Well,' I inquired, 'should you do it? Is it necessary?'

" 'It would make him feel much more comfortable. And the doctor has asked that it be done.'

"I whispered to her, 'Is he conscious?'

" 'I'm inclined to think so,' she replied, 'for he is stubbornly clenching his jaws.'

" 'Then stand in a corner,' I said, 'close your ears, and we'll see what can be done.'

"The nurse complied, a bit dubiously. I leaned over John and said, 'Listen, a beautiful woman is trying to brush your teeth, which, by some miracle, still remain in your possession. Why don't you open your eyes and see for yourself what you are missing, you . . .'

"John opened his eyes, then his

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mouth, and the nurse had no further trouble in brushing his teeth. Thus encouraged, the young woman held a glass of mouthwash to his lips. 'Now please rinse your mouth with this, Mr. Barrymore.'

"He promptly swallowed the mouthwash, to the consternation of the nurse. Worriedly she reported to the doctor, who replied: 'Never give Barrymore anything in a small glass, unless you know it can be safely taken internally.' "

THAT JOHN BARRYMORE survived for 60 years proves once again the power of the human will to maintain life. And of the many stories told about him, this one will be remembered for generations.

There is an alarum, and King Richard clanks onstage with his distraught cry: "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"

On this particular night, Barrymore hardly had delivered his penetrating vocals regarding the need for a charger when some gentleman in the balcony emitted the loudest guffaw since the days of Rabelais.

Barrymore, encased in black armor, raised his sword towards the balcony and, without departing far from the iambic pentameter of the Bard, called out: "Make haste, and saddle yonder ass!"

