



STAGELAND.

IN these days when the popular actress 'lives on velvet,' as the phrase goes, is belauded, travels in private cars, has her diamonds stolen, and attracts almost as much public attention as an empress, it is interesting to look back on some of the earlier women of the stage and learn something of their vicissitudes, talents and shortcomings. It will be found that in those days when the stage performer was far more of an outcast than he is to-day, there were women who lived honest, painstaking lives, and were admirable examples for some of the modern petted celebrities.

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The earliest actress of any prominence on the English stage was Mrs. Betterton, who died a very old woman in 1712, and was the wife of the first great English tragedian. It is not certainly known, but it is considered very probable, that she was the first regular actress to tread the boards in England. She was pronounced great because of her beautiful performances of Shakespeare's female characters.

It is one of the most marvellous things about Shakespeare that he created those exquisite women of his for men to perform, and was not prevented by the consciousness of this fact from giving them those divine feminine characteristics that will delight the world forever. Certainly Mrs. Betterton contributed to the public appreciation of the great dramatist in no mean way, in first showing the British public the glorious stage possibilities of those characters of his. *Lady Macbeth* was her greatest rôle, and though little is known of her, it is pleasant to record that that little paints her as a devoted and faithful wife through many years of hard labour.

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Coming later and departing earlier was the jolly little singer, dancer and comedienne, Nelly Gwynne, immortalised by the dying words of King Charles II., 'Don't let poor Nelly starve.' Certainly, the King, who never said a foolish thing and never did a wise one, abated a little of his folly when he made this request for the little red-haired sinner, who had been true to him always, and who gave back to the poor

the wealth that was ground out of them for the King's pleasures. Her fame, alas! rests on other claims than those of her art, and she probably was no great actress, but just a sprightly, good-hearted little singer, whose head was not altogether turned by the King's favour.

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If you have read Charles Read's whole-souled novel, 'Peg Woffington' (of whom more anon), you remember the esteem which Mrs. Ann Bracegirdle is represented as having won in the early days. Her purity won her the name of the Diana of the stage, and she was a woman whom the poor blessed when they saw her, and who, according to all authorities, richly deserved their benedictions. She lived from 1663 to 1748,—saw the downfall of the Stuarts and the rising of the House of Hanover, the wars and revolutions by which this was brought about; and she acted on a stage that was in many things vile,—so vile that the

lines in the plays were enough to befoul a less earnest woman's soul. Her chief charm lay in the lighter drama, and her dark brown hair and eyebrows, her sparkling black eye, her fresh, rich complexion, gave her the appearance of a joyous, sparkling creature whenever she appeared. She inspired the best authors to write for her, and won their love into the bargain, and she is the woman of whom it was said that she had as many lovers as she had men in her audiences. According to the merry practices of the time she many times narrowly escaped abduction by some of her less scrupulous admirers, and once indeed was only saved through the rising of the London populace in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane.

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Mrs. Elizabeth Barry, possibly the greatest actress of that epoch, first introduced the fashion of extravagant dressing on the stage, in which she has been followed by many less eminent performers of these days. In one old piece she appeared as Queen Elizabeth at her coronation, and managed to procure the robes of James II.'s Queen. She overcame many crudities, and in her early days gave no promise of the fame she afterwards achieved, according to that good old gossip, Colley Cibber. Her father was a gentleman,—a colonel in the army, who had formerly practised as a barrister. She took to the stage in 1700 because she was without means. Unlike most of the famous women of those days when beauty was prized so much, she was not beautiful, but rather a slubby creature, and seems to have been a great *Lady Macbeth*. Unhappily, she does not appear to have been as exemplary in her ways as some of her contemporaries of less genteel origin.

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Anyone who has ever seen Ellen Terry's exquisite impersonation of *Nance Oldfield* will like to learn something of the woman who was Charles Reade's inspiration. Henry Fielding said that her "ravishing perfections" were so much the admiration of every eye and every ear, that they would remain in the memory of many when the plays she acted were forgotten. And old Cibber pronounces her tall, beautiful in action and aspect with a face as benevolent as her heart. Once when a discarded suitor rose in the pit to ungallantly hiss her, she looked at

him with such withering contempt and remarked, "Poor creature," that the boor was glad to slink down under the seat and out of sight. With such powers of scorn it is not wonderful that she became a great tragedienne, but unluckily her advantages of birth and education did not make her wholly circumspect in her ways.

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Dr. Johnson pronounced Kitty Clive the best actress he ever saw, one who at her best excelled Garrick, and a better romp than any he ever saw in nature; while the genial Tate Wilkinson found her a mixture of combustibles—passionate, cross, vulgar,—yet sensible, very sensible, and as a comic actress, a diamond of the first water. She appears to have been ugly, but a veritable goddess of mirth, and the wits of the middle portions of the last century were never tired of singing her praises. With those times, however, the name of Peg Woffington is for ever associated as its greatest actress. Her genius for comedy was remarkable, but many seem to have regarded the Irish girl as a great tragedienne as well. She had a demure, pensive face that lit up with a very fire of delight in comedy. Her dark eyes, and her dark curls, which, strange to say, she wore without powder, won her the reputation of being the most beautiful woman who ever graced the boards. Anyone who has read Charles Reade's novel, must have fallen in love with the ideal character there presented, and although the real Peg was probably less angel, still the way in which Garrick, whom she loved very dearly, absolutely jilted her, gives a tragic side to the life of this little genius whom all the world fêted.

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We pass over with a word Mrs. Abingdon, whom Garrick pronounced silly and false, and yet who rose from the position of barmaid to have great ladies running after her for points on dress, and to study her wonderful distinction of manner. She was Sheridan's choice for the original of *Lady Teazle*, and this speaks volumes for her talents. The real genius who followed her was Mrs. Siddons, the greatest of them all, a woman on whom volumes have been written. There never was a better stage figure. Her height, above the middle size, her figure charming and of delicious roundness, a beautifully formed face, lit by eyes that pierced into the very souls of her auditors,—constituted her endowments. The face, too, was wonderfully mobile, so that there was no emotion that was not perfectly expressed on it, and yet it was never overcharged with expression, according to the best judges. There are actresses who can look so terribly fierce, so fearfully wrought up, that the scene becomes exaggerated; but this divine barn-stormer, who afterwards became the world's greatest actress, preserved the perfect classic medium. This actress brings us into the present century. Her wonderful performances of *Lady Macbeth* and other great rôles, her genuine goodness all through life, her powers of mind,—these have made her immortal. And when the actresses of to-day reflect that all through her youth she played in barns, travelled in the rain and storm along muddy roads, and had to go without a meal sometimes, they must thank their stars that though we do not pet genius so much nowadays, or regard it as so wonderful a thing, yet the way for its expression is much better paved than it was one hundred years ago.

THE PROMPTER.

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It is about time that a summer theatre was instituted in Toronto. There is reason why our theatres should close promptly at the end of May or thereabout, and remain shrouded in dusky gloom until early September. But surely there is room in Toronto for an airy roof garden.

AUDREY.