JOHN
J. JENNINGS

THEATRICAL AND CIRCUS LIFE OR, SECRETS OF THE STAGE, GREEN-ROOM AND SAWDUST ARENA

John J. Jennings

Theatrical and Circus Life or, Secrets of the Stage, Green-Room and Sawdust Arena

EAN 8596547223191

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I. A PRELIMINARY PEEP.
CHAPTER II. A THEATRE OF SHAKESPEARE'S DAY.
CHAPTER III. THE AMERICAN THEATRE.
CHAPTER IV. AT THE STAGE-DOOR.
CHAPTER V. BEFORE THE FOOT-LIGHTS.
CHAPTER VI. BEHIND THE SCENES.
CHAPTER VII. IN THE DRESSING-ROOM.
CHAPTER VIII. WITHIN THE WINGS.
CHAPTER IX. STAGE CHARMS AND OMENS.
CHAPTER X. NOT DOWN IN THE BILL.
CHAPTER XI. THE ILLUSIONS OF THE STAGE.
CHAPTER XII. MORE OF THE MYSTERIES.
CHAPTER XIII. THE ARMY OF ATTACHES.
CHAPTER XIV. STAGE-STRUCK.
CHAPTER XV. THE REHEARSAL.
CHAPTER XVI. CANDIDATES FOR SHORT CLOTHES.
CHAPTER XVII. TRAINING BALLET DANCERS.
CHAPTER XVIII. PLAYS AND PLAYWRIGHTS.
CHAPTER XIX. "MASHERS" AND "MASHING."
CHAPTER XX. THE MAIDEN AND THE TENOR.
CHAPTER XXI. FISHING FOR FREE PUFFS.
CHAPTER XXII. THE ACTRESS AND THE INTERVIEWER.
CHAPTER XXIII. A FEW FOOT-LIGHT FAVORITES.
CHAPTER XXIV. CHINESE AND JAPANESE THEATRICALS.
CHAPTER XXV. OPERA AND OPERA SINGERS.
CHAPTER XXVI. THE MINSTREL BOYS.

CHAPTER XXVII. PANTOMIME.
CHAPTER XXVIII. VARIETY DIVES AND CONCERT SALOONS.
CHAPTER XXIX. A TEAM OF IRISH COMEDIANS.
CHAPTER XXX. THE BLACK ART.
CHAPTER XXXI. THE INDIAN BOX-AND-BASKET TRICK.
CHAPTER XXXII. VENTRILOQUISM.
VOICE I.
THE SUFFOCATED VICTIM.
VOICE II.
CHAPTER XXXIII. "ON THE ROAD."
CHAPTER XXXIV. THE GREEN-EYED AND OTHER MONSTERS.
CHAPTER XXXV. JOHN WILKES BOOTH, PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S ASSASSIN.
CHAPTER XXXVI. THE SUMMER VACATION.
CHAPTER XXXVII. FUN AMONG THE ELKS.
CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE CIRCUS IS HERE.
CHAPTER XXXIX. UNDER THE CANVAS.
CHAPTER XL. ACROBATICS AND EQUESTRIANISM.
CHAPTER XLI. A ROMANCE OF THE RING.
CHAPTER XLII. LEAPING AND TUMBLING.
CHAPTER XLIII. AN ADVENTURE WITH GIANTS.
CHAPTER XLIV. THE "TATTOOED TWINS."
CHAPTER XLV. IN THE MENAGERIE.

CHAPTER I.
A PRELIMINARY PEEP.

Table of Contents

Anybody can get into the auditorium of a theatre by paying an admission fee reaching from twenty-five cents up to $1.50, and the sawdust precincts of the circus may be penetrated for the modest sum of fifty cents; but behind the curtain of the theatre and beyond the screened door through which circus attractions enter the exhibition arena, are sacred places, with secrets that are so valuable to their owners that they dare not for less than a small fortune allow the public to view or even to understand them. A general knowledge of the simplicity of theatrical and circus tricks—of the delusions that make up the stock in trade of showmen generally—would destroy their value as salable articles, and make everybody a little Barnum or Jack Haverly of his own, with ability to furnish himself with amusement at home, while the former mastodonic managers could only look on and weep at the educational facilities with which the country was overrun, and mourn the Shakespearian days when people were easily pleased with the poverty-ridden stage and bare representations that were offered them. But there is no fear that the public will ever be instructed up to such a high degree in regard to the inside workings of the theatre and circus, that there will not at all times be plenty of patrons for both these excellent forms of entertainment. The managers take good care to keep their secrets to

themselves, as those who go prying around the shrines in which the theatric arcana are held, very soon find out. At the back door of every theatre—the entrance to the stage—is a cerberus of the most pronounced kind, who would sooner bite his own grandfather's ear off than allow anybody not entitled to the privilege, to pass him; while at the door of the circus dressing-room and all around it are faithful sentinels who will listen to no password, and through whose ranks it is as impossible to break as it is for the fat boy in the side show to throw a double somersault over seventeen horses, with an elephant as big as Jumbo at the far end of the line. It will, however, be the proud privilege of the readers of this book to get as close to the secrets of the stage and sawdust arena as one can well do without knowing absolutely all about them, and by the time the last page is read and the volume is ready to be closed, I think the readers will be both delighted and astonished with the revelations that have been made.

Turn the average man loose on the stage of a theatre at night, while a play is going on, and it is a Russian kobol against a whole San Juan mining district that he will not know whether he has struck the seventh circle of heaven or is in a lunatic asylum. He will meet some very queer creatures in the scenes; he will see many strange things; the brilliant lights around him, the patches of color flashing into his eyes, the sea of faces and the tangle of millinery in the auditorium, will mystify him; the startling streaks of black upon the faces of the men and women who jostle him as he closely hugs the wings, their red noses and blooming cheeks, the general tomato-can aspect of their faces, the

shaggy wigs and straggling beards that look as if they had been torn off the back of a goat only ten minutes before; the dismal, commonplace clothes that shine so radiantly when seen from a chair in the parquette or dress circle,—all these things will set his poor brain in a whirl; and while he is looking on awe-stricken, the scene shifters will come rushing down upon him with a new delusion, trampling on his toes in a manner that suggests in a most potential way his superfluity in that particular place, and pushing him aside without the merest apology, and perhaps with no other remark than a fragment of fervent profanity, as if he were a wretched street Arab in that mimic world in which the scene shifter and the captain of the "supers" play such very important parts. People come out of every imaginable place all around him. There seem to be doors everywhere,—in the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and even in space; and as the "vasty deep" and the rest of the surroundings give up their dwellers, the intruder receives fresh jolts and thrusts, and possibly additional donations of profanity. This, of course, applies only to the male apparitions that overwhelm the strange visitor to the new world behind the scenes. The female portion of that illusory sphere have nothing to say to him except with their eyes, which very forcibly inquire the meaning of his presence there.

LOTTA.

If a person would like to understand how awfully strange and lonely it will be for the last individual left alive upon earth, he need only pay a first visit to the stage of a theatre where he is not acquainted with any of the actors or actresses, and has not even the pleasure of knowing one of the minor attaches. Any attempt to form an acquaintance is promptly and unmistakably repelled, and all the poor unfortunate has to do is to move up where he is out of everybody's way, and he can look on and wonder to his heart's content. As he inspects his surroundings and has his attention called to the actions of the people whose business it is to place the stage in shape for an act or scene of a play, he will readily comprehend the meaning of forming a world out of chaos. If they are getting ready the balcony scene for "Romeo and Juliet," wing pieces are pushed out to represent trees and the side of the house of the Capulets—and what a

house it usually is, too, for such elegant people! The front of the house is rapidly placed in position between two wings, the balcony is quickly nailed on, and with the aid of a rude scaffolding behind the scene and a ladder, the fair Juliet mounts, and, feeling her way carefully, at last steps out upon the frail structure to tell the sweet moon her love for Romeo. The whole thing looks ridiculous. Even the stately daughter of the Capulets has not beauty or skill enough to remove the absurdity from the scene which has the appearance of being, and is in reality nothing else than wood and canvas freely splashed with paint of the proper colors. A painted box represents a stone; a green carpet passes for grass; the beautiful bric-a-brac that opens the eyes of the æsthetic people in the audience is only brown paper hurriedly daubed by the scene painter's apprentice; the wall of the Capulets' garden is a very frail canvas concern, and the floral attributes are frauds of the deepest dye from the scenic artist's long table of colors. The whole picture is simple, but unintelligible to the looker-on for the first time, and as he vanishes through the door he laughs heartily at the very thin disguise tragedy and comedy are required to put on to delude and please the public.

Let him return to the theatre in the morning and view its mysteries shorn of the dazzle and splendor that the night brings. He will be more astonished still. The place is usually as dark as a dungeon, there being something peculiar in the construction of theatres which makes them bright at night and dismal during daylight. If a stray slant of light falls anywhere upon the stage it will be rudely mocked by the bits of burning candle by the aid of which the stage

carpenter is at work right in the very spot where, twelve hours before, Romeo and Juliet lived and died for each other in such a lamentably pathetic way that the audience shed tears, and only gave the lachrymal rainstorm a rest at intervals long enough to shower the star with applause. The stage carpenter's assistant is there too, the machinist, the scene painters, the men who have charge of the company's baggage, the property-man, and others. They fill the scene in a lugubrious and wholly uninteresting way,—all are at work, and as heedless of the attendance of strangers as the actors and stage hands of the night before had been. The scenes have lost their color—such as are left, and this mimic world that had its admiring and aspiring hundreds is as bare and desert-like as a bald head after its owner has been using hair restoratives for about six months. It has neither shape nor any suggestion of its whilom beauty and attractiveness. The green-room may be explored, and the dressing-rooms, but they will reveal nothing; their former occupants are probably still abed, and unless there is to be a rehearsal they will not be seen around again until 7 o'clock at night. He must not be too searching in his explorations or the attention of the attaches will be attracted, and the conversation that will follow may not be the most pleasant in the world to him. Moving down the stairs that lead to the space under the stage, the explorer will find it darker and more dungeon-like still, and even if it were light nothing could be seen but the steam boiler, for heating and power purposes, the ventilating apparatus, the numerous trap-door openings and the posts about them, with a few other accessories that are hardly worth

mentioning. Again he will be forced to confess that everything is very simple, but he cannot understand any part of it, and again he goes away with a laugh on his lips and merriment in his heart because the people are so easily pleased, and theatrical managers find it so easy to entertain them.

A visit to the dressing-tent of the circus will be equally barren of appreciable results. He can see the dazzling costumes, the shapely limbs of the females, the gaily-caparisoned steeds, the red gold-laced coats of the supers, and a chaotic heaping up of a number of indescribable articles, but behind the canvas screen that divides the tent lie secrets that he must not attempt to penetrate, for there are the lives, the lies and the fascinations of the performers. There, awkward limbs receive their roundly shaping, and old age, by a magic touch with the elixir of the "make-up" box, puts on the masquerading bloom of youth. The same might, to some extent, be said of the dressing-rooms of the theatre, only the application could not be as wide or general as in the circus profession, for the lives these people lead soon lay waste their beauty if they happen to be young, and crowd senility upon them long before the usual time. Their work is always hard, their surroundings are of the very worst kind, they grow up in an atmosphere of fraud, and they necessarily learn early the arts of deception whereby their employers make fame and fortune. But I have taken a stranger into the dressing-tent, and I must not abuse the hospitality of the place by exposing its sins in his presence. The stranger is introduced all around, shakes hands with everybody, even the premiere equestrienne, or, perhaps,

the charming and daring little lady who is twice daily shot out of a cannon, and besides makes two headlong dives a day from the dome of the tent into the net spread beneath. All are glad to see him, and he is surprised to find that the two Indians who juggle fire-brands and do other feats not at all consistent with the traditions of the aborigines, have not sufficient savage blood in their veins to make respectable cigar store signs, but are base counterfeits of the noble red man, applications of chocolate and vermilion to their faces, and the usual accompaniment of black hair, feathers, and deerskin clothing having bestowed upon them all the air of the child of the forest that they possessed. As the band sounds the music for the riding act the equestrienne's horse dashes tamely into the ring, and the gentlemanly agent of the show pushes the visitor out to have him "look at an act that beats anything of the kind in the world."

As in the material or mechanical features of the show there are mysteries of the most interesting and instructive kind, so, too, the personal features of the realm of entertainment—the great world of amusement—contain much that will not only surprise, but will tickle the unsophisticated. By lifting the veil the least bit, the reader can have a peep at the most attractive of the events and incidents that go to make the romantic career of an actor or actress. There are various little things that look simple and innocent enough when they appear in the shape of a newspaper paragraph that contain a world of meaning to the initiated. There are methods of getting and keeping players before the public of which the latter know no more than they do of the wife of the man in the moon. There are

flagrant scandals mingling with the innocent revels of these masquerading people, and there are, too, some of the saintliest, sweetest, manliest and womanliest of individuals in a profession that almost the entire world looks upon with the wildest suspicion, and whose bright names and fair fames can never be tarnished by the iniquitous doings of persons lower and less respectable in character. In all that will be written here regarding the dark side of theatrical life, I wish it distinctly understood that there is no desire or intention to cast even the slightest reflection upon the honored and respected members of a grand profession, and wherever a seemingly sweeping and uncomplimentary statement may be made, the reader will be kind enough to add a saving clause in favor of all those who do not deserve such condemnation. In the concert saloon, the variety den, the boys' theatre, and the numerous other dives in which vice parades boldly and nakedly, will be found ample field for trenchant and graphic writing. These pits of infamy flourish everywhere, and are as freely patronized as the charms of their female attractions are freely displayed; the girls in short dresses, in gleaming tights, with padded bust and cotton-rounded limbs, their seductive wiles, their beer-thirstiness, their reckless familiarity with male friends and strangers, alike from the beardless boy of fourteen to the bald and withering *roué*, the ample freedom with which they throw themselves into the arms of victims and give themselves up to the most outrageous revels; the female minstrel gang and the break-o'-day girls, who supplement their sins on the stage with subsequent and even more surprising iniquity in the hop or dance that follows the show,

—all these phases of the lower strata of theatrical life, as being more productive of interesting secrets of a so-called stage, must be touched upon, that the reader may be able to contrast the extremes of the amusement world, and understand that in mimic as well as real life, there are abject misery and squalid sinfulness while, above all, shines the grand and stainless character of the noble and pure-minded people who bring genius and virtue to the profession of which they are bright, shining ornaments.

CHAPTER II.
A THEATRE OF SHAKESPEARE'S DAY.

Table of Contents

If some of the old Greek dramatists could shake together their ashes and assume life, they would open their ancient eyes to look upon the beauty, comfort, and charming symmetry of the first-class theatre of the present day. The ancients were at first obliged to put up with representations given upon rude carts; afterwards stone theatres were constructed, with the performers placed in a pit in the middle space, but no such effort at decoration, or to provide for the convenience of spectators, was to be seen as is to be found everywhere now. The plays, too, while they may have been delightful to our Hellenic predecessors, would hardly draw a corporal's guard at the present time, when spectacular melodrama is all the rage, and the only chorus the average theatre-goer cares to see is the aggregation of pretty girls in entrancing tights, and with the utmost scantiness of clothes to hide their personal charms, who sing the concerted music in comic opera. This is the kind of chorus that sends a thrill of ecstacy through the heart, and around the resplendent dome of thought of the much-maligned modern bald-head. The strophe and anti-strophe of the ancient drama would set the nineteenth century citizen crazy as a wild man of Borneo. The ancient drama was gradually replaced by the ecclesiastical drama,—the

mystery or miracle play,—an example of which remains to us in the celebrated "Passion Play," performed at Obarammergan at stated intervals, and over the projected production of which, in this country, there was so much trouble that the play was never produced. In this style of drama, events in the life of the Savior, or the great mysteries of the church, were the topics dealt with by the saintly playwright, and the actors personated characters ranging from the Devil up through the various grades of saintliness and angelic beatification to God Almighty himself. The miracle play flourished during the middle ages, and survived down almost to the Elizabethan period, when Shakespeare appeared upon the scene; and with his advent there came a revolution, the outgrowth of which is the present perfect and beautiful theatre. The change in the style of plays brought a change in the style of places for their representations, and while the Bard of Avon was making his reputation in the dramatic line, the Globe and Blackfriars were leading the way to advancement in the matter of theatrical structures. They had performances on Sunday in those olden times, and while good Christians were worshipping God in their sanctuaries, the undevout Britons of the "golden age" were worshipping Thespis in his.

Let us drop back into a theatre of the Shakespearian epoch, some Sunday afternoon when the weather is fine, and you will not be compelled to stand bare-headed in the pit. Let us go to the Globe. It was situated on the Bankside. It was a wooden building, of hexagonal shape, open to the sky, and partly thatched. To a little tower-like projection from the roof was fastened a staff of no inconsiderable height,

from which always fluttered the flag of England. Windows were sparsely distributed here and there, on each side of the building, while over the door was displayed the figure of Hercules bearing the globe upon his brawny shoulders. Whether the mythological giant came with his terrestrial burden to dedicate, *in propria persona*, this temple to the mightiest of the muses, or whether the whole thing was only a cunning contrivance of some skilful artisan, embodying the conception of a clever play writer, history does not record.

Whenever a play was to be enacted, the entrance to the Globe was always jammed with footboys, eager for a chance to hold a gentleman's horse, or lounging gallants, who collected to show themselves and to ogle the ladies as they entered. It was a lively spectacle, as stiff dames and ruffled noblemen, poor artisans and sleek gallants, wits and critics, footmen and laborers and ragged urchins stepped forward to pay the admittance fee of a shilling or a sixpence, or to make a respectful offer of their credit, which was usually most disrespectfully condemned as unlawful tender. It was a lively sight as gouty old gentlemen flourished huge *batons* over the scraggy heads of malicious boys who jostled them purposely; as titled old dames in immense flaring petticoats endeavored to smooth their noble wrinkles, and look mincing and modest under the impertinent gaze of the bedizened fops, and as the fops themselves twisted and bent and bowed and shook their powdered wigs, twirled their glove-fingers, or turned out their toes fastidiously, at the imminent risk of dislocating their tarsals.

But let us enter with the crowd and observe the internal economy of the theatre, and the character of the performance. Though externally hexagonal, the building within is circular in form. There is no roof, as before intimated, and the exhibitions occurring only in the summer and in pleasant weather, the air is always serene and pure, and the audience requires no protection from storms or wind. In the centre of the enclosure is the pit, as in modern play-houses. Here, "the understanding gentlemen of the ground," as Ben Jonson has it, revelled in the delights of the drama at sixpence a head; the bosom of the earth their sole footstool, and the blue canopy of heaven their only shelter. The "great unwashed did congregate" upon this spot, sometimes in immense numbers, to luxuriate at once in Shakespeare and tobacco; for be it known, the ancient theatres of London were to the working classes very much what its modern porter and beer shops are. They were places of resort where tradesmen and tradesmen's wives assembled to gossip and smoke and steep.

Surrounding the pit upon all sides except where the stage completed the circle, were the boxes or rooms, as they were called. In these were assembled those who could lay claim to rank or wealth. They were furnished with wooden benches—a luxury of which the pit could never boast, and which was purchased for a shilling. It will be observed, from what has been said, that the internal arrangements of the ancient theatres were upon precisely the same plan as those of the modern. The cause of this identity of structure may be easily traced. As late as the reign of Henry VIII., it was customary to enact plays and pageants in the courts of

inns. These were usually quadrangular in form, with balconies or piazzas projecting into the court, and corresponding with the stories of the building. The stage was erected near the entrance-gate, and occupied one entire side of the quadrangle. The inn-yard thus formed the pit or parquette, for the accommodation of the "understanding gentlemen," while the balconies or rooms (rising above each other in tiers varying with the number of stories) corresponded to the boxes. It was from this crude, original conception that the architects of Queen Elizabeth's reign fashioned the Globe and Blackfriars, and from thence has it come down to the present day.

Directly in front of the pit was the stage, protected by a woollen curtain. Unlike modern "drops," it was divided in the middle, and suspended by rings from an iron rod. When the performance was about to commence it was drawn aside—opening from the middle; the rolling up process is an achievement of some later mind.

Hark! Do you hear the gentle grating, the jingling, the rustling of woollen? Without the slightest premonitory symptoms there has been a rupture of the curtain, and the mysteries it so securely hid are most unexpectedly revealed. Seated upon wooden stools or reclining upon the rushes with which the stage is strewn, are a number of individuals composedly smoking long pipes, whom the unsophisticated might take for actors. Far from it; they are the perpetual bane of actors—wits and gallants, who delight in nothing so much as in exhibiting themselves for the public to admire, or confusing the actors by their pleasantries and disturbing the progress of the play.

Protruding from the further wall of the stage is a balcony, supported on wooden pillars, and flanked by a pair of boxes in which those who rejoiced in being singular or who could not afford the full price of admission were accommodated. The balcony was used by the actors. It served as the rostrum when a large company was to be addressed; it was the throne of kings and princes, the grand judgment-seat of mighty umpires, and in cases of necessity was convenient as the first-story window of an imaginary dwelling-house. For this latter purpose it was particularly useful in the garden scene between Romeo and Juliet. But while we have been delaying in description, the rushes upon the boards have rustled, the actors have made their appearance, and the business of the play has commenced.

For the purpose of illustrating the manner in which performances were conducted, we select the "As You Like It," of Shakespeare, as being most familiar to the general reader, and also peculiarly adapted to our purpose. Orlando and Adam make their appearance, and a signboard nailed to one of the side entrance communicates the altogether unsuspected fact that we are gazing upon an orchard. We see nothing which in any way favors the agreeable illusion: there are the rushes, the smoking fops, the balcony and a maze of pine boards, but nothing that looks like trees. Still, let not these things move you to that degree of uncharitableness or presumption that you doubt whether there be an orchard; does not the infallible board with its painted letters positively affirm, "This be an orchard?" Other *dramatis personæ* soon enter, and the hypothetical orchard becomes the scene of a most animated and interesting

colloquy—the assembled company receiving no intimation that the fruit trees are no more, until the curtain falls, or rather is drawn, upon the first act.

When the woolen hangings are again separated, the imagination is no longer painfully strained to support the illusion of the apples, but the unerring board directs the wandering eye to the vast forests of Arden. Here Jaques makes his sublime forest meditations in an area of ten feet by twelve, enclosed in rough pine boards; his enthusiasm, considerably damped by the provoking witticisms of critics and gallants, and his utterances choked by the volumes of tobacco smoke which roll in lazy, suffocating clouds toward the ceiling from a score of pipes. The affectionate ditties of Orlando are nailed to visionary trees, and he makes passionate love to the fair Rosalind amid fumes which strangle tender phrases, and convert sighings into pulmonary symptoms of a different character.

It should here be observed by way of explanation, that Rosalind, when personated in Elizabeth's time, was fair only by courtesy; for female parts were enacted during her reign, and indeed, during many subsequent reigns, by boys or young men. There is an anecdote related of Charles II., which is a matter of history, and illustrates this point very well. It is said that on one occasion, visiting the theatre at the bringing out of a new play, by some great author, he became impatient at the unusual delay in drawing asunder the curtain. The royal wrath soon became extreme, and it was essential to the prospects of the "management" that it should be appeased. Accordingly, when the vials of imperial indignation were about to be emptied promiscuously upon

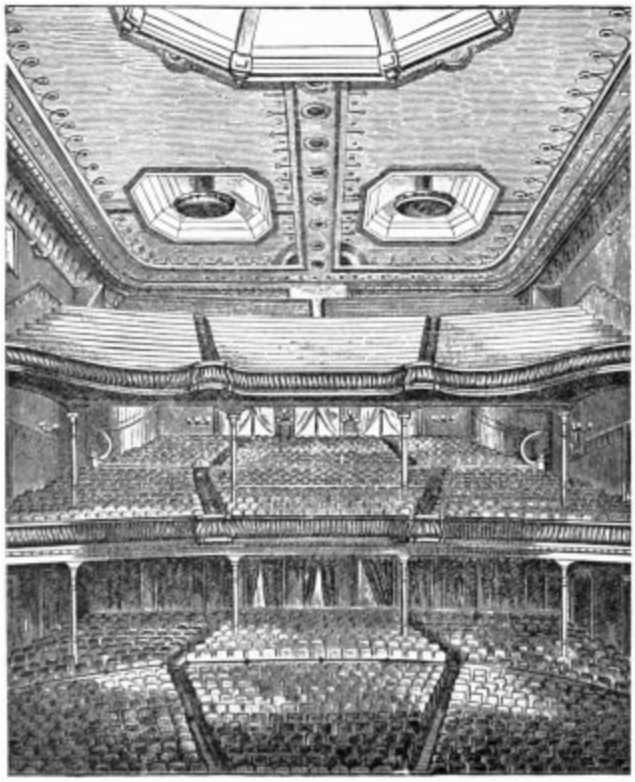
the assembly, when the storm was just about to burst, a messenger from the green-room informed his majesty that the fair heroine had not finished shaving,—and the tempest immediately subsided. At each successive act new boards with fresh inscriptions inform us of the situation of the performers. The saloons of the duke's palace and the cottage of the peasant—scenes in doors and scenes out of doors—are precisely the same, with the exception of the invariable and ever-changing signboard.

But there is one novelty, one new feature in the representation as the play progresses. It will be recollected that the balcony was mentioned as furnishing a throne for princes, and a judgment-seat for dispensers of justice. During the wrestling contest between Charles and Orlando, this most serviceable commodity comes into requisition. Here sits the "duke" as umpire of the combat and general of the troops and retainers who stand on guard below. It is quite refreshing to hear his stentorian voice issuing from so unusual a quarter—it furnishes quite an agreeable relief to the tedious monotony of insipid dialogue going on among the rushes below.

The play, however, proceeds rather sluggishly from the utter meagreness and insufficiency of the "scenery, machinery and decorations," so indispensable to the attractiveness of theatrical exhibitions. The tradesmen in the pit turn their backs to the stage and their eyes to the skies, as they clasp affectionately the almost exhausted flagon, and pour into their thirsty throats the residue of half a dozen potations. The crimpled dames in the boxes relax their majestic stiffness, and relapse somnolent into the arms

of the gouty old gentlemen, their husbands. The wits and "clever" men upon the stage grow more boisterous in their pleasantries, and fumigate more zealously as they pelt the unfortunate actors with rushes, or trip them as they "exeunt." To the vulgar crowd the only attractions which the performance offers, are the brilliant dresses of the actors and the vestige of a plot which the personation enables them to glean. As a general thing, however, the stage now receives hardly any attention. Pipes, tankards, and gossip are the order of the day, and everybody is glad when Orlando succeeds in obtaining his hereditary rights, wins the hand of the beautiful Rosalind, is dismissed in happiness, and the woolen screen slips along its iron rod for the last time.

Such was the style of dramatic exhibitions in the Elizabethan era. The stage was totally devoid of all scenic appendages calculated to produce the illusion necessary to add interest and intelligence to the plot. Rocks and trees, palaces and hamlets, places of festivity and scenes of shipwreck, all existed merely in the imagination, with neither properties nor scenery to aid in the deception.



INTERIOR OF A MODERN THEATRE.

CHAPTER III.
THE AMERICAN THEATRE.

Table of Contents

Good-natured, rosy-cheeked, cheerful little Davy Garrick, as Dr. Johnson called the tragedian, was in the zenith of his glory at the Drury Lane, London, about the middle of the last century, and Goodman's Fields, which had cradled the wonderful actor, was in its decline. It declined so rapidly after Garrick deserted it that its manager, Wm. Hallam, failed in 1750, and the theatre was closed. Hallam at once turned his thoughts toward America as a field in which his fortune might be replenished,—English actors and managers still look upon this country as an El Dorado,—and so he consulted with his brother Lewis Hallam, a comedian, and the two came to the conclusion to organize a company and run the risk of being scalped by what they considered the liberal but bloodthirsty tomahawk-wielding citizens of the New World. They got a company together, twenty-four stock plays, many of them Shakespearian, were selected, with eight farces and a single pantomime, "The Harlequin Collector, or The Miller Deceived." Wm. Hallam and his brother were to share the profits of the venture, and the former was to remain at home while the latter managed the company and threw in his services as first low comedian, his wife and children also taking parts in the performances.

Under the direction of Lewis the company, with some scenery, costumes, and all the usual stage accessories, set

sail on board the Charming Sally in 1752. During the voyage when the weather permitted, the company rehearsed their plays on the quarter-deck of the vessel, having the crew and officers for their audience, and receiving from them many manifestations of the delight which their histrionic efforts brought to the Jack Tars' hearts. They landed at Williamsburg, then the capital of Virginia, and the manager after a diligent search found a store-house on the outskirts of the town, which he thought would suit his purpose. This he leased and metamorphosed into a theatre with pit, gallery, and boxes, and having the establishment ready on September 5, 1752, on that day the first performance ever given in America by a regular company of comedians, was given to a presumably large and delighted audience. As was the custom in those days, the bill was a double one, consisting of "The Merchant of Venice" and the farce "Lethe." The cast for "The Merchant of Venice" was as follows: *Bassanio*, Mr. Rigby; *Antonio*, Mr. Clarkson; *Gratiano*, Mr. Singleton; *Salanio* and *Duke*, Mr. Herbert; *Salarino* and *Gobbs*, Mr. Wignel; *Launcelot* and *Tubal*, Mr. Hallam; *Shylock*, Mr. Malone; *Servant to Portia*, Master Lewis Hallam (being his first appearance on any stage); *Nerissa*, Miss Palmer; *Jesica* (her first appearance on any stage), Miss Hallam; *Portia*, Mrs. Hallam. The cast for "Lethe" was as follows (the *Tailor* having been cut out, and the part of *Lord Chalkston* not having been written into the farce at the time the Hallam company left England): *Esop*, Mr. Clarkson; *Old Man*, Mr. Malone; *Fine Gentleman*, Mr. Singleton; *Frenchman*, Mr. Rigby; *Charon*, Mr. Herbert; *Mercury*, Mr. Adcock; *Drunken*

Man and *Tattoo*, Mr. Hallam; *John*, Mr. Wignel; *Mrs. Tattoo*, Miss Palmer; *Fine Lady*, Mrs. Hallam.

The Williamsburg theatre was a very rude structure, and so near the woods that the manager could, as he often did, stand in the back door of the building and shoot pigeons for his dinner. Still the company remained here for a long time and met with much success. The house was finally destroyed by fire and the company removed to Annapolis, where a substantial building was converted to their use and where they remained with fortune favoring them until they got ready to go to New York. This they did in 1753, opening a theatre in the metropolis on September 17th, that on Nassau Street, in a building afterwards occupied by the old Dutch Church. The bill for the first night was "The Conscious Lovers" and the ballad-farce "Damon and Phillida." But three performances were given each week—on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—and this continued to be the rule up to the beginning of the present century. The price of admission was eight shillings to the boxes, six shillings to the pit and three shillings to the gallery. This was on the first night, but the second night the prices were lowered to six shillings, five shillings, and three shillings for boxes, pit, and gallery respectively, and by the middle of October a fourth reduction was made, so that admission to the pit could be had for four shillings and to the gallery for two shillings. The performance began at six o'clock, and on the bill for the opening night appears a request that ladies and gentlemen will come to the theatre in time, and a statement that nothing under the full price will be taken during the entire performance. This seems to be a departure from the custom

of the mother country, where half price was received for admission after the third act. The Nassau Street theatre was closed on the evening of March 18, 1754, with "The Beggars' Opera" and "The Devil to Pay."

While the company was still in New York, Manager Hallam was endeavoring to come to terms with the Quakers of Philadelphia, who strenuously objected to having players in their midst, or to allowing stage representations in their city. Mr. Malone, a member of the company, was at length sent on to the Quaker City, as Hallam's ambassador, and after considerable trouble succeeded in obtaining Gov. Hamilton's permission to present twenty-four plays and their attendant farces provided there was nothing indecent or immoral in them. In April, 1754 the company gave its first performance in Philadelphia, playing the tragedy of "The Fair Penitent," and the farce, "Miss in Her Teens." The building occupied by the actors is designated by William Dunlap, the historian of the early American theatre, as "the store-house of a Mr. Plumstead," and was situated "on the corner of the first alley above Pine Street." After the twenty-four performances had been given by "authority of his excellency," Gov. Hamilton, the players were allowed to add six more nights, after which they returned to New York. Here they erected a theatre on Cruger's wharf, between Old Slip and Coffee House Slip, and prospered.

Boston did not have a theatre until 1792, and then got its first place of amusement only because Wignell and three other members of Hallam's company, for some reason or other, seceded from it. The seceders brought to their standard some money men of the Hub, a building was

erected, and on August 10, 1792, the first show was given; feats on the tight rope and acrobatic and other artists contributing to the entertainment. Five years later New York had two theatres, one on the Johns, and the other on Greenwich Street, and when the nineteenth century began, amusements were in a flourishing condition in all the large cities of the country, and the theatre had taken firm root and gave full promise of its present prosperity in the New World.

They were a queer band, these early strollers on American soil. It reads like a romance to follow them through the history of their early struggles, and to scrutinize the personal peculiarities of the individuals who composed the company. One of them—I forget which at the present moment—was an imaginative fellow given up to all sorts of schemes and inventions, and published far and wide the announcement that he had discovered a process of manufacturing salt from sea water. A member of one of the earliest orchestras—a short time after Hallam had ceased furnishing music to his audience with "one Mr. Pelham and his harpsichord" or the single fiddle of a Mr. Hewlett—had been a Catholic priest in Switzerland, and had suffered the tortures of the Inquisition. He told his story to his manager one day and it was really touching. His mother, he said, had dedicated him in his infancy to the priesthood. When he became old enough he was placed in a theological seminary, instructed and duly ordained. He was a priest when Spain went to war against France. His canton raised a regiment, and the priest being made its chaplain accompanied it to Madrid. In Madrid he for the first time