

THE STAGE:

BOTH

BEFORE AND BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

CHAPTER I.

Reduction of prices, and consequent reduction of character—Difference of views taken in and out of Parliament—Mr. Kemble's theory and practice opposed to one another—Mr. Farley—"Stars" self-nominated—Olympic company superior to the Covent Garden one—Cheap postage no benefit—Auber and Rodwell—Doctor O'Toole and Doctor Yates—The Provost of Bruges—Mr. R. B. Peake's frolics—Proposed illumination for the return of legitimacy—Not enough money taken to pay for it—Miss Joanna Baillie and Sir Walter Scott—Theatrical funds, and their annual dinners—Tom Dibdin, and *his* annual dinner—Marriage certificate of Malibran.

THE reduction of the prices at Covent Garden Theatre, the nature of the performances to which that reduction led, and the manner in which those performances were prepared, created a greater revolution in the theatrical world than had ever yet taken

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place, not excepting the unprecedented circumstance of uniting the two theatres. Nor is it to be wondered at. If it did nothing else, it turned into complete ridicule all the efforts the parties accessory to this desecration of their property had been for two successive sessions of parliament making to uphold it.

In the memorial the proprietors had on these occasions addressed to the Lord Chamberlain, and in the petition they preferred to the House of Commons, they studiously pointed out to his lordship, and to that one branch of the legislature, the stipulations they had expressly made with their lessee, that “their theatre should be conducted as Covent Garden “has always been accustomed to be conducted”—they made this stipulation, most certainly in their lease with me. I *did* so conduct it; and on a diminution of £1,500 per annum in the rent, I offered to do so again, for, *by* doing so, I knew I should be in a position to appeal to parliament for protection, in the event of any fresh invasion of the patent rights that had been leased to me. It will, moreover, be found, on a reference to Sir William Davenant’s patent, that it authorises “his heirs, executors, administrators, and “assigns, to receive such sum or sums of money as “was, or thereafter from time to time should be, “ACCUSTOMED to be given or taken in other play-houses and places for the like plays, scenes, pre-sentments, and entertainments!” It may be argued, that though this is an authority for demanding high prices, it is not a prohibition against taking low

CONSEQUENT REDUCTION OF CHARACTER. 3

ones. Virtually I think it is—inasmuch as it having been “customary” to take seven shillings to the boxes, there could be no contemplation of such a degrading reduction, that reduction *not* having been “customary.” It appeared to me they were, by making it, flying in the face of the very patent, whose prerogative they had been so lustily fighting to defend; and assuredly they were falsifying all the fine sayings they had been preaching up. It would be a difficult argument to sustain, that, reducing the prices to 4s., 2s., and 1s., and presenting on that stage the common pieces which had been worn out at the Surrey Theatre, was “conducting Covent Garden Theatre in the manner it had been *accustomed* to be conducted.”

When, in the year 1832, that redoubtable display of mummery, entitled “a select committee on dramatic literature,” was entertained, under the chairmanship of Mr. T. S. Duncombe, M.P. and Mr. E. L. Bulwer, M.P., Mr. Charles Kemble was asked, (*question* 628,) “whether he thought the price of admission “could not be lowered a great deal?”—And he replied, “I do not think it could, so as to give that “perfection of performance which you are now in “the habit of witnessing in those theatres!”—and again, (*question* 714,) when interrogated as to lowering the prices giving satisfaction to the public, he returned for answer, “I do not believe we should “have one person more in the theatre if we did!!!” With all this evidence lingering on his memory, as

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the result of his judgment, still Mr. Charles Kemble was a party to the leasing of Covent Garden Theatre *expressly to be opened at these reduced prices*, thereby entirely converting it to a minor theatre! It is not to be supposed that his object was a selfish one. Yet it is somewhat singular, that in a preceding part of his evidence before this “select committee,” (*question 611*), when asked, “Is a minor theatre able to “give a larger salary to an eminent performer than a “larger theatre?” his response was, “It may for “a moment, for the sake of opposition. A man “having no capital embarked in a theatre of this “sort may say, ‘My aim must be to weaken my “adversary, therefore I will offer an eminent actor “double the money he gets at the other theatre:’ and “I am sorry there are TOO MANY OF US incapable of “*resisting applications of that description*.” It can scarcely be imagined that a gentleman, maintaining such an opinion, consented to the conversion of his own major into a minor house, merely to have an opportunity of carrying that opinion out: but it is extraordinary that his own subsequent actions bore testimony to his antecedent judgment; for he became “one of those incapable of resisting” the offer of a tempting payment, having, immediately after the humiliation of Covent Garden Theatre, engaged himself to his tenant on a high nightly salary.

This inconsistency between conduct and opinion in a person of Mr. Charles Kemble's talents and station in his profession, was calculated to effect a con-

siderable alteration in the aspect of theatrical affairs, and no doubt would have done so, had not his own share in the matter completely verified his own assertions. Mr. Kemble's observation that those reduced prices would not bring one person more into the theatre was fully borne out in the longrun, and consequently the establishment had all the disgrace, without any of the advantages, of the speculation. It was an undertaking based in error, and not altogether clothed with integrity. Very large sums of money had years back been paid by the present occupiers of private boxes, in the full expectation that the tenants of them would be provided with the same class of entertainment, and the same degree of talent, as far as possible, that had hitherto sustained the reputation of that theatre; and that, before the curtain, the same class of society and the same order of decorum would be received and preserved as heretofore. They made the large investments in those boxes upon the faith of the proprietors of the theatre, and were as fully justified in appealing to them to keep that faith inviolate, as the proprietors were in appealing to parliament, and stating that they had invested large sums of money upon the patent theatre, on the faith of the crown. They were equally amenable to the shareholders, who had made such heavy advances, under the impression that the faith of the crown and that of the proprietors was coeval. It was, therefore, a very questionable measure in point of probity, and in every other respect it was a disgraceful and a ruinous one. The result of it at

the time was a failure, and it has since had the effect of lessening the character of both the patent theatres in public estimation, while it has left an unnecessary slur upon the profession, the reputation of which is not sufficiently fortified to bear any additional indignity. Beside Mr. Charles Kemble's own able testimony, submitted to the committee of the House of Commons, he had the warnings of many writers and friends, capable of giving sound advice, decrying the commission of a step, the consequences of which it was impossible to foresee;* but "Obadiah per-

* The alienation of feeling produced by this degradation of Covent Garden Theatre cannot be better conveyed than in the following few lines from a gentleman whose industry and great abilities so many years contributed to its fortunes and reputation. They are in reply to a letter I thought it due to myself to write to Mr. Farley, expressive of the regret I felt then, and have since, at being unable to offer an engagement to one of the most gentlemanly and willing officers that ever were attached to the staff of a commander:

" 3, Hart Street, Bloomsbury,

" Oct. 1, 1835.

" My dear Sir, and late Commander,

" Permit me to offer you my best thanks for the kind note you favoured me with last evening, and believe me it is with equal regret that you are prevented enlisting me under your banner in the ensuing campaign, in which I wish you a *most decided victory*; and believe me to be,

" Most truly and loyally,

" (though not in service) Yours,

" CHARLES FARLEY.

" I have for several years had the entrée of Drury Lane, and the privilege of bringing a friend: am I asking too much in requesting a continuance of *that favour*?"

sisted, and the mule threw him.” Covent Garden was opened upon the worst principle of a minor establishment, that of having a miserable company to support one or two exotics, who had adopted the poet’s exquisite line, where, in apostrophising the heavenly bodies, he exclaims,—

“ Fortune, fame, POWER, life, *have named themselves A STAR ! !* ”

The prices were the same as those of the Olympic ; but the performances to be supported by Miss Wrihten, Mrs. West, Mr. Vale, and Mr. Morley, were not as likely to be patronised as those entrusted to the talent of Madame Vestris, Mrs. Orger, Mr. Liston, and Mr. Keeley. As there was no attraction in the entertainment, people were not disposed to pay even four shillings to sit in a large building, where they were sure to be disgusted. Had the company and their representations been on a par with those the people had hitherto been accustomed to in this theatre, it would have been altogether another affair : but as it must have been well known that the average houses to be expected from such prices could not cover the expenses attendant upon such arrangements, and as it had been asserted—too truly—that the reduction of prices would not bring a greater number of people into the building, the result might have been anticipated.

Is there any man, in his senses, believes that the contemplated reduction of postage will turn out otherwise than a fearful loss to the income of the

country, and such a loss, that the substitution of some other and much more offensive tax will have to be provided to make up the deficiency? It may answer the purpose of those who are deriving the profit of some newly-established situation in connexion with the alteration, to argue to the contrary; but, as the Welsh say, “*wait* you” until the year of probation be passed, until the novelty has died away, and the deficiency in the revenue return made manifest, and then you’ll hear the truth. The labouring man’s necessities of life will have to pay for the abolition of a charge onerous to very few classes of society, a matter of indifference to a great portion of it, and of no relief whatever to the poor. This is not a country for cheap commodities; and, above all, in matters of taste or amusement. If it had not been for the fortunate result of *The Jewess*, so unconcerned is the public generally about either theatre, and was especially so at this juncture, that with the disgrace of one, the downfall of both might have been accomplished.

Amongst other disadvantages arising out of the manner in which the patent theatres have so long been conducted, may be classed that rivalry in the production of novelties which is generally ruinous to all parties, and that nothing but the classification of performance, I yet hope to see established in them, can possibly prevent. As I have observed already, one example is better than fifty arguments. With the view of following up the success of *The Jewess*, I had

been preparing Auber's opera of the *Bronze Horse* on a very extensive and a very expensive scale. It was placed in the hands of the best singers of the day, the music arranged to be given entire, its incidental ballet superintended by a Parisian master, and the paraphernalia of the *mise en scene* prepared on gorgeous and characteristic scale. It had been begun before Covent Garden Theatre had a tenant, but temporarily laid aside for the production of *The Jewess*, during the run of which it was again taken up and finished. Notwithstanding all this outlay, and notwithstanding my own conviction and my rival's knowledge that he did not possess the materials to do it any degree of justice, "AUBER'S LAST NEW OPERA OF THE BRONZE HORSE" was announced for representation at Covent Garden by an operatic company incapable of singing the music, with scarcely a chorus singer or dancer, and without, I believe, the expenditure of £50. Instead of it being "AUBER'S *last* opera," it was (at least a great part of it) "RODWELL'S *last* opera"—another, among the many of my friend George's waggeries.* Not but what Rodwell is a man of great talent, and an opera from him, advertised as

* Whenever Covent Garden or Drury Lane Theatres are to be let, it is invariably insinuated in all theatrical circles, followed up by paragraphs in all the papers, that Mr. Rodwell has made an offer for the one advertised. The Cockneys swallow this for a day or two, and Rodwell, though too modest a man to insert such things about himself, believes it himself for another day or two; but the only theatre he has taken, or is likely to take, is the one that is to be "*let alone*."

such, is a very welcome visiter; still he is not MONSIEUR AUBER. The object of all this could be but to forestall the operations of Drury Lane, and, by being first in the field, to throw cold water on any similar subject that appeared afterwards. The same attempt was subsequently made, this same season, with Herold's opera of *Zampa*; and though in both instances the result recoiled upon the schemers of the scheme, the intention was the same; and had it been attended with any degree of favour, the labour and expense which had been incurred at Drury Lane might have been neutralised by the parsimony and false expedition at Covent Garden; but these are more of the delights of management.

A singular instance of the further trials to which the stage, or rather its director, is exposed, occurred at this time. I was beset by several people, and especially by the individual himself, to give a comparative stranger to the London boards a trial in the character of DOCTOR O'TOOLE. The exorbitant price paid for Mr. Power's talent, and the hopelessness of finding any one, for some time past, able to compete with it, rendered the accession of a successful representative of Irish character of the first consequence. Mr. Macarthy was therefore allowed his probation, and, by his own urgent request, a repetition of the part was granted. His performance gave no indication of his being enabled to fill the desired post, and with as much regard to what the gentleman was pleased to call his reputation, as could consistently