JEROME KLAPKA JEROME

ON THE STAGE-AND OFF

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On The Stage-And Off / The Brief Career Of A Would-Be Actor:

Содержание

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PREFACE

In penning the following pages I have endeavored to be truthful. In looking back upon the scenes through which I passed, I have sought to penetrate the veil of glamour Time trails behind him as he flies, and to see things exactly as they were – to see the rough road as well as the smiling landscape, the briers and brambles as well as the green grass and the waving trees.

Now, however, that my task is done, and duty no longer demands that memory should use a telescope, the mellowing haze of distance resumes its sway, and the Stage again appears the fair, enchanted ground that I once dreamt it. I forget the shadows, and remember but the brightness. The hardships that I suffered seem now but picturesque incidents; the worry only pleasurable excitement.

I think of the Stage as of a lost friend. I like to dwell upon its virtues and to ignore its faults. I wish to bury in oblivion the

bad, bold villains and the false-hearted knaves who played a part thereon, and to think only of the gallant heroes, the virtuous maidens, and the good old men.

Let the bad pass. I met far more honest, kindly faces than deceitful ones, and I prefer to remember the former. Plenty of honest, kindly hands grasped mine, and such are the hands that I like to grip again in thought. Where the owners of those kindly hands and faces may be now I do not know. Years have passed since I last saw them, and the sea of life has drifted us farther and farther apart. But wherever on that sea they may be battling, I call to them from here a friendly greeting. Hoping that my voice may reach across the waves that roll between us, I shout to them and their profession a hearty and sincere God Speed.

CHAPTER I. I Determine to Become an Actor

THERE comes a time in every one's life when he feels he was born to be an actor. Something within him tells him that he is the coming man, and that one day he will electrify the world. Then he burns with a desire to show them how the thing's done, and to draw a salary of three hundred a week.

This sort of thing generally takes a man when he is about nineteen, and lasts till he is nearly twenty. But he doesn't know this at the time. He thinks he has got hold of an inspiration all to himself – a kind of solemn "call," which it would be wicked to disregard; and when he finds that there are obstacles in the way of his immediate appearance as Hamlet at a leading West-end theater, he is blighted.

I myself caught it in the usual course. I was at the theater one evening to see *Romeo and Juliet* played, when it suddenly flashed across me that that was my vocation. I thought all acting was making love in tights to pretty women, and I determined to devote my life to it. When I communicated my heroic resolution to my friends, they reasoned with me. That is, they called me a fool; and then said that they had always thought me a sensible fellow, though that was the first I had ever heard of it.

But I was not to be turned from my purpose.

I commenced operations by studying the great British dramatists. I was practical enough to know that some sort of preparation was necessary, and I thought that, for a beginning, I could not do better than this. Accordingly, I read through every word of Shakespeare, – with notes, which made it still more unintelligible, – Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Sheridan, Goldsmith, and Lord Lytton. This brought me into a state of mind bordering on insanity. Another standard dramatist, and I should have gone raving mad: of that I feel sure. Thinking that a change would do me good, I went in for farces and burlesques, but found them more depressing than the tragedies, and the idea then began to force itself upon me that, taking one consideration with another, an actor's lot would not be a happy one. Just when I was getting most despondent, however, I came across a little book on the art of "making-up," and this resuscitated me.

I suppose the love of "making-up" is inherent in the human race. I remember belonging, when a boy, to "The West London United Concert and Entertainment Association." We used to meet once a week for the purpose of regaling our relations with original songs and concertina solos, and on these occasions we regularly burnt-corked our hands and faces. There was no earthly reason for doing so, and I am even inclined to think we should have made our friends less unhappy if we had spared them this extra attraction. None of our songs had the slightest reference to Dinah. We didn't even ask each other conundrums; while, as for the jokes, they all came from the audience. And yet we daubed

ourselves black with as much scrupulousness as if it had been some indispensable religious rite. It could only have been vanity.

"Making-up" certainly assists the actor to a very great degree. At least, I found it so in my case. I am naturally of mild and gentle appearance, and, at that time, was particularly so. It was no earthly use my standing in front of the glass and trying to rehearse the part of, say, a drunken costermonger. It was perfectly impossible for me to imagine myself the character. I am ashamed to have to confess it, but I looked more like a young curate than a drunken costermonger, or even a sober one, and the delusion could not be sustained for a moment. It was just the same when I tried to turn myself into a desperate villain; there was nothing of the desperate villain about me. I might, perhaps, have imagined myself going for a walk on Sunday, or saying "bother it," or even playing ha'penny nap, but as for ill-treating a lovely and unprotected female, or murdering my grandfather, the thing was absurd. I could not look myself in the face and do it. It was outraging every law of Lavater.

My fiercest scowl was a milk-and-watery accompaniment to my bloodthirsty speeches; and, when I tried to smile sardonically, I merely looked imbecile.

But crape hair and the rouge pot changed all this. The character of Hamlet stood revealed to me the moment that I put on false eyebrows, and made my cheeks look hollow. With a sallow complexion, dark eyes, and long hair, I *was* Romeo, and, until I washed my face, loved Juliet to the exclusion of all my

female cousins. Humor came quite natural when I had a red nose; and, with a scrubby black beard, I felt fit for any amount of crime.

My efforts to study elocution, however, were not so successful. I have the misfortune to possess a keen sense of the ludicrous, and to have a morbid dread of appearing ridiculous. My extreme sensitiveness on this point would have been enough to prevent my ever acting well under any circumstances, and, as it was, it hampered and thwarted me at every turn: not only on the stage, but even in my own room, with the door locked. I was always in a state of terror lest any one should overhear me, and half my time was taken up in listening on one side of the key-hole, to make sure that no one was listening on the other; while the slightest creak on the stairs was sufficient to make me stop short in the middle of a passage, and commence whistling or humming in an affectedly careless manner, in order to suggest the idea that I was only amusing myself. I tried getting up early and going to Hampstead Heath, but it was no good. If I could have gone to the Desert of Sahara, and assured myself, by the aid of a powerful telescope, that no living creature was within twenty miles of me, I might have come out strong, but not else. Any confidence I might have placed in Hampstead Heath was rudely dissipated on the very second morning of my visits. Buoyed up by the belief that I was far from every vestige of the madding crowd, I had become quite reckless, and, having just delivered, with great vigor, the oration of Antony over the body of Cæsar, I was about starting on something else, when I heard a loud whisper come from some

furze bushes close behind me: “Ain’t it proper, Liza! Joe, you run and tell ‘Melia to bring Johnny.”

I did not wait for Johnny. I left that spot at the rate of six miles an hour. When I got to Camden Town I looked behind me, cautiously. No crowd appeared to be following me, and I felt relieved, but I did not practice on Hampstead Heath again.

After about two months of this kind of thing, I was satisfied that I had learned all that could possibly be required, and that I was ready to “come out.” But here the question very naturally arose, “How can I get out?” My first idea was to write to one of the leading managers, tell him frankly my ambition, and state my abilities in a modest but a straightforward manner. To this, I argued, he would reply by requesting me to call upon him, and let him see for himself what I could do. I should then go to the theater at the time appointed, and send up my card. He would ask me into his private room, and, after a little general conversation on the weather, and the latest murder, etc., etc., he would suggest my rehearsing some short scene before him or reciting one or two speeches. This I should do in a way that would quite astonish him, and he would engage me on the spot at a small salary. I did not expect much at first, but fancied that five or six pounds per week would be near the mark. After that, the rest would be easy. I should go on for some months, perhaps a year, without making any marked sensation. Then my opportunity would come. A new play would be produced, in which there would be some minor part, not considered of any importance, but which in my hands

(I had just read the history of "Lord Dundreary," and believed every word of it) would become the great thing in the play, and the talk of London.

I should take the town by storm, make the fortune of my manager, and be the leading actor of the day. I used to dwell on the picture of the night when I should first startle the world. I could see the vast house before me with its waves of wild, excited faces. I could hear their hoarse roar of applause ringing in my ears. Again and again I bowed before them, and again and again the cheers burst forth, and my name was shouted with waving of hats and with bravos.

I did not write to a manager, though, after all. A friend who knew something about the subject said he wouldn't if he were I, and I didn't.

I asked him what course he would advise, and he said: "Go to an agent, and tell him just exactly what you want." I went to two or three agents, and told them all just exactly what I wanted, and they were equally frank, and told me just exactly, what *they* wanted, which, speaking generally, was five shillings booking fee, to begin with. To do them justice, though, I must say that none of them appeared at all anxious to have me; neither did they hold out to me much hope of making my fortune. I believe my name is still down in the books of most of the agents – at least, I have never been round to take it off – and I expect that among them they will obtain for me a first-class engagement one of these days, when I am Bishop of London, or editor of a society

paper, or something of that sort.

It was not for want of worrying that they did not do anything for me then. I was forever what I called "waking them up," a process which consisted of studying the photos in the outer office for half an hour, and then being requested to call again. I had regular days for performing this duty, on the mornings of which I would say to myself: "Well, I must go round, and wake those agents up again to-day." When I had said this, I felt quite important, and had some vague idea that I was overworking myself. If, on my way, I happened to meet a friend, I greeted him with "Haven't got a minute, old man. I'm just going round to my agents," and, scarcely stopping to shake hands, would rush off, leaving him with the impression that I had been telegraphed for.

But I never succeeded in rousing them to a full sense of their responsibilities, and, after a while, we began to get mutually tired of one another; especially as about this time I managed to get hold of two or three sham agents, – or rather, they managed to get hold of me, – who were much more pleased to see me. One of these, a very promising firm (though not quite so good at performing), had its offices then in Leicester Square, and consisted of two partners, one of whom, however, was always in the country on important business, and could never be seen. I remember they got four pounds out of me, for which they undertook, in writing, to obtain me a salaried London engagement before the expiration of a month. Just when the time was nearly up, however, I received a long and sympathetic letter

from the mysterious traveling partner. This hitherto rusticating individual had, it appeared, returned to town the previous day, but only to discover a state of things that had shocked him beyond all expression. His partner, the one to whom I had paid the four pounds, besides defrauding nearly all the clients by taking money for engagements which he had no possible means of obtaining, had robbed him, the writer of the letter, of upward of seventy pounds, and had bolted, no one knew whither. My present correspondent expressed himself deeply grieved at my having been so villainously cheated, and hoped I would join him in taking proceedings against his absconding partner – when found. He concluded by stating that four pounds was an absurd sum to charge for obtaining such an engagement as had been held out to me, and that if I would give him (who really had the means of performing his promises) two pounds, he would get me one in a week, or ten days at the outside. Would I call and see him that evening? I did not go that evening, but I went the first thing the next morning. I then found the door locked, and a notice on it that all letters were to be left with the housekeeper. Coming downstairs, I met a man coming up, and asked him if he knew where either of the partners could be found. He said that he would give a sovereign to know, and that he was the landlord. I heard of the firm again the other day, and I believe it is still flourishing, though with the customary monthly change as to name and address. By the by, I wonder if the agent nuisance will ever be stamped out. Perhaps, now that education is compulsory,

the next generation of actors and managers may be able to look after their own affairs, and so dispense with the interference of these meddlers on commission.

CHAPTER II. I Become an Actor

AMONG the sham agents must be classed the "Professors," or "X. Y. Z.'s," who are always "able to place two or three" (never more than two or three: it would be no use four applying) "lady and gentlemen amateurs, of tall or medium stature, either dark or fair, but *must* be of good appearance, at a leading West-end theater, in good parts: Salaried engagement." These gentlemen are appreciative, and very quick to discern real talent. They perceived mine in a moment. They were all of them sure that I should make a splendid actor, and I was just the man they wanted. But they were conscientious. They scorned to hide the truth, and told me of my faults without reserve. They said that I was full of promise, that I had the makings of a really great actor in me, *but*– and the remarkable part of it was that no two of them agreed as to that "but." One said it was my voice. All that I wanted was to train my voice; then I should be perfect. Another thought my voice was a very fine one, but told me that my attitudes would not do at all. When my attitudes were a little more artistic, he could get me an engagement at once. A third, after hearing me recite a trifle or two from *Macbeth*, clapped me on shoulder, and insisted on shaking hands. There were tears almost in his eyes, and he appeared quite overcome. He said:

"My boy, you have got it in you. You are an actor! but – you want chic."

I had not got the slightest notion what he meant. I said:

"You think so."

He was sure of it. It would be impossible for me to succeed without chic: *with* chic, I should soon be famous. I determined, at any price, to get chic, and I deferentially put it to him, how he thought I could obtain it. He paused for a minute or so, evidently considering how it could be done, while I stood anxiously awaiting the result. Suddenly a bright idea seemed to strike him. He laid his hand confidentially on my arm, and in the impressive voice of a man who is communicating some extraordinary discovery, said: "Come to me, twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, say, from eight to nine." Then he drew back a few paces to see what effect it had upon me.

I replied that I supposed he meant he would teach it me. He seemed struck with my intelligence, and acknowledged that that was just precisely what he did mean. He explained – always in the same strictly confidential manner, as though he would not for the world have any one else know – that he had had great experience in this particular branch of dramatic education. He had letters now in his desk from well-known actors and actresses, persons of the greatest eminence, acknowledging that they owed their present position entirely to his teaching, and thanking him for all that he had done for them. He would show me those letters, and he rose to do so. But no, on second thoughts he would not; they were written in confidence, and it would not be right for him to let others see them – not even me, whom he felt he could trust.

To do him justice, he never did show those letters, either to me, or, as far as I could learn, to any one else, though I subsequently came across three or four people who expressed an earnest desire to see them.

But I was slowly and painfully gaining experience, and I went away without leaving the five-pound note which I – "as a man of business'" – ought to have seen was an absurdly small amount, his usual charge being twenty guineas; only, somehow or other, he had taken an interest in me, and felt sure I should reflect credit on his teaching, and so make it up to him in that way.

Another class that make a very good thing out of stage-struck asses, are the "managers" (?) who have vacancies for "an amateur lady and gentleman in a specially selected company." They are men who evidently believe in the literal truth of Jaques's opinion as to all men and women being players, for they put raw novices into the leading parts with a confidence as to the result that is simply touching. The Thespian aspirant, who has never acted out of his own back parlor, feels a little nervous, though, at being cast for Banquo and Colonel Damas, to open with on the following Saturday. He cannot quite make up his mind whether a mistake has been made, a practical joke played upon him for the amusement of the rest of the company, or whether it is that the manager is really an intelligent man, who knows ability when he sees it. He does not like to speak about it, lest it should be thought he was not confident of his own powers – a failing of which the stage tyro is not usually guilty. Besides which, the parts might

be taken from him, and this he by no means desires, although, at the same time, he is perfectly sure that he could play every other character in the piece much better. I had only one experience of the sham manager – at least, of this kind of sham manager. Unfortunately, there are other kinds, as most actors know to their cost, but these I have not come to yet. No, and I wish I had never gone to them, either.

There were about half a dozen of us noodles who had answered one advertisement, and we met every night for rehearsals at a certain house in Newman Street. Three or four well-known professionals, who were then starring in the provinces, but who would join us at the beginning of the next week, were to fill the chief parts, and we were to start for Gravesend immediately after their arrival. I had been engaged at a weekly salary of one pound fifteen shillings, and had been cast for the parts of Gilbert Featherstone in *Lost in London*, and the King in *Hamlet*. Everything went smoothly; there had been no suggestion of a premium or anything of that kind; and although I had, by this time, grown exceedingly suspicious, I began to think that this, at all events, was not a swindle. But I soon found out the trick. On the fifth night of the rehearsals, our manager was particularly pleasant, and complimented me on what he called my really original reading of the parts. During the pauses, he leant familiarly on my shoulder, and discussed the piece with me. We had a little argument about the part of the King. He differed from me, at first, on one or two points, but afterward came round

to my views, and admitted that I was right. Then he asked me how I was going to dress the part. I had thought of this, even before I had studied the words, so I was as pat as could be on the subject, and we went through all the details, and arranged for a very gorgeous costume, indeed. He did not try to stint me in the leasts though I was once or twice afraid he might grumble at the cost. But no, he seemed quite as anxious as I was that the thing should be done in good style. It would be a little expensive, as he himself said, but then, "you may just as well do the thing properly, while you are about it," he added, and I agreed with him. He went on to reckon up the amount. He said that he could get the things very cheap – much cheaper than any one else, as he had a friend in the business, who would let him have them for exactly what they cost to make. I congratulated him on the fact, but feeling no personal interest in the matter, began to be rather bored by his impressiveness on the subject. After adding it all up, he came to the conclusion that nine pounds ought to cover the lot.

"And very cheap, too," said he; "the things will be good, and will always come in useful;" and I agreed with him again, and remarked that I thought they would be well worth the money; but wondering what on earth all this had got to do with me.

Then he wanted to know whether I would pay the money that evening, or bring it with me next time.

"Me! me pay!" I exclaimed, rendered ungrammatical by surprise. "What for?"

"What for! Why, for the costume," replied he; "you can't play

the part without, and if you got the things yourself, you'd have to pay about four pounds more, that's all. If you haven't got all the money handy," he continued soothingly, "let me have as much as you can, you know, and I'll try and get my friend to trust you for the rest."

On subsequent inquiry among the others, I found that three of them had already let him have about five pounds each, and that a fourth, intended to hand him over four pounds ten the following night. I and another agreed to wait and see. We did not see much, however. We never saw the well-known professionals, and, after the next evening, we never saw our manager again. Those who had paid saw less.

I now thought I would try hunting for myself, without the aid of agents or advertisements. I might be more successful, and certainly could not be less. The same friend that had recommended me not to write to the managers, concurred with me in this view, and thought I could not do better than drop in occasionally at "The Occidental"; and I accordingly so dropped in. I suppose there is no actor who does not know "The Occidental," though it does try to hide itself down a dark court, being, no doubt, of a retiring disposition, like the rest of the profession.

I found the company there genial and pleasant, and without any objection to drinking at my expense. When, however, I hinted my wish to join the profession, they regarded me with a look of the most profound pity, and seemed really quite

concerned. They shook their heads gravely, told me their own experiences, and did all they could to dissuade me from my intention. But I looked upon them as selfish fellows who wanted to keep young talent from the stage. Even if their advice were given honestly, I argued, it was no use taking any notice of it. Every one thinks his own calling the worst, and if a man waited to enter a profession until those already in it recommended him to, he might sit and twiddle his thumbs for the rest of his life. So I paid no attention to their warning, but continued in my course, and, at length, found some one to help me.

He was a large, flabby-looking individual, who seemed to live on Scotch whisky and big cigars, and was never either drunk or sober. He did not smell refreshing – a fact he made all the more impressive by breathing very hard, right into one's face, while talking. He had formerly been a country manager, but how he earned his livelihood now, was always a mystery to me, as, although he rented a dirty little back room in a street leading out of the Strand, and called it his office, he never did anything there but go to sleep. He was, however, well known to the theatrical frequenters of "The Occidental," – better known than respected, as I afterward learnt, – while he himself knew everybody, and it appeared to me that he was just the very man I wanted. At first, he was not any more enthusiastic than the others, but my mentioning that I was prepared to pay a small premium in order to obtain an appearance, set him pondering, and, in the end, he didn't see why it could not be done. When I stated the figure I

was ready to give, he grew more hopeful still, and came to the conclusion that it *could* be done. He did not even see why I should not make a big name, if I only left myself entirely in his hands.

"I have done the same thing for other people," said he, "and I can for you, if I like. There is – ," he went on, getting talkative all at once, "he is drawing his eighty pounds a week now. Well, damn it all, sir, I made that man – made him. He'd never have been anything more than a third-rate provincial actor, if it hadn't been for me. Then look at – , at the – , I knew him when he was having twenty-two shillings a week for responsibles, with old Joe Clamp, and that only when he could get it, mind you. I brought him up to London, started him at the Surrey, took him on to the West-end, and worked him up to what he is. And now, when he passes me in his brougham, he don't know me," and my newfound friend heaved a sigh, and took another pull to drown his grief at the ingratitude of human nature.

"Yes, sir," he continued, on emerging from his glass, "I made those men, and why shouldn't I make you?"

As I could not show any reason for his not doing so, he determined that he would; although he supposed that I should turn out just the same as the rest of them, and forget him, when I was at the top of the tree. But I assured him most solemnly that I would not, and that I should be just as pleased to see him, when I was a great man, as I was then, and I shook hands warmly with him, as a token of how pleased I was to see him then; for I felt really grateful to him for the favors he was going to bestow

on me, and I was quite vexed that he should think I might prove ungrateful, and neglect him.

When I saw him the next day, he told me he had done it. He had arranged an engagement for me with a Surrey-side manager, to whom he would introduce me to-morrow, when the agreement could be signed, and everything settled. I was, accordingly, to be at his office for the purpose at eleven o'clock the following morning – and to bring the money with me. That was his parting injunction.

I did not walk back to my lodgings, I skipped back. I burst open the door, and went up the stairs like a whirlwind; but I was too excited to stop indoors. I went and had dinner at a first-class restaurant, the bill for which considerably lessened my slender means. "Never mind," I thought, "what are a few shillings, when I shall soon be earning my hundreds of pounds!" I went to the theater, but I don't know what theater it was, or what was the play, and I don't think I knew at the time. I did notice the acting a little, but only to fancy how much better I could play each part myself. I wondered how I should like these particular actors and actresses, when I came to know them. I thought I should rather like the leading lady, and, in my imagination, sketched out the details of a most desperate flirtation with her, that would send all the other actors mad with jealousy. Then I went home to bed, and lay awake all night, dreaming.

I got up at seven the next morning, and hurried over my breakfast, so as to be in time for the appointment at eleven. I

think I looked at my watch (I wonder where that watch is now!) at least every other minute. I got down to the Strand a little before ten, and wandered up and down a small portion of it, frightened to go a stone's throw from the office, and yet dreading to go too near it. I bought a new pair of gloves. I remember they were salmon color, and one of them split as I was trying to get it on, so I carried it crumpled up in my hand, and wore the other one. When it got within twenty minutes of the time, I turned into the street where the office was, and loitered about there, with an uncomfortable feeling, that every one living in it knew what I had come about, and was covertly watching me from behind blinds and curtains. It seemed as though eleven o'clock never would come, but Big Ben tolled it out at last, and I walked up the door, trying to look as if I had just strolled!

When I reached the office, no one was there, and the door was locked. My heart sank within me. Had the whole thing been a cruel hoax? Was it to be another disappointment? Had the manager been murdered? Had the theater been burned down? Why were they not here? Something extraordinary must have happened to make them late on such an important occasion as this. I spent half an hour of intense suspense and then they arrived. They hoped they had not kept me waiting, and I replied, "Oh no, not at all," and murmured something about having only just come myself.

As soon as we all three were inside the little office, I was introduced to the manager, who turned out to be an actor I had

often seen on the boards, but who did not look a bit like himself, though he would have done very well for his own son; he was so much shorter and younger than he ought to have been. The clean-shaven face gives actors such a youthful appearance. It was difficult to believe, at first, that the sedate-looking boys I used to meet at rehearsal, were middle-aged men with families, some of them.

Altogether, my future manager did not realize my expectations of him. He was not dressed with that reckless disregard for expense that I had looked for in a man of his position. To tell the truth, he presented a very seedy figure, indeed. I put it down, however, to that contempt for outward appearance, so often manifested by men of great wealth, and called to mind stories of millionaires who had gone about almost in rags; and I remembered, too, how I had once seen the mother of one of our leading burlesque actresses, and how I had been surprised at her extreme dinginess – the mother's.

They had the agreements all ready, and the manager and I signed in each other's presence, and exchanged. Then I handed him a ten-pound bank note, and he gave me a receipt for it. Everything was strictly formal. The agreement, especially, was very plain and precise, and there could be no mistake about it. It arranged for me to give my services for the first month gratis, and after that I was to receive a *salary according to ability*. This seemed to me very fair, indeed. If anything, it was, perhaps, a little reckless on his part, and might press heavily upon him.

He told me candidly, however, that he did not think I should be worth more than thirty shillings a week to him for the first two or three months though, of course, it would depend upon myself entirely, and he should be only too pleased if it, proved otherwise. I held a different opinion on the subject, but did not mention it, thinking it would be better to wait and let time prove it. So I merely said I wished for nothing but what was fair and just, and it appearing that this was exactly what he wanted me to have, we parted on the best of terms; but not before all particulars had been arranged. He was going to open for the summer season in three weeks' time, and the rehearsals were to commence about a fortnight before. For the next week, therefore, I was nothing; after that, I was an Actor!!![1]

[1] My friends deny this. They say I never became an actor. I say I did, and I think I ought to know.

CHAPTER III.
Through the Stage Door

IT was not until about a week before the opening night, that I received a summons to attend at the theater. Eleven o'clock was the time appointed for "the company to assemble on the stage," and, accordingly, at a few minutes before that hour, I stood in front of the stage-door.

It was a dingy-looking place, up a back street, with a barber's shop on one side, and a coal shed on the other. A glorious spring sunshine made it look, by contrast, still more uninviting, and I likened it to the entrance to the enchanted palace in the fairy tales, where the gloomier the portal through which the prince passes, the more gorgeous the halls beyond. This was before I had seen the inside.

But it wouldn't do for me to stop there meditating. It was already two minutes past eleven and the rest of the company would be waiting for me.

I laid my hand upon the latch, and —

A moment, please. Before I throw open that door and let daylight in upon the little world behind, let me offer a word or two of preparatory explanation.

The theatrical world is a big world. From one of the leading London theaters to a traveling booth (I intend no slighting

allusion to our talented American cousin) is a wide stretch, and embraces a great variety. My experience was confined to three or four of these varieties, and by no means extended to the whole. My short career was passed among the minor London theaters, and second and third rate traveling companies; and it is of these, and these only, that I shall speak. But of these – of what came under my actual observation, that is – I shall speak freely, endeavoring to record things exactly as I found them – nothing extenuating, nor setting down aught in malice. It may be that, in the course of my comments, I shall think it necessary to make a few more or less sensible and original remarks; to tell actors and actresses what they ought to do, and what they ought not to do; to explain to managers how they ought to manage their own business; and to give good advice generally all round. Therefore, at the outset, I wish to be clearly understood that, when so doing, I have in mind only that part of the theatrical world with which I am acquainted. As regards such theaters as, for example, the Lyceum or the St. James's, they are managed quite as well, perhaps, as I could manage them myself, and I have no fault to find with them. Even if I had, I should not do so here, for in these reminiscences I intend to talk only about what I understand – an eccentric resolution for an author, I admit; but no matter, I like to be original now and then. With this understanding, we will push back the door and enter.

I found a wheezy little old man inside, boxed up behind a glass partition, toasting a bloater before a small fire. On that morning, I

felt kindly disposed toward all living things, and I therefore spoke kindly, even to this poor old buffer. I said:

"Good-morning. It's a fine day."

He said, "Shut the door, can't yer; or else get outside."

Acting on this suggestion, I shut the door, and then stood leaning against it, while he finished toasting the bloater. When I saw that this operation was completed I had another try at him. I remarked that my name was – . Of course, I had assumed a stage name. They all do it. Heaven only knows why; I am sure *they* don't. While in the profession, I met a young fellow whose real name happened to be the very one that I had assumed, while he had taken my real name for his assumed one. We were both happy and contented enough, until we met; but afterward we took a sadder view of life, with all its shams and vanities.

As the mere announcement of my name had no visible effect upon the stage-door keeper – for such I found him to be – I fired my last shot, and told him I was an actor. It roused him. It electrified him to such a degree, that he took his gaze off the bloater, and looked at me. Having feasted his eyes upon me to his full satisfaction, he said, "Down the yard," and returned to what, I suppose, was his breakfast; there being a dismal, just-got-up sort of look about him.

Gathering from this that there was a yard somewhere in the neighborhood, and that, when I had found it, I was to go down it, I started off to look for it. I discovered it at last, quite unexpectedly, by the process of stumbling over a friendly cat,

and bursting open a door with my head. The moment I got into it, I was surrounded by at least half a dozen of the feline species. They looked hungry, and welcomed me with enthusiasm, under an absurd idea that I was the cat's meat man, whom I did not resemble in the least. Cats are kept at theaters to keep away the rats, but sometimes the cats themselves become so numerous as to be rather more of a nuisance than the rats, and then it is necessary to keep some one to keep away the cats. They take a great interest in the drama, these cats. They always make a point of coming on in the middle of the most pathetic scenes, when they take the center of the stage, and proceed to go through one or other of their decidedly peculiar toilet exercises.

Going down the yard, as directed, and groping my way through a dark passage at the end, I found myself in a vast, gloomy vault, full of hollow echoes, and strange, shapeless shadows; at least, that is what it seemed to me.

I cannot say, now, what notions I had previously formed of "behind the scenes." They were dispelled so rudely and suddenly, that all trace of them is lost. I know they were formed; partly by Dower Wilson's charming sketches, where fairy damsels (in the costume of their country) lean gracefully against the back of the landscapes, with their pretty legs crossed; partly by the descriptions of friends who said they had been there; and partly from my own imagination – a vivid one. The reality, however, exceeded my wildest expectations. I could never have dreamt of anything so utterly dismal, as an empty theater by daylight, or

rather day-darkness. No, not even after a supper of beefsteaks and porter.

At first, I could see nothing; but, after a while, I got used to the dimness, and was able to look about me. The decorations of the place (such as they were – such as might be expected in a theater where the stalls were three shillings, and the gallery fourpence) were shrouded in dirty white cloths. The music stools and stands in the orchestra, together with the big drum, and the violoncello in a green baize case, were all in a heap in the corner, as if they had had a performance on their own account during the night, and had ended up by getting drunk. This idea was further suggested by the appearance of the gallery bar, which could be seen from the stage, though it looked about half a mile off, and which was crowded with empty bottles and dirty pewter pots and glasses. Shabby, patched scenery – a mere unintelligible daub, seen close to – was littered all round me; propped up against the great wooden beams which supported the flies, or against the side walls; piled up at the back, in what was called the "scene dock"; lying down flat at my feet; or hanging suspended over my head. In the center of the stage was a rickety table, and on the table was a candle, stuck in a ginger-beer bottle. A solitary sunbeam, having sneaked in through some odd crevice, threw a band of light across the gloom, and showed up the dust, of which the place seemed full. A woman, with a noisy cold in her head, was sweeping out the pit; and some unseen animal, which I judged to be a small boy, by the noise it made, was performing a shrill

whistle somewhere in the region of the dress circle. The roar from the streets sounded dull and muffled, but the banging of a door, or the falling of a chair within the building, made such a noise, that the spiders ran into their holes for fright.

CHAPTER IV. Behind the Scenes

IHAD the stage all to myself for about half an hour. It is the etiquette of the theater for every one to be late. You estimate the position of an actor, by the time he is late for rehearsal. If he (I don't say a word about ladies: they are always an hour late for everything, bless 'em) is twenty minutes behind, he is most likely mere utility. If a man keeps everybody waiting an hour and a half, you may put him down as a star.

I occupied the time pleasantly enough in wandering about, and finding out all I could. I climbed up a shaky wooden staircase to the "flies," and looked down upon the stage from a height of fifty feet. I scrambled about up there amidst ladders, and small platforms, and ropes, and pulleys, and windlasses, and gas pipes, and empty gas bags, and beer cans, and darkness, and dust. Then, up another ladder, leading higher still, and along a narrow plank, crossing from one side of the stage to the other, over a perfect hanging forest of scenery.

Clambering round behind, I came to the scene-painting room. It was a long, narrow sort of loft, forty feet above the stage. One side of it was of canvas – part of an enormous sheet, which passed right through it, in at the top and out at the bottom. This sheet of canvas, on which a scene was being painted, was suspended from the roof of the theater by means of pulleys, so that the whole could be raised or lowered at pleasure, and every portion of it

brought within reach of the scene-painter, without his moving.

If I have not explained myself clearly, try this: Take your wife's best traveling trunk (choosing a time when she is not at home), wrench the cover off, and then hold the box up against the window blind, in such a position that the blind is where the cover would have been. There you have it. The box is the scene-painter's room – the blind, the scene.

There was plenty of light and color (the latter in buckets) in the room, but very little else. A long, deal table, crowded with brushes and paint pots, ran nearly the whole length of it. The scene-painter's palette, a marble slab about six feet square, lay on the floor, and, near it, one of the brushes with which the sky had been laid on. This brush was the size of an ordinary carpet broom. Noting these things, I left the studio, and descended.

A little lower down was the wardrobe room.

There was not much in it though. Dresses are borrowed as they are wanted, now, from the costumiers round Covent Garden and Drury Lane; everything being found for so much a week. Years ago, I believe, each theater used to make, and keep, its own costumes. Even now, a few old-fashioned provincial houses have a substantial wardrobe attached to them, but these are the exceptions, and, as a rule, little, if any thing, is kept in stock. Here, there were a few pairs of very loose and baggy-looking tights, half a dozen rusty tin helmets, a heap of buff shoes in a corner – half of them right, half left, sort 'em as you want 'em – some natty waistcoats – red and blue, with a dash of yellow;

the sort of thing stage Yorkshiremen wear when they come to London, black cloaks for any one who might wish to dissemble, and an assortment of spangled things. These were the principal items, all of which had seen their best days.

Between the yard and the stage was a very big room, containing so heterogeneous a collection of articles that at first I fancied it must be a cooperative store in connection with the theater. It was, however, only the property room, the things therein being properties; or, more commonly, "props," so called, I believe, because they help to support the drama. I will give you some of the contents of the room haphazard as I recollect them. There was a goodly number of tin cups, painted black up to within half an inch of the rim, so as to give them the appearance of being always full. It is from these vessels that the happy peasantry carouses, and the comic army get helplessly fuddled. There is a universality about them. They are the one touch of (stage) nature which makes the whole world kin. They are used alike by the Esquimaux and the Hottenot. The Roman soldiery appear never to have drunk out of anything else: while, without them, the French Revolution would lose its chief characteristic. Besides these common cups, there were gold and silver ones, used only for banquets, and high-class suicides. There were bottles, and glasses, and jugs, and decanters. From these aids to debauchery, it was pleasant to turn to a cozy-looking tea service on a tray with a white table cloth: there was a soothing suggestion of muffins and domestic bliss about it. There was plenty of

furniture, a couple of tables, a bedstead, a dresser, a sofa, chairs – half dozen of them, high-backed ones, for "hall in the old Grange," etc.; they were made by fixing pasteboard backs on to ordinary cane chairs. The result was that they were top heavy, and went over at the slightest touch; so that picking them up, and trying to make them stand, formed the chief business of the scenes in which they were used.

I remember the first time our light comedy attempted to sit down on one of these chairs.

It was on the opening night. He had just said something funny, and, having said it, sat down, crossed his legs, and threw himself back, with all that easy, negligent grace so peculiarly his own. Legs were the only things that could be seen for the next few minutes.

Other "props" were, a throne, gorgeous in gilt paper and glazed calico; a fire-grate, stuffed with red tinfoil; a mirror, made with silver paper; a bunch of jailer's keys; handcuffs; leg irons; flat irons; rifles; brooms; bayonets; picks and crowbars for the virtuously infuriated populace; clay pipes; daggers made of wood; stage broadswords – there is no need to describe these, everybody knows them, they are like nothing else on earth; battle axes; candlesticks; a pound or two of short dips; a crown, set with diamonds and rubies each as big as a duck's egg; a cradle – empty, an affecting sight; carpets, kettles, and pots; a stretcher; a chariot; a bunch of carrots; a costermonger's barrow; banners; a leg of mutton, and a baby. Everything, in short, that could possibly be

wanted, either in a palace or a garret, a farmyard or a battle-field.

Still wandering about, I came across a hole in the floor at the side of the stage, and groped my way down a ladder to the region beneath, where the fairies come from, and the demons go to. It was perfectly dark, and I could see nothing. It smelt very moldy, and seemed to be full of cunning contrivances for barking your shins. After bumping myself about a good deal there, I was glad to find my way out again, deferring all further investigations to some future period, with a candle.

On emerging, I saw that the company had at last begun to arrive. A tall, solemn-looking man was pacing the stage, and him I greeted. He was the stage manager, and so of course rather surly. I don't know why stage managers are always surly, but they are.

In the course of the next few minutes, there trotted in a demure-looking little man, who turned out to be our "first low comedy," and very good low comedy he was, too, though, from his wooden expression, you might have thought him as destitute of humor as the librettist of a comic opera. Then followed the heavy man, talking in a very gruff voice to a good-looking young fellow with him, who played the juveniles when our manager didn't take them himself. Then, after a short interval, a lady – an old queer-looking little lady, who walked with a stick, and complained of rheumatism, and who, as soon as she reached the stage, plumped herself down on the thick end of a mossy bank, from which nothing would induce her to rise until she got up to go

home. She was our "old woman." She did the doting mothers and the comic old maids. She had played everything in her time, and could play anything still. She would have taken Juliet, or Juliet's nurse, whichever you liked, and have done both of them well. She would have been ten minutes making up for Juliet, and then, sitting in the middle of the pit, you would have put her down for twenty.

The next to appear was a gentleman ("walking") in a fur-trimmed overcoat, patent-leather boots and white gaiters and lavender kid gloves. He carried a silver-headed cane in his hand, a glass in his left eye, a cigar in his mouth (put out as soon as he got to the stage, of course), and a small nosegay in his button-hole. His salary I subsequently discovered to be thirty shillings a week. After him came two ladies (not with any designs upon the young man: merely in the order of time). One of them was thin and pale, with a careworn look underneath the rouge, just as if she were some poor, hard-working woman, with a large family and small means, instead of an actress. The other was fat, fair, and – forty, if she was a day. She was gloriously "got up," both as regards complexion and dress. I can't describe the latter, because I never can tell what any woman has got on. I only know she conveyed an impression to my mind of being stuck out all round, and thrown out in front, and puffed out at the back, and towering up at the top, and trailing away behind, and all to such a degree, that she looked four times her natural size. As everybody was very glad indeed to see her and welcomed her

with what seemed to be irrepressible joy, even the stage manager being civil, I naturally concluded that she was the embodiment of all the virtues known to human kind. The whispered remarks that I overheard, however, did not quite support this view, and I was at a loss to reconcile matters, until I learned that she was the manager's wife. She was the leading lady, and the characters she particularly affected, and in which she was affected, were the girlish heroines, and the children who die young and go to heaven.

The rest of the company was made up of a couple of very old men, and a middle-aged stout one, two rather pretty girls, evidently possessed of an inexhaustible fund of humor, for they kept each other giggling all the morning; and the manager himself, who arrived last, and was less interested in the proceedings than any one else. No one took the slightest notice of me, though I purposely stood about in conspicuous positions, and I felt like the new boy at school.

When everybody had arrived, the rickety table was brought down to the front, and a bell rung; whereupon a small boy suddenly appeared for the first time, and was given the "parts" to distribute. It was a manuscript play, though well known to the company, nearly all of whom had played in it plenty of times before. All the parts were torn and greasy except one, which was prominently clean. When the boy came to that one he seemed puzzled, not knowing to whom it belonged; so he stood in the center of the stage and bawled out the name on it; and as it was

my name, and I had to claim the part, I was at once lifted out of my obscurity, and placed in an opposite extreme hardly more comfortable.

CHAPTER V. A Rehearsal

I HURRIEDLY unfolded the paper, to see what kind of a part I had got. I was anxious to begin studying it immediately. I had to form my conception of the character, learn the words and business, and get up gesture and expression all in one week. No time was therefore to be lost. I give the part in extenso:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.