HUMOR FROM "SEVENTEEN" A PLAY OF YOUTH

RUTH GORDON as LOLA PRATT SURROUNDED by GROUP of ADMIRERS

GREGORY KELLY as WILLIE BAXTER and AGNES HORTON as ETHEL BOKE

WILLIE (GREGORY KELLY) "BORROWS" FATHER BAXTER'S OLD DRESS SUIT, CANE and HAT to CALL UPON MISS PRATT as a MAN of the WORLD

SCENES FROM BOOTH TARKINGTON'S "SEVENTEEN"

By BOOTH TARKINGTON.

THE play "Seventeen" is not mine; before the opening performance I hadn't seen the script, even. One of my aversions is the habit of some authors to avoid all possible references to the actual playmakers, in the case of plays founded on popular books. The writer of the book usually permits such a play to be referred to as his play—sometimes he encourages such references; and I have known the writers of dramatized books who somehow got to believing that they had made the dramatizations. I know one lady writer who travels with the company, makes first night speeches, and talks about "my little play"—puts in the "little" to show how modest she is—and she never in her life wrote a line in any play produced!

Now, since I didn't write the play, I can, without reservation or exception, indorse "Seventeen," the dramatization of my book by the same name as produced by Stuart Walker. I saw the play and am frank to say that I enjoyed it. But I must confess that the parts I enjoyed most were not mine. They were the features added by Mr. Walker, the master craftsman, and his players, which fit so well with the spirit of youth and the spirit in which the book was written.

"SEVENTEEN."

A play of youth and love and summertime.

Scenes—the living room of the Baxter home and the porch of the Parcher house, next door.

Mr. Baxter—Mary!—Mary!—Jane! (Jane enters with some food in her hands). Have you seen my *Tribune*?

Jane—Yes, sir. (She darts upstairs and soon returns with the paper). I was looking at the pictures.

Mr. Baxter—Jane, did you ever think about not eating for a while?

Jane—The doctor told mamma it was good for me. (Mrs. Baxter has entered).

Mr. Baxter—I don't see where you put it all. I finished my dinner ten minutes ago.

Jane—You eat awful fast, papa. Mamma said——

Mrs. Baxter—That will do, Jane.

Jane—Well, what you said was all right. You just said——

Mrs. Baxter—Jane!

Jane—Yes'm—(changing the subject rapidly)—Willie's reading!—a big book—He reads it lots. He's in his room—It has a brown cover. (She departs.)

Mrs. Baxter—I've never seen such a memory for the details of other people's business, especially William's.

Mr. Baxter—She probably suspects that we're interested.

Mrs. Baxter—Well, now, Sylvanus, I never encourage her to repeat things.

Mr. Baxter—It's impossible to discourage her. If she doesn't tell it today, she'll tell it to-morrow. You mark my words, she'll tell me yet that you said I gobbled my food.

Mrs. Baxter—Well, I didn't put it that way; but I don't want the children to get in the habit of eating fast and in silence.

Mr. Baxter—What is Willie reading?

Mrs. Baxter—I don't know—he reads a great deal—every now and then.

Mr. Baxter—What was the matter with him at dinner?

Mrs. Baxter—He said he wasn't hungry.

Mr. Baxter—He seemed to be worried about something.

Mrs. Baxter—He doesn't like to be called Willie, I suppose.

Mr. Baxter—That's nonsense. We've always called him Willie.

Mrs. Baxter—Yes, but he feels he's getting too old for pet names and petting.

Mr. Baxter—Pshaw! That's not a pet name—it's just a name.

Mrs. Baxter—Well, Sylvanus, we mustn't be too hard on the boy. He's at the painful age when he's too old to be a child and too young to be a man.

Mr. Baxter—Does he think that everything is going to change because he's getting older? He's not the only boy who has added a year to his life.

Mrs. Baxter—But he doesn't realize that—no boy does.

Mr. Baxter—Now, Mary, I wasn't that way. When I was his age I would have jumped at the chance to go to college, and I know I wasn't the self-conscious jackanapes this boy is.

Mrs. Baxter (smiles, because she knows boys)—Every boy of his age likes to seem perfect, Sylvanus. He wants everything just right—a just so home, family, the very best in town, clothes just right.

Mr. Baxter—Then why doesn't he take care of his clothes.

Mrs. Baxter—That's a different matter, dear—there is still lots of the child in him——

Mr. Baxter—Well, I give it up. I don't know what's the matter with him.

Mrs. Baxter—He's seventeen. (There is silence. He reads, and she sews).

(A little later Willie comes downstairs, makes a vain plea to his father for a dress suit, and is sitting reading when his friend Johnnie Watson drops in.)

Willie—Come on in, Johnnie.

Johnnie—H'lo, Silly Bill—what's the news?

Willie—Now, look here, John Watson; you know I don't like to be called Silly Bill any more. Of course, it's a nickname—but it doesn't mean what it sounds like. Bill is short for William and Silly is short for Sylvanus. But it ain't dignified.

Johnnie—Sure not!

Willie—I'd like to be called Baxter like any other man in this town. Come on, Johnnie, what's the matter of us trying to get in the habit of being a little manly about things once in a while.

Johnnie—All right. What's the news, Baxter?

Willie (coldly)—Don't know any.

Johnnie—Dull times, ain't it? I heard May Parcher was comin' back to town to-day, though.

Willie—Well, let her.

Johnnie—They said she was goin' to bring a girl to visit her. They said she was a regular ringdinger, and——

Willie—Well, what if she is? Makes little difference to *me*, I guess!

Johnnie—Oh, no, it don't! *You* don't take any interest in girls! *Oh*, no!

Willie—I never saw one in my life I'd care whether she lived or died!

Johnnie—Honest? Honest, is that so?

Willie—Yes, "honest!" They could *all* die. *I* wouldn't notice!

Johnnie—Why *I* didn't know you felt that way about 'em. Silly Bill.

Willie—You've got to stop calling me "Silly"—that name! I don't want any one to call me anything but Baxter, except May, and perhaps she'll call me *Mr.* Baxter.

Johnnie—She'll call you Willie, I bet. When her father and your father and her mother and your mother are friends and together so much——

Willie—That's no excuse for familiarness. A man's a man sometimes even if he did grow up with you!

Johnnie—Gee, Bill, you're sarcastic!

Willie—Well, I'm not as sarcastic as Joe Bullitt. May says he's the sarcasticest man she ever knew. I only get that way once in a while. You have to with girls.

Johnnie—I'm going to see the new girl this afternoon. Don't you want to come along?

Willie—I should say not! Ye gods! Johnnie, don't you know anything about good form? It's a lady's place to ask to have a man introduced. Besides, when I call on a strange lady for the first time—and I'm not saying I'll call on May's friend—I'm going to call in the evening, like any other man—in a dress suit, with my hair brushed straight back and kinda brillintined, maybe.

But how different was the meeting—not at all according to Willie's intention to be as impressive as a man of the world should be. The fair stranger, Lola Pratt, comes with May Parcher to call on Mrs. Baxter. Willie strolling downstairs munching—in most un-man-of-the-worldly fashion—a slice of bread and butter and applesauce, meets Lola who is carrying her little dog, Flopit, upstairs to be presented to Mrs. Baxter. Thus it becomes inevitable that they should meet, face to face, for the first time in their lives. Willie had perceived, even in the distance, that she was unknown to him—a stranger, because he knew all the girls in that part of the town who dressed as famously in the mode as that! And then, as the distance between them lessened, he saw that she was ravishingly pretty; far, far prettier, indeed, than any girl he knew. At least, it seemed so, for it is, unfortunately, much easier for strangers to be beautiful. Aside from this advantage of mystery, the approaching vision was piquant and graceful; and she carried a light and fluffy burden which she carried nestled in the inner curve of her right arm, a tiny dog with hair like cotton and a pink ribbon around his neck—an animal sated with indulgence and idiotically unaware of his privilege. He was half asleep. William did not see the dog, for it is the plain anatomical truth that when he saw how pretty the girl was his heart—his physical heart—began to do things the like of which, experienced by an elderly person, would have brought the doctor in haste. He suffered from breathlessness and from pressure on the diaphragm.

She, apparently, took no note of William, even when she and William had come within a few feet of each other. Yet he knew that she would look up and that their eyes must meet—and he strove to obtain greater ease and some decent appearance of manly indifference. Thus, in the instant of panic that befell, when her dark-lashed eyelids slowly lifted, he had a flash of inspiration. He opened his mouth somewhat, and as her eyes met his, full and startlingly, he placed three fingers across the orifice, and also offered a slight vocal proof that she had surprised him in the midst of a yawn.

"Oh, hum!" he said.

For the fraction of a second the deep blue spark in her eyes glowed brighter—gentle arrows of turquoise shot him through and through—and then her glance withdrew from the ineffable collision. Her small, white shod feet continued to bear him upward, away from him, while his own dimmed shoes peregrinated in the opposite direction—William necessarily, yet with excruciating reluctance, accompanying them. But just at the moment when he and the lovely creature were side by side, and her head turned from him, she spoke—that is, she murmured, but he caught her words.

"You, Flopit, wake up!" (In the tone of a mother talking baby talk.) "*So* indifferink!"

William's feet and his breath halted spasmodically. Then he comprehended that Flopit and not William Sylvanus Baxter, was the gentleman addressed. But—but she had *meant* him.

He took two steps to follow her, but she disappeared upstairs. The room did not seem empty—a rosy glamour lingered in the air. William's soul was tremulous, for she had done her work but too well.

Willie—"Indifferink! *So* indifferink! (he murmured, thrilling at his own exceeding indifferent imitation of her voice. "Indifferink!" that was just what he would have her think—that he was a cold, indifferent man.)

But so far from being indifferent is William that he "borrows" father's dress suit, his hat and his cane, in order to make the impressive evening call he had planned long before his heart was enthralled. Now, more than ever, was it necessary to appear as a man of the world. Concealing the dress suit under his bathrobe, in order that the "borrowing" need not be explained to the family, he is discovered by Genesis, the colored house servant.

Willie—Genesis, you ought to knock before you come in.

Genesis—I wasn't comin' to see nobody.

Willie—What do you want?

Genesis—Well, you see, I brung dis pa'm in heah. (Willie is trying to straighten a buckle tongue with his teeth). You break you' teef on 'at buckle.

Willie—No I won't, either. I can crack nuts with my teeth.

Genesis—Yes, suh, you kin now. Ain't my teef. Bust 'em, you want to. But you'll haf to hav gol' ones when you git ole as you' pappy.

Willie—He's not old; he's middle aged.

Genesis—Well, suh, my pappy had three chillun fo' he wuz twenty—he had two when he wuz eighteen.

Willie—He did! How old was he when he had the first one?

Genesis—He wuz just your age. He wuz seventeen.

Willie—By George! (Waits for the world to stop spinning.) By George!

Genesis—I wuz de youngist one—bawn when he wuz sixty-one.

Willie—What became of the one that was born when he was seventeen?

Genesis—Well, suh, I nev' did know.

Willie—Was it—a boy?

Genesis—Seem like it mus' been a boy.

Willie—How old was he when he was married?

Genesis—Him? Well, suh, dat 'pens. I reckon he was ma'ied once—

Willie (intensely interested)—Well, I *have* heard of people getting married even younger'n he was. You take India, for instance. Why, they get married in India when they're twelve, and even seven and eight years old. For the matter of that, there was a young couple got married in Pennsylvania the other day. The girl was only fifteen and the man was sixteen. It was in the papers and their parents said it was a good thing. And somewhere in Iowa a boy began shaving when he was thirteen, and shaved every day for four years, and now he's got a full beard and he's goin' to be married this year, before he's eighteen years old. Right up to about a hundred years ago there were more people married at those ages than there were along about twenty-four and twenty-five the way they are now. For instance, you take Shakespeare—I mean you take olden times. Hardly anybody got married after they were nineteen or twenty years old, unless they were widowers, because they were all married by that time. Then, there was a case I heard of over in California—

Genesis (utters loud chuckles)—Mr. Willie! When you begin to talk you cert'nly kin travel!

Willie (obviously pleased, coughs with his certain importance. But his interest in the topic is by no means exhausted)—Genesis—do you remember when your father was married? How did he feel about it? Was he kinda nervous or anything like that beforehand?

Genesis—Some time he wuz and sometime he wuzn't—I guess I bettah go now—you goin' to bed early?

Willie—I'm just starting out!

Genesis—Well, *well!*—Goo' night!

Willie—Good night.

(Genesis having deposited his palm departs. Willie, left alone, removes the bathrobe and hangs it in the closet. He is in full evening dress. He takes a straw hat from the closet and also a bamboo walking stick; then goes to the mirror to inspect himself. Jane, his ten-year-old sister, appears on the stairs in her nightie. She sees Willie first and falls back into a strategic and protected position. Willie, unaware of Fate in the form of young sisters, poses magnificently, then goes out, swinging his cane with a smile of utter contentment.)

Jane (peeps into the closet and then calls her mother)—Mother!

Mrs. Baxter—Yes, dear. (Enters.)

Jane—I'm ready. (Mrs. Baxter sits and Jane kneels before, racing through her prayers.) Now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep - I - pray - the - Lord - my - soul - to - keep - and - bless - papa - and - mamma - and - and - well, bless Willie. (That over, she continues eagerly) But I want to tell you something, mamma, it's about papa's evening clo'es. Willie's got 'em on."

(Jane proceeds to relate how weary poor Mr. Parcher has become of his daughter's visitor, Lolo Pratt, and of her court of lovesick boys, especially Willie Baxter.)

Jane—And, mamma, Mr. Parcher said since Miss Pratt came to visit there wasn't anywheres he could go because of Willie Baxter and all the other ones. He said he couldn't go anywhere around the place any more without steppin' on the dog or Willie Baxter. And, mamma, he said—he said, mamma, it was getting on his nerves, he simply couldn't stand that damn boy.

Mrs. Baxter—*Jane!* You *mustn't* say such things!

Jane—I didn't, mamma. Mr. Parcher said it. How can I tell you what he said unless I say d—— (Mrs. Baxter chokes off the word.) Oh, I know, I'll say "word" instead. Won't that be all right?

Mrs. Baxter—I—I suppose so.

Jane—Well, Mr. Parcher said he couldn't stand that "word" boy. He said when he was young he wasn't such a "word," "word" fool as these young "word" fools were. He said in all his born days Willie Baxter was the "wordest" fool he ever saw.

(In the meantime Willie has created a sensation by his appearance in evening dress; and under Mr. Parcher's library window has engaged the fair Miss Pratt in a conversation upon the tender topic of love.)

Willie—What do you think about actors and actresses making love to each other on the stage? Do you think they have to really feel it, or do they just pretend?

Lola—Well, sometimes one way—sometimes the other.

Willie—Yes, but how can they pretend like that? Don't you think love is a sacred thing, Cousin Lola? (in the deepest tone of which his vocal cords are capable). Don't you think love is sacred?

Lola—Ess!

Willie—I do! I think love is the most sacred thing there is. I don't mean some kinds of love. I mean real love. You take some people, I don't believe they ever know what real love means. They talk about it, maybe, but they don't understand it. Love is something nobody can understand unless they feel it. Don't you think so?

Lola—Ess!

Willie—Love—love is something nobody can ever have but one time in their lives, and if they don't have it then, why probably they never will. Now, if a man really loves a girl, why he'd do anything in the world she wanted him to. Don't you think so?

Lola—Ess, 'deedums!

Willie—But if he didn't then he wouldn't. But when a man really loves a girl he will. Now, you take a man like that and he can generally do just about anything the girl he loves wants him to. S'ay, f'instance, say she wants him to love her even more than he does already—or almost anything like that—and supposin' she asks him to. Well, he would go ahead and do it. If they really love each other he would! (Pauses—in a lowered tone) I think real love is sacred, don't you?

Lola—Ess!

Willie—Don't you think love is the most sacred thing there is—that is, if it's real love? (Within the library a wretched man writhes and mutters "word," "word," word"!)

Lola—Ess.

Willie—I do! I—I'm glad you feel like that, because I think real love is the kind nobody could have but just once in their lives, but if it isn't real love, why—why, most people never have it at all, because—(he seeks for the exact phrase to express his meaning)—because the real love a man feels for a girl, and a girl for a man, if they really love each other, and you look at a case like that, of course they would both love each other, or it wouldn't be real love, well, it's sacred, isn't it? (Mr. Parcher mutters between clinched teeth, "Word," "word," "word"!)

Lola—Ess! Ess, 'deedums!

Willie—How—how do you—how do you think of me when I'm not with you?

Lola—Think nice-cums. Flopit and me think nice-cums!

Willie—No, I mean what name do you have for me when you're—when you're thinking about me? (Miss Pratt is puzzled, perhaps justifiably, and makes a cooing sound of interrogation.) I mean like this: F'instance, when you first came I always thought of you as "Milady!" I wrote a poem about it.

Lola—Oo, a poem for me! Please read it! Please read it!

Willie—Well—I have an old copy of it—I just dashed it off.

Lola—Oo, ickle boy Baxter is a poet! Read it! Read it!

Willie (takes out a carefully rolled fair copy of his lyric tied with a red ribbon and reads)—

"Milady,"
I do not know her name,
Though it would be the same,
Where roses bloom at twilight,
And the lark takes his flight;
It would be the same anywhere,
Where music sounds in the air;
I was never introduced to the lady,
So I could not call her Lass or Sadie,
So I will call her Milady.
By the sands of the sea
She will always be
Just Milady to me.

—William Sylvanus Baxter, Esq.
July 14.

Lola—Boofums! Ickle boy Baxter give Lola a copy of pitty poem?

Willie—You can have this.

Lola—Oo, thank you—"Milady"—Boofums!

Willie—But now I don't call you that any more. Now I think of you by another name when I'm alone. It—it just sort of came to me. I was kind of just standing up this evening and I didn't know I was thinking about anything at all very much, and then all of a sudden I said it to myself out loud. It was about as strange a thing as I ever knew of! Don't you think so?

Lola—Ess. It uz dest wierd! What are dat pitty name?

Willie (tensely)—I called you—I called you "My Baby Talk Lady!"

(Bang! They are startled by a crash from within the library. A heavy weight seems to have fallen—or to have been hurled—a considerable distance. Stepping to the window Willie beholds a large volume lying in a distorted attitude at the foot of the wall opposite to that in which the reading lamp is a fixture. But of all human life the room is empty, for Mr. Parcher has given up and is now hastening to his bed in the last faint hope of saving his reason. Doors are heard crashing as he goes from room to room. Willie picks up the book and remarks casually, "Somebody must have thrown it at a bug or something, I guess.")

(May Parcher, Johnnie Watson and Joe Bullitt have appeared—Joe crosses ardently to Lola.)

Joe—Lo, Lola——

Lola—Oh, goody-cute. Here's big Bruva Josie-Joe. Stroke big Josie-Joe's pink teeks, darlin' Flopit! (Josie-Joe's pink checks are indicated by the expression "pink teeks" evidently, for her accompanying action is to pass Flopit's paw lightly over those glowing surfaces). 'At's nice. Stroke him gently, p'eshus Flopit, an' nen we'll coax him to make pitty singin' for us like us did yestiday. *Coax* him to make pitty singin! I *love* his voice—I'm dest *crazy* over it. Isn't oo? (William's passion for Mr. Bullitt's voice appears to be under control. He laughs coldly, almost harshly.)

Willie—Him sing? Has he been tryin' to sing around *here*? I wonder the family didn't call for the police!

Joe—Well, they will if you ever spring one of your solos on 'em. (Turning to Miss Pratt, he laughs loudly and bitterly.) You ought to hear Silly Bill sing——

(Miss Pratt does have that opportunity not long after—also poor Mr. Parcher, who jumps up hastily and closes his window. For Willie and Johnnie, though sent home early by May, according to a promise exacted by suffering Father Parcher, return almost instantly equipped with ukulele and guitar to serenade their lady love.)

Willie—Wait until they're upstairs before we begin.

Johnnie—Let's sing "The Soldier's Farewell" first; then we'll make up some words—come on, let's make 'em up now you do it. You've written more than I have.

Willie—What'll we sing 'em to? "Oh, Genevieve, sweet Genevieve"—(trying it.)

"Oh, Lola Pratt, sweet Lola Pratt,
"I wonder what—da da da da dat——"
(Tries it again.)
"Oh, Lola Pratt, Sweet Lola Pratt,
"I wonder what——

Johnnie (finishes it)—"You're looking at!"

Willie—No, they don't say "looking" in poetry. They say "gazing." That's it:

"Oh, Lola Pratt, Sweet Lola Pratt,
"I wonder what you're gazing at——"

and then we can repeat it, and we'll mix it up like a medley. Is the light in their room?

Johnnie—Not yet—and Mr. Parcher's window shut tight!

Willie—Isn't that just like him to get cold in July? (Taking from his pocket a box.) Have a smoke?

Johnnie—Not to-night. What have you got there?

Willie—Oh, fine cubebs.

Johnnie—I won't smoke before singing.

Willie (who smokes only to be impressive)—I don't believe I will, either. Say, Johnnie, have you ever thought of getting married?

Johnnie—Sure!

Willie—I think it's fine to get married young. Genesis's father had three children when he was eighteen.

Johnnie (interested)—How many did he have at seventeen?

Willie—One—And Genesis's father wasn't scared when he was married, Genesis said. Is their light on yet?

Johnnie—Yes, there it goes. Now—all right—the one we made up! (They sing repeatedly the inspired words. Paint applause and giggles spur them to more repetitions. Finally, to the relief of poor Mr. Parcher, they tune up on "Good Night, Ladies!" and perforce must leave the enchanted spot from which they can see the window of their beloved.)

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