When All Actors Knew Shakespeare.

By Clara Morris.

PART III.

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UP to this time the only world I had known had been narrow and sordid and lay chill under the shadow of poverty; and it is sunlight that makes the world smile into flower and fruit and laugh aloud through the throats of birds. But now, standing humbly at the knee of Shakespeare, I began to learn something of another world—fairy-like in fascination, marvelous in reality. A world of sunny days and jeweled nights, of splendid palaces, caves of horror, forests of mystery and meadows of smiling candor. All peopled, too, with such soldiers, statesmen, lovers, clowns—such women of splendid chill chastity, fierce ambition, thistle down and lightness and burning tragic love as made the heart beat fast to think of.

At that time Forrest, crowned and wrapped in royal robes, was yet tottering on his throne. Charlotte Cushman was the tragic queen of the stage. Mr. James Murdoch, frail and aging, but still acting, was highly esteemed. Joseph Jefferson, E. L. Davenport, J. K. Hackett, Edwin Adams, John E. Owens, Dan Setchell, Peter Richings and his daughter Caroline, Mrs. D. P. Bowers, Miss Lucile Western, Miss Maggie Mitchell, Mr. and Mrs. Conway, Matilda Heron, Charles Couldock, Joseph Proctor, Mr. and Mrs. Albaugh, Mr. and Mrs. Barney Williams, the Webb sisters, Kate Reignolds, were all great favorites, not pausing to mention many more, while Edwin Booth, the greatest light of them all, was rising in golden glory in the east.

Of the above mentioned twenty-eight stars, eighteen acted in Shakespeare's plays. All stars played a week's engagement—many played two weeks, therefore, at least twenty-four of our forty-two-weeks season was given over to Shakespearean productions, and every actor and actress had the bard at their tongue's tip.

Looking back to the actors of '65, I can't help noticing the difference between their altitude of mind towards their profession, and that of the actor of today. Salaries were much smaller then, work was harder, but life was simpler. The actor had no social standing—he was no longer looked down upon—but he was an unknown quality; he was, in short, an actor, pure and simple. He had enthusiasm for his profession—he lived to act, not merely living by acting. He had more superstition than religion, and no politics at all; but he was as patriotic and shouldered his gun and marched away in the ranks as cheerfully as any other citizen soldier.

But above all and beyond all else, the men and women respected their chosen profession. Their constant association of mind with Shakespeare seemed to have given them a certain dignity of bearing as well as of speech.

Today our actors have, in many cases, won some social recognition, and they must, therefore, give a portion of their time to social duties. They are clubmen, and another portion of their time goes in club lounging. They draw large salaries, and too frequently they have to act in long-running plays, that are made up of smartish wit and cheapest cynicisms—mere froth and frivolity, while the effective smashing of the seventh commandment had been for so long a time the principal motif of both drama and farce, that one cannot wonder much at the general tone of flippancy prevailing among the theatrical people of today. They guy everything and everybody, and would jeer at their profession as readily as they would at an old man on the street wearing a last year's hat.

They are sober, they are honest, they are generous, but they seem to have grown utterly flippant and I can't help wondering if this alteration can have come about through the change in their mental pabulum.

At all events, as I watched and listened in the old days, it seemed to me as if they were never weary of discussing readings, expressions, emphasis and action. One would remark, say at a rehearsal of "Hamlet," that Macready gave a certain line in this manner and another would instantly express a preference for a Forrest or Davenport rendering, and then the argument would be on and only a call to the stage would end the weighing of words, the placing of commas, etc.

A Sharp Snub.

One night I had been one of the crowd of "witches"—I had also had my place at that shameless papier mache banquet given by Macbeth to his tantalized guests, and then being off duty, was as usual planted in the entrance, watching the acting of the grown-up and the grown-great. Lady Macbeth was giving the sleep-walking scene. Her method was of the old, old school. She spoke at almost the full power of her lungs throughout that mysterious, awe-inspiring, sleep-walking scene. It jarred upon my feelings—I could not have told why, but it did. I believed myself alone, and when the memory-haunted woman roared out: "Yet, who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" I remarked, sotto voce: "Did you expect to find ink in him?"

A sharp "ahem!" right at my shoulder told me I had been overheard and I turned to face—oh, horror! the stage manager. He glared angrily at me, and began: "Since when have the ladies of the ballet taken to criticising the work of the stars?"

Humbly enough, I said: "I beg your pardon, sir—I—I was just talking to myself, that was all."

But he went on: "Oh, you would not criticise a reading unless you could better it—so pray favor us with your ideas on this speech."

Each sneering word cut me to the heart. Tears filled my eyes. I struggled hard to keep them from falling, while I just murmured: "I beg your pardon!" Again he demanded my reading, saying: "They were not too old to learn," and in sheer desperation I exclaimed: "I was only speaking to myself, but I thought Lady Macbeth was amazed at the quantity of blood that flowed from the body of such an old man—for when you get old, you know, sir, you don't have so much blood as you used to, and I only just thought that as the 'sleeping men were laced' and the knives 'smeared' and her hands 'bathed' with it, she might have perhaps whispered: 'Yet, who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.'" I don't mean any impertinence, and down fell the tears, for I could not talk and hold them back at the same time.

He looked at me in dead silence for a few moments, then he said "humph" and walked away, while I rushed to the dressing room and cried and cried, and vowed that never, never again would I talk to myself—in the theatre at all events.

Favoriteism but No Scandal.

If the family theatre was disliked by those who had already won recognized positions, it was at least an ideal place in which a young girl could begin her professional life. The manager, Mr. John A. Ellsler, was an excellent character actor, as well as a first old man. His wife, Mrs. Effie Ellsler, was his leading woman—his daughter Effie, though not out of school at that time, acted whenever there was a very good part that suited her. The first singing soubrette was the wife of the prompter and the stage manager. The first old woman was the mother of the walking lady, and so it came about that there was not even the pink flush of a flirtation over the first season; and, though another season was shaken and thrilled through and through by the elopement of James Lewis with Miss Frankie Hurlbut, a young lady from private life in Cleveland, yet in all the year I served in the old theatre, no real scandal ever smirched it.

The Riot Act is Read.

One Saturday night we were all corralled by the prompter, before we could depart for home, and were gravely addressed by the manager, the whole thing being ludicrously suggestive of the reading of the riot act; but, after reminding us that Mr. James Murdoch would begin his engagement on Monday night, that the rehearsals would be long and important, he proceeded to poison the very source of our Sunday's rest and comfort by fell suggestions of some dire mishap threatening the old gentleman through us. We exchanged wondering and troubled glances. What could this mean?

Mr. Ellsler went on: "You all know how precise Mr. Murdoch has always been about your readings; how crochety and exacting about where you should stand, at this word or at that, how quickly his impatience of stupidity has burst into anger, but you probably do not know that since his serious sickness he is far more exacting than ever, and has acquired the habit—when much annoyed of—of—er—well, of having fits!"

"Oh—h!" it was unanimous—the groan that broke from our oppressed chests.

Stars who gave us fits we were used to, but the star who went into fits himself—good heavens! Good heavens!

Rather anxiously, Mr. Ellsler continued: "These fits, for all I know, may spell apoplexy—anyway he is too old a man to safely indulge in them, so, for heaven's sake, do nothing to cross him; be on time; be perfect—dead letter perfect in your parts; write out all his directions, if necessary; grin and bear anything, so long as he doesn't have a fit! Good night."

The riot act had been read—the mob dispersed, but the nerve of the most experienced was shaken by the prospect of acting a whole week with an old gentleman who at any moment might get mad enough to have a fit.

Think, then, what must have been the state of mind of my other balletmate, Hattie, who, in her regular turn, had received a small part, but of real importance, and who had to address her lines to Mr. Murdoch himself. Poor girl—always nervous, this new terror made her doubly so. She roused the star's wrath even at rehearsal:

"Speak louder!" (imperatively). "Will your speak louder?" (furiously). "Perhaps in the interest of those who will be in front tonight, I may suggest that you speak loud enough to be heard by—say the first row!" (satirically).

Now a calmly controlled body is generally the property of a trained actress, not of a raw ballet girl, and Hattie's restless shifting about and wriggling drove him into such a nagging rage that, to the rest of us, he seemed to be trembling with inchoate fits—and I saw the property man get his hat and take his stand by the stage door, ready to fly for the doctor—or as he called him, "the fit sharp."

She, too, was to appear as a page. She was to enter hurriedly—always a difficult thing for a beginner to do. She was to address Mr. Murdoch in blank verse—a more difficult thing—and implore him to come swiftly to prevent bloodshed, as a hostile meeting was taking place "between young Count So-and-So, and your nephew, sir!"

This news was to shock the uncle so that he would stand dazed for a moment, when the page, looking off the stage, should cry:

"Ah, you are too late, sir—already their blades are out!"

"See how the foils writhe," etc.

With a cry, the uncle should recover himself, and furiously order the pages to "————call the watch."

Alas! and alas! when the night, the play, the act, the cue came, Hattie—as handsome a boy as you could wish to see—went bravely on, as quickly, too, as her terror-chilled legs would carry her, but when she got there—had no word to say—no, not one.

In a sort of icy rage, Mr. Murdoch gave her her line, speaking very low, of course:

"My lord—my lord! I do beseech
you, haste,
Else here is murder done!"

But the poor girl, past prompting, only caught wildly at the sense of the speech, and gasped out:

"Come, on, quick!"

She saw his feet tapping with rage—thought his fits might begin that way, and madly cried out at the top of her voice:

"Be quick—see! see! publicly they cross their financiers!"

Then, through the laughter, rushed from the stage, crying with streaming tears: "I don't care if he has a dozen fits! He has just scared the words out of my mouth with them!"

And truly, when Mr. Murdoch, trembling with weakness, excitement and anger, staggered backwards, clasping his brow, every one thought the dreaded fit had arrived.

Next day he reproachfully informed Mr. Ellsler that he could not yet see blank verse and the king's English (so he termed it) murdered without suffering physically, as well as mentally, from the shocking spectacle that he was an old man now, and should not be exposed to such tests of temper.

Yes, as he spoke, he was an old man—pallid, lined, weary-faced; but that same night he was young Mirabel—in spirit, voice, eye and movement. Fluttering through the play—"Wine Works Wonders," in his satins and laces, young to the heart—young with the immortal youth of the true artist.

Both these girls spoke plain prose well enough, and always had their share in the modern plays, but as all was grist to my individual mill, most of the blank verse and Shakespearean small characters came to me. Nor was I the lucky girl they believed me to be; there was no luck about it. My small success can be explained in two words—extra work. When they studied their parts, they were contented if they could repeat their lines perfectly in the quiet of their rooms, and made no allowance for possible accidents or annoyances with power to confuse the mind and so cause loss of memory and ensuing shame. But I was a careful young person, and would not trust even my own memory, without first taking every possible precaution. Therefore, the repeating of my lines correctly in my own room was but the beginning of my study of those lines until, had the very roof blown off the theatre at night, I could not have missed one. Then only could I turn my attention to the acting of them—oh, bless you, yes!—I quite thought I was acting, and at all events, I was doing the next best thing—which was, trying to act.

A Bit of Broad Comedy.

My manager considered me to have a real gift of comedy, and he several times declared that my being a girl was a distinct loss to the profession of a fine low-comedian.

It was in playing a broad comedy bit that my odd experience came to me. Mr. Dan Setchell was the star. He was an extravagantly funny comedian, and the laziest man I ever saw—too lazy even to rehearse his most important scenes properly. He would sit on the prompt table—a table placed near the footlights at rehearsals, holding the manuscript, writing materials, etc.; with a chair at either end, one for the star, other for the prompter or stage manager—and with his short legs dangling, he would doze a little through other people's scenes, rousing himself reluctantly for his own, but instead of rising, taking his place on the stage and rehearsing properly, he would kick his legs back and forth and smiling pleasantly would lazily repeat his lines where he was, adding—"I'll be on your right hand when I say that, Herbert. Oh, at your exit, Ellsler, you'll leave in the center, but when you come back, you'll find me down left."

After telling James Lewis several times at what places he would find him at night, Lewis remarked in despair: "Well, God knows where you'll find me at night!"

"Oh, never mind, old man!" answered the ever-smiling, steadily-kicking Setchell. "If you're there, all right! If you're not there—no matter!" which was not exactly flattering.

Of course such rehearsals led to many errors at night, but Mr. Setchell cleverly covered them up from the knowledge of the laughing audience.

It is hard to imagine that lazy presence in the midst of awful disaster, but he was one of the victims of a dreadful shipwreck while making the voyage to Australia. Bat-blind to the future, he—at that time—laughed and comfortably shirked his work in the day-time, and made others laugh when he did his work at night.

In one of his plays, I did a small part with him—I was his wife, a former old maid of crabbed temper. I had asked Mr. Ellsler to make up my face for me as an old and ugly woman. I wore cork-screw side-curls and an awful wrapper. I was a fearful object, and when Mr. Setchell first saw me, he stood silent a moment—then after rubbing his stomach hard and grimacing, he took both my hands, exclaiming: "Oh, you hideous jewel, you positively gave me a cramp at just first sight of you. Go in! little girl, for all your worth! and do just what you please—you deserve the liberty for that make-up!"

And, goodness knows, I took him at his word, and did anything that came into my giddy head. Even then I possessed that curious sixth sense of the born actress—and, as a doctor with the aid of his stethoscope can hear sounds of grim warning or of kindly promise while there is but silence to the standers-by—so an actress, with that stethoscope sixth sense detects even the forming emotions of her audience, feeling incipient dissatisfaction before it becomes open disapproval, or thrilling at the intense stillness that ever precedes a burst of approbation.

And that night, meeting with a tiny mishap which seemed to amuse the audience, I seized upon it, elaborating it to the limit and making it my own, after the manner of an experienced old actor.

There was no elegant comedy of manners in the scene, understand; it was just the broadest farce, and it consisted of the desperate effort of a hen-pecked husband to assert himself and grasp the reins of home government, which resolved itself at last into a scolding match, in which each tried to talk the other down—with what result you know well without the telling.

The stage was set for a morning room, with a table in the center spread with breakfast for two; a chair at either side, and, as it happened, a footstool by mine. His high silk hat and some papers, also, were upon the table. For some unexplainable cause, the silk hat has always been recognized, both by auditor and actor, as a legitimate object of fun-making, so, when I absent-mindedly dropped all my toast crusts into that shining receptacle, the audience expressed its approval in laughter, and so started me on my downward way—for that was my own idea, and not a rehearsed one. When my husband mournfully asked if there "was not one hot bisouit to be had," I deliberately tried each one with the back of my knuckles and remarking, "yes, here is just one"—which was the correct line in the play—I took it myself, which was not in the play. And so we went on till the scolding match was reached.

In my first noisy speech I meant to stamp my foot, but, by accident, I brought it down upon the footstool. The people laughed—I saw a point—I lifted the other foot and stood upon the stool. By the twinkle in Mr. Setchell's eye, as well as by the laughter in front, I knew I was on the right track. He roared—he lifted his arms above his head, and in my reply, as I raised my voice, I mounted from the stool to the seat of the chair. He seized his hat, and, with toast crusts falling about his face and ears, jammed it on his head, while in my last speech I lifted my foot and firmly planted it upon the very breakfast table.

It was enough—the storm broke from laughter to applause. Mr. Setchell had another speech—one of resigned acceptance of second place—but as the applause continued, he knew it would be an anti-climax, and he signaled the prompter to ring down the curtain.

But I—I knew he ought to speak! I was frightened—tears filled my eyes!

"What is it?" I whispered, as I started to get down.

"Stand still!" he sharply answered—then added: "It's you, you funny little idiot; you've made a hit, that's all!" and the curtain fell between us and the laughing crowd in front.

The prompter started for me instantly from his corner, exclaiming in his anger: "Well, of all cheeky devilment I ever heard or saw," but Mr. Setchell had him by the arm in a second, crying: "Hold on, old man! I gave her leave—she had my permission. Oh, good lord! did you see that ascent of stool, chair and table? eh? Ha! ha! ha!"

I stood trembling like a jelly in a hot day. Mr. Stchell said: "Don't be frightened, little girl! That applause was for you! You won't be fined or scolded; you've made a hit, that's all!" and he patted me kindly on the shoulder and broke again into fat laughter.

I went down to my room—I sat down with my head in my hands. Great drops of sweat came out on my temples—my hands were icy cold—my mouth dry—that applause rang in my ears! A cold terror seized upon me—a terror of what—of the public! Ah, it was a tender mouth, and it was bitted and bridled at last. The reins were in the hands of the public, and it would drive me—where?

The public! The public! I had never feared it before—because I had never realized its power. If I pleased it!—well and good! If I displeased it—I should be driven forth from the dramatical Eden I loved, in which I hoped to learn so many things theatrical and to become very wise—and I should wander all my life in the stony places of poverty and disappointment! I clenched my hands and writhed in agony at the thought! I seemed again to hear that applause which had been for me—my very self, and I thrilled at its wild sweetness!

Ah, the public! It could make or it could mar my whole life! Mighty monster! without mercy! The great, many-headed creature, all jeweled over with fierce bright eyes—its countless ears astrain for error of any kind! That beat the perfumed air with its myriad hands when it pleased—when pleased? A strange great stillness seemed to close about me—something murmured: "In the future—in the dim future, a woman may cause this many-headed monster you fear to think as one mind—to feel as one heart! Then the bit and bridle will be changed—that woman will hold the reins and will drive the public!"

At which I broke into shrill laughter—in spite of flowing tears. Two women came in—one said: "Why, what on earth's the matter? Have they blown you up for what you did tonight? What need you care, you pleased the audience!"

But the other said, quietly: "Just get a glass of water for her—she has a touch of hysteria—I wonder who caused it?"

But I only thought of that woman—of the dim future—who was to conquer the public—who was she?

Why that round of applause should have so shattered my happy confidence I cannot understand—but the fact remains that from that night I have never faced a new audience, or attempted a new part without suffering a nervous terror that sometimes but narrowly escapes total collapse.

Blanch Bradshaw, Who Introduced Clara Morris to Mr. Ellsler.

James Lewis.

CLARA MORRIS AS SHE APPEARED IN FIVE OF HER PRINCIPAL ROLES.

The Sure Thing Crook AND The Town of Nubbinville

By George Ade, Author of Fables in Slang

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Once there was a Grafter who would do anything for Money, except Work.

He had acted as Capper and Plugger for all sorts of Shady Enterprises and he had helped to operate every variety of Skin Game on the Farmers who came out of the Union Station carrying Telescope Valises and Shoe Boxes full of Lunch. He had given the Razoo and the neat Double Cross and the quick Zing-Zing to Cattlemen who hang around and invite Trouble after they have drawn their Money. He stood in with the Police and knew an Aldermar, and the Law had no Terrors for him.

In fact, the Grafter thought he was one of the Brightest and Best. When the Fish were running and the Nets came up heavy he would wear a large Stone in front and smoke a 15-Center with a Gold Label on it and feel sorry for the Tads that were putting down the Cedar Blocks for $1.10 a Day.

One Spring there was an Election coming and the Reform Element had to be soothed and jollied, so the Authorities suddenly discovered that the Town was Bad and closed everything tighter than a Drum. The Pool Rooms, Poker Joints, Brace Faro Games, Policy Shops, Opium Dens, Crap Parlors, and in fact nearly all the Sporting Centers, except the Stock Exchange, put up the Green Shutters and went out of Business until the periodical Spasm had played itself out. The Police were so Vigilant that anyone who dropped a Penny in the Slot to get a stick of Wintergreen Gum was taking his life in his Hands.

During this Season of Depression the accomplished City Grafter decided that he would go out among the Jays and try to scare up two or three Green Wrappers for his rapidly diminishing Roll.

He had a Scheme for coaxing Money out of those who want to get Something for Nothing and think they are Cute enough to beat the Sharper at his own Tricks. His Lay was to sell 18-Carat Jewelry and Alaska Diamonds at a Nominal Price, in order to introduce the Goods, and then put Real Money in the Boxes as an Extra Inducement. One corner of the Greenback was allowed to Protrude as an Evidence of Good Faith, yet it may be unnecessary to add that no one but the Booster ever got a Cash Prize.

The Grafter had a Satchel filled with Tin Jewelry and Alaska Diamonds, just received from the Glass Works, when he descended on a Flag Station called Nubbinville, which is near the Jumping-Off Place in Pike County. It was one of these Towns that seemed to be trying to hold two Farms apart. When you are passing it on a Train it Leaves Off and you are cut out in the Country again before you have time to ask the Name.

The Grafter.

The Marshal.

The Judge.

It looked very Yappy to the well-dressed Shark from the City and he hoped to do well. He stood up on a Dry Goods Box at the Principal Corner and made a Hurry-Up Call and began to give away "Friendship" rings in order to whet the Interest.

Just as he was elucidating his Unselfish Motives for the benefit of the Male Residents, who were looking up at him with their Mouths open, the Town Marshal came racking down the middle of the Street with a piece of Sapling in one Hand and a Tin Star on his Coat.

The Marshal needed Money that Day. He drew a Salary every Month, but it was so Small that if it had been paid to him in Pig Iron he could have carried it home all right. But he got his Bit every time he Pinched anyone, so he had to Arrest somebody about once so often in order to have enough for Groceries and Fuel. This official did not find it advisable to put his Constits into the Cooler, because he was around every Year asking them to vote for him. But if a Hired Hand came in and accumulated a Sosh, or if any Stranger began to act New along Main street, he was Jerked Up in less than no Time. And one of them Thimble-Ringers from the City was justly regarded as Meat.

So the Representative of the Dignity and Majesty of the Law broke through the Crowd and introduced himself.

"If you are the Town Marshal, as you say, I will ask you to remain here while I am giving my Lecture and Free Entertainment and if any one makes any Trouble, you arrest him," quote the diplomatic Grafter, who thought that a Calm Bluff would smooth everything.

But the Town Marshal was not to be Waved aside. He said he wanted $2 for a License Fee right away or he would put the Grafter into the Hen-House so quick it would make his Head swim. So the Grafter gave up Two and started in to mix up the Little Boxes and the Town Marshal arrested him for Swindling and led him over to the Calaboose.

The next thing to do was to send for the Squire. He was out trimming a Hedge, but when he heard that there was some Easy Money down town, he put on his Black Coat and got out his Revised Statutes. The Squire and the Town Marshal backed the Grafter up into one Corner of the Calaboose and made him stand for a Search. They found nearly $80 on him, so they advised him to get a Lawyer and told him they would do the Fair Thing by him and give him a Jury Trial. They had a good deal of Local Pride and were down on all Confidence Games, so they did not want to see any of that ill-gotten Money taken out of Town.

The Marshal happened to have 12 Personal Friends who had not Seen Working much for a number of Years, so he went over to the General Store, where they were wont to Congregate and Criticise the Government, and summoned them to serve as Jurors. He told them it would not take long because the man was Guilty.

At the Trial the Prosecutor made a pathetic Spell about the Honest Laboring Man who is done out of his Money by Designing Villians who live in the City. The Peers who were trying the Case shifted their Cuds and looked Serious. The Attorney for the Defendant collected his Fee in Advance and then advised his Client to Plead Guilty.

When the Evidence was in, the Squire gave the Twelve Good Men and True a few Instructions. He said if they found the Defendant Guilty they