

been the inventor of a thousand schemes for winning money without work ; his wits had been sharpened in all directions ; he was familiar with every phase of pauper life ; he knew thoroughly the kind of demoralization which it engendered, and he possessed not only a facile tongue, but an illimitable impudence, which a worthy motive could readily soften into self-respectful courage and ingenious address.

On the border of "The Beggars' Paradise," at the corner of a street devoted mainly to the purchase and sale of old clothes, many of which were collected and pawned by the beggars themselves, there was a dilapidated assembly-room, called by the ambitious proprietor "The Athenæum." In earlier days it had been the scene of sundry cheap shows and low theatrical exhibitions. During one whole season a quartette of negro minstrels, with very large posters and very small jokes, had occupied "The Athenæum." This was in its "palmiest days." But the minstrels and the glory departed together. The grime of years had clothed itself upon the bare arms and legs of Melpomene and Terpsichore, which illuminated the drop-scene of the little stage ; many of the seats were broken ; the spiders had woven their gray webs across the angles and corners ; boys had scrawled the walls with rude effigies of the proprietor, and legends not altogether complimentary to his sense of decency and habits of cleanliness, and everything betrayed not only the degeneracy of the hall itself, but that of the neighbourhood on which it had originally depended for support.

Nicholas, for a very modest sum, secured a lease of "The Athenæum" for six months. He caused the shutters to be opened one bright morning, started the fires, put a little army of labouring men and women into the room with brooms and scrubbing-brushes, rolled the presiding muses out of sight, and before night had a clean little theatre that would comfortably seat five hundred people.

In the meantime he had informed his friends and associates of what he was doing, and the greatest curiosity and interest prevailed throughout the little group. Ways and means were discussed, prophecies were indulged in, and all looked forward to the night of the opening with keenly delightful anticipations.

The announcement of the first performance at "The Athenæum" was composed by the "Larkin Bureau," and revised and modified under the suggestions of Mr. Jonas Cavendish and his friends ; and "The Beggars' Paradise" awoke one morning to the surprise of the flaming poster, on every convenient dead-wall of the region, to which allusion has already been made. It read as follows :

GREAT BREAD MEETING !

Every Ticket a Loaf of Bread, wrapped neatly in brown paper !