

RANDOM RECOLLECTIONS

CHAPTER I.

J. L. TOOLE—*continued.*

A CURIOUS THEATRICAL ENGAGEMENT.

One of the, if not the very last engagement Mr. Toole had at the Gaiety Theatre in the Strand before he went to America might have led to a much more serious misunderstanding than it did. I think I am right in saying that John Hollingshead seldom had written agreements with any of the principal people in the company. His word was his bond; and his word was good for any sum to his staff. Toole's understanding in this particular engagement was that he was to take one-half of the receipts after, I think, seventy pounds per night. Now, on the face of that understanding, it would certainly seem that no mistake could arise, because, if there was not seventy pounds in the house any night, Toole would not receive anything. And it so happened there were nights when the receipts were under seventy pounds; but on Monday and Saturday, at the least, there was nearly double that sum per night. On the first Monday an account

of the receipts was rendered to Mr. Toole, Mr. Hollingshead first crediting himself with six times seventy pounds, or, in round figures, £420, and then dividing the balance between himself and Mr. Toole. Toole at once objected to that mode of making out the account, and wanted to take no note of the under seventy pound nights, and only share the over that sum nights' receipts. He mentioned the matter to me, and I advised him to write Hollingshead a line on the matter. He did so, and I think the wording of his note was about as follows :—"Dear Hollingshead,—The account is wrong. I share after seventy, and have nothing to do with the nights under that sum.—Yours, J. L. T." Hollingshead's reply was more brief than Toole's : "Dear Johnny,—You share on the week.—Yours, J. H."

And there, if I remember rightly, the matter ended. Both gentlemen were no doubt convinced in their own minds that they were right. The manager was obliged to insure as far as he could the expenses for his theatre and company, and such an experienced man as Mr. Toole should have stipulated per night, and not the week. However, Toole knew he would not be a great loser by the mistake, and I do not think the matter was ever made a serious question between matter-of-fact J. H. and J. L. T. I mention the matter because I really think it was a curiosity in agreements, and in litigious hands would have made a pretty case for arguments in wigs and gowns, because anyone

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may see at a glance that the interests of both parties might have been considerable. For instance, if the receipts during no one night in the week had not been more than seventy pounds, Mr. Toole would not have secured a penny; as a matter of fact, when he made the agreement, he reckoned that the receipts on Saturday, Monday, and perhaps another night or two in the week would insure him a good sum, and even if there were two or three nights of only forty or fifty pound houses, that was his manager's loss. But, as seen above, methodical John Hollingshead certainly knew what agreement he had made, and Mr. Toole did not. And yet he had, at that time, had agreements with almost every theatrical manager of note in the three kingdoms, and that particular form of agreement had escaped his memory, if he had ever made one of the kind. However, if I remember rightly, under seventy pound houses were an exception, so no great harm came to actor or manager, but the case is, perhaps, worth a mem. by actors.

The blessing of being able to sleep almost at will at any time day or night is not given, I am afraid, to many men or women when they have lived to the time when the cares of this world must, or should, make them think well over life's destiny.

Strange to say, I can well remember the time when Mr. Toole could go to sleep almost whenever he pleased; to such a busy and active-minded man as he was it must have been a blessing indeed. The day nor the night was never too long for his

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wonderful activity and mirth, but the moment, as it were, the curtain went down on the day or the night's work, joy, or pastimes, he would go to sleep almost at once, as a rule for a given time, and then awake and be up again as fresh as a lark.

Some years ago, I forget how many, Toole went to play at the Ryde Theatre, Isle of Wight, the last weeks of one of his most successful country tours. He did not expect to take much money there, for it was not the Isle of Wight season, and there were very few visitors. But he and his capital little company had had a hard-working travel round the provinces, so the genial actor-manager thought a week on the Solent would be good for him and his company. Besides, our dear old friend Humphry, or rather Humph Barnet, had rented the Ryde Theatre for a time, and had begged Toole to go there, reckoning on at least fair, if not great, business, even though the island was short of visitors. However, Humph had reckoned without his host, or, it might almost be said, with his host, for without doubt Toole is a good host at any time. At all events, much to the amazement of Barnet and the great comedian, business at the theatre was very bad indeed, so much so that, but for his old friend Barnet, Toole would not, I think, have played the week out.

Besides, a few old friends had agreed to meet and spend the week on the island during Toole's stay there. The subscriber and his wife and Mr. B. L. Farjeon were of the party, and a right merry time

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indeed we had, and, strange to say, the bad business was the cause of much mirth. Barnet was by no means a poor man, so our thoughtless laughs at his loss, or rather not gain, of money he had doubtless counted upon did not injure him in any way seriously, although he did at times look so glum that it was hardly possible not to laugh. In fact, two or three times, when several of us had journeyed to the other side of the island, Toole would worry Humph not a little, and pretend he would not play that night, and would defer returning to Ryde to almost the last moment, always of course intending to be at his post at the right time.

It was Mr. Toole's custom in those days to have a benefit one night in the week in most of the towns he visited, mostly I think on a Friday. Any how, on the Friday of the week in question his benefit was announced, and certainly more of the inhabitants favoured him with their presence than on the other nights, but the theatre was by no means crammed; however, it was not what is called in theatrical language a "bad" house. Toole romped through two of his favourite plays, and the late John Maclean, who was then a member of Toole's company, recited Hood's poems of "The Song of the Shirt" and "Eugene Aram," and the scene in the dress circle while he was reciting was a strange sight. Maclean had a powerful and impressive voice, and, as is well known, the poems themselves are impressive indeed. Before he had finished reciting "The Song of the Shirt," two ladies had fainted, and by the time the

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line “And Eugene Aram walked between, with gyves upon his wrists,” was reached, two or more ladies had fainted, and the circle was in a hopeless confusion. The curious part of the matter was that Maclean got so excited over his work that he had not the slightest notion of what happened until I went to his room and told him. I always thought John Maclean a very good actor, and, even with his rather hard, harsh voice, should have held better positions and earned more money than he did during his rather long career upon the stage. For, although he was for years a member of John Hollingshead’s company at the Gaiety Theatre, and played all sorts of parts from tragedy to burlesque, his favourite parts were, without doubt, serious ones.

I knew Maclean when he was quite a young man. He was then, in about 1854, working as a cabinet-maker in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill, and was even at that time a very good amateur actor, and quite a favourite reciter at a Mechanics’ Institution, where I used to go for such entertainments. Mr. Searle, the able writer for *The Weekly Dispatch*, under I think the signature of “Caustic,” was fond of giving readings from Shakespeare at the Institution, and I remember his reading was very slow and measured in comparison to young Maclean’s quick and stirring delivery. Doubtless, the old scholar was more correct if more dull than his young contemporary at that work.

Miss Glynn, the celebrated actress, had a very high opinion of Maclean as a friend and as an actor,

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and for years never tired of giving him much excellent advice in acting. That clever lady never doubted that he would be in the front rank of actors of his time if a good chance came for him, but I am afraid the chance did not come. And poor Maclean, one of the sturdiest and most respected actors of his time, after playing small and often poor parts for years, drifted into delicate health, and died before he was by any means an old man. As a Freemason, I have heard John Maclean was very much respected indeed.

At the end of our merry week on the island, Mr. Toole's acting manager engaged a large saloon railway carriage, and over twenty of us journeyed to London together. Perhaps the night before had been a rather sleepless one for some of us, for our host the comedian had kept the table in a roar, and so as soon as the train was in motion he said to me, "I'm going to have five minutes, Bill," and was off to dreamland almost the next minute. The five minutes extended to nearly twenty, and then the whole of us were very much awake the remainder of the journey.

Those bits of sleep Mr. Toole could so easily take were doubtless the secret of his wonderful energy and spirits, and I think I may say that at that time and for some years later he was not called upon to bear many of the greatest troubles of life. He had an excellent wife and two clever children, whom he loved very much indeed, and for whose comfort then and in future years he was proud

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to work. But sorrows force their way into homes and places where least expected, and Mr. Toole has had more than his share. And now, alas! I am truly sorry to know that, at no very great age, our excellent comedian and English gentleman is broken down in health, and the voice which once was so full of mirth is full instead of sadness and sorrow.

CHAPTER II.

TOOLE'S CONJURING AND OTHER CONJURERS.

I have seen some curious and amusing blunders in conjuring, but one which amused me very much was made some years ago by Toole at his theatre. He was going to produce a farce, called, I think, "The Wizard of the Wilderness," and engaged Bland, the well-known conjurer of Oxford Street, to show him some tricks. Amongst them Toole was anxious to accomplish the well-known feat of producing a glass bowl of water containing gold fish from a pocket-handkerchief. As is well known, the bowl of water with the fish in it is concealed in a large back pocket in the conjurer's coat, and, to prevent the water escaping, an almost invisible piece of india-rubber is strained tightly over the rim of the bowl, the art of doing the trick well consisting in taking the bowl out of the pocket with one hand whilst doing a lot of flourishing with the handkerchief in the other, and the moment the bowl is safely hidden by the handkerchief, the india-rubber is released and easily drops off without being seen by the audience. There is neither art nor trouble in doing the trick slowly, but there is some art in doing it very quickly, which means, of course, some or a good deal of practice. Bland, whose nature corresponded to his name, was

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pleased to practise the trick, and show how easily it was done, and it was easy enough without the water and fish. It was, however, rather a poser for Toole to manage the feat with water and fish and bowl complete. In fact, serious as Bland was in the matter, Johnny would play all sorts of games with him.

However, after some persuading, Toole let him put the bowl of water and fish into his pocket, and then began the fakement with the handkerchief and to fumble for the bowl. In doing so he released the india-rubber, down from the pocket came a stream of water, and instead of bringing out the bowl and its contents complete, he produced in its place one of the gold fish, and in his most comic manner said to Bland, "I told you so." However, nothing daunted, Bland persuaded him to have another try, which he did, with no better effect. Toole then mentioned refreshments, for we were all convulsed with the absurdity of his attempt at the trick—at least, all of us except Bland, who looked as serious as if his life and existence depended on Toole being perfect in his conjuring. When Toole and I were away from the rest of the company, he whispered to me, "I shall do the trick that way to-night, Bill." He did so, and the audience roared at what they thought was a blunder on his part.

In one of Byron's plays Toole wore rather a full-setting pair of knee-breeches, the leg portions of which, when unfastened at the knees, dropped