

**THE LITTLE GRAY
LADY: A PLAY
WITHOUT A HERO**

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The Little Gray Lady: A Play Without a Hero by Channing Pollock

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CHANNING POLLOCK

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THE LITTLE GRAY LADY

A PLAY WITHOUT A HERO

*To dear
Gunt Ella
who was mid-wife at
the birth of this play,
from her affectionate
nephew.*

BY
CHANNING POLLOCK

Channing Pollock

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PREFACE

To one person, at least, the perusal of the following pages has been a pleasant excursion along The Road to Yesterday.

"The Little Gray Lady" was my first original play. (That is, it was my first original play, if you will be kind enough to except a crude melodrama produced in my adolescence and Proctor's Fifty-eighth Street Theater.) It was begun in my twenty-second year, and with nothing in my mind but the conviction that I *should* write a play. My regular occupation was securing publicity for William A. Brady, who had just presented Wilton Lackaye in my dramatization of Frank Norris' novel, "The Pit." That fortunate debut, I argued, would avail me nothing, unless it was followed, reasonably soon, by another opus.

So, with my mind made up, and a promising period of summer idleness ahead, I sat me down to write a play. I hadn't the faintest idea what the play was to be about, or where located. In fact, as aforesaid, I hadn't anything but a conviction, and a title—"The Little Gray Lady." My only method of breaking down a wall is to beat my head against it. For more than a month I sat behind a locked door, in my apartment on Seventh Avenue, from nine in the morning until six at night, and tried to think out a story. The books and papers about me proved a temptation, so they were taken out, and, on the theory that forbade decorations in the Wagnerian theater at Bayreuth, the room was stripped of all furniture but a chair, a table, and a typewriter. At the end of five or six weeks, I had nerves, but no narrative.

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An old friend, a physician, told me the important truth that the best way to find an idea is not to look for it. Dejected and discouraged, I deserted the bare work-shop, took a train to Baltimore, disembarked there, and started to walk to Washington. On the way came something of a theme. The cause of its coming was rather personal, but perhaps you will forgive that phase of the history. I was engaged to be married to a lady who considered herself plain. She wasn't, and isn't, as anyone who knows my wife will tell you, but that is *too* personal, and much beside the point. The point is that she thought herself plain, and that I was forever telling her what Mrs. Graham tells Mrs. Jordan—that "a girl can push a man down hill pretty fast, but it takes a woman to help him up."

Here, then, was a thesis with the advantage of fitting a title I was resolved not to give up. The rest came in Washington, where I was born, had gone to school, had written dramatic criticism for *The Post* and *The Times*, and, most helpful of all, had lived in boarding houses and had friends who clerked for the Government. It would be like calling attention to Mont Blanc to note the wisdom of writing only of the things you know well. O. Henry's prime genius lay in confining himself to the romance of "Bagdad on the Subway," where he was familiar with every twist and turn of street and human nature, rather than seeking it in Asiatic Turkey. Washington's boarding houses, and what they had produced, and indicated, in their inhabitants was a forgotten mental reservoir into which water had flowed during the most impressionable period of my life. Once the dam was down, came the deluge.

Within twenty-four hours, I had my play—a rushing river, to keep the metaphor, into which flowed the futile dreaming of Captain Jordan, the

prying energy of Mrs. Jordan, the vulgar self-seeking of Ruth Jordan, the eddying of Perry Carlyle, caught in a back-water, and the infinite maternity of Anna Gray. I knew all these people—dozens of them—hundreds. Each was a type; one of a group that had sat about me summer evenings on the front steps, and gone "car-riding" for economical diversion. They themselves provided the story. It remained only for me to refresh memory photographs, confirm detail, and question friends in the Secret Service as to the possibility of occurrences connected with the manufactured bill. The bill itself was made small purposely. "The Little Gray Lady" was to be a comedy of small people, of their small joys and sorrows and hopes and fears and doings.

Back in my bare room, the piece was finished within a fortnight. I had not then acquired the knowledge of good work that leads to constant and destructive comparison, nor developed the faculty of criticism that tears down more than it can build. I was not forever asking myself if this speech could be bettered, or that situation advantageously remodeled. I wrote because I did not know *how* to write; as the centipede, in the verse, ran until someone asked how he managed his legs. But, alas, neither did I know how to sell, and here was merchandise that required considerable persuasive ability. Anybody can dispose of a play like every other play. The fact that it *is* like something that made a hit assures the average manager that it, too, will make a hit. But the man who produces anything different for the American Theater, anything fresh and original and without precedent, goes into the market-place accompanied by the Shadow of Bankruptcy.

So far as any actress had been in my mind, "The Little Gray Lady" was written for Phoebe

Davies, then in her third or fourth season of "Way Down East." Miss Davies wanted a new vehicle, but her husband and manager, Joseph Grismer, associated with my employer, Mr. Brady, was sure of "Way Down East." Charles Frohman, to whom the piece was offered for Annie Russell, declined it, only to tell me later, when he had seen the play and sent for me, that he had never received the manuscript, and would have considered it ideal for Miss Russell. A list of producers who declined "The Little Gray Lady" would fill my allotted space, as a list of their reasons would embrace every outstanding feature that afterward figured in its success. Elisabeth Marbury, my agent, finally grew weary—as, indeed, after three years, she had reason to be—and suggested that we retire my unlucky heroine to some nice, comfortable desk drawer.

Throughout, her imitation had the unflagging and unflinching faith of the original Little Gray Lady. I mention this impersonally as may be, and in the same spirit that impells me to mention a new champion, my second agent, Alice Kauser. Miss Kauser believed in the play, kept her belief, inspired with her enthusiasm, and, I think, invested some of the necessary capital, when, in 1905, four years after it was written, she finally found a producer in Maurice Campbell. And this intrepid adventurer, though limited as to means and influence, and without a theater, brought to the piece skilful and imaginative direction that added immeasurably to whatever value it may have possessed.

"The Little Gray Lady" was acted on the road in the Autumn of 1905, and came to the Garrick Theater, in New York, January 25th, 1906. It was, perhaps, the first play of its genre—of everyday happenings to commonplace people, who were not the rustics of James A. Herne, nor the crowded

metropolitans of Edward Harrigan, but more closely paralleled later in Rachel Crothers' charming "The Three of Us." The newspaper verdict on the performance was practically unanimous. The things I had liked, and feared—the grayness and everydayness of story and characters; the unimportance, except to them, of what came near being their tragedy—were taken as they had been intended, and criticism universally was of the sort authors and actors believe in—which is to say, favorable. That the piece made a somewhat deeper impression than do many offerings of its sort has been gratifyingly indicated this year, when I have seen two pleasant mentions of it in books of comment, one of them Walter Prichard Eaton's "The American Stage Today." It gave me what came to be the close friendship of a great and generous man, Clyde Fitch, who, after its first performance, wrote to the apprentice in his shop, "Your 'Little Gray Lady' is a very big little lady, I think."

Anna Gray and her associates did not make much money in New York. For one reason, Mr. Campbell, as aforesaid, did not have a theater, and, because the owner of the house wanted to bring in a production of his own, we were obliged to leave the Garrick at the end of our 'biggest week. The Majestic, to which we moved, was pretty large, and pretty far up-town. Another reason I see now in reading the comedy after sixteen years. "A Play Without a Hero" may be an interesting experiment, but it is not likely to be popular. Perriton Carlyle was made what he is because his type is common in Washington, and exemplifies conditions in departmental life in Washington. Moreover, because that was the kind of man to call forth what was best in Anna Gray, and, finally, because, at twenty-two, I had more tolerance and sympathy for weaklings than now. Edgar Selwyn, since become a