

A Bad Case of St. Vitus' Dance

The child inched closer and closer to the edge of the rooftop. He was alone in the yard; his mother and brother were occupied indoors with arrangements for the celebration of his third birthday. He had become restless with the preparations for the party and had wandered out into the sunlight of the spring afternoon. He spied the trellis fastened against the side of the barn, and it called out to him. Soon he had climbed to the top of the barn. There he stood, teetering at the edge of the parapet, calmly surveying the ground below.

His reverie was suddenly broken by the sound of his brother's voice calling from inside the house: "Mama, he's on the roof!" The child did not budge. Then he heard his mother respond in frustration, "Not again!"¹

The mother ran out to the foot of the barn where she strained to look up through the glaring sunlight at her baby boy perched on the edge, the child's brother not far behind. To find her young son in a perilous position was not uncommon of late. What troubled her most was not the constant risk-taking in which the toddler had indulged almost since he was able to crawl, but the solemn expression on his face. What was that look? His countenance betrayed neither excitement, fright, nor defiance. She ordered him down, and they silently watched as he turned, walked to the edge of the roof, sat down, flipped over the edge to the eaves and scuttled down the latticework without effort. It was not the first time—and certainly not the last—that an audience would be entranced by the acrobatic antics of Douglas Fairbanks.

Douglas Fairbanks, ca. 1893

While such stories of his early childhood acrobatics are somewhat suspect, the early risk-taking is beyond dispute. One revealing account has him leaping off the roof and knocking himself unconscious. This brought about a marked change. Revived in his mother's arms, the hitherto taciturn child suddenly evolved into a smiling, laughing boy.² The event also resulted in a scar above his left eye, which he used to elicit further maternal attention. (It would be noticeable for the rest of his life.) Whatever the varying content or chronology, the significance of these two tales lies in his discovery that when he was in action, attention was paid.

The man who would one day be known as Douglas Fairbanks was born Douglas Elton Ulman in Denver, Colorado, on May 23, 1883. In his own recollections of his early life, style invariably triumphed over content—and for good reason. By all accounts, he had been a glum, silent child, with an absent father and a controlling mother. She was born Ella Adelaide Marsh in New York in 1847 to a prosperous Roman Catholic family. Her mother's family had originally hailed from Virginia, and in later years, Ella often romanticized her past by suggesting that she too was a southern belle. However, she and her younger sister, Belle, were born and raised above the Mason-Dixon Line. Ella married the mysterious John Fairbanks, a wealthy planter and heir to a sugar mill, whose illustrious lineage can supposedly be traced back to one of the oldest families in Massachusetts—that of the Yorkshireman Jonathan Fayerbanke—and what is thought to be the oldest existing timber frame house in North America, the “Fairbanks House” in Dedham, Massachusetts.³

John Fairbanks died of tuberculosis not long after the birth of their only child, John Jr., in 1873. Swindled by her husband's business partners, Ella turned to his friend H. Charles Ulman, a New York-based attorney, for help. Despite his best efforts, however, Ulman was unable to obtain restitution for the young widow and her infant son.

While living with her sister Belle outside Atlanta, Georgia, Ella was persuaded into marriage by a certain Edward Wilcox. The union was doomed from the start, however, because Wilcox was an abusive alcoholic. A second son, Norris Wilcox, failed to make the domestic situation tolerable; and, in defiance of her faith and society in general, Ella sued Wilcox for divorce in 1877. Her attorney was again H. Charles Ulman. The friendship between attorney and client blossomed, and after successfully obtaining her divorce, she did the unthinkable and defied prevailing sentiments of the time by eloping with her attentive litigator.

H. (for Hezekiah) Charles Ulman was born to German-Jewish immigrants near Philadelphia in 1833. His father, Lazarus, was mainly involved in mercantile endeavors.⁴ H. Charles attended law school and

Douglas Fairbanks's mother,
Ella Adelaide Fairbanks
Wilcox Ulman (née Marsh).

Douglas Fairbanks's father,
H. Charles Ulman.



was admitted to the state bar in 1856, practicing law in Pennsylvania until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Responding immediately to the call for volunteers, he became a captain in the Pennsylvania Reserve Corps. He was wounded in 1862 and transferred from active service into the Veteran Reserve Corps until his resignation in 1864. Ella was initially pleased with her multifaceted beau: he was an attorney of prominence (first in Philadelphia and later in New York), a Civil War captain, a politician, and a publisher. He was also, she later discovered, an alcoholic and a bigamist.

Ulman's choice to run off with Ella forced him to abandon law and New York society. The once widowed, once divorced, and now again pregnant Ella supported his decision to go west with her and John Jr. (her secondborn son, Norris Wilcox, was left to be raised by a paternal aunt) and make a fresh start in the rough-and-tumble mining territory of Colorado. In making the move west, Ulman was also putting distance between his "new family" and the one he already had—a wife and two daughters he abandoned in New York.

The 47-year-old H. Charles and the 33-year-old Ella were married in Boulder County, Colorado, on September 7, 1881, and six months later, on March 3, 1882, she gave birth to a son, Robert Paine Ulman. The western frontier failed to be the idyll that the couple had envisioned, and after a time, Ella grew increasingly disenchanted with her surroundings and her new husband—particularly as his alcohol

Robert Ulman and Douglas Ulman, ca. 1888. Photograph by Clements.



consumption increased in direct proportion to his dwindling business ventures. There was also a disturbingly restless nature to the man; he was frequently away, ostensibly pursuing his mining interests. Restlessness was a legacy passed down to his second son, Douglas Elton, born the following year at the family home at 61 South Fourteenth Street in Denver. As their family grew, Ulman moved from one ill-advised business venture to another until, financially ruined and hopelessly addicted to alcohol, he abandoned both his business and his family and joined Benjamin Harrison's campaign for president in 1888 as a paid political speaker.

Although Douglas Fairbanks rarely spoke in later years about the enigmatic man who had abandoned him at the age of five, Ulman was evidently a frustrated actor and relished reciting long passages from Shakespeare to his son, who credited his father with instilling into him a love of the theater. Ulman also captivated his sons with tall tales of his Civil War exploits and supposed friendship with Edwin Booth (America's foremost actor and the brother of Abraham Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth), whom he had supposedly resembled as a younger man.

Moreover, Douglas Fairbanks's love of the West began with his visits to his father's mining camps in the wild country and watching his father ride horseback. Most of his memories of his father were unpleasant ones, however, which Douglas kept to himself. When he was twelve, he unexpectedly ran into his father on the streets of Denver and urged

him to come back home and see his mother. Ulman, in Denver on business, consented to do so, after first stopping at the bar of the Windsor Hotel with his son in tow and downing a few shots of Scotch for fortification. The reunion was an unhappy one. Ella, now divorced from Ulman on grounds of desertion, became enraged. She promptly chased her inebriated former husband out of the house, grabbed young Douglas by the hand, and led him to the local office of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, where she made him sign the temperance pledge vowing never to consume a drop of alcohol. It was a traumatic incident in Douglas's early life. He had wanted to please his mother and prove that he was special by reintroducing his father into the family, but the attempt had backfired horribly. Incidents like the row he witnessed between his mother and father fostered a lifelong need to avoid personal confrontations.

As if making them take the temperance pledge were not enough, in 1900, Ella petitioned to have her two son's names legally changed from Ulman to Fairbanks. (She had reverted to the surname of her beloved first husband not long after Ulman's desertion in 1888.) In doing this, and having the boys confirmed in the Roman Catholic faith, she attempted to eradicate any lingering trace of H. Charles Ulman from their lives. However, Ulman had already left an indelible imprint on his youngest son, who inherited his restlessness, rodomontade, lack of introspection, and constant need to be the center of attention. Douglas saw his father only a few more times before Ulman's death in New York on February 23, 1915, at the age of 81. Ulman occasionally appeared backstage asking his son for a handout, and it was always given. Despite this, Fairbanks held a grudge against his father for his abandonment of the family.

The loss of contact with his father was difficult enough. His embittered mother's obliteration of all traces and memories of his father made matters worse. To mitigate the loss, he erected a self-protective wall to insulate himself from his pain and learned to detach himself from the people and things around him. Douglas Elton Ulman ceased to exist at the age of twelve, and Douglas Elton Thomas (his Roman Catholic confirmation name, chosen by his mother) Fairbanks now faced a painful division within himself. His substitute for emotional connection was physical action. He discovered he was happiest when pouring his seemingly boundless energy into the welcome distraction of physical challenges; when his body was maximally engaged, his disengagement from his emotions gave way to exhilaration.

He still had his mother to contend with and to care for him. While she was loving and doting, she was also demanding and difficult to

please. She was image-conscious, status-seeking, and success-driven throughout her life (traits she instilled into her youngest son). She adored Douglas, but her personality and prejudices prevented her from giving her favorite child unconditional love. Jewish blood was stigmatizing in the eyes of the socially insecure would-be Southern belle, and she was ashamed of her youngest child's dark skin, which hinted at a socially inferior father. "I was the blackest baby you ever saw," Fairbanks recalled. "I was so dark even my mother was ashamed of me. When all the neighbors came around to look at the new baby, Mother would say, 'Oh, I don't want to disturb him now—he's asleep and I'd rather not.' She just hated to show off such a dark baby."⁶ What he received from Ella was narcissistic love; she needed to see and love her son as a white-skinned, non-Jewish, all-American boy. Fairbanks remarked that the fact he was born with skin darker than his brothers fostered shame and resentment in his mother. His mother's covering his crib with a blanket and the fuss and concern she demonstrated undoubtedly contributed to his taciturn nature. This led to more maternal anxieties over her stigmatized child, because there began to be whispers among some of the neighbors that young Douglas suffered from mental retardation.⁷ This was yet another factor in his growing isolation.

Fairbanks had discovered, as early as the day that he climbed onto that rooftop, that the best way of remedying feelings of isolation was to exercise his natural physical prowess. In doing so, the child was also attempting to prove to his mother that he was special and deserving of the attention he so desperately craved. The continual jumping, leaping, and bounding about somewhat curtailed the streak of morbidity that had been in him since infancy. Though it could always resurface, it was relieved as quickly as it came by a quick jump, leap, or kick-step in the air.

This tendency to become airborne at the slightest provocation did not serve him well as a student in school. As a way to curtail his hyperactivity and make him focus on his studies, his teachers would often assign him long soliloquies from Shakespeare or other passages to memorize and recite. Given his already all-consuming need for attention, this proved particularly potent, and before long his theatrical aspirations began to blossom. All of this was alarming to his mother, who sent both Robert and Douglas to Jarvis Hall Military Academy for two years, hoping this might instill some much needed discipline into them. When the family's financial situation became precarious, Ella, who had been supporting her family in a life filled with shabby-genteel pretenses by taking in lodgers, as well as accepting assistance from her sister Belle and John Jr., ordered them home to 1629 Franklin Street. The brothers enrolled in East Denver High School on September 7, 1898, from which, just be-

fore his sixteenth birthday, Douglas was expelled. According to family lore, this was because he had adorned the school's statuary with green bows and silly hats as a St. Patrick's Day prank.⁸

None of this mattered to Douglas. Concurrent with high school, he had been attending a drama school run by two former New York actresses, the retired Margaret Fealy and her daughter, Maude (later a star in cinema prior to World War I). He was also an aspiring playwright. A surviving theater program from the Tabor Grand School of Acting's performance at Denver's Elitch Theatre from August 1898 records that Fairbanks wrote and acted in a sketch entitled "Mr. and Mrs. Moffet."⁹ Burns Mantle, a Denver neighbor who later became an esteemed critic and annalist, remembered that the teenage Fairbanks, "would recite you as fine and florid an Antony's speech to the Romans as you ever heard. With gestures too."¹⁰ The very same month as his expulsion from high school, he encountered Frederick Warde, a well-known British actor-manager, who was in Denver for a week's run at the Broadway Theatre. Fairbanks attended an assembly the actor gave for the students at the high school and was enthralled. According to Warde:

While in Denver, Colorado, I made an address on the study of Shakespeare to the faculty and students of the High School. On the following day a very youthful student of the school called on me and expressed a desire to go upon the stage. Such applications were not uncommon, but this applicant, little more than a boy, had an assurance and persistence in spite of my discouragement, that attracted me. He replied frankly to all my questions, realized the gravity of the step he desired to take; told me the conditions of his life and referred me to his mother for confirmation.

The lady called on me the next day, endorsed all that her son had told me, approved of the boy's ambitions and the result was I engaged him for my company for the following season, to lead the supernumeraries and to play such small parts as his capacity and appearance would permit.

The youth was of rather less than average height but of athletic build, with frank attractive features and his name was Douglas Fairbanks.¹¹

Fairbanks apparently made his professional stage debut as Florio, a lackey, in *The Duke's Jester*, an adaptation of Alexandre Dumas père's novel *La Dame de Monsoreau* by Espy Williams, on September 10, 1900, in Richmond, Virginia.¹² Warde was charmed by the 17-year-old Fairbanks's boundless enthusiasm and infectious personality, but less

than impressed by him as an actor. He summed up Fairbanks's performance with his troupe "a catch-as-catch-can bout with the immortal bard."¹³ Fairbanks himself liked to recall a particularly caustic review from a Duluth newspaper: "Mr. Warde's supporting company was bad, but worst of all was Douglas Fairbanks as Laertes [in *Hamlet*]."¹⁴ Fairbanks toured with Warde's company for two years as the troupe journeyed throughout the United States, playing mainly in smaller cities and never in Fairbanks's dream destination, New York City. When Warde finally dismissed him, he kindly recommended that the young man gain more life experience in order to bring greater conviction to the roles he portrayed.

Fairbanks followed Warde's advice by traveling to Britain, where he enjoyed a peripatetic existence in England for a few months, also venturing into France. Upon his return, he first found employment in the Wall Street brokerage house of De Coopet & Doremus, later on as a clerk in a hardware store, and finally in the law offices of E. M. Hollander and Sons. Fairbanks later created the myth of his attending Harvard University during this period, disregarding the fact that he had dropped out of high school after his freshman year.¹⁵ In 1901, Fairbanks and his mother were permanently living in New York City, Ella having sold her Denver home to join her youngest son as he attempted to find work on the New York stage. Fairbanks believed nearly two years of life experience sufficient to attain his goal: becoming a star on Broadway.

At the time of his arrival in New York City, Broadway was on the cusp of one of its golden periods, with approximately fifty theaters in operation. The "Great White Way," as it was to be dubbed the following year, stretched from Thirteenth Street north to the newly christened Times Square, and the burnishing lights that fashioned that nickname spelled out the names of a luminous generation of stars: John Drew, Anna Held, Lillian Russell, Maude Adams, Sarah Bernhardt, Minnie Maddern Fiske, and John, Ethel, and Lionel Barrymore. It was primarily an era of the star vehicle, and everyone went to the theater or vaudeville for entertainment. Fairbanks's potent mixture of ambition and energy, combined with a healthy dose of luck, enabled him to make a Broadway debut without undue hardship in the short-lived *Her Lord and Master* in February 1902. In September that year, he appeared in *A Rose o' Plymouth-Town*, whose leading lady, Minnie Dupree, called his acting "a bad case of St. Vitus' Dance."¹⁶ Dupree's remark is one of many contemporary accounts suggesting Fairbanks's overwhelming energy. His first starring role came with *A Case of Frenzied Finance* in April 1905. The actress Grace George saw him in the role of Fred Everett in the musical



Douglas Fairbanks, ca. 1902. His dark brown hair and blue-gray eyes were striking against his naturally dark complexion. Photograph by White.

As the bellman Benny Tucker in the Broadway production of *A Case of Frenzied Finance* by Kellett Chambers (1905). Photograph by Otto Sarony.

As Lute Ludlam in the Broadway production of *As Ye Sow* by John M. Snyder (1905).

comedy *Fantana* and, impressed with his youthful zeal, brought him to the attention of her husband, William A. Brady, one of New York's leading producer-impresarios. Though Grace George conceded that he was not very handsome, she enthused that he had "a world of personality." Brady remembered: "After one look at him I hired him in support of my wife in a play called *Clothes*. An odd young man, running over with energy to such an extent that it fatigued me to look at him sitting down—and he seldom sat."¹⁷

In one of the set pieces for *Clothes*, which opened in September 1906, Fairbanks had to climb a long flight of steps to a high platform. During a break in rehearsals, the fidgety Fairbanks entertained himself

by walking up and down the stairs on his hands. Brady was delighted with his acrobatics and worked the bit into the play. Soon after, Brady signed Fairbanks to a five-year contract.¹⁸ In December 1906, he had his first unqualified hit in a leading role in *The Man of the Hour*. As the play's second lead, Fairbanks had his first real taste of success, something with which he had been obsessed. He frequently doodled the word "success" over and over again on scraps of paper. He was not concerned with the specific nature of the success; he thought about it only in the most general terms. And with this play, he achieved it.¹⁹

During the Boston run of *The Man of the Hour*, the 25-year-old Douglas Fairbanks first set eyes on the beautiful, blonde 19-year-old Beth Sully, who had seen him in the production and been instantly smitten with him. At her instigation, a meeting between the two was arranged. A romance quickly developed. Sully was starstruck, and Fairbanks, for his part, was flattered by the attention. She was attractive on many levels, not least because of her wealthy family and their social connections.

One person not enthralled was Beth's father, the former "Cotton King" Daniel J. Sully. A onetime financial powerhouse, he had recently fallen on difficult times, but he still maintained his social position and was not about to let his beloved daughter become involved with an actor. Beth was determined to marry Fairbanks, however, and to appease her, he gave his blessing to the union, provided Fairbanks abandon his theatrical career and work for the Buchan Soap Company, Sully's comeback enterprise. After careful deliberation, Fairbanks accepted. Douglas Fairbanks and Beth Sully were married at the Sully mansion, called Kenneth Ridge, at Watch Hill, Rhode Island, on July 11, 1907. After returning from their honeymoon, which they spent in Europe (a gift of the Sully family), Fairbanks jumped into his new position as soap salesman with his usual enthusiasm. Though not a great success in securing new business deals for the struggling company, he did manage to secure a contract for Buchan's soap from Frank Case, owner of the (pre-Round Table) Algonquin Hotel, where he and Beth took up residence after their marriage. For those clients with whom he was unable to secure contracts, he at least left a lasting impression by following through on his pledge to take a bite out of a bar of "Buchan's Twenty Three Brand" soap to prove its purity.²⁰ The excitement of all this soon began to pale in comparison with the memories of his former stage glory; and before long, with a call to William A. Brady, he was back on Broadway.

Once Fairbanks recommitted himself to the theatrical life, he was rarely again at liberty. His stage career in the ephemeral fare popular at the time was successful. His extraordinary physical gifts, which



As Bud Haines, with the actor-manager-playwright Thomas A. Wise, in the Broadway production of *A Gentleman from Mississippi* (1908) by Wise and Harrison Rhodes. Photograph by White.

As Steve Oldham, with Millicent Evans, in the Broadway production of *The Cub* by Thompson Buchanan (1910). Photograph by White.

had previously been displayed only in bits and pieces, began revealing themselves in full; and the acrobatics delighted audiences. Brady recalled Fairbanks's return in a play called *The Cub* in November 1910:

In one scene he had to run upstairs in a two-level set and save somebody's life—probably the heroine's.

“Run?” he said, when he first saw the set, “what's the matter with jumping?”

I eyed the twelve-foot gap between stage floor and upper floor and expressed some doubts.

“Why, that's simple,” he said, took a little run, caught the edge of the flooring by the stair-opening and pulled up as easy as an alley-cat taking a fence. That made a tremendous hit with the audience.²¹

Soon after his return to the stage, he left Brady's management and signed on with his friends George M. Cohan and Sam Harris, who saw great possibilities in the comic actor. After starring in the Chicago touring production of *Officer 666* for Cohan and Harris in 1912, he followed Wallace Eddinger in the New York production. Cohan wrote *Broadway Jones* especially as a vehicle for Fairbanks. However, Cohan

As Edgar Willoughby Pitt in the Broadway production of *A Gentleman of Leisure* by John Stapleton and P.G. Wodehouse (1911). Photograph by White.



found the part of Jackson Jones so irresistible, he cast himself in it instead. Undeterred, Fairbanks went on to flourish in Broadway comedies or comic melodramas such as *Hawthorne of the U.S.A.* (1912–13), *The New Henrietta* (1913–14), and *He Comes Up Smiling* (1914). Of this period in his career, Fairbanks reflected:

Long before *The Lamb* [Fairbanks's first starring film] I had done similar stunts on the stage; in fact, it was this sort of thing that commended me to my first New York manager, William A. Brady, who always liked bustle, speed and energy in the plays that he directed. In a later play in which I appeared, *Hawthorne of the U.S.A.*, I made my first appearance by vaulting a wall, and at the end of the third act I sprang from a balcony to the throat of the villain.²²

Also contributing to the growing success of Fairbanks's career at this stage was his wife, Beth. No one was happier than she when Douglas decided to return to the stage after his brief hiatus in her father's company. Fairbanks often relied on Beth's judgment in considering properties and parts that were offered to him, and she proved to be an astute judge. On December 9, 1909, the couple became the proud parents of Douglas Elton Fairbanks Jr. With his work ever more in demand, Beth raising their son, and the entire family enjoying blissful New England summers at the Sully home in Watch Hill, Fairbanks appeared to have settled down into what most men would consider an idyllic family life.

As Anthony Hamilton Hawthorne in the Broadway production of James Bernard Fagan's *Hawthorne of the U.S.A.* (1912). Photograph by White.

As Bertie "The Lamb" Van Alstyne in the Broadway production of *The New Henrietta* by Winchell Smith and Victor Mapes (1913). Photograph by White.

As Jerry Martin in the Broadway production of *He Comes Up Smiling* by Byron Ongley and Emil Nyitray (1914). Photograph by White.





Fairbanks and the infant Douglas Fairbanks Jr. on vacation in Bourne End, England, 1910.

Douglas Fairbanks, his mother, and his wife Beth (seated with Douglas Fairbanks Jr.) in a family portrait, New York City, 1915. Photograph by Byron.

Except that Fairbanks was unlike most men. Although everything appeared tranquil, his ever-present restlessness resurfaced to undermine the stability of home life. He was by now a highly sought-after comedy star. However, he could go only so far, even on Broadway, and he began to wonder if there was not more out there—new, uncharted territories just waiting to be conquered.

One day in 1914, as he and Beth were strolling through Central Park with Junior, they were stopped by a motion picture cameraman who asked Fairbanks to do a bit of mugging for the camera. Fairbanks responded by jumping over a park bench.²³ Several weeks later, the film was viewed by Harry E. Aitken of the newly formed Triangle Film Corporation, who was struck by the celluloid image of the charismatic Broadway actor; he jumped not just over a park bench but out of the screen. Aitken approached him with an offer to appear in motion pictures.

At the dawn of the feature-film era, cinema was looked down upon by most “legitimate” theater people. Though it was not uncommon for a stage actor to work in the movies during the Broadway summer hiatus—when the stifling city heat forced most theaters to close down for the summer—this was viewed as nothing more than a mild diversion and a quick way to earn some additional income until “real” work began again in the autumn. Many lesser lights of the New York theater, and some major ones as well, including John Barrymore and the Divine Sarah herself, had played in front of the movie cameras in the summer-

As Jerome Belden in his last Broadway play, *The Show Shop* by James Forbes (1914), a comedy concerning the foibles of theater people and show business. Photograph by White.



time. It was a lark; but it was certainly not something for which any respectable thespian would consider abandoning the theater.

It was with this attitude that Fairbanks greeted Aitken's offer. He was a major star on Broadway; to give it all up and accept an offer to appear full-time in the movies seemed like lunacy. However, Aitken was offering much more than he could ever hope to make in the theater, even as a major Broadway star. He consulted with his friend, Frank Case, owner of the Algonquin:

Fairbanks told me he had an offer of \$2,000 a week to go to Hollywood but did not know whether to accept or not. Two thousand dollars was very much more than he could possibly hope for in the theater; moreover, the employment and salary were to be continuous, fifty-two weeks in the year, not for an indefinite season as in the theater. When I pointed out to him that \$104,000 was a handsome amount of money, he said, "I know, but the movies!"²⁴

In the end, however, it was more than the promise of wealth that lured Fairbanks out on that rooftop again. He had achieved all he could in New York; he had to go out bigger—further—to lands unknown. His restless psyche would not have it any other way. The theater's three walls and proscenium arch proved too restricting for his restless energy. Allan Dwan, who directed ten Fairbanks films, summed it up best when he said: "Pictures were made for him. The theater was too little."²⁵