



Stageland. ✦

BY HECTOR CHARLESWORTH.

WHEN one sits down to write of Christmas-tide in the theatres, one's mind naturally turns to thoughts of pantomimes and Christmas spectacles, and the thousand jolly, nonsensical entertainments that are associated with the day sacred to the message, "Peace on earth, good-will toward men," which on that day took fleshly form. To be sure the fashion of these jollities has passed away in America, but the legend of them still exists, and across the sea the scene painters, the singers, the dancers, the comedians are preparing for Christmas mumming. Even with us Christmas week usually means packed theatres, and the play has its function in the season of rejoicing.

But somehow one's mind wanders away from the revels of the theatre as we know them from the audience point of view, and the thought of what Christmas means to the homeless ones of the stage-world—that devil-may-care set of people who make the merriment for us who look on at the play. What does Christmas mean to the actor? A better certainty of getting his salary that week—nothing more, I am afraid. One of the cleverest artists of the day recently said that the actor lives apart from the everyday-world, in a little dream-world of his own, and only wanders into our practical sphere when he wants something to eat. This saying, which in-addition to being witty, contains a great deal of truth, is more or less pathetic in its application to Christmas-tide. The festival of Jesus' birth, which is a token of rejoicing in the world at large, of kindlier glances from our friends, of homely comforts, and of the laughter of little children, is usually a season of keener loneliness to the wanderers of the stage. Probably the thousands of people, rich and poor, who go to the theatre for a Christmas treat, never think of how the comedian may be wishing to be with his wife and his youngsters five hundred miles away—how the leading lady may be longing to kiss her little child away off there in the distance, how the agent who stands at the door, and has no share in the actors' triumphs, is lonely, and would give a week's salary for a Christmas dinner at home.

Actors are a curious folk, they are vain and reckless and unscrupulous, perhaps. They knock about from place to place, and do not meet with much that could make them better. They may not be rogues, but in a way they are vagabonds, because they must sacrifice all those joys of home which are after all the sweetest joys of all, the joys of good-fellowship and cheer. And so they journey on from place to place, and see new faces constantly, and make new acquaintances; and if, perhaps, they find a real friend, and a good one, once in a while, they must tear themselves away ere the friendship is begun, and follow the same routine as before. The variety of the actor's life fascinates many an

accident mind; but in reality it is a monotonous variety, if such a paradox may be permitted. It is the same course over and over again, only it is a different sort of routine from that of the bank clerk.

It is natural for most human beings to run in grooves. Monotony, if we only know it is the staple of most of our lives. There is no profession that does not finally become monotonous to its practitioners. In reality it is the monotony in our lives that holds us prisoners; that fascinates us; that makes the actor always an actor; the business man always a business man; the lawyer always a lawyer. No matter how badly he acts; no matter whether he be a self-confessed failure; the player never wants to give up the field he has chosen. He hangs on almost invariably till death rings down the curtain. And yet, though the monotony of his experiences fascinates him, it must not be thought that the joys he has sacrificed look any less beautiful to him, or that the sense of his loss dies away. The feeling of his homelessness cannot fail to lie strongly upon the actor at Christmas-tide.

It often happens that the husband and wife travel together in a company, and then, perhaps, the loneliness is not so keen; but still the wife is a little blue at the memories of days gone by, and she is thinking of the mother who was a little tenderer than usual on Christmas Day, and of the noisy brothers who got up so early to look into their stockings, and laughed so much about it. And the husband, like all of us, has memories of that sort too. To most grown people, without family circles of their own, Christmas brings its under-taste of sadness; and to these dreamers, who hurry over the elaborate hotel menu for Christmas Day, the past is doubly real. And then, too they must not be thinking of enjoying too much of the Christmas dinner upon which the hotel cook so prides himself. It is, perhaps, the least poetic thing above Christmas Day, and yet one of the heartiest features of it, that humanity makes it the occasion of a deal of over-eating. The actor cannot give way to this degustatory consolation, however, because for him it is a day of hard work, a long matinee before a throng of a good-natured people, and a long performance to follow. At midnight when the grease paint is washed off; when the costumes are carefully hung up, and the ordinary attire donned, the man or the woman forgets about the stage for awhile, and remembers that Christmas is over, and that it has been a day of sad memories and hard work.

To the man or the woman who has no one at hand to call one's own, the day is sadder yet. Christmas comes to us with snow and sleigh bells, sometimes, although occasionally even in this bracing zone of ours, the sleigh of St. Nicholas must scrape over mud and stones. But the actor may be away off in the humid south, while his nearest and dearest ones are enjoying the Christmas snowflakes in the north. And just here I am moved to tell of a little incident which does not teach a very good lesson, but which has a good deal of human nature in it. It is of a comedian who always cracks his jokes with gusto that wins his audience, a joyous individual whose name a good many readers are familiar with. He has a wife and some youngsters whom he loves very much, and when he goes forth on his travels it is generally with an aching heart. He happens to be a Canadian and he associates Christmas-tide with snowflakes. But one Christmas he was away off in Texas and it was raining, and when he woke up in the morning he thought of his wife and his babies,

and of the frost and sleigh-bells, and the plum pudding, and he was home sick for Canada. And he went down to breakfast and said "Merry Christmas" to the colored waiters, and they said "Merry Christmas" in a mellow, obsequious way, but that did not make him feel any better. And he tried to make friends with several people, but they had enterprises of their own on hand and did not appreciate his loneliness. And so he wandered off through the rain to the matinee, and back again to dinner and off to the theatre once more. The audiences were sympathetic and generous but somehow he felt lonelier still to see everyone so happy. And after it was all over and his Christmas was nearly done, he wandered into the bar-room, as actors sometimes do, to get what he called a "night cap." Looking along the bar he saw the familiar label of a well known Canadian brand of whisky. He had got so low in spirits that the sight of this bottle that had come all the way from Canada made him happy. He felt willing to pay double its price, and here it is well to draw the curtain. I am sorry to say that he was in a sense happier still when he went to bed, and I am sorry that the whole episode is very farcical, yet it struck me as pathetic when I heard it, and perhaps the pathos of it is my excuse for telling it. When a man gets desperate with loneliness he will grasp at a straw.

Christmas to the children of the stage is happier than for their elders, just as it is the children's season everywhere. They have no memories to make them sad. Every body is pleasanter to them, even than usual, and makes great efforts at spoiling them. They receive, perhaps, a multitude of presents from the good-hearted people that they live among, and hang up their stockings at the hotel mantel-piece. Only there is something rather pathetic in the thought of these tots who have to work on Christmas Day when to so many thousand of little ones it is a holiday; and the idea of Christmas at a hotel instead of at home saddens one. I know of one company where there will be a happy family part on Christmas Day, though, even though it be far from home. It is but an ordinary company playing a very thread bare melodrama. Papa plays a tramp, and mamma plays a jolly boot-black, and their two little golden-haired boys are the children of the piece. It's as happy a family as you will find anywhere, and they will all try to make the hotel fare seem like Christmas dinner at home, and the little lads will be up romping in the hotel corridor with a bright and early call of "merry Christmas."

Once in a while you find these family arrangements that help to ameliorate the falseness and tinsel of the dream-world I have spoken of. One could write something more, perhaps, about the sorrows of the many players scattered over the vast reaches of our continent, who will spend Christmas with the desolate feeling of those who are stranded with an outlook of want and misery ahead. At Christmas-tide, however, we try to make all humanity forget the wolf that hovers at the heels of the stragglers in the race of life. The thought that should be in our minds is simply that men of whatever degree have sympathies and sorrows that make them kin; for this was the religion of the One whose coming we all of us celebrate. Saint and sinner join hands at Christmas-tide.

