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978-1-108-05743-1 - Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving: Volume 1

Bram Stoker

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Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving

The greatest actor of his day, Sir Henry Irving (1838–1905) thrilled audiences with his tragedy and melodrama, his Hamlet and Richard III, most famously at the Lyceum Theatre in London. Born John Henry Brodribb, he took the name Irving for his first professional stage appearance in 1856. A long and exhausting apprenticeship followed, during which he played some 700 roles in theatres up and down the country before establishing his reputation in 1871 in the psychological thriller *The Bells*. In 1878, he took over the Lyceum and here, with his business manager Bram Stoker (1847–1912) and actress Ellen Terry (rumoured to be his mistress), he became the theatrical icon of his age. This engaging two-volume tribute by Stoker, his closest friend, was first published in 1906. Volume 1 includes reminiscences of Irving's Shakespeare, performances of *The Bells*, *Faust* and Tennyson's plays, Ellen Terry's acting, and his appearances in America.

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VOLUME 1

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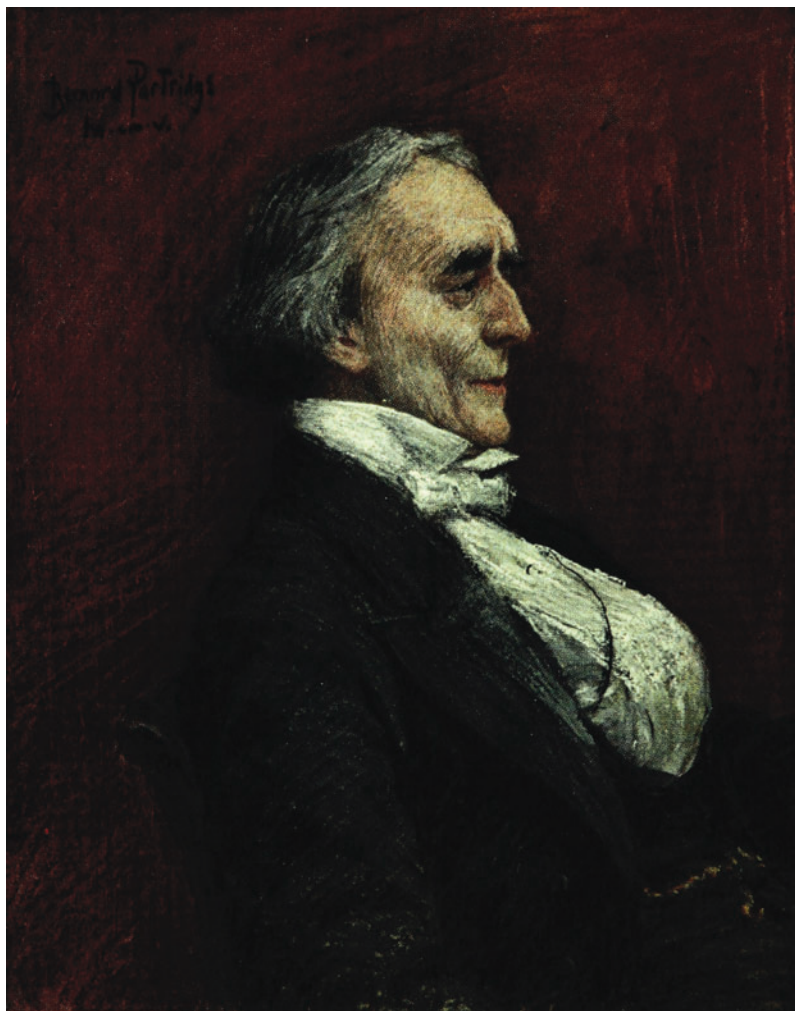
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THE LAST PICTURE PAINTED OF HENRY IRVING

FROM A PASTEL

BY J. BERNARD PARTRIDGE

(IN THE POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR)

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VOLUME I

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TO
THE MEMORY OF
JOHN LAWRENCE TOOLE
LOVING COMRADE AND TRUE FRIEND
OF
HENRY IRVING

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PREFACE

WERE my book a "life" of Henry Irving instead of a grouping of such matters as came into my own purview, I should probably feel some embarrassment in the commencement of a preface. Logically speaking, even the life of an actor has no preface. He begins, and that is all. And such beginning is usually obscure; but faintly remembered at the best. Art is a completion; not merely a history of endeavour. It is only when completeness has been obtained that the beginnings of endeavour gain importance, and that the steps by which it has been won assume any shape of permanent interest. After all, the struggle for supremacy is so universal that the matters of hope and difficulty of one person are hardly of general interest. When the individual has won out from the huddle of strife, the means and steps of his succeeding become of interest, either historically or in the educational aspect—but not before. From every life there may be a lesson to some one; but in the teeming millions of humanity such lessons can but seldom have any general or exhaustive force. The mere din of strife is too incessant for any individual sound to carry far. Fame, who rides in higher atmosphere, can alone make her purpose heard. Well did the framers of picturesque idea

understand their work when in her hand they put a symbolic trumpet.

The fame of an actor is won in minutes and seconds, not in years. The latter are only helpful in the recurrence of opportunities; in the possibilities of repetition. It is not feasible, therefore, adequately to record the progress of his work. Indeed that work in its perfection cannot be recorded; words are, and can be, but faint suggestions of awakened emotion. The student of history can, after all, but accept in matters evanescent the judgment of contemporary experience. Of such, the weight of evidence can at best incline in one direction; and that tendency is not susceptible of further proof. So much, then, for the work of art that is not plastic and permanent. There remains therefore but the artist. Of him the other arts can make record in so far as external appearance goes. Nay, more, the genius of sculptor or painter can suggest—with an understanding as subtle as that of the sun-rays which on sensitive media can depict what cannot be seen by the eye—the existence of these inner forces and qualities whence accomplished works of any kind proceed. It is to such art that we look for the teaching of our eyes. Modern science can record something of the actualities of voice and tone. Writers of force and skill and judgment can convey abstract ideas of controlling forces and purposes; of thwarting passions; of embarrassing weaknesses; of all the bundle of inconsistencies which make up an item of concrete humanity. From all these may be derived some consistent idea of individuality. This individu-

PREFACE

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ality is at once the ideal and the objective of portraiture.

For my own part the work which I have undertaken in this book is to show future minds something of Henry Irving as he was to me. I have chosen the form of the book for this purpose. As I cannot give the myriad of details and impressions which went to the making up of my own convictions, I have tried to select such instances as were self-sufficient to the purpose. If here and there I have been able to lift for a single instant the veil which covers the mystery of individual nature, I shall have made something known which must help the lasting memory of my dear dead friend. In the doing of my work, I am painfully conscious that I have obtruded my own personality, but I trust that for this I may be forgiven, since it is only by this means that I can convey at all the ideas which I wish to impress.

As I cannot adequately convey the sense of Irving's worthiness myself, I try to do it by other means. By showing him amongst his friends, and explaining who those friends were; by giving incidents with explanatory matter of intention; by telling of the pressure of circumstance and his bearing under it; by affording such glimpses of his inner life and mind as one man may of another. I have earnestly tried to avoid giving pain to the living, to respect the sanctity of the dead; and finally to keep from any breach of trust—either that specifically confided in me, or implied by the accepted intimacy of our relations. Well I know how easy it is to err in this respect; to overlook the evil force of irresponsible chatter. But I have

PREFACE

always tried to bear in mind the grim warning of Tennyson's biting words:

“Proclaim the faults he would not show;
Break lock and seal; betray the trust;
Keep nothing sacred; 'tis but just
The many-headed beast should know.”

For nearly thirty years I was an intimate friend of Irving; in certain ways the most intimate friend of his life. I knew him as well as it is given to any man to know another. And this knowledge is fully in my mind, when I say that, so far as I know, there is not in this book a word of his inner life or his outer circumstances that he would wish unsaid; no omission that he would have liked filled.

Let any one who will read the book through say whether I have tried to do him honour—and to do it by worthy means: the honour and respect which I feel; which in days gone I held for him; which now I hold for his memory.

BRAM STOKER.

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