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978-1-108-06492-7 - Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble: Including a History of the Stage, from the Time of Garrick to the Present Period: Volume 1

James Boaden

Excerpt

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THE
L I F E
OF
JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE, Esq.

BOOK THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS.—HIS BIRTH.—THE AUTHOR'S RECOLLECTIONS OF HIS PARENTS.—HIS ACTING WHEN A CHILD.—PLAY OF CHARLES THE FIRST.—MR. KEMBLE NEVER INTENDED FOR THE STAGE.—HIS EDUCATION.—NOTICES OF HIM AT DOUAY.—HIS STUDIES.—HIS MEMORY.—ORIGINAL BENT OF MIND.—GIBBON.—KEMBLE.—COMES TO ENGLAND.—FIRST EFFORTS.—BISHOP WARBURTON.

THE biography of an actor is the record of his art. To endeavour after any other fame than excellence in his profession, will be injurious rather than salutary, and probably unsuccessful. The studies connected with his art are fully sufficient to occupy his leisure hours, and to divide attention is certainly to weaken it. The less notice the actor

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excites off the stage, the better for himself and the public.

The dramatic soil is by no means the natural seed-plot of the virtues; on the contrary, I feel that the actor is surrounded by infinite temptations, and may, therefore, fairly be allowed a somewhat “larger tether” than can be given to other men. And, accordingly, when we find him combine with professional genius the quiet duties of private life; when we know him to be as much respected for his virtues as followed for his talents, he reflects part of his fame upon the community of which he is the ornament. The great tragedian, whose progress I have undertaken to record, was a striking example of the happy combination alluded to. No man was more beloved for his private merits, as no one could be more admired for exalted powers. His reputation as a man passed beyond the circle of his friendships, and became a sort of public property; and frequently, indeed, in his professional life, has that character interposed itself as a shield to protect him against the rash and groundless hostility levelled at him as an actor or a manager.

At first sight one would imagine, that the vast importance of such an union of public with private worth was too obvious to need inculcation. For, let us look to the sure consequences which follow the neglect of it. If, inflated by success upon the stage, the young performer commence a life of

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MR. KEMBLE'S BIRTH.

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pleasure or profligacy; if he mix with the dissolute great or the tasteless vulgar, he will not long retain the desire or the power to cultivate his art. He will be contented with his first thoughts, and his judgment will never ripen: he will pall by unvaried repetition, and grow careless when he excites but faint applause. His manager will naturally estimate him by his attraction, and his salary will decline; his scale of living must be contracted, and his associates will drop off. Commencing his career with popularity, he will close it in neglect; and, if remembered, will be classed with those at whom good men look grave and prudent men shake the head, and whose celebrity is confined to a circle drawn by the magic hand of intemperance.

As the life I am about to write will show an unvaried aspiration after the best fame, so I have premised the few reflexions above, as a warning to those who affect or feel an indifference for its possession.

John Philip Kemble was born on the first of February 1757, at Prescott in Lancashire. His father, Mr. Roger Kemble, was manager of a provincial company, performing in Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Gloucestershire, &c. &c. His mother, whose maiden name was Ward, was the daughter

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of that actor and manager, who, in the year 1746, on the 9th day of September, gave a benefit play in the town-hall of Stratford-upon-Avon, for the purpose of restoring the monument of Shakspeare in the church there.* The play was Othello; and he spoke himself a prologue written expressly for the occasion by the Rev. Joseph Greene. A few years after this, Mr. Ward's daughter, by giving birth to Mrs. Siddons and Mr. Kemble, did infinitely more for the fame of our great dramatic poet.

As in the course of our friendship he took an opportunity of introducing me to his father and mother, the reader who loved Kemble may thank me here for the impression made by the persons and minds of those from whom he sprung. It will readily be conceived that children, so remarkable for dignity of form and expression of countenance, did not proceed from parents deficient in both. Indeed those qualities were merely transmitted.

I only knew them in their decline of life, and although certainly not surprised, yet I can safely say that I never was more struck than by the sight of his venerable parents. His father had the same style of head as his own, except that the features were more delicately finished, and somewhat less

* Mr. Ward had been a performer in the time of Betterton, and in 1723 was the original Hazeroth in Fenton's *Mariamne*. On the 25th April 1760, at Dublin, the celebrated Woffington made her first appearance in Sir Harry Wildair for his benefit.

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HIS PARENTS.

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energetic. But his countenance excited reverence beyond any that I have seen ; to which the silver curls of his hair contributed, and the sweet composed and placid character of his deportment.

He was sitting in his son's library, and from a peculiar costume that he had adopted from liability to take cold, (a partial silk covering for the head,) he looked to me rather like a dignitary of the church two centuries back, than a layman of the present age. Our introduction to each other was at once simple and expressive. "This, sir, is my father." And to the old gentleman, "Allow me to present to you my friend, Mr. Boaden." He received me with the benignity suitable to his age, and addressed himself to me occasionally in a way that confirmed my first impression at entering the room. *

His mother had been a distinguished beauty in her youth, and had once been tempted by a coronet. What remained of her was of the highest order. She had very uncommon vivacity and point in her conversation. As I sat next to her at dinner, I had full opportunity to remark and enjoy the soundness of her judgment and the peculiar

* I have been all my life particularly observant of the manners of men at table. I have never yet seen greater ease nor higher polish than were exhibited by Mr. Kemble's father. This opinion of mine was accidentally confirmed the other day by a friend, who is himself commonly deemed one of the best bred men in Europe.

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energy of her expressions. I should fancy, among her own sex, that she must have been deemed, like Dr. Johnson, a tremendous converser. Her husband being a catholic, led her to the subject of religious toleration, on which she spoke with great feeling and propriety. She was pleased to find that I could cordially esteem one who was sincere in the profession of opinions different from my own. On the subject of modish affectation, I even yet recollect the poignant severity of her language. Her utterance was, like that of Mrs. Siddons, deliberate, careful in enunciation ; and her diction had a nervous and exact propriety, such as we have all admired in her son.

I remember, too, that in the course of the afternoon the old gentleman, less animated than his wife, had receded to the fire side ; and she took the opportunity to speak to me, aside, of his merits as an actor. He did not hear our conversation, and she finished a pretty extensive range of dramatic characters by a touch of valuable discrimination. “ There sits, unconscious of our remarks, the only *gentleman* Falstaff that I have ever seen.” I may incidentally observe that, among our artists, Falstaff is exhibited as a low and beastly buffoon ; they forget that, though he is Jack with his familiars, he is Sir John with all Europe. It is in this very point of gentility that Mr. Fuseli’s picture of him differs from every other.

The reputation of their children may render

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these slight sketches of the parents of some value. They seemed to feel for their son the greatest esteem as well as affection; and his manner of addressing THEM was a model of filial deference and consideration. I never beheld a family group more interesting; and he no doubt designed to oblige me highly, when he that day took me home with him, without a formal invitation.

Mr. Kemble, while yet a child, performed in his father's company. In all probability he represented the little prating York in Richard the Third, while his sister might assume the character of Prince Edward; for it appears by a play bill dated the 12th of February 1767, that he played at Worcester, the part of the Duke of York, afterwards James the Second, in Havard's pathetic tragedy of Charles the First. His sister, Mrs. Siddons, personated that glorious creature the Princess Elizabeth, to whom her dying father commended his last farewell to the Queen, her mother, together with the assurances of his inviolable fidelity and affection. The vulgar assassins of that day had, it is said, formed the gracious design of placing her as an apprentice to a button maker, but the sufferings of her family sunk so deeply into her tender mind, that their malice was disappointed.

“ She died, a most rare child ! of melancholy.”

Although this tragedy has long been laid aside in our theatres, it was once extremely popular. A

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few months before Mr. Kemble made his first appearance in the York company, Cummins, his great rival, acted the character of King Charles at Hull; and the curtain had no sooner fallen upon the catastrophe, than a very amiable young lady, the daughter of an officer whose name was Terrot, dropt down dead instantaneously in her box. There was no doubt at the time that this disaster was caused by too severe a sympathy in the distresses of the scene. Such a circumstance enveloped the tragedy in a sort of superstitious horror; and for a long while the company could not venture to repeat it.

Mr. Kemble, the father, never intended the stage as a profession for any of his children; and accordingly, after receiving the first elements of education at a preparatory school at Worcester, his son John was sent to the roman catholic seminary of Sedgely Park, in Staffordshire. The exigencies of the company might require the early aid of his children, but if he originally designed them for other professions, it was injudicious to subject them, at the time of life when impressions are the keenest, to the glitter of the stage and the delight of popular applause. However destined, they all, we know, at some period of their lives, made attempts upon the stage, though with various success. Of some I can truly say, that they were but respectable in the art, to which pretty general opinion, no doubt, the transcendent excellence of the others itself greatly contributed.

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HIS EDUCATION.

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At Sedgeley Park Kemble certainly distinguished himself. He had great application and diligence, and his proficiency was so decided, that it was determined he should complete his studies in the course prescribed by his religion; and he was accordingly, at the usual period, removed to the English college at Douay, to qualify him, at all events, for one of the learned professions.

I have heard the system of tuition at Douay, highly commended by a cotemporary there of Mr. Kemble's, and he himself always spoke with admiration and gratitude of the professors who had directed his studies. He mentioned the facility he formerly possessed of Latin declamation, and I remember spontaneously evinced that he had by no means lost the power, by addressing, for some minutes, an imaginary assembly, in the language of his own Brutus. In recapitulating his Greek studies, he assured me that his early impression from some of the writings of the Stagyrte had never been weakened; and that he thought the intellect of that philosopher superior to all competition. We were speaking of the Ethics and the Art of Poetry; and the conversation arose out of an examination he had been making of the admired translation of the latter by Mr. Twining. Our poetic versions of the Greek tragedians were not close enough to satisfy him.

He pointed in his library to a voluminous work of Alban Butler's, "The Lives of the Saints," which he told me he once knew thoroughly, whatever

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might be his present studies ; and that the writings of the fathers of the church were familiar to him. He evidently, at that time, studied for divinity. But, amid the classical or sacred pursuits of his college, he kept up an ardent love for the literature of his country ; and, as a reciter from our great poets, he had, at Douay, the reputation which through life he constantly maintained, of being one of the most harmonious speakers of English versification.

I once heard, from unquestionable authority, a pleasing trait of Kemble's mind, during his residence at Douay. His class, for some indiscretions, had fallen under severe censure of the masters ; and with a view to vicarious atonement, an imposition was proposed of two books of Homer, to be gotten by heart. Kemble modestly, but immediately, volunteered to accept the task ; and by close application, and his uncommon memory, enabled himself to remove the censure, by accurately repeating at least 1500 lines. The gallantry of the act could not but endear him to his class, and acquire for him the esteem and strong attention of the masters.

Of this college, perhaps, my readers may wish some brief account. It originated in the desire formed by certain English exiles to live together in some establishment, in which they might pursue their studies, and also propagate their religious opinions. William Allen, formerly of Oxford, and