

In and About Drury Lane, and Other Papers

VOL. I.

Table of Contents

IN AND ABOUT DRURY LANE.

ABOUT MASTER BETTY.

CHARLES YOUNG AND HIS TIMES.

WILLIAM CHARLES MACREADY.

PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

THE SMELL OF THE LAMPS.

A LINE OF FRENCH ACTRESSES.

SOME ECCENTRICITIES OF THE FRENCH STAGE.

NORTHUMBERLAND HOUSE AND THE PERCYS.

LEICESTER FIELDS.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

PREFATORY REMARKS.

The republication of papers which have originally appeared in a Magazine frequently requires justification.

In the present instance this justification, it is thought, may be found in the special knowledge which Dr. DORAN had of all matters pertaining to the stage; in his intimacy with the literature which treats of manners and customs, English and foreign; and in his memory, which retained and retailed a great amount of anecdote, told with a sprightly wit.

These volumes, reprinted with one or two exceptions from the pages of the 'Temple Bar' Magazine, will, it is believed, be found to contain many good stories, and much information unostentatiously conveyed. It is hoped, therefore, that the public will endorse the opinion of the writer of this Preface, and consider that the plea of justification has been made out.

G. B.

IN AND ABOUT DRURY LANE.

In the afternoon of 'Boxing-day,' 1865, I had to pass through Drury Lane, and some of the worst of the 'slums' which find vent therein. There was a general movement in the place, and the effect was not savoury. There was a going to-and-fro of groups of people, and there was nothing picturesque in them; assemblings of children, but alas! nothing lovable in them. It was a universal holiday, yet its aspect was hideous.

Arrived at the stage-door of Drury Lane Theatre, I found my way on to the stage itself, where the last rehearsal of the pantomime, to be played for the first time that evening, was progressing.

The change from the external pandemonium to the hive of humming industry in which I then stood, was striking and singular. Outside were blasphemy and drunkenness. Inside, boundless activity, order, hard work, and cheerful hearts. There was very much to do, but every man had his especial work assigned him, every girl her allotted task. An unaccustomed person might have pronounced as mere confusion, that shifting of scenes, that forming, unforming, and reforming of groups, that unintelligible dumb show, that collecting, scattering, and gathering together of 'young ladies' in sober-coloured dresses and business-like faces, who were to be so resplendent in the evening as fairies, all gold, glitter, lustrous eyes, and virtuous intentions. There was Mr. Beverley—perhaps the greatest magician there—not only to

see that nothing should mar the beauty he had created, but to take care that the colours of the costumes should not be in antagonism with the scenes before which they were to be worn. There was that Michael Angelo of pantomimic mask inventors, Mr. Keene, anxiously looking to the expressions of the masks, of which he is the prince of designers. Then, if you think those graceful and varied figures of the *ballet* as easy to invent, or to trace, as they seem, and are, at last, easily performed, you should witness the trouble taken to invent, and the patience taken to bring to perfection—the figures and the figurantes—on the part of the artistic ballet-master, Mr. Cormack. But, responsible for the good result of all, there stands Mr. Roxby, stern as Rhadamanthus, just as Aristides, inflexible as determination can make him, and good-natured as a happy child, he is one of the most efficient of stage-managers, for he is both loved and feared. No defect escapes his eye, and no well-directed zeal goes without his word of approval. Messrs. Falconer and Chatterton are meanwhile busy with a thousand details, but they wisely leave the management of the stage to their lieutenant-general, who has the honour of Old Drury at heart.

When a spectator takes his seat in front of the curtain, he is hardly aware that he is about to address himself to an entertainment, for the production of which nearly nine hundred persons—from the foremost man down to the charwoman—are constantly employed and liberally remunerated. Touching this 'remuneration,' let me here notice that I have some doubt as to the story of Quin ever receiving 50*l.* a night. By the courtesy of Mr. —, the gentleman at the head of the Drury Lane treasury, and by the favour of the

proprietors, I have looked through many of the well-kept account-books of bygone years. These, indeed, do not, at least as far as I have seen, go back to the days of Quin, but there are traces of the greater actor Garrick, who certainly never received so rich an *honorarium*. His actual income it is not easy to ascertain, as his profits as proprietor were mixed up with his salary as actor. It has often been said that Garrick was never to be met with in a tavern (always, I suppose, excepting the 'Turk's Head'), but he appears to have drawn refreshment during the Drury Lane seasons, as there is unfailing entry in his weekly account of 'the Ben Jonson's Head bill,' the total of which varies between sixteen and five-and-twenty shillings.

At Drury Lane, John Kemble does not appear to have ever received above 2*l.* a night, exclusive of his salary as a manager. Nor did his sister's salary for some years exceed that sum. When Edmund Kean raised the fallen fortunes of old Drury, he only slowly began to mend his own. From January 1814, to April 1815, during the time the house was open, Kean's salary was 3*l.* 8*s.* 8*d.* nightly. If the theatre was open every night in the week, that sum was the actor's nightly stipend, whether he performed or not. If there were only four performances weekly, as in Lent, he and all other actors were only paid for those four nights. Within the period I have named, Elliston received a higher salary than Kean, namely 5*l.* per night, or 30*l.* per week, if the house was open for six consecutive nights. The salary of Dowton and Munden, during the same period, was equal to that of Kean. They received at the rate of 3*l.* 8*s.* 8*d.* nightly, or 20*l.* weekly, if there were six performances, irrespective as to their being employed in them or not. That great actor Bannister, according to these Drury Lane account-books, at this

period received 4s. per night less than Kean, Dowton and Munden; while Jack Johnstone's salary was only 2l. 10s. nightly, and that was 6s. 8d. less than was paid to the handsome, rather than *good* player, Rae.

It was not till April 1815, when Kean was turning the tide of Pactolus into the treasury, that his salary was advanced to 4l. 3s. 8d. per night. This was still below the sum received by Elliston. Kean had run through the most brilliant part of his career, before his salary equalled that of Elliston. In 1820, it was raised to 30l. per week if six nights; but Elliston's stipend at that time had fallen to 20l., and at the close of the season that of Kean was further raised to 40l. for every six nights that the house was open. That sum is occasionally entered in the books as being for 'seven days' pay,' but the meaning is manifestly 'for the acting week of six days.'

At this time Mrs. Glover was at the head of the Drury Lane actresses, and that eminent and great-hearted woman never drew from the Drury Lane treasury more than 7l. 13s. 4d. weekly. From these details, it will be seen that the most brilliant actors were not very brilliantly paid. The humbler yet very useful players were, of course, remunerated in proportion.

There was a Mr. Marshall who made a successful *début* on the same night with Incledon in 1790, in the 'Poor Soldier,' the sweet ballad-singer, as Dermot; Marshall, as Bagatelli. The latter soon passed to Drury Lane, where he remained till 1820. The highest salary he ever attained was 10s. per night; yet with this, in his prettily-furnished apartments in Crown Court, where he lived and died, Mr. Marshall presided, like a gentleman, at a hospitable table, and in entertaining his friends

never exceeded his income. You might have taken him in the street for one of those enviable old gentlemen who have very nice balances at their bankers.

The difference between the actor's salaries of the last century and of this, is as great in France as in England. One of the greatest French tragedians, Lekain, earned only a couple of thousand livres, yearly, from his Paris engagement. When Gabrielli demanded 500 ducats yearly, for singing in the Imperial Theatre at St. Petersburg, this took the Czarina's breath away. 'I only pay my field-m Marshals at that rate,' said Catherine.

'Very well,' replied Gabrielli, 'your Majesty had better make your field-m Marshals sing.'

With higher salaries, all other expenses have increased. Take the mere item of advertisements, including bill-sticking and posters at railway stations, formerly, the expense of advertising never exceeded 4*l.* per week; now it is never under 100*l.* Of bill-stickers and board-carriers, upwards of one hundred are generally employed. In the early part of the last century, the proprietors of a newspaper thought it a privilege to insert theatrical announcements gratis, and proprietors of theatres forbade the insertion of their advertisements in papers not duly authorised!

Dryden was the first dramatic author who wrote a programme of his piece ('The Indian Emperor'), and distributed it at the playhouse door. Barton Booth, the original 'Cato,' drew 50*l.* a year for writing out the daily bills for the printer. In still earlier days, theatrical announcements were made by sound of drum.

The absence of the names of actors in old play-books, perhaps, arose from a feeling which animated French actors as late as 1789, when those of Paris entreated the *maire* not to compel them to have their names in the 'Affiche,' as it might prove detrimental to their interests. Some of our earliest announcements only name the piece, and state that it will be acted by 'all the best members of the company, now in town.' There was a fashion, which only expired about a score or so of years ago, as the curtain was descending at the close of the five-act piece, which was always played first, an actor stepped forward, and when the curtain separated him from his fellows, he gave out the next evening's performance, and retired, bowing, through one of the doors which always then stood, with brass knockers on them, upon the stage.

The average expenses of Drury Lane Theatre at Christmas-tide, when there are extra performances, amount to nearly 1,500*l.* per week. The rent paid is reckoned at 4,500*l.* for two hundred nights of acting, and only 5*l.* per night for all performances beyond that number. About 160*l.* must be in the house before the lessees can begin to reckon on any profit. In old times, the presence of royalty made a great difference in the receipts. On February 12, 1777, I find from the books that the 'Jealous Wife,' and 'Neck or Nothing,' were played. An entry is added that 'the king and queen were present,' and the result is registered under the form, 'receipts 245*l.* 9*s.* 6*d.*, a hundred pounds more than the previous night.'

The number of children engaged in a pantomime at Drury Lane generally exceeds two hundred. The girls are more numerous than the boys. It is a curious fact that in engaging these

children the manager prefers the quiet and dull to the smart and lively. Your smart lad and girl are given to 'larking' and thinking of their own cleverness. The quiet and dull are more 'teachable,' and can be made to seem lively without flinging off discipline. These little creatures are thus kept from the streets; many of them are sons and daughters of persons employed in the house, and their shilling a night and a good washing tells pleasantly in many a humble household, to which, on Saturday nights, they contribute their wages and clean faces. It was for a clever body of children of this sort that *benefits* were first established in France in 1747. In England they date from Elizabeth Barry, on whose behalf the first was given, by order of James the Second.

Then there are the indispensable, but not easily procured, 'ladies of the ballet.' They number about five dozen; two dozen principals, the rest in training to become so. Their salary is not so low as is generally supposed—twenty-five, and occasionally thirty shillings a week. They are 'respectable.' I have seen three or four dozen of them together in their green-room, where they conducted themselves as 'properly' as any number of well-trained young ladies could at the most fashionable of finishing establishments.

There was a scene in the 'Sergeant's Wife' which was always played with a terrible power by Miss Kelly; and yet the audience, during the most exciting portion of the scene, saw only the back of the actress. Miss Kelly represented the wife, who, footsore and ignorant of her way, had found rude hospitality and rough sleeping quarters in a wretched hut. Unable to sleep, something tempts her to look through the

interstices of the planks which divide her room from the adjoining one. While looking, she is witness of the commission of a murder. Spell-bound, she gazes on, in terror almost mute, save a few broken words. During this incident the actress had her back turned to the audience; nevertheless, she conveyed to the enthralled house an expression of overwhelming and indescribable horror as faithfully as if they had seen it in her features or heard it in her voice. Every spectator confessed her irresistible power, but none could even guess at the secret by which she exercised it.

The mystery was, in fact, none at all. Miss Kelly's acting in this scene was wonderfully impressive, simply because she kept strictly to nature. She knew that not to the face alone belongs all power of interpretation of passion or feeling. This knowledge gave to Rich his marvellous power as Harlequin. In the old days, when harlequinades had an intelligible plot in which the spectators took interest, it was the office of Harlequin to guard the glittering lady of his love from the malice of their respective enemies. There always occurred an incident in which Columbine was carried off from her despairing lord, and it was on this occasion that Rich, all power of conveying facial expression being cut off by his mask, used to move the house to sympathy, and sometimes, it is said, to tears, by the pathos of his mute and tragic action. As he gazed up the stage at the forced departure of Columbine every limb told unmistakably that the poor fellow's heart was breaking within him. When she was restored the whole house broke forth into a thunder of exultation, as if the whole scene had been a reality.

I cannot tell how this was effected, but I *can* tell a story that is not unconnected with the terrible pantomime of suffering nature.

Some years ago an unfortunate man, who had made war against society, and had to suffer death for it in front of the old Debtors' door, Newgate, took leave of his wife and daughters not many hours before execution, in presence of the 'Reverend Ordinary,' Mr. Cotton, and a young officer in the prison, who has since attained to eminence and corresponding responsibility in the gloomy service to which he is devoted. The scene of separation was heartrending to all but the doomed man, who was calm, and even smiled once or twice, in order to cheer, if he could, the poor creatures whom he had rendered cheerless for ever. When the ordinary and the prison officer were left alone, the reverend gentleman remarked—'Well, H—, what do you think of the way in which the prisoner went through *that*?'

'Wonderfully, sir,' answered H—, 'considering the circumstances.'

'Wonderfully!' replied Mr. Cotton, 'yes; but not in your sense, my friend.'

'In what sense, then, sir?' asked H—.

'You said "wonderfully." I know very well, wherefore—because you saw him smile; and because he smiled, you thought he did not feel his condition as his wife and daughters did.'

'I confess that is the case,' said the young officer.

‘Ah! H——,’ exclaimed Mr. Cotton, ‘you are new to this sort of thing. You looked in the man’s face, and thought he was bold. I had my eye on his back, and I saw that it gave his face the lie. It showed that he was suffering mortal agony.’

H—— looked inquiringly at the chaplain, who answered the look by saying, ‘Listen to me, H——. You are young. Some day you will rise to a post that will require you to sit in the dock, behind the prisoners who are tried on capital charges. On one of those occasions, you will see what is common enough—a prisoner who is saucy and defiant, and who laughs in the judge’s face as he puts on the black cap, and while he is condemning him. Well, H——, if you want to know what that prisoner really feels, don’t look at his face—look at his back. All along and about the spine, you will find it boiling, heaving, surging, like volcanic matter. Keep your eye upon it, H——; and when you see the irrepressible emotion in the back suddenly subsiding, open wide your arms, my boy, for the seemingly saucy fellow is about to tumble into them, in a dead faint. All the “sauce,” Mr. H——, will be out of him at once, and perhaps for ever, unless he be exceptionally constituted.’

A little party of visitors was gathered round the narrator of this, the other day, in that dreadful room where Calcraft keeps his ‘traps and things.’ I had my hand on the new coil already prepared and in order for the next criminal who may deserve it; another was looking at Jack Sheppard’s irons, which were never able to confine him; and others, with a sort of unwilling gaze at things in a half-open cupboard, which looked like the furniture of a saddle-room, but which were instruments of other purposes. We all turned to the speaker, as he ceased, and

inquired if his experience corroborated Mr. Cotton's description. H—— answered in the affirmative, and he went into particulars to which we listened with the air of men who were curious yet not sympathizing; but I felt, at the same time, under the influences of the place, and of being suddenly told that I was standing where Calcraft stands on particular occasions, a hot and irrepressible motion adown the back, which satisfied me that the Cottonian theory had something in it, and that Miss Kelly, without knowing it, was acting in strict accordance with nature, when she made her back interpret to an audience all the anguish she was supposed to feel at the sorry sight on which her face was turned.

By way of parenthesis, let me add that Mr. Cotton himself was a most accomplished actor on his own unstable boards. When he grew somewhat a-weary of his labour—it was a heavy labour when Monday mornings were hanging mornings, and wretches went to the beam in leashes—when Mr. Cotton was tired of this, he thought of a good opportunity for retiring. 'I have now,' he said, 'accompanied just three hundred and sixty-five poor fellows to the gallows. That's one for every day in the year. I may retire after seeing such a round number die with *cotton in their ears*.' Whether the reverend gentleman was the author of this ingenious comparison for getting hanged, or whether he playfully adopted the phrase which was soon so popularly accepted as a definition, cannot now be determined.

While on this subject, let me notice that, with the exception of one Matthew Coppinger, a subaltern player in the Stuart days, no English actor has ever suffered death on the scaffold. Mat's offence was not worse than the mad Prince's on Gad's Hill, and

it must be confessed that one or two other gentlemen of the King's or Duke's company 'took to the road' of an evening, and perhaps deserved hanging, though the royal grace saved them. Neither in England nor France has an actor ever appeared on the scaffold under heavy weight of crime. As for taking to the highway, baronets' sons have gone that road on their fathers' horses; and society construed lightly the offences of highwaymen who met travellers face to face and set life fairly against life. In England, Coppinger alone went to Tyburn. In France, I can recall but two out of the many thousands of actors who have trodden its very numerous stages,—not including an occasional player who suffered for political reasons during the French Revolution. One of the two was Barrières, a Gascon, who, after studying for the church and the law, turning dramatic poet and mathematician, and finally enlisting in the army, obtained leave of absence, and profited thereby by repairing to Paris, and appearing at the Théâtre Français, in 1729, as Mithridate. His Gascon extravagance and eccentricity caused at first much amusement, but he speedily established himself as an excellent general actor, and forgot all about his military leave of absence. Not so his colonel, who had no difficulty in laying his hand on the Gascon recruit, who was playing in his own name in Paris, and under authority of a furlough, the period of which he had probably exceeded—the document itself he had unfortunately lost. Barrières was tried, condemned, and shot, in spite of all the endeavours made to save him.

Sixty years later it went as hardly with Bordier, an actor of the Variétés, of whom I have heard old French players speak with great regard and admiration. He was on a provincial tour,

when he talked so plainly at *tables d'hôte* of the misery of the times and the prospects of the poor, that he was seized and tried at Rouen under a charge of fomenting insurrection in order to lower the price of corn. Just before his seizure he had played the principal part (L'Olive) in 'Trick against Trick' (*Ruses contre Ruses*), in which he had to exclaim gaily: 'You will see that to settle this affair, I shall have to be hanged!' And Bordier *was* hanged, unjustly, at Rouen. He suffered with dignity, and a touch of stage humour. He had been used to play in Pompigny's 'Prince turned Sweep' (*Ramoneur Prince*)—a piece in which Sloman used to keep the Coburg audience in a roar of delight. In the course of the piece, standing at the foot of a ladder, and doubtful as to whether he should ascend or not, he had to say: 'Shall I go up or not?' So, when he came to the foot of the lofty ladder leaning against the gigantic gallows in the market-place at Rouen, Bordier turned with a sad smile to the hangman and said: 'Shall I go up or not?' The hangman smiled too, but pointed the way that Bordier should go; and the wits of Rouen were soon singing of him in the spirit of the wits of Covent Garden singing of Copping:

Mat did not go dead, like a sluggard to bed,
But boldly, in his shoes, died of a noose
That he found under Tyburn tree.

To return to more general statistics, it may be stated that, in busy times, four dozen persons are engaged in perfecting the wardrobes of the ladies and gentlemen. Only to attire these and the children, forty-five dressers are required; and the various *coiffures* you behold have busily employed half a dozen hairdressers. If it should occur to you that you are sitting over

or near a gasometer, you may find confidence in knowing that it is being watched by seventeen gasmen; and that even the young ladies who glitter and look so happy as they float in the air in transformation scenes, could not be roasted alive, provided they are released in time from the iron rods to which they are bound. These ineffably exquisite nymphs, however, suffer more or less from the trials they have to undergo for our amusement. Seldom a night passes without one or two of them fainting; and I remember, on once assisting several of them to alight, as they neared the ground, and they were screened from the public gaze, that their hands were cold and clammy, like clay. The blood had left the surface and rushed to the heart, and the spangled nymphs who seemed to rule destiny and the elements, were under a nervous tremor; but, almost as soon as they had touched the ground, they shook their spangles, laughed their light laugh, and tripped away in the direction of the stately housekeeper of Drury, Mrs. Lush, with dignity enough not to care to claim kinship with her namesake, the judge; for she was once of the household of Queen Adelaide, and now has the keeping of 'the national theatre,' with nine servants to obey her behests.

To those who would compare the season of 1865-1866 at Drury Lane with that of 1765-1766, it is only necessary to say that a hundred years ago Mrs. Pritchard was playing a character of which she was the original representative in 1761, namely, Mrs. Oakley, in Coleman's 'Jealous Wife,' a part which has been well played this year by Mrs. Vezin to the excellent Mr. Oakley of Mr. Phelps. The Drury Lane company, a hundred years ago, included Garrick, Powell, Holland, King, Palmer, Parsons, Bensley, Dodd, Yates, Moody, Baddeley, all men of

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

