

called into devise effective shapes and contrasts of colour, and then Polly's nimble fingers went to work and carried out his ideas with wonderful dexterity. Polly, indeed, was endowed with that talent for all branches of needlework which appears to be a positive inspiration with some women; and as she was remarkable also for personal neatness and the care she took of her clothes, the inheritance which Mabel had come into of her cousin's theatrical costumes was by no means a despicable one.

"What pretty lace this is round the black velvet jacket, Aunt Mary!" called out Mabel from her room. She was contemplating the costumes spread out on her bed, with secret delight. At seventeen, one may still take pleasure in that source of happiness known to children as "dressing up."

"Oh yes," answered Aunt Mary, shaking out a brocaded satin petticoat from its creases, "that's real point, Mabel, and remarkably fine old lace. I gave it to Polly years ago. It was part of the wedding-dress of Uncle John's and of course also your father's great-aunt; but if you want to see fine old lace you must coax Mrs. Darling to show you her store."

"Mrs. Darling?"

"Our first old woman. She is the strangest old body you can fancy; but she has a wonderful wardrobe—such antique brocades, high-heeled shoes, fans, buckles, flowered satins, such as they don't make now-a-days, and, above all, such lace! I believe that she would not sell a yard of it to save her life; and some of it is of considerable value."

"Do you know all the other members of the company, Aunt Mary?"

"Why, yes; most of them, I believe. There are the Copestakes, husband and wife: he plays the heavy business, and she second old woman, or whatever is wanted. Then there are Mr. Moffatt himself and his daughter: Miss Lydia St. Aubert, the leading lady; old Shaw, the first old man—his real name is O'Shaughnessy, but he always denies being an Irishman; I'm sure I don't know why—and one or two more. I'm not at all clever at describing people; but you will very soon find them out for yourself."

In the evening Jack returned, and, having posted his mother's letter, came back to give an account of what he had heard and done at the theatre.

"Here's the bill of the first night," said he, pulling from his pocket a long narrow playbill, still reeking with damp printer's ink. "We open with Macbeth, you see."

"Yes; I knew that was to be the first piece. And the farce is the two Gregorays."

"There's a list of the company, Mabel. No stars. Moffatt entirely objects to the starring system. He won't even give Miss St. Aubert, who is a great favourite here, a line to herself in the bill. He says it would be invidious to the rest of the company."

Mabel ran her eyes over a number of names printed in a double line at the head of the bill. First came Mr. Moffatt's name in very large letters. "That's because he's the manager, you know," explained Jack. But by-and-by the name occurred again in a preliminary address or opening flourish, setting forth to the inhabitants of Kilclare at what vast trouble and expense Mr. Moffatt had succeeded in getting together a company of artists "culled from the principal members of the leading provincial and metropolitan theatres."

"Mr. Moffatt's name is in very conspicuous capitals here, too," observed Mabel.

"Ah, yes—well—of course you see he likes to have a little pull over the others. It makes the people fancy him a big man."

"And here, too, Miss Moffatt's name is quite striking in the size of its letters."

"Well, you know she's his daughter, and, of course—"

Mabel could not help recalling La Fontaine's fable, in which the lion hunts with the heifer, the goat, and the sheep, in a quadruple partnership; but when it comes to the division of the spoil, the king of beasts, having found good and sufficient reasons for taking three-fourths to his own share, puts his paw on the sole remaining

portion, and simply announces that as to that quarter, should any one offer to touch it, he will be strangled without more ado.

"Who is this lady?" asked Mabel, pointing to a name in the list.

"Ah! Who should you think, now?"

Mabel coloured, and said, hesitatingly, "Is it—isn't—I?"

"Yes it is, though. That was my idea. Nobody had ever thought of a name for you."

"I should not have been ashamed of my own."

"Well, you can take it afterwards, if you like. But, for the present, there you are, transformed from Mabel into Miss M. A. Bell! I thought it ingenious, but if you don't approve—"

"Oh no, dear Jack. It will do beautifully. And when I said I should not be ashamed of my own name, I didn't think of Aunt Mary's having generously given up the name she had a right to bear, to spare a selfish pride. But I should think there's no one left now, to whom it matters very much whether I am Miss Earnshaw or Miss M. A. Bell in the playbill."

"The call is at ten, in the green-room, for the music of Macbeth, and at eleven on the stage. Everybody."

"I'm so glad I have nothing to do the first night but go on as a witch. I shall get a little accustomed to the look of the theatre. But I shall feel very shy at first, amongst all the actors and actresses."

"It isn't a very big 'all'. Courage, Miss M. A. Bell. Good night; and get a good rest to prepare yourself for to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV. IN THE GREEN-ROOM.

The Theatre Royal, Kilclare, stood in a retired and obscure part of the town, and the end of a dismal narrow street, one side of which consisted of a dead wall which bounded the large gardens of a Protestant clergyman, while the opposite side was partly formed by the high, blank, nearly windowless buildings of the back portion of a convent of Sisters of Mercy. Its front was adorned with a stumpy little portico supported by brick pillars, on each of which now hung a large green bill (technically termed a poster), setting forth, with a lavish expenditure of printer's ink, the intellectual feast that awaited the Kilclare play-goers within the building. I am too ignorant of architecture to be able to assign the theatre to any recognised "order." Perhaps it belonged to none. But it had two elements which I am told are indispensable to great architectural effects; breadth and simplicity. It was very wide, and its sole ornament was a wash of pale yellow ochre, which covered the whole surface, including the brick pillars of the portico. Beneath the portico were two green doors, one giving access to the pit, and the other to the boxes. The gallery entrance was at the back. At the back, also, in a lane that was always very muddy in winter and very dusty in summer, was the stage door. Mysterious portal, giving access to a realm of unknown enchantments, round which the little boys of Kilclare—the shod and the shoeless united in one crowd by the common instinct strong in little boys to do whatever they are expressly bidden to abstain from doing: which instinct, as we all know, is quite peculiar to little boys, and is never, never, found to survive in big boys—would congregate for hours, peeping and watching, and listening with breathless interest to any sound of voices that might reach their ears from the interior. Occasionally, the little crowd would be routed and sent flying in various directions by a vigorous sortie on the part of the stage carpenter. A very irascible personage, who would come out, hammer in hand, growling and swearing in a manner that was rendered inarticulately terrible by reason of his mouth being full of tin tacks,

But the boys invariably re-assembled very shortly, and there Mabel found them when, on Saturday morning, she accompanied her aunt and Jack to rehearsal.

"Take care, Mabel," said Jack. "You'd better give me your hand. It's very dark. Shall I help you, mother?"

"No, no. I know the way of old. Look after Mabel; I can take care of myself."

Cautiously and slowly, for to eyes just come from the outer daylight the way was absolutely pitch-dark, Mabel followed her cousin, and, ascending a short flight of rickety wooden stairs, passed through a heavy swing door, which he held open for her, and stood behind the scenes of the Theatre Royal, Kilclare.

The interior of a theatre by day was no new scene to Mabel Earnshaw, although she had not been in one, except as a spectator, for more than six years. The Kilclare theatre was of course, very small and very shabby; but the shape of the audience-part of the house was good, and the stage very spacious for the size of the whole building. Potter, the irascible carpenter, was hammering away at the porticulis of Macbeth's castle, and the propertyman, Nix—who was also the messenger, bill-deliverer, armourer, and general factotum of the establishment, besides personating all the invisible excited multitudes, and leading the buzzes of enthusiasm and the groans of disaffection at the wing—was communicating a lurid glare to the painted flames beneath the witches' cauldron by means of a judicious distribution of little bits of red foil. From the green-room came the thin tones of a fiddle.

"Oh, Mr. Trescott is here already, I hear," said Mrs. Walton. "He's always punctual."

Mabel followed her aunt into a long uncarpeted room, with seats fixed all around the wall, and the lower halves of the windows whitewashed, to exclude prying eyes. In one corner stood a bundle of spears, with tin tops, and a crimson calico banner. There were also two cane hoops, partially hidden by garlands of pink and white paper flowers, which had figured in some rural merry-making last season, and which, having remained there ever since, were now covered with a thick coating of dust.

About one-third of the extent of the room was taken up by a temporary construction made of scraps of old scenery to form a dressing-room; the accommodation of that kind in the Kilclare theatre having been originally provided on too scanty a scale even for Mr. Moffatt's small company of performers.

On the wooden chimney-piece stood a white earthenware jug full of cold water, and a tumbler; over it, hung a board covered with what had once been crimson cloth, but which had now faded into a dusty reddish brown; stuck on to this board with pins, were two or three scraps of paper, containing "calls" and "notices" announcements, that is to say, of the hours of rehearsal, and the pieces to be performed during the week.

Such was the aspect of the green-room of the Theatre Royal, Kilclare. When Mrs. Walton and Mabel entered it, it was occupied by two persons. One was Mr. Trescott, who, violin in hand, was limping up and down, occasionally playing a bar or two, and carelessly rasping out a few chords. The other was a thin, hatchet-faced old man, with a scorbutic complexion and a curiously sour expression of countenance. He was dressed in a threadbare brown coat, coming down to his heels, and buttoned tightly across his chest. He wore a pair of large woollen gloves (although the weather was bright and warm), and in the crown of his hat, which stood on a chair beside him, was a very big blue-checked cotton pocket-handkerchief. Perhaps I should have said that the room was tenanted by three persons—certainly the sour-visaged old man would have said so—for, stretched at his master's feet, with his nose between his fore-paws, lay a nondescript dog, bearing more resemblance to a Scotch sheep-dog than any other breed, and who, though evidently flattering himself that the world supposed him to be buried in slumber, was regarding everything that passed with one bright observant half-open eye. This was Lingo, Mr. Shaw's dog, companion, and only friend. Lingo's fidelity, accomplishments, sagacity, and high moral worth, were the only themes on which it was possible to elicit anything like enthusiasm from old Jerry O'Shaughnessy, alias Shaw; but on this topic the old man would dilate for hours to a sympathetic listener. Lingo was a celebrated character in theatrical circles in Ireland, and there were mysterious