

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

PITTSBURGH'S OTHER TRIANGLE¹

SAMUEL STEVENS HOOD

A HALF-FORGOTTEN marriage license is Exhibit A in one of literature's most famous triangles. On file in the city-county building archives, in Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle, it started something not so golden. The license, dated March 22, 1907, was issued to British actress Ellen Terry and the American actor James Carew. The couple was in Pittsburgh in the Nixon Theater's production of *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, the play George Bernard Shaw wrote for Miss Terry.

In the play Miss Terry was Lady Cicely Waynefflete who escaped the bonds of matrimony with Captain Brassbound, played by Carew. On stage, when going through the Shavian antics, they were puppets, with Shaw the master of the situation. But when they departed from the script and gave a real-life fourth act to Shaw's three-act farce, it gave Shaw bottom billing in the real-life drama—a position he has persistently fought all his life. In short, the marriage started a feud between Miss Terry and Shaw whose love-letter correspondence between 1892 and 1922 made a sizzling book.

But to return to March 22, 1907—appropriately the first of Spring. When the young actor's fancy turned to love—and there are reasons to believe that a not-so-young actress, ex-

¹Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 28, 1950, under the fuller title, "Pittsburgh's Other Triangle (not so Golden): Ellen Terry—James Carew—George Bernard Shaw." Mr. Hood has been a *Pittsburgh Press* reporter since 1945. He has published a book about the authorized biographer of George Bernard Shaw, entitled *Archibald Henderson: the New Crichton* (New York, Beechhurst Press, 1949).—Ed.

perienced in man-catching, helped him make up his mind as much as did the voices of Spring—he found himself and his bride (who had been married twice before² and who was a grandmother) standing before a Bellevue justice of the peace.

The theatrical love birds had slipped away and were married by Squire George J. Campbell, a secret kept until their return to England months later. Miss Terry camouflaged the newsworthy event by signing her current real name, Ellen Alice Wardell. Carew, whose real name was Usselmann, was so little known that signing his stage name on the license put the couple in no danger of getting into the news. Of course to Squire Campbell the matter was just another couple in the marriage mill.

The license³ itself is an interesting document. Miss Terry, unlike most actresses, did not lie about her age—fifty-nine. Carew, who was Goshen, Indiana's contribution to the stage, was only thirty-one and a freshman at the altar. Their signatures, however, are more revealing than the statistics. Miss Terry's handwriting is evidence of why she had long-run plays and short-run marriages. Her bold signature (the ink is still as unfaded as the Terry legend) shows her individualism. Carew's handwriting did not strain the pen. He was not aware of it then, but, though off stage, he was playing his greatest role.

The marriage, sad to state, did not last. Shaw himself best summed up why all three failed: "Her marriages were adventures and her friendships enduring."⁴ Miss Terry's son, Edward Gordon Craig, the famous stage designer, had this to say in his book about her: "For the institution of marriage she had some understanding, a great respect, but no liking. She married three times, so . . . it could not be said that she

²At sixteen she married George Frederick Watts, the painter, but this marriage quickly dissolved. In 1876 she married Charles Wardell, an actor who went under the name Charles Kelly, but they separated in 1881, and he died in 1885.

³No. F-23229, Carew-Wardell, Allegheny County Marriage License Bureau, Pittsburgh.

⁴In a preface by Shaw (p. xiii) to Christopher St. John, ed., *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence* (New York, 1931).

had been unfair to marriage . . . and proved it a farce each time."⁵

But to get back to Pittsburgh's other triangle. On her honeymoon, Miss Terry (pardon, Mrs. Carew) found time to write to Shaw.⁶ Although the letter, dated April 7, 1907, makes no mention of her having captured *Brassbound*, it is of interest to Pittsburghers, because here was a strolling player having a compliment as well as a jibe for Pittsburgh. Her boost reads like a Chamber of Commerce script: "Pittsburgh," wrote Mrs. Carew, "of all places in the world is lovely! Surely, never was there more beautiful sunshine than today's! The smoke of the place was unendurable and I just crossed the river and went up to the Allegheny hills and there found all the wonderfulness." One might add here that Mrs. Carew, as the song writer says, had a case of "smoke gets in your eyes." So for a grandmother turned bride one could hardly blame it all on the steel mills. The two-paragraph letter, written in three days, was finished in Montreal. She signed it "Ellen" and added a postscript about her husband. However, she did not let Shaw know of Carew's new role. "James Carew," she said, "acts better and better every week. He is a splendid fellow and adores you *and me*."

By August 5, when the secret was out, Shaw wrote her—with a "Mrs. Carew" salutation—recommending that Carew stick to playing *Brassbound* since "he will be the attraction as your latest victim." Shaw, in another letter to Miss Terry, ridiculed Carew by calling him "wampum and feathers," obviously comparing Carew's striking features with the American Indian. In the same letter Shaw let go with another broadside: "I still think he treated me rather badly in marrying you: after all, you were my leading man and not his."⁷

The Terry-Carew-Shaw triangle started in London in 1906. The scene was the Court Theatre where Shaw says he and

⁵Edward Gordon Craig, *Ellen Terry and Her Secret Self*, 47 (London, n.d.).

⁶Terry-Shaw Correspondence, 315.

⁷Terry-Shaw Correspondence, 316, 320.

Miss Terry had their first serious meeting. This dispels the popular legend that they never met. The playwright had written *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* for Miss Terry in 1899, and she was just getting around to playing in it. Shaw and Miss Terry were talking in the rehearsal room when Carew, who was then playing a minor role, Captain Kearney, walked by. The incident, as described by Shaw, was as follows: Miss Terry asked, "who was that?" and Shaw said, "that's the American captain." Shaw sadly added: "Without an instant's hesitation she sailed across the room; put Mr. Carew in her pocket . . . and married him. The lucky captive naturally made no resistance. . . . I cannot believe James had any choice of his own in the matter." Shaw admits he was "awestruck" adding, "I had not believed it possible for even the most wonderful of women to choose her man at a single glance." In this preface to the Terry-Shaw correspondence, written more than twenty years after the Court Theatre episode, Shaw claims that "so swift a decision by a huntress" made him say to himself, "there but for the grace of God, goes Bernard Shaw."⁸

He did not plan it that way, however. In describing his love-letter correspondence with Terry, he said personal contacts were unnecessary. But in the same preface he admits that Sir Henry Irving, the famous actor, had passed on, and that "Ellen's heart was for the moment vacant. I could not help speculating as to the possibility of my filling the vacancy. But Providence had other views."

It must be emphasized here that there was another triangle, the Terry-Irving-Shaw triangle, which had more to do with the voluminous correspondence. Here Shaw engineered a conspiracy to alienate Miss Terry from the domination of Sir Henry, of the Lyceum Theatre, who personified the Shakespearean "old school" style of acting and drama. Shaw wanted to win Miss Terry over to the "new school" personified by

⁸*Terry-Shaw Correspondence, Shaws' preface, xxvii.*

Ibsen and himself. Her marriage to Carew is a significant dividing line.

The book of Terry-Shaw letters devotes 315 pages to the fifteen years up to 1907; for the fifteen years after that, the letters cover only fifteen pages. That her marriage to Carew practically ruptured her friendship with Shaw is illustrated in her letters during the latter period. She asked Shaw for help in getting theater parts but he did not offer to help. In one letter he accused Carew of being tied to her apron strings, and in another crossed out "dearest Ellen" in the original manuscript and substituted "My Dear Mrs. Carew."

The fact that Shaw himself was married all these years may seem confusing. His marriage to Miss Charlotte Payne-Townshend, the Irish "millionairess," lasted from 1898 to her death in 1943. She bought the license and ring and so must have known what she was doing. After more than four decades of living happily with Shaw, Mrs. Shaw staged something more Shavian than anything her husband ever did. It was her will. She left money to teach the Irish manners. This came from the woman who was married to the most famous and impudent of Irishmen! But to get back to Shaw and Miss Terry. What he seemed to want most from her was remote control domination. He had won the intellectual battle to bring her into drama's "new school" but now he lost in battling Miss Terry's heart throbs for young Cupid Carew.

Another incident also figured in the puncture of Shaw's ego. That is, Miss Terry did not like the play he wrote for her. Archibald Henderson, Shaw's authorized biographer, has this to say: "When her son, Gordon Craig, became a father, Ellen Terry who made no secret of the fact that she was born in 1848, playfully wrote Shaw that now no one would ever write plays for a grandmother. Shaw immediately began to write *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. . . . Shaw drew the character Lady Cicely Waynefflete entirely from Ellen Terry's letters to him and from his long and admiring study of her

nature and temperament through her stage parts. . . . Ellen Terry made no secret of her disappointment."

Henderson adds that she "soon changed her mind, but could not believe that the big public was ready for Shaw; and her public was the big public." He also explains the Terry-Irving-Shaw triangle: "During the period of his drama criticism on the *Saturday Review*, Shaw relentlessly criticized Henry Irving and the Lyceum for being reactionary. . . . He was most eager to have her play a leading role in one of his own plays . . . [and] cherished the indignation of the modern artist against Irving for depriving Ellen Terry, the greatest English actress of her day, of the opportunity of playing modern roles."⁹

But let us get back to the Pittsburgh love birds and see what happened to them. First it should be said that the match lasted two years. That was exactly how long Miss Terry's daughter, Edith Craig, predicted it would last. Her brother, Gordon, however, was not so pessimistic, although he had no illusions that it would last forever. Edith disapproved of Carew, but her brother Gordon liked him. In his book Gordon wrote of his stepfather, only four years his senior: "James Carew . . . a jollier fellow I do not know. . . . On hearing the news [of the marriage] I felt delighted."¹⁰ It might be added that Gordon was not so delighted when the Terry-Shaw letters were published and in a supplement to his book (a pamphlet entitled *A Plea for G.B.S.*, dedicated to Sir Henry Irving) he charged Shaw with having the jealousy of Iago.

Miss Terry lightly breezed over her third marriage when writing her autobiography (her only book), published the year after she became Mrs. Carew. In it she says: "In 1907 . . . I toured in America . . . playing modern plays for the first time. . . . But this tour was chiefly momentous to me because at Pittsburgh I was married for the third time, and

⁹Arohibald Henderson, *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, 496-497 (New York and London, 1932).

¹⁰Craig, *Ellen Terry*, 58.

married to an American. My marriage was my own affair, but very few people seemed to think so. . . . Well I am happy and while I am happy I cannot feel old."¹¹

But her notebook contradicts this. Christopher St. John, in a biographical appendix to the republished Terry memoir, reports that Miss Terry frequently wrote character sketches in notebooks. One, not published in the Terry autobiography, is about "J. an Interesting Study," in which she observed: "I love him. He is a child . . . and the child, J., makes me wish I were twenty years younger." (That would still make her nearly ten years older than Carew). "But he has jealousy," she continued, "[he is] a mixture. He is a half wild thing. . . . The rather violent explosions are temporary and at times merely amusing. . . . When the fits are past it is hard to realize they have been, but their daily recurrence means more than ordinary wear and tear of one's body and spirit. I only ask for the *attempt* for control."¹²

In short, the basic difference between Ellen Terry and James Carew was that she had talent: he had temperament. This, however, was not Carew's verdict. After his wife's death he had this to say: "The only way to get on with her was not to live in the same house." St. John, who describes Carew as incapable of giving a straight answer without going into circles, said he once gave a direct answer when asked why Miss Terry married him: "I suppose because she was mad about me."

Although his wife forgot him, Carew never forgot her. After she died in 1928, at the age of eighty, her casket stood for more than a year in her daughter's apartment. A room was converted into a chapel and a sanctuary light burned night and day. During the year when negotiations were made to place the ashes in St. Paul's, Convent Garden, flowers were sent to the chapel every week. They came from James Carew.

¹¹Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life*, 326-327 (New York, 1908).

¹²Ellen Terry's *Memoirs*, 287 (New York, 1932).

And what happened to Carew, the least famous of Pittsburgh's other triangle? But first a mention of the triangle's two greats: Miss Terry, shortly before her death, was made a Dame, the equivalent of knighthood; Shaw, approaching ninety-four, is still going strong at his English country home, collecting royalties and in general reaping money by sowing insults. Carew, who achieved only reflected glory, died at sixty-two. A 1938 dispatch from London to the *New York Times* listed his claim to fame as being "Mr. Ellen Terry," and added that in his twilight years he was a movie bit player, a radio comedian over the BBC, and the first half of "Alexander and Mose," a music hall blackface act.

However, the saddest note is that in her autobiography Ellen Terry did not mention James Carew's name.