THE STAGE:

BOTH

BEFORE AND BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

CHAPTER I.

Inutility of Biography—Various views of management and various managers—Lord Byron and Mr. Robins—Receipts to Kean's first appearance—Mr. Henry Harris—Mr. R. Sheil—Mr. C. Kemble—Mr. Elliot—King George and King Robert—Break up of the old understanding between the two Theatres—and its consequences—Mr. Price and Mr. Bish—A bad actor a bad bargain—The American Stage the ruin of the English Stage—Advantages of utility—Curious illustration thereof—Combination of Kean and Young in tragedy, and Liston and Mathews in comedy—Ingredients of an utilitarian—Failure of the theatres the fault of the public—Sir Robert Walpole, and his medical advisers.

Those who open the following pages for the mere purposes of idle curiosity, to ascertain if the writer had any ordinary or extraordinary father or mother, uncle or aunt, brother or sister, relative or friend,
will decidedly be disappointed. Those who seek for information or amusement, it will be his utmost endeavour to satisfy.

The object of the work is not biographical—it can be a matter of no moment to any one, ignorant of the fact, when or where the writer was born, what was his parentage, or what the nature of his education. Though the prejudice may run in favour of the usual number of limbs, and a limited quantity of back*, yet it would no more detract from my doings, for the stranger to be told that I was short of a leg, or had a hump on each shoulder, than it would add to them for him to hear I was a perfect Adonis.

I have stood in the dwellings, and beside the tombs, of some of earth’s greatest people, with whose biography the world at large is perfectly familiar, and heard such monstrous falsehoods roundly asserted as truths, that I have returned home content, as a very little person, with the knowledge there was no biography of myself extant. In the room where Shakespeare is generally supposed to have been born, at Stratford-upon-Avon, my late esteemed and eminent friend, Charles Mathews, and I, have heard its defunct tenant, Mrs. Hornby, of garrulous memory, with a pair of bright blue eyes glistening under a flaxen front, positively aver, that a rusty rapier, hanging up over the mantel piece, was the identical one worn by the poet when he enacted the character of Romeo—a

* The Rivals—Act III. Scene 1.
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character which, it is perfectly well known, *he never enacted at all!* We two have been “authoritatively” informed, in the lodge of Warwick Castle, that a metal vessel shown there by the porter, holding about one hundred gallons, contained, when full, the daily breakfast of the renowned Guy, Earl of War-
wick, and that the instrument in it, resembling in size and shape a modern pitchfork, was what he used to eat it with—a recital which naturally induced Mathews to say, the noble Earl was able to swallow more than he and I, put together, could.

There are those now living, whose ancestors landed with the Norman, and were a party to the celebration of the historical anecdote yeault “the Battle of “Hastings,” whom Duke William would not have suffered to wipe his sword clean from the stain of that memorable onslaught. What could biography do for such varlets as these? There are those also living who, holding a conspicuous place in the world’s eye, are readily disposed to believe they had ancestors, but have not the remotest conception who they were. The man who

“Was not of an age, but for all time,”

has very truly said, that “some are born great, some “achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust “upon them.” It is not for me to say, what I have achieved, but I have had a great deal “thrust upon “me,” which I have found unpleasant to bear, and extremely difficult to get rid of. The reader, I
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Imagine, would much rather hear all the particulars of this "greatness," than any thing of him who has had to groan beneath its fardels.

Biography is but an attempt at fame, and fame is the most worthless strumpet that ever beguiled a man into a conception of his own importance:

"For this men write, speak, preach, and heroes kill,
"And bards burn what they call their midnight taper,
"To have, when the original is dust,
"A name, a d—d bad picture, and worse bust!"

Stuff, stuff! if the contents of this book are worth a pinch of snuff, without being subject to the frequent consequences of one, viz. a very loud sneeze—it will be owing to the matter embodied in it, emanating from others, rather than to the manner in which it will be imparted by me. The reader, therefore, whom I have not the honour to class among my acquaintance, will be good enough to be satisfied with a statement of the simple fact that, like the rest of my fellow creatures, I have had the average number of relations—that my father wore a sword instead of swallowing one—that I was considered, as the Rev. Mr. Plumtree* has it, "respectable till I took a turn for the "stage"—that by some I am considered rather good

* The departed divine immortalised by George Colman's celebrated lines, beginning
"There was an old woman, who lived in Dundee."
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looking, and by others remarkably ugly—that I was forty-three years old last April (not the first, mind!) and that I have a very even temper, when I am not in a passion! What more could all the biographers on earth do for me than this?

Depend upon it, that the great secret of composition, be it for the stage or the study, is, to arrive at the point, and not by too circuitous a route. If I were peculiarly gifted with a descriptive faculty, I might amuse the reader with the adventures of the schoolboy, the aspirations of the lover, and the earliest dreams of the youth; for there are few of us, even of the dullest, who could not recite some "moving incident, by flood or field," in which they have chanced to play a leading part. To me this seems all foreign to the purpose; and I prefer accordingly confining myself to the actions of others rather than to any particular account of my own, unless in connection with them. If the reader could have witnessed the swagger of many puppets whose strings I have had the task of pulling for some years past—of some who, without a soul on earth to claim connection with, console themselves with the hereditary pride of at all events being descendants of the earliest navigators whom Noah enlisted in his crew!—of others who, blest with all the family advantages of life, have foresworn and disgraced them—of boasters with nothing to boast of, and of complainers with much to vaunt themselves upon—of the self-satisfied and the dis-satisfied, the turbulent and the vain—he would feel he was
acting the wiser part in leaving unchronicled his own participation in any such peculiarities.

We are told that "self is a subject on which all "men are supposed to be fluent, and none agreeable," and I for one agree in the doctrine. The biography of those connected with the stage, as far as they are individually concerned, is generally a very dull affair —it is only by association it becomes diverting; and in the full persuasion, therefore, that the public would rather a thousand times hear the anecdotes of those I have had so much intercourse with, than any relating to myself, I enter upon my task.

At page 190 of the second volume of Grimaldi's memoirs, the editor (who adopts the facetious coxcombrity of calling himself "Boz") states, with reference to an engagement I gave the renowned Jor many years ago at Birmingham, "Mr. Bunn behaved "on this occasion, as Grimaldi states he did upon "every other in which he was concerned, with great "liberality;" and to this admission the aforesaid editor condescends to append the following note:—"In "another part of the data upon which these memoirs "are founded, Grimaldi has the following remarks "concerning this gentleman, which, as he appears to "have been anxious that they should obtain pub- "licity, the editor subjoins in his own words: 'A "'great deal has been said about, and indeed against, "'Mr. Bunn, since he has become a London Ma- "'nager; but I have had many opportunities of ob- "'serving him, and his mode of doing business, and
"I feel satisfied that he has most liberal notions, and would, if it were in his power, amply recom pense, according to their talents, any artiste em ployed by him. I beg it may be understood that in this remark I do not allude in any way to myself; I speak from what I know of his conduct with regard to others; and if ever his industry meets with the success it deserves, I feel certain that the liberality of disposition I have spoken of will be displayed in a commensurate degree."

In reply to the "great deal that has been said about, and indeed against, Mr. Bunn since he has become a London Manager," Mr. Bunn takes the liberty of speaking at last for himself. Vituperation is the fate of all public men, and one who has been so much, and so long before the public as myself, must or ought to have been prepared for a given quantum —it is the more than sufficient that I find fault with. I have been aimed at by too many shafts to escape, and though brought down at last, the marksmen will find they have "scorched, not killed" their prey. The tremendous quantity of down-right falsehoods that have been put into circulation respecting so humble an individual, have induced many people to believe, until they saw the animal, that it must be one with two snouts, and at least half-a-dozen tails. I have endeavoured to console myself at times with the bit of comfort the French poet has prescribed, when he says—
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"Quand on a perdu tous ses ennemis,
"On a perdu tous ses charmes;"

and to feel convinced that unless I possessed some extraordinary qualifications, I should never have provoked such extraordinary hostility. I have however felt the one, without finding out the other.

The unprecedented circumstance of any person undertaking to manage the two National Theatres, at a time when no other could be found to enter upon the management of even one, undoubtedly engendered a more than ordinary degree of that "envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness," which constitute the creed of histrionic life, and of those in any respect connected with it. I shall take the liberty, however, of adopting a course somewhat different from that which has been pursued by those with whom I have had intercourse and dealing. Instead of resorting to an on dit,—to the ambiguous prelude of "a certain manager of one of our largest theatres"—to the puzzling innuendo of "we are informed on the authority of a principal performer"—to "it is reported"—"we have reason to believe"—"but one opinion seems to prevail"—"for on our parts we think," &c. &c. and all such awful twaddle, I purpose applying myself to deeds and documents, to persons and their peculiarities, to men and things by their right names. I will not encumber my record with allusions never meant.

"Ne'er doubt
"This—when I speak, I don't hint, but speak out!"
AND MANAGERS.

I will treat of all as I have found them, exercising to others the same degree of freedom, that others have exercised towards me. Feelings of disappointment or personal annoyance shall in no instance take precedence of experience, or matters of fact. Of that little article “disappointment,” I do not feel a sensation, being vain enough to think that I have conducted, unassisted, the National Stage for a longer consecutive period than any successor will be found to do; and that within the same period I have produced on it more attractive and talented performers and performances than years to come will furnish. At all events, a full account of such doings will be found chronicled in their proper places, and, without apprehension, I am content to abide the judgment of the public.

When a man has been reviewed seventy-seven times, he is not apt to care very much about the seventy-eighth! When a manager has been heralded by the asinine tenant of a rostrum at the Auction Mart as one whose exertions had raised the shares of a theatre to an unprecedented value, and has subsequently been denounced by the same breath as a Bartholomew Fair exhibitor, he can smile with considerable complacency on the quack who could deliver such conflicting sentiments. They partake, to a great degree, of the spirit of that celebrated couplet,

"I have seen the king hiss'd, and then care'ss'd;
"But don't pretend to settle which was best!"

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for it would puzzle a greater conjuror than even the persons in question to arrive at any just conclusion, from the hyperbole of the one opinion, and the detraction of the other. But to business.

So much has been written, and continues to be written, opposed to truth, and defiance of experience, upon the subject of the Drama, more particularly in its connection with the Theatres Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden, that it appears doubtful if the observations of a practical person will be received with the attention they would otherwise be entitled to claim. The dramatic intelligence purveyed by observers on the one side, and the theoretical notions entertained by speculators on the other, are only calculated to mislead the public, who, if left to themselves, will be tolerably right in the long run.

It is not under any egotistical impression of the infallibility of my own opinions, that I have entered upon the task of recording them; but

"When F——'s read, and C——'s understood,
"I can't help putting in my claim to praise."

So vast a quantity of nonsense has been published on the duties of a manager, their fulfilment and non-fulfilment; such wanton falsehoods have on most occasions been invented and circulated, and such erroneous impressions have thereby been imbibed, that having come in for rather more than my due share of flagellation, I have thought it necessary at last to