OUR OLD FRIEND JOE JEFFERSON

By John S. Wise

Drawings by Joseph Clement Coll

IN the long period he was on the stage, more than sixty years, no man brought more gladness, more joy, to the hearts of men and women than Joseph Jefferson. His life and work were the embodiment of the Christmas spirit; so this delightful reminiscence of a friendship that lasted half a century is especially appropriate at this time. Then, too, one of his most famous characters was Caleb Plummer in "The Cricket on the Hearth," one of Dickens' finest Christmas carols, and just the mention of the name will recall a thousand memories of that wonderful portrayal.

NO sweeter or gentler fellow ever lived or died than Joe Jefferson. This has been said of him so often that it may sound trite and stale; but it is true, nevertheless. I knew him well and long. When I cast back to my earliest recollections of him, it seems a thousand years ago. In fact, it is nearly half a century since I first saw him. I can hardly say that I was acquainted with him, for I was a little fellow nine years old and he a young man about town; but I was a pretty wide awake chap and took notice of the things I saw.

We both lived in Richmond, Virginia. At that time Richmond had a theater and a stock company of actors. The old Marshall Theater was quite a celebrated playhouse. It either burned down or was pulled down shortly before the war, and in its place was reared the new Marshall Theater, a most ill fashioned structure, which disappeared some years ago.

The roll of the stock actors of the Marshall Theater included the names of a number of people who afterward achieved fame and at least one of them obtained infamy. Theaters and actors in those days were much more primitive than they are now The scenic effects and the great outlays made for stage properties nowadays were things not dreamed of then. I have a very vivid recollection of a spectacular performance called "The Naiad Queen." It was regarded as a triumph of startling effects; but, as I remember it now, its cheap gauze and tinsel would not be tolerated amid the splendors of the present in the most ordinary vaudeville show.

But the play! That was indeed the thing. The actors of that period worked hard; for, according to the conception of that time, they were required to do as much muscular labor as if they had been cutting a cord of wood.

The elder Booth and Edwin Forrest came to town occasionally, and when they did it was as if a Kansas cyclone had struck the place. They literally "tore a passion into tatters." Edwin Forrest was built like a bull of Bashan and his voice was like rolling thunder. His lungs and physique were taxed to the utmost when he gave his rendition of a Shakespearean play.

If the great actors of that day could appear on the metropolitan stage now and turn themselves loose in "Hamlet" or "Macbeth" or "King Lear," as they did then, people would think they were crazy

When He Was a Youngster

JOE JEFFERSON was a youngster in the stock company of the Marshall Theater, and I think he told me himself that when Edwin Forrest played Hamlet he took the part of one of the grave diggers. I have no trustworthy recollection of having seen Joe Jefferson act before he appeared in "Rip Van Winkle,"—in fact he may have dissolved his connection with the Marshall Theatre Stock Company before I went to live in Richmond, which was January 1, 1856,—but he had a large acquaintance in Richmond and was very fond of the place, and whether he was actually employed there in his profession or not he came back frequently, and I remember having seen him often.

Wilkes Booth was a member of the company, and Maggie Mitchell and old Mrs. De Bar. Lucille Western was there; but I am not certain that she was a member of the company. I remember seeing them all act. Mrs. De Bar was one of the best actresses I ever saw on the stage in her particular line.

A distinguished member of the theatrical profession then living in Richmond was Mrs. Anna Cora Mowatt. She had retired from the stage and was happily married to William F. Ritchie, editor of "The Richmond Inquirer." She was a Miss Hoffman of New York, I think; a lovely woman and prominent in all social events in Richmond, and did as much as anybody there to improve the literary taste of the community.

Jefferson had a particular friend and chum, Willie Caskie, who afterward became a distinguished artillery officer in Lee's army. I think the bond of sympathy between the two was that Caskie had a keen sense of the ridiculous and was exceedingly clever with his pencil. His caricatures of local celebrities were very amusing; and Joe Jefferson not only loved drawing and painting, but enjoyed harmless wit as much as any man I ever knew. Long years after Willie Caskie disappeared from Richmond, Joe Jefferson always recalled him whenever he visited the place, and talked with me often about the good times they had together when they were two youngsters lounging about the town and making fun of anything and everything that happened to come in their way.

It was the fashion of those days for young actors to appear in the streets dressed in the most startling and pronounced fashions of the day. Wilkes Booth always sought to make himself the glass of fashion and the mold of form. He was an exceedingly handsome young man, and his costumes were the envy of men of his own age. At that same period Lester Wallack supported a similar character in New York circles.

One of the most astounding apparitions in Richmond society was a young actor named R. Dorsey Ogden, long connected with the Marshall Theater. He was an Englishman, and aspired to preëminence in everything connected with the theatrical world of Richmond. He was a gasconading, self important chap, and was often the butt of Caskie's caricatures. He remained at the theater during the Civil War, and, though a robust specimen of fighting man who always took the part of hero, he claimed his exemption as a British subject and never entered the service. The soldiers guyed him mercilessly. Jefferson as a young man never fell into the follies or the foibles of this class of his associates; but while he never was a dandy, nobody ever saw him look otherwise than neat and fresh, and his manners were sweet and quiet and easy going. He had as merry and contagious a laugh as you could wish for. His eye was bright, and his smile was winning, and his love of fun and good company made troops of friends for him then as it did later in life. He often told me that he never had anywhere a warmer reception or a more enthusiastic audience than awaited him on his first appearance and ever afterward in "Rip Van Winkle" in Richmond. He changed less in appearance from youth to old age than any man I ever knew.

"Here's Your Good Health, And Your Family's; May They Live Long and Prosper."

One cold winter afternoon in 1856 I had a stiff fight in the Capitol square in Richmond with a little rowdy. I was not much over nine years old. My father was Governor, and the Richmond community was overwhelmingly opposed to him politically. It was at the time of the Know Nothing excitement, and even the boys thought it a good thing to lick the Governor's sons. I broke my arm in the mêlée; but I whipped my man.

About the time the fight was over young Jefferson came up and drove the boys away. He saw my arm was broken and escorted me to my home. Oh, how tender and sympathetic he was, and how he flattered me by telling me he saw the fight and I did well! He patted and caressed me and told me not to be afraid, that he would tell my father I did right; and when we parted at the door of the Government house we had become and were ever afterward sworn friends.

Although our friendship was interrupted by the war, and in the interim I had grown to be a young man, he remembered me perfectly when we met soon after the war in Philadelphia. I presume it was easier to recall me because he had known me as the Governor's son, and a Governor in that period was a much more important personage than he seems to be nowadays.

When Jefferson first came to Richmond after the war our acquaintance was renewed most agreeably. The whole town turned out to greet him, and somebody—I forget who—gave him a jolly supper after the theater at Jonah White's. Jonah White at that time kept the best eating house in Richmond. Jefferson made one of his inimitable after dinner speeches, which made everybody present feel as if he had taken him in his lap and patted him on the cheek and said, "Oh how glad I am to see you again!"

Helping the Brother in Law

ONE day, sometime after, I received a telegram from Jefferson from some point out West, advising me that his brother in law, Harry Warren, a young actor with a traveling company, was ill in Richmond, and that he felt anxious about him. He asked me to see that he was not neglected. I hunted up Warren, and found him at a most uncomfortable place, a very sick man, having an attack of jaundice. I had him removed to a private house, where he was cared for tenderly and attended by my own physician; so that he soon recovered.

An amusing thing occurred in this connection. Warren was left alone in his room under the influence of strong drugs while his sickness was at its height. This was proper; but it naturally depressed him. There was a speaking tube in the room; but the patient had no occasion to use it. The good woman of the house, having heard nothing from him for a long time, became anxious and thought he might need some attention, and that possibly the speaking tube was obstructed; so she told the servant to go up to Warren's room and ascertain if there was anything she could do for him, and also to learn whether the speaking tube was in order. The servant, who was almost a giant in height, attended to the request of the mistress and reported to her that Warren needed nothing. That was late in the afternoon.

Half an hour later I called there to see how the patient was getting on. I went to his room, and found him decidedly improved, but curious to know the meaning of the servant's visit. He said he had been much depressed and homesick; that as he lay there in the darkening evening shadows he heard a gentle tap on the door, and that in response to his invitation to come in the door swung open and a black giant stood there towering over and glowering at him, inquiring grimly, "Is your tube a-working?" He had no idea what he meant by the inquiry, and in his megrim condition felt sure it was a bogy man coming after him; but after his prompt and eager declaration that his tube was working his visitor had disappeared. I told him it was a servant in the house, and not a bogy.

"But," said he, "what did he mean by inquiring, 'Is your tube a-working?'" I explained that the inquiry referred to the condition of the speaking tube in the room. "Ah," said he with a sigh of relief, rolling over in his bed, "I thought it was the devil, anxious to learn whether the doctor's medicine was doing its allotted work."

When I told the story to Jefferson afterward it amused him greatly. "Harry doesn't understand the Southern negro as I do," he said, chuckling.

Many a time after that, when Jefferson and I met