

## THE STROLLERS

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM.

Author of "Under the Rose"

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"I am on my way to New Orleans," said the traveler after a moment's hesitation: "my business, fortune getting, in sugar, tobacco or indigo culture."

"New Orleans?" exclaimed the manager, pointing the lady in mid-air. "That, too, is our destination. We have an engagement to play there. Why not join our band? Write or adapt a play for us. Make a temperance drama of your play."

"You are a whimsical fellow," said the stranger, smiling. "Why don't you write the play yourself?"

"I? An unlearned, illiterate dotard? Why, I never had so much as a day's schooling. As a lad I slept with the rats, held horses, swept cowsheds and lived like a mudrat. He wrote a play! I might let fall a suggestion here and there, how to set a fat or where to drop a fly, to plan an entrance or to arrange an exit. No, no! let the shoemaker stick to his last! It takes—with deference—a scholar to write a drama."

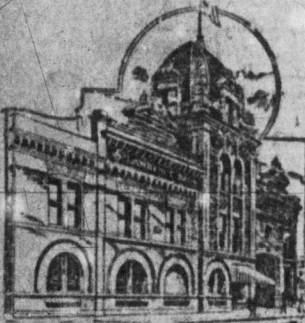
"You are a disqualifying me," laughed the other, drawing out a pipe, which he filled and lighted with a coal held in the iron grip of the antique tongs. "If it were only to help plant a battery or stand in a gap," he said gruffly, replacing the tongs against the old brick oven at one side of the grate. "But to teach King Dacchus in three acts! To storm a castle in the first, scale the walls in the second and blow up all the king's horses and all the king's men in the last—that is, indeed, serious warfare."

"True, it will be a roundabout way to New Orleans," continued the manager, disregarding his companion's response, "but there is no better way of seeing the new world—that is, if you do not disdain the company of strolling players. You gain in knowledge what you lose in time. If you are a philosopher, you can study human nature through the buffoon and the mimic. If you are a naturalist, here are grand forests to contemplate. If you are not a recluse, here is free, though humble, comradeship."

His listener gazed thoughtfully into the fire. Was the prospect of sharing this gipsylike life attractive to him? An adventurer, he was, he had known toward these homeless strollers, for whom the illusions of dramatic art shone with enticing luster in the comparative solitude of the circuit on the wilderness?

As he sat before the glow, the light of the burning shingle, playing idly above the dying embers, outlined the stalwart yet active figure and the impenetrable, musing features. But when, with an upward shower of sparks, the backing fell madder and the waning flame cast yet more gipsy shadows behind them, he leaned back in his heavy, brown chair, and again bent an attentive look upon the loquacious speaker.

"Or, if you desire," resumed the manager after some hesitation. "It might become a business venture as well as a pleasure jaunt. Here is a sinking ship. With the salvage warrant helping us into port—that is, New Orleans! There is even a tattering tale. The captain's well equipped, has a vessel."



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gery—"is a man," he knew her as I do, had watched her grow—his voice trembled—"and to think, sometimes I do not know where the next day's sustenance may come from! That she?"

He broke off abruptly, gazing at his companion half apologetically. "We players, sir," he resumed, "present a jovial front, but—tapping his breast—"few know what is going on here!"

"Therein," said the younger man, emptying his pipe, "you have stated a universal truth." He pushed a smoldering log with his foot toward the remnants of the embers. "Suppose I were so minded to venture—and he mentioned a modest sum—"in this hazard and we patched up the play to gether?"

"You don't mean it?" cried the manager eagerly. Then he regarded the other suspiciously. "Your proposal is not inspired through sympathy?"

"Why not through the golden prospect you have so eloquently depicted?" replied Saint-Proper coldly.

"Why not indeed?" exclaimed the reassured manager. "Success will come; it must come. You have seen Constance but once. She lives in every character to her heart's core. How does she do it? Who can tell? It is born—a heritage to her!"

His voice sank low with emotion. "Yes," he murmured, shaking his head thoughtfully as though another image arose in his mind. "A heritage, a divine heritage." But soon he looked up. "She's a brave girl," he said. "When times were dark she would always smile encouragingly, and in the light of her clear eyes I felt that the Lord would temper the wind to the shorn lamb."

"One, two, three, four," rang the great clock, through the silent hall, and at its harsh clangor Barnes started.

"Bless my soul, the maddie'll be up and doing and find us here!" he exclaimed. "One last cup. To the success of the temperance drama!"

In a few moments they had parted for their respective chambers, and only the landlord was left downstairs. Now as he came from behind the bar, where he had been apparently dozing and secretly listening through the half open door leading into the kitchen, he had much difficulty to restrain his laughter.

"That's a good one to tell Ezekiel," he muttered, turning out the lights and sweeping the ashes on the hearth to the back of the grate. "To the temperance drama!"

CHAPTER VI.  
DOWN the hill, facing the tavern, the shadows of night were slowly withdrawn, ushering in the day of the players' leaving. A single tree at the very top, isolated from its elvish neighbors, was bathed in the warm sunshine, receiving the earliest benediction of day.

Down, down came the dark shade, pursued by the light, until the entire slope of the hill was radiant and the sad colored foliage flaunted in newborn gayety.

Coming from the stable, where he had been looking after his horse, the soldier stood for a moment before the inn, when a flower fell at his feet, and glancing over his shoulder, he perceived Susan, who was leaning from her window. The venturesome rose, which had clambered as high as the second story, was gone, plucked, alas, by the wayward hand of a coquette.

Saint-Proper bowed and stooped for the aspiring but now hapless flower which lay in the dust.

"You have found the chariot, I hear," said Susan.

"For the present," he replied.

"And what parts will you play?" she continued, with smiling inquisitiveness.

"None."

"What a pity! You would make a handsome lover," she blushed. "Lud! What am I saying? Besides—maliciously—"I believe you have eyes for some one else. But remember—shaking her finger and with a coquettish turn of the head—"I am an actress and therefore vain. I must have the best part in the new piece. Don't forget that, or I'll not travel in the same chariot with you." And Susan disappeared.

"Ah, Kate," she said a moment later, "what a fine-looking young man he is!"

"Who?" drawled her sister.

"Mr. Saint-Proper, of course."

"He is large enough," retorted Kate.

"Large enough! Oh, Kate, what a phlegmatic creature you are!"

"Fudge!" said the other as she left the chamber.

Entering the tavern, the soldier was met by the wily old lady who bobbed into the breakfast room and explained the kind of part that fitted her like a glove, her prejudices being strong against modern plays.

"Give me dramas like 'Orsino,' 'The Rival Queens' or Webster's pieces," she exclaimed, quoting with much dexterity years:

"We are only like dead walls or vaulted arches!"

"And do not forget the heavy 'in your piece' called out Hawkes across the table. 'Something you can dig your teeth in!'"

"Nor the juvenile lead," chimed in the Celtic Adonis.

"Adonis makes a great hit in a small part," laughed Kate, appearing at the door. "My lord, the carriage is waiting!"

"My lady, your tongue is too sharp!" exclaimed Adonis, nettled.

"And put in a love scene for Adonis and myself," she continued, lazily dozing into the room. "He is so fond of me it would not be like setting."

This bantering was at length interrupted by the appearance of the chariot and the property wagon at the front door, ready for the journey. The rumbling of the vehicles, the resounding hoofs and the resonant voice of the stable boy awakened the young lord of the manor in his chamber above. He stretched himself sleepily, swore and again composed himself for slumber, when the noise of a property truck thumping its way down the front stairs a step at a time awakened him into life and consciousness.

"Has the world come to an end?" he muttered. "No! I remember. It's only the players taking their departure."

But, although he spoke carelessly, the bumping of boxes and slamming and banging of portable goods annoyed him more than he would confess. With the "crazy quilt," a patchwork of begonia's of different hues and patterns, around his shoulders, clothing him with all the colors of the rainbow, he sat up in bed, wining at each concussion.

"I might as well get up," he exclaimed. "I'll see her once more—the perverse beauty!" And, tossing the kaleidoscope covering viciously from him, he began to dress.

Meanwhile, as the time for their going drew near, nine best downstairs sped the parting guest with good cheer, having found profitably by the patronage the players had brought to the inn, but his daughter, Arabella, looked sad and pensive. How weary, flat and stale appeared her existence now!

With a lump in her throat and a pang in her heart she wearily wiped her eyes upon the best parlor curtain, as even Barnes mounted to the box, as robust a stage driver as ever extricated a coach from a quagmire. The team, playful through long confinement, tugged at the reins, and Sandy, who was at the bit, occasionally shot through space like an erratic meteor.

The manager, by forgetting his whip impatiently when Constance and Susan appeared, the former in a traveling costume of blue silk, a paletot of dark cloth and, after the fashion of the day, a bonnet of satin and velvet. Susan was attired in a lute sweeping and immensely full—to be in style—and jacket with sleeves of the pagoda form. The party seemed in high spirits as from his former window Manville, adjusting his attire, peered through the latter over the edge of the moss grown roof and leaf clogged gutters and surveyed their preparations for departure. How well the rich color of her gown became the young girl! He had told himself she was his best adornment, but his opinion varied on the moment now, and he thought he had never seen her to better advantage, with the blue of her dress reappearing in the lighter shade above the dark paletot, in the lining of the bonnet and the bow of ribbons beneath her chin.

"On my word, but she looks handsome!" muttered the patron. "Might sit for a Gainsborough or a Reynolds! What dignity! What comeliness! All except the eyes! How they can lighten! But there's that adventurer with her," as the figure of the soldier crossed the yard to the property wagon. "No getting rid of him until the last moment!" And he opened the shutter wider, listening and watching more closely.

"Are you going to ride in the property wagon?" he heard Saint-Proper ask.

"Yes; when I have a part to study I sometimes retire to the stage throne," he answered lightly. "I suppose you will ride your horse?"

Of his reply the listener caught only the words "windbreak" and "lame." He observed the soldier assist her to the throne and then, to Manville's surprise, spring into the wagon himself.

"Why, the fellow is going with them!" exclaimed the land baron. "Or, at any rate, he is going with her. What can it mean?" And hurriedly quitting his post, his toilet now being complete, he hastened to the door and quickly made his way downstairs.

During the past week his own addresses had miscarried and his gallantry had been lowe's labor lost. At first he had fancied he was making progress, but soon acknowledged to himself he had underestimated the enterprise. Play had succeeded play—he could not have told what part favored her most! Opelia sighed and died; Susan danced on her grave between acts, according to the programme, and turned tests into soliloquies; the farewell night had come and gone—and yet Constance had not a sign of compliance to reward the patient wooer. Now, at the sight of these preparations for departure and the presence of the stalwart stranger in the property wagon, he experienced a sudden sensation of pique, almost akin to jealousy.

Sleeping from the tavern, was with this effect he suppressed his chagrin and vexation and assumed that air of nonchalance which became him well. Smilingly he bade Susan and the other occupants of the chariot farewell, shook Barnes by the hand and turned to the property wagon.

"The noise of your departure a raked me," he said to the young girl. "So I have come to claim my compensation—the pleasure of seeing you!"

"Depart!" she laughed quickly. "Momentarily discovered," he turned to the soldier. "You ride early."

"As you see," returned the other tamely.

"A habit contracted in the army, no doubt!" retorted Manville, recovering his easy self-possession. "Well, a bumping trunk is as efficacious as a buxle call! But an revoir, Miss Carew!"

For we may meet again. The world is broad—yet its highways are narrow! There is no need wishing you a pleasant journey.

His glance rested on Saint-Proper for a moment, but told nothing beyond the slight touch of irony in his words, and then shifting to the young girl it lingered upon each detail of costume and outline of feature. Before she could reply Barnes cracked his whip, the horses sprang forward, and the stable boy, a confused tangle of legs and arms, was shot as from a catapult among the sweet willows. The abrupt departure of the chariot was the cue for the property wagon, which followed with some labor and jolting, like a convoy struggling in the wake of a pretensions ship. From the door Manville watched it until it reached a tollgate, passed beneath the portcullis and disappeared into the broad province of the wilderness.

CHAPTER VII.  
CALM and still was the morning; the wandering air just stirred the pendulous branches of the elms and maples, and in the clear atmosphere the russet hills were sharply outlined. As they swung out into the road, with Hans, the musician, at the reins, the young girl removed her bonnet and leaned back in the chair of state where kings had fretted and queens had lolled.

The throne, imposing on the stage, now appeared but a flimsy article of furniture, with frayed and torn upholstery and carving which had long since lost its pilded magnificence. Seated amid the jumble of theatrical appliances and accoutrements—scenery, rolled up rug fashion property trunk, stage clock, lamps and draperies—she accepted the situation gracefully, even finding nothing strange in the presence of the soldier. New faces had come and gone in the company before, and when Barnes had complacently informed her Saint-Proper would journey in a semibusiness capacity the arrangement appeared conformable to precedent.

The manager's satisfaction augured well for the importance of the semibusiness role assumed by the stranger, and Barnes' friendliness was perhaps in some degree unconsciously reflected in her manner, an attitude the soldier's own reserve, or tactfulness, had not tended to dispel. So his being in the property wagon seemed no more singular than Hans' occupancy of the front seat, or if Adonis, Hawkes or Susan had been there with her. She was accustomed to free and easy comradeship; indeed, knew no other life, and it was only assiduous attentions like those of the land baron's that startled and disquieted her.

As comfortably as might be she settled back in the capacious, threadbare throne, a slender figure in its depths—more adapted to accommodate a corpulent Henry VIII.—and smiled gayly as the wagon, in avoiding one rut, ran into another and lurched somewhat violently. Saint-Proper, lodged on a neighboring trunk, quickly extended a steady hand.

"You see how precarious thrones are!" he said.

"There isn't room for it to more than totter," she replied lightly, removing her bonnet and lazily swinging it from the arm of the chair.

"It's safer than real thrones," he answered, watching the swaying bonnet, or, perhaps, contrasting the muscular, bronzed hand he had placed on the chair with the smooth, white one which held the blue ribbons; a small, though firm, hand to grapple with the minotaur. Life!

She slowly wound the ribbons around her fingers.

"Oh, you mean France," she said, and he looked away with sudden disquietude. "Poor monarchs! Their road is rougher than this one."

"Rougher truly!"

"You love France?" she asked suddenly after studying, with secret, sidelong glances, his reserved, impenetrable face.

His gaze returned to her—to the bonnet now resting in her lap—to the hand beside it.

"It is my native land," he replied.

"Then why did you leave it—in its trouble?" she asked impulsively.

"Why?" he repeated, regarding her keenly. "In a moment he added: 'For several reasons. I returned from Africa, from serving under Buganda, to find the red flag waving in Paris; the king fled!'"

"She said quickly. 'A king should—'"

"What?" he asked as she paused.

"I was going to say it was better to die than live in a king's house."

"Than live in an outcast's!" he concluded for her, a shadow on his brow.

She nodded. "At any rate, that is the way they always do in the plays," she added brightly. "But you were saying you found your real king fled."

His heavy brows contracted, though he answered readily enough: "Yes, the king had fled. A kinsman in whose house I had been reared then bade me head a movement for the restoration of the royal figure. For what object? The regency was doomed, the king a May fly."

"And so you refused?"

"We quarreled; he swore like a Gascon. His little puppet should yet sit in the chair where Louis XIV. had lolled. He, I, who owed my commission to his noble name, was a republican—a deserter! The best way out of the difficulty was out of the country. First it was England; then it was here; tomorrow—where?" he heaved in a lower tone, half to himself.

"Where?" she repeated lightly. "That is our case too."

He looked at her, with sudden interest. "Yours is an eventful life, Miss Carew."

"I have never known any other," she said solemnly, adding after a pause: "My

gone and it towered but a mighty shell, the slender figure of the actress was clearly outlined, but against that dark and roughly furrowed background she seemed too slight and delicate to buffet with storms and hardships. That day's experience was a forerunner of the unexpected in this wandering life, but another time the mishap might not be turned to diversion. The coach would not always traverse sunny byways. The dry leaf floating from the majestic arm of the oak, the sound of an acorn as it struck the earth, presaged days less happy to come.

"How do you enjoy being a stroller?" asked a voice, interrupting the soldier's reverie. "It has its bitter and its sweet, hasn't it, especially its sweet?" Susan added, glancing meaningfully at the young girl. "But, after all, it doesn't much matter what happens to you if you are in good company."

"Positively one little yawn, real or imaginary."

"Positively one yawn, real or imaginary?"

"A part to study," he mused contentedly. "How I hate studying a part! They say what you wouldn't, and don't say what you would. But I'm off to bed," rising impatiently. "I'm getting sleepy."

"Sleepy?" echoed Barnes. "Take your choice—the Hotel du Omnibus—indicating the chariot—or the Villa Italia—'with a gesture toward a tent made of the drop curtain, upon the walls of which was the picture of an Italian scene."

"The chariot for me," answered Susan. "It is more high and dry and does not suggest spiders and other crawling things."

"Good night, then, and remember a good conscience makes a hard bed."

To be Continued.

This is a world of compensations, and he who would be no slave must consent to have no slave.—Abraham Lincoln.

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