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MISS KITTY TAKES TO THE ROAD

The Barretts of Wimpole Street in Seattle

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In the 1930s the comparatively new medium of radio featured the Town Crier—newsman and occasional actor Alexander Woollcott. Over several years, until his death in 1943, he repeated in the Christmas season the story of a noteworthy theatrical performance given under extraordinary circumstances in Seattle during the Christmas season of 1933. He wrote the story for the *Saturday Evening Post* in August 1934, and it appeared again in later collections of his writings.

The actress who starred in this 1933 adventure received a prestigious honor and award in 1937, and that surely had its way smoothed by the 1933 episode. The award ceremony took place at the White House under the auspices of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor. A large array of guests included diplomats and cabinet officials, plus the actress's husband and Woollcott, who frequently came as guest to the White House in those years. The actress herself suffered something near stage fright, but Eleanor Roosevelt, who was becoming Woollcott's friend, calmed her.

In 1933 a highly regarded theater group had launched forth from New York City's Broadway to take some plays on the road, for roughly 15,000 miles. This venture had a newsworthy aspect because "taking the show on the road" had declined greatly in the preceding years of the 20th century. Across the land, theaters built for live productions succumbed to the seemingly inevitable—movies. In fact, theatres actively opposed any reinvigoration of the onetime traveling troupes. So this 1933 tour, extending over all those miles, had offered both challenge and adventure.

During a performance in Amarillo, a sandstorm beat so relentlessly against the venue's metal roof that actors were reduced to nearly silent mime for part of the performance. Weather played an even more injurious role in December as the venturesome troupe left Duluth bound for Seattle. Irony invested the fact that these performers, meaning to bring live theater back to the country, should ride a train most of 2,000 miles between performances. At least in part, that arose from the reluctance of small city theaters across North Dakota and Montana to trifle with their now-solidified movie arrangements.

Though the tour proved surprisingly successful, if not quite repeatable, problems even greater than sandstorms and movie-house intransigence provided accompanying drama. Exceedingly heavy rain threw a pall over the itinerant thespians as they made their way west on the Great Northern, and it threatened to get worse. An evening performance on Christmas day graced the schedule for Seattle's Metropolitan Theater on Fourth Avenue, across from the Olympic Hotel. A planned arrival at 8:30 on the morning of the 25th had seemed comfortable for preparations.

The company, however, did not reckon with the rain that, by the way, was directly followed by very bitter cold.

Aboard that train and growing ever more uneasy, the actors clung to the hope of performing, on opening night, a drama set in 19th-century England, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. On Christmas Eve evening they made arrangements to have the dining car reserved for their use at 8:30, where they toasted one another with punch and sang, "Silent Night, Holy Night." The leading lady and central feature of the Seattle visit was Katharine Cornell, scheduled to perform on opening night as the invalid Elizabeth Barrett. Robert Browning, the poet, would be played by the elegant and handsome Basil Rathbone. A very youthful member of the troupe, Orson Welles, had a propensity for mischief, so much as to arouse the restraining effort of Cornell and her husband—the director of the plays and of the tour—Guthrie McClintic. McClintic did not accompany the troupe through all its travels and performances, but he would not miss the Seattle stay, as he had been born and raised there.

And now we pay closer attention to Woollcott's tale. He began his essay, "Miss Kitty Takes to the Road," with some thoughts and memories of Sarah Bernhardt. When Woollcott had paid a call at her Paris home ten years before the present episode, she had become "a ravaged and desiccated old woman with one leg. And the foot of that one was already in the grave." Despite all that, she spoke to her visitor of "the witching possibility of just one more farewell tour of America—that charming America where she had always been so uncritically applauded and so handsomely paid." She admitted that she was "too old" for cross-country junketings, and her visitor had sufficient French to oblige her by being "gallantly incredulous." No, extensive touring was out of the question; but, "of course, she would play Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington," and "perhaps" Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, St. Louis, Denver, and San Francisco.

"Hers was a viewpoint," Woollcott continued, "which seemed both alien and anachronistic in an era when there had come into possession of the New York stage a generation of players who regarded any departure from Broadway as penitential...." Bernhardt had been, as had "all the great men and women of the theater of her time," a "trouper.... Of the younger stars now shining brightest in the theatrical firmament only one is entitled to be called by that name. That one is Katharine Cornell." Back to that "trouper" and her supporting band, "trundling" toward Seattle, as told by the Town Crier:

Many of this troupe's experiences during the tour they will none of them ever want to forget. They will long remember, I suppose, the leisurely progress from Columbus to Louisville, some of the players making the jump by water, moving serenely down the Ohio, taking their ease in the rocking chairs on the deck of perhaps the only river boat in the world which is captained by a woman....

And surely no one in that troupe will forget while he lives the Christmas they spent together in 1933. Christmas Eve—it was a Sunday, you remember—found them trundling through Montana. They were booked to begin a week's engagement in Seattle, and you may be sure that Mr. McClintic had joined the troupe in St. Paul to witness his great lady's triumph in his home town. All that Sunday there had been prodigious preparations in the purlieus of the dining car. The mere members of the public who were traveling on that train were notified to dine early, as the diner had been preempted from 8:30 on. Miss Cornell was giving a Christmas dinner for her company, the whole troupe—actors, electricians, everybody.

There was immense hilarity, with young Marchbanks from Candida cracking nuts for Juliet's nurse while Robert Browning and the hated Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street drank to each other's everlasting prosperity in thick railway tumblers of Christmas punch. But even as the last toasts were drunk and the troupe scattered to their berths with much wishing of Merry Christmas and quotations from Tiny Tim, the management was growing uneasy because of telegraphed reports that the December rains were making transit through the state of Washington slow, perilous, and incalculable. It had already rained for three and twenty days and nights, and if it kept up much longer, they might have to make the rest of the trip in an ark and give their show, if at all, on the first convenient Ararat. At best, they would be later than they had hoped to be in reaching Seattle.

After they passed Spokane, it began to be doubtful whether they would get there at all. At every pause a telegram would come on board with anxious inquiries from the worried management ahead. The tickets had all been sold for the first performance. Even if the company could not arrive at the appointed time, would the management be justified in sending out word over the radio and catching the evening papers with an announcement that, however late, the troupe would at least arrive in time to give the performance at the scheduled hour? Then, as night fell, they were still proceeding at a snail's pace through rain-drenched darkness far from Seattle. The anxiety shifted to the question whether, even if the curtain could not be sent up as advertised, would they at least be there in time to make it worth while holding the audience fifteen minutes or half an hour?

Seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock passed, and still they crawled through the darkness, stopping even at one point while hastily mobilized bands of railroad workers flung up a new trestle, over which the train might creep breathless past the wreckage of one which had given way. By this time the company had given up hope. There could be no performance. This meant that, on the following Saturday night, one-eighth would be missing from each salary envelope. It is a rule of the theater that such deductions can be made whenever a performance is called off through what is blasphemously known as an act of God. It was, therefore, a gloomy bunch of thespians who rode the last stretch, their noses glued to the streaming windowpanes as the train seemed to crawl over a bridge made of the very faces of the railroad workers who stood aside to let it pass, grim, rain-drenched Mongolian faces lit up in the darkness by the flare of acetylene torches, staring in cold frightening wonder at the perilous passage of these strangers whose necessity had brought them out to work in the night and the rain.

It was an exhausted and disgruntled troupe that finally climbed down on the platform in Seattle at 11:15 p.m. They were just collecting their wits and their baggage when they were pounced upon and galvanized into immediate action by an astonishing piece of news. The audience was still waiting. All the best trucks in Seattle were assembled at the station to grab the scenery and costume trunks, and rush them to the theater. Tarpaulins were stretched and a hundred umbrellas proffered to protect it as it was being put into the trucks and taken out at the other end.

A line of automobiles was waiting to carry the company to the stage door. At the theater, or loitering in groups in the lobby of the Olympic Hotel across the street, twelve hundred people were still waiting. Most of them were in evening dress and some of them were sustaining themselves with light midnight snacks. They had waited so long. Would Miss Cornell still play for them? Would she?

But the company must have time to unpack their trunks, put on their makeup and get into the crinolines and gay, shapely pantaloons of 1855. They promised to do it in record time. Meanwhile, it seemed a pity to ask that audience to wait any longer with no entertainment of any kind. So, for once in the history of the theater, the curtain was rung up forthwith and that Seattle gathering, at midnight on Christmas Day, actually saw the stage being set and lighted, saw swing

into place the walls of the Victorian prison in which the tyrant of Wimpole Street chained his frail and gifted Andromeda.

*Each feat of the stage hands received rounds of applause. As the windowed wall of Elizabeth Barrett's room fell into place before the distant canvas glimpses of Wimpole Street and the windows in turn were hung with the rich portieres and valances of yesteryear, the enthusiasm mounted. It grew as the trunks, in full view of the audience, were opened and the costumes doled out by the wardrobe mistress. The actors, in dripping raincoats and horn-rimmed spectacles lined up like charity boys at a handout, each collecting his ecru pantaloons, his flowered waistcoat, his ruffled shirt, and what not. There was a great round of applause for the one member of the troupe who was already in complete costume when he arrived at the theater—Flush, the guileful and engaging cocker spaniel who has never missed a performance of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* since the first one, in Detroit, some years ago.*

*The greatest interest of all, I think, attached to the mysterious and intricate process by which a stage is lighted, a carefully calculated cross-play of beams by which certain parts of the stage are bathed in radiance and others, in which the action will be less important, are left in shadow. The focal point of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* is the couch from which Robert Browning rescues the sleeping princess. As Elizabeth Barrett, Miss Cornell must spend the entire first act, probably the longest act in all dramatic literature, supine upon that couch, and it is a matter for very careful calculation to have the lights which play upon it adjusted to the fraction of an inch. For this purpose, to the rapture of Seattle, Jimmy Vincent, the stage manager, stretched himself out and assumed, one after another, all the postures he knew Miss Cornell would later assume. As Mr. Vincent is stocky and Oriental in appearance, and as the visible gap between his trousers and his waistcoat widened horrifically with every languorous pose into which he tried to fling his arms and head, the effect was stupefying. Then the warning bell rang, the lights in the auditorium went down, and the curtain fell, only to rise again with Miss Cornell at her post on the couch. The play was ready to begin.*

It was five minutes past one in the morning. The entire troupe—scenery, costumes and all; had arrived in the town less than two hours before and already the curtain was rising, which is probably a record for all time. The excitement, the heady compliment paid by the audience in having waited at all, had acted like wine on the spirits of the troupe, and they gave the kind of performance one hopes for on great occasions and never gets. But at the end of that first long act, Miss Cornell was visited by a kind of delayed fatigue. A postponed weariness took possession of her. She felt she must have something, anything, if she was to go on at all with what remained of the play. To Mr. McClintic, hovering apprehensively in the offing, she merely said: "Get me an egg," and rushed to her dressing room.

Into the streets of Seattle at two o'clock in the morning rushed the faithful McClintic in quest of an egg. Nothing was open except a drugstore and a lunch wagon, and the audience, in its long wait, had consumed every morsel of food in that part of town. There wasn't an egg to be had. The kitchens at the Olympic across the street were dark and inexorably locked. As a last desperate measure, McClintic began calling up such surviving citizens of Seattle as he had gone to school with years before. Finally one such appeal aroused someone. A sleepy voice asked who could be calling at such an hour in the morning. It was with some difficulty that he succeeded in identifying himself. "You remember Guthrie, who used to live in such-and-such a street and used to go to school with you?" Oh, yes, and then what? "Well," the voice from the past faltered in its final task, "can you let me have an egg?" Incidentally, she could and did.

It was a quarter of four in the morning when the final curtain fell. And that blessed audience, feeling, perhaps, that it was too late by this time to go to bed at all, stayed to give more curtain calls than the exhausted troupe had ever heard.

When the tour wound up in Brooklyn, on June 23, Miss Kitty had played to more than half a million of her fellow countrymen. I suppose they will all remember her, but none, I am sure, more fondly than the faithful band in Seattle which, on the day after Christmas, waited until one in the morning for her first curtain to rise. They will ever have a welcoming round of applause to greet her entrance when she is an old, old actress playing the Nurse to the Juliet of some youngster as yet unthought-of. The Juliet, perhaps, of Mary MacArthur. Mary is Helen Hayes's daughter.

That theatrical episode had, of course, newsworthy qualities; but it should be borne in mind that that performance came against a backdrop of hardship, well beyond a Christmas Eve inadequately enjoyed while "trundling" westward. On the 23rd the *Seattle Star's* front-page headline read: "FLOODS HALT CHRISTMAS TRAFFIC." Two days later the *Post-Intelligencer* carried even sadder front-page fare: "2 WOMEN DIE! Pair Buried Alive in Sea of Mud; Two Men Are Rescued," that occurring at a house on Maple Valley Road east of Renton. Theatrics had a place, as in a page-four photo in the *Post-Intelligencer* on the 24th showing Katharine Cornell and Basil Rathbone under the words, "SUAVE ACTING." The next day the same paper had a photograph of Cornell alone with caption telling of her appearance "in her most famous role" as Elizabeth Barrett "tonight on the Metropolitan Theatre's stage." That did not reckon with realities. The page-three photograph of her on the next day bore the heading, "Better Late than—"

Several days later Seattle's *Town Crier*—not to be confused with Woollcott—gave an overview of the "Cornell Week in Seattle," beginning thus:

Maybe Hell had no hand in it, but High Waters certainly did their best to prevent Seattle from consummating the long-looked-forward-to grand opening of The Barretts of Wimpole Street, with none other than The Cornell starring, Basil Rathbone supporting, and Guthrie McClintic supervising production in person. So notable a theatrical trio has not visited Seattle in many a long year. Not, in fact, since the good old days.

It made a memorable story, and a Mount Vernon free-lance writer, Joyce L. Harris, recalled it over 43 years later in the *Post-Intelligencer*, May 15, 1977. She had come upon the "sparkling tale" in one of Woollcott's books, and that had fed her recollection of "The Night 'The Barretts' were Late to the Metropolitan." Her family had four tickets, two for *The Barretts* and two for George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*. Both she and her sister wanted to see Cornell in *The Barretts*. "Older and bigger than I, she won the argument." The older sister and a friend attended the fabled performance while Joyce L. Harris and a friend saw the Shaw play a few days later. Here she recalled feeling "rather let down, as though I were seeing something anti-climatic [sic] to that exciting First Night."

But Joyce Harris, too, would "witness history." That night Miss Cornell had as her leading man "a young 17-year-old actor unknown to most of us at the time." Before the decade of the 1930s had ended, that actor—Orson Welles—was known to all who knew theater. Welles, a member of the troupe through the instrumentality of Thornton Wilder and, more directly, Alexander Woollcott, seems to have been 18 at this time, certainly old enough to play Marchbanks in *Candida* and to crack Christmas nuts for Miss Kitty, who occasionally had to constrain him.

Time "flies," as Harris noted at the outset, but the Woollcott story had "tumbled her backward into another time." That happened, of course, less and less. In 1961 Seattle papers duly noted the death of Guthrie McClintic, and mention was made of his 1955 autobiography, *Me and Kit*. That story of the Seattle fellow who married Katharine Cornell has interesting material about his Seattle boyhood, and the Lincoln High School history teacher who encouraged and guided him

on his course toward theater. It seems, however, meager in its treatment of the Christmas adventure of 1933. Perhaps Woollcott's rendition of the tale did not admit of improvement, and so we turn to him for the curtain. In the 1946 edition of *The Portable Woollcott*, the gentleman himself having died in 1943, an introduction by John Mason Brown began this way:

At CBS in New York they still show you with proper pride the sizable hand bell which announced the Town Crier on the air. This bell is all the introduction Alexander Woollcott needed or now needs...mainly because, as this book once again proves, Woollcott was a storyteller who could himself ring the bell again and again. "Hear, ye! Hear, ye! This is Woollcott speaking."

In 1939 Cornell returned to Seattle where she and Woollcott dined together on Christmas day. They must have mused about her visit of six years earlier. Woollcott's tale of that visit retains its interest over the decades, and Seattle might well cherish not only the story itself, "Miss Kitty Takes to the Road," but also the sentiment that Woollcott placed above that title: "PROVING that a great audience is as rare and as wonderful as a great actress."

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