MRS FISKE

FRANK CARLOS GRIFFITH

V

THE THEATRICAL SYNDICATE

THERE are few people who have not heard of the Theatrical Syndicate, and probably a far less number among theater-goers who care two straws about it. It was organized about the time Mrs. Fiske returned to the stage, and was composed of six men, who owned or controlled a sufficient number of theaters, stars, productions, and booking privileges to warrant them in believing that if they could acquire a few more interests of these varied classifications they might be able to create a practical monopoly of all theatrical enterprises.

If they held by ownership, lease, or contract to book exclusively the principal theaters of the United States, the stars and producing managers would be obliged to come to them for their time, which meant a booking fee from the touring managers and the same from

the theaters booked, as well as their profits from those they leased or owned.

Should the touring manager decline this proposition, he would be obliged to play his attractions in second-class houses, with a loss in prestige and perhaps pocket.

To reverse this plan, if the Syndicate could corral the principal stars and productions, the theaters not under their control would be without attractions much of the time, or must fill in the gaps with inferior ones. Mr. Jefferson, who termed the scheme as one inimical to the best interests of the theater, was one of the first to surrender. Nat. Goodwin, Francis Wilson, and Richard Mansfield, who each had denounced the Syndicate in good set terms, fell into the outstretched net one by one; but Mrs. Fiske steadfastly held aloof.

The scheme was certainly a bold one, and in line with the methods of the big trusts in oil, steel, coal, tobacco, sugar, etc.

Attempts were made to break down the organization by applying the anti-trust laws and decisions to its operation, but in every minor

as well as important case against the theater the decison was persistently adhered to,—that a theater is a "private" enterprise; it could not be classed as a necessity or that the establishment of rules or prices was in restraint of trade. No one was obliged to go to the theater, and no suffering was entailed upon him by the raising of prices and his consequent absence from it.

No, the theater was private property, and, as such, the manager could do what he pleased with it, so long as his offerings did not corrupt the morals of the community or become a nuisance in any way. Hence opposition was useless on these lines.

In Boston and in Chicago there was always a first-class theater for Mrs. Fiske,—the Tremont Theater, or the Grand Opera House, in the latter of which all of Mrs. Fiske's engagements in Chicago have been played.

At first there was little difficulty for her to obtain bookings in first-class houses, but gradually, as season after season came and went, the screws were turned a little tighter, and she had at length to resort to the second-class or

melodramatic houses, always, however, raising the prices to her level, be it remembered.

It was during nearly all of the time of her struggle for independence that my connection with her interests was continued.

Mr. Fiske put up a hard and bitter fight through the columns of the *Dramatic Mirror*, which he owned, and through other journals that from time to time allied themselves with him.

Eventually David Belasco became an independent, and Henrietta Crosman, through her husband Maurice Campbell, and also James K. Hackett, were for a time under the Syndicate ban.

Along in December, 1892, when the sole Independents were Mrs. Fiske, Miss Crosman, and Mr. Hackett, we were presenting "Mary of Magdala" at the Manhattan Theater, and the bookings outside of New York were few and far between for the independents. Mrs. Fiske, with her great name and prestige, succeeded in filling her time, but the others found it pretty "hard sledding" and far more difficult to do

so. Hence on December 18 I was requested to go to Pittsburg to see if it were possible to get a theater opened to the Independents. No clue was given me to work upon, excepting by the process of elimination, which left two possibilities.

My first visit was to Mr. Williams at the Duquesne, to whom I gradually unfolded my desires. Mr. Williams was very polite and equally emphatic, that he knew what he could do with vaudeville, but he could not answer for results with first-class stars.

After presenting my entire stock of arguments, he finally informed me that he could not do this even if he would, as there was an agreement existing with the Bijou management —he not to present drama, while on the other hand they were not to give vaudeville during the continuance of that agreement.

My next call was upon Mr. Gulick at the Bijou, and after some considerable effort I succeeded in convincing himself and his partner, Mr. McNulty, that their interests lay in high-priced dramatic stars at the Duquesne, rather

than low-priced vaudeville, and I gained their consent to an annulment of the agreement with Mr. Williams, so far as our bookings were concerned, provided Mr. Williams wished to do so.

Back to Mr. Williams with my story, but he was far from acquiescent. Again I opened my box of tricks, and as eloquently as possible I plead my clients' case. To make a long story brief, I was to write out the form of option I desired and bring it to him that evening, and he would mull on it over Sunday and let me know his decision Monday morning.

This was on Saturday afternoon, December 20, 1902. That evening I returned with my option carefuly written out and passed it over to Mr. Williams. He deliberately adjusted his glasses, and I sat back while he carefully and slowly read the paper to the end. I then expected some comment from him; but not a word did he utter, and when he had finished he laid the paper down upon his desk and fumbled among his papers for something which proved eventually to be his pen, which, when found,

he unconcernedly utilized to sign the paper. He then tossed it over to me, with the simple remark. "There, I suppose that is what you want." And it was.

I had been informed that the opening of theaters in Cleveland and Detroit to the Independents depended upon the acquisition of one in Pittsburg, and it may easily be inferred what my feelings were while en route back to New York with the document in my pocket that really did open all three cities.

One other incident that was of importance to us occurred a little later. We opened on Christmas Day in a large city of the Atlantic Slope, and because of its being Christmas, and of course a holiday, I did not call upon the editor-in-chief of the principal evening paper, who was a personal friend, as I should have done on any other day of the week.

This particular daily owned one of the principal theaters that was under Syndicate control, and quite naturally an inferior attraction, appearing there against us, received a flattering notice while Mrs. Fiske, her play, and company

came in for the crumbs that fell from the Syndicate table.

During Tuesday I called to pay my respects to the aged editor-in-chief, and in the course of the conversation he inquired if the paper had used us all right. I replied that I was very sorry to say that it had not.

Astonished and grieved at this announcement, for he gave little personal attention to this department himself, he wished to know why. I explained that the opinions expressed by his critic were as much out of harmony with the universal verdict as they would have been had he characterized the Savior on the cross as a thief and the two thieves as the martyred Sons of God.

Little more was said on the subject, other than that he was extremely sorry, and that he wished I had called the day before. However, the climax came later.

That evening a special writer was dispatched to the theater where we were, and on the following day a very delightful interview appeared with a portrait—the paper not using

them as a rule. On the following Sunday a column article appeared, very gratifying and just in every respect, *over the signature* of the writer of Tuesday's unfavorable review.

These are but two illustrations of the constant vigilance and activity that prevailed during the long struggle for independence.

The greatest blow the Independents received was in the agreement between the Syndicate and Stair & Havlin that practically closed the second-class houses to first-class stars. Mrs. Fiske came nearer being bottled up, corked in, and wired down then than at any other period, but Houdini-like, it was impossible to keep her entirely chained. She was now forced to seek an outlet, like pent-up steam, and vaudeville houses, burlesque houses, and stock company houses gave way for a week or a night to her; halls and rinks were utilized; upstairs and downstairs stages; clubhouses with stages and auditoriums were offered to her; while such vast amusement places as the Auditoriums in St. Paul and Los Angeles, not controlled by the Syndicate, were appropriated.

We have played great rinks in the British Northwest so vast that huge sailcloths were hung across the center of the building to shut off the immensity of space, and act as a sounding board.

We played "Rosmersholm," with two diminutive interiors and a cast of seven people, on that enormous stage of the St. Paul Auditorium, a stage so immense as to enable all the transfer wagons, and then some, to be driven upon the stage back of the set scenes, that looked like little bird houses, so great was the vacant space about them.

The Pacific Coast gave us much trouble for a long time, but we invariably found some opening somewhere. In Los Angeles it was first the Grand Opera House, then the Burbank, next the Belasco,—both the latter stock houses,—and lastly the Auditorium. The last named was on a rental, but the week proved one of the biggest ever played to by Mrs. Fiske.

It was during this struggle that I was dispatched to Joseph Jefferson's private car, to sound him on the subject of Independence; but

I must say that the interview resulted in no satisfaction to the Independents.

The rise of the Shuberts was of great value to Mrs. Fiske, and on the other hand she of inestimable value to them, and it is a question if they would have been able to get on their feet if it had not been for her bookings and her magic name associated with them.

It was a mutual advantage, however, and had circumstances been indefinitely favorable to the coalition it might still be to the advantage of both, for about the time the fight was called off against Mrs. Fiske and Mr. Belasco the Shuberts were becoming exceedingly strong and have become much stronger since.

Even as early as 1909, in January, evidence for a desire for amity began to get about and reach us from sources intimately connected with the Syndicate, but nothing materialized that could be considered official; still there were whisperings which finally developed into open declarations that if Mrs. Fiske or Mr. Belasco wished to play in any Syndicate house, one or all of them, they would be welcomed,

and no questions asked. It was while we were in Cincinnati, on April 29, that the information came to Mrs. Fiske by wire and newspaper announcement, and we were at once besieged by interviewers for any statement Mrs. Fiske might choose to make.

It might have been expected of Washington, that he would have something to say after seven years' struggling for independence. It might also have been expected of Lincoln, after the four years' war that ended in his triumph; but no one, especially gentle-minded people, wish to exhibit a spirit of triumph over those whom they have vanquished.

The Fiske's contention had been for the right to book, without dictation, with the managers of theaters direct or their representatives, without any compulsion to play certain other cities; and to play one theater or another according as the terms and other conditions suited the contracting parties themselves.

When this restraint was removed, Mrs. Fiske had no further visible contention, for the independence she had fought for had been at-

tained, and the published statement, agreed to by Messrs. Klaw and Erlanger, Mr. Fiske and Mr. Belasco, stated that they would, "hereafter, whenever mutually agreeable, play attractions in each other's theaters"; and furthermore, the announcement stated, "nothing was discussed that would or could interfere with the fulfillment of any existing arrangements or contracts by any of the parties concerned. No writing of any kind was prepared, except the foregoing statement."

The only comment that Mrs. Fiske would make was a very brief statement of fact, that was given out to each paper alike, to the effect that the New York announcement was true; but that she had not relinquished her independent attitude in any respect.

This information was at first given over her signature, but immediately after delivering them Mrs. Fiske dispatched a hastily penciled note to me, to the effect that perhaps there had been an understanding between the parties concerned that no one should give out a statement, and that therefore she would be grateful if

the papers would use the matter, not as a personal statement from her, but as a simple statement of fact.

The war was ended, but the winner of a long struggle showed no more evidence of it than if it had been an every-day occurrence. A woman of more perfect control over her emotions I cannot imagine. The subject was scarcely even discussed between us.

The causes that led up to the truce, armistice, protocol, or capitulation to the Fiske contention I will not discuss. I will merely state a fact, and that is, that the Shubert or Independent interest had gotten to be a powerful one, and a little later it received a perfect landslide of acquisitions in the West, and especially on the Pacific Coast, where hitherto they had been exceedingly weak. This much is history and not personal opinion.