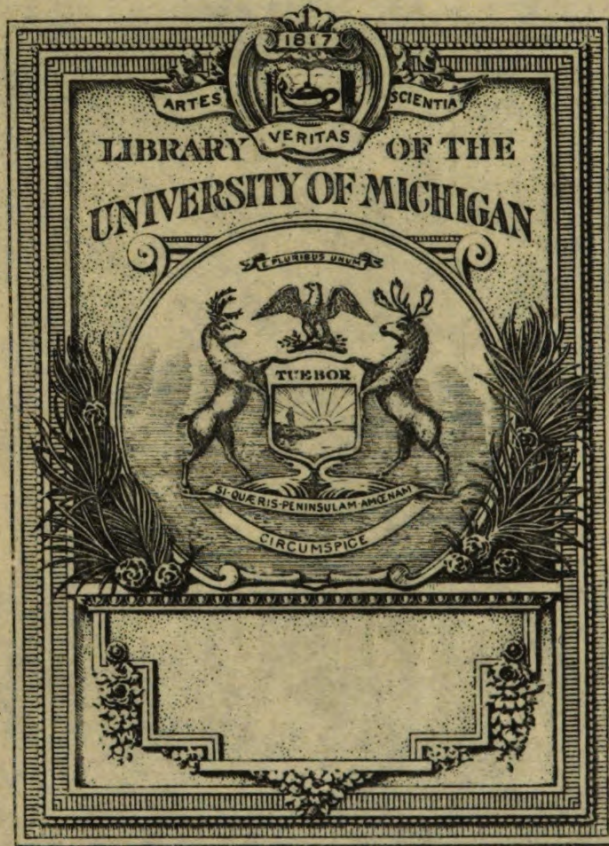


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TWENTY-SIX YEARS

OF

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THE LIFE

OF

AN ACTOR AND MANAGER.

INTERSPERSED WITH SKETCHES, ANECDOTES AND OPINIONS
OF THE PROFESSIONAL MERITS OF THE MOST CELE-
BRATED ACTORS AND ACTRESSES OF OUR DAY.

BY

FRANCIS COURTNEY WEMYSS.

“ Vanitas vanitatis, et omnia vanitas !”

New York
1847



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P R E F A C E .

HAVING been frequently asked to commit to paper the varied scenes of an actor's life, in which I have been engaged, I have commenced, partly from recollection, and partly from memoranda made at various periods, the present journal, under the title of the *Life of an Actor and Manager*, in the course of which I may have occasion to mention the names of nearly all the European Actors who have appeared upon the American stage during the last twenty years. If any amusement may be derived from such a source, reader, it is at your service; but should the frequent occurrence of the personal pronoun *I*, disgust you, lay down the book. If you will travel through it—spare its faults—under the assurance of its veracity. Wherever a change of opinion has taken place it is faithfully chronicled, without reference to the first impression, which remains as it first struck the author, thus endeavoring to do full justice to my professional brethren.

THE AUTHOR.

NEW-YORK, October, 1846.

REMARKS.

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LONDON, 1810.

New York, London, 1810.

His theatre, on the opening night, Monday, the 31st of August, 1840, presented a scene of splendor never witnessed in America. In decorating a house for the amusement of the public, if any fault could be found, it was excess of ornament, the gilt moulding on a pure ground of white being too much crowded; the eagles supporting the drapery of the proscenium boxes, were the most chaste and beautiful things I ever saw. Mr. Foster, who came among us with Cooke, and whose experience at the Adelphi Theatre, in London, gave him all the requisite knowledge, seemed to have bent all his energy to this one purpose, and succeeded perfectly. Burton was fortunate, too, in securing the aid of Haviland to superintend the alterations. His opening pieces were the "Rivals," and "A Roland for an Oliver;" his company, Mr. P. Richings, stage manager, J. R. Scott, James Thorne, Shaw, Whiting, Graham, Neafie, T. Placide, C. Porter, Becket, Brooke, Quayle, Herbert, Oakey, Stafford, Boulard, Woodbury, Master Reed, J. Van Stavooren, Bright, Ince, and Reed; Misses C. Cushman, Melton, S. Cushman, E. Petrie, Porter, Fanny Ince, Jones, Wilson, Delsmere, Collingbourne, Flannigan, Wilkins; Mesdames Brooke, Becket, and Ferrers; a strong and judiciously selected stock company, to which his own name added a tower of strength; yet he did not give his company a fair chance. In over anxiety to commence the starring system, he checked their rising popularity. Hacket was the first star—the weakest he could have selected—and Abbot, who followed, was really, as far as attraction was concerned, no star at all. Graham failed, but appears to have had no favorable opportunity to display his powers, and, in returning to England, showed that he, at least, possessed a quality most rare in actors—common sense. Of the actors new to the Philadelphia public, whom Burton introduced,

MISS CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN

deserves more than a passing notice. This young lady is a proof of what perseverance, steadily directed to one object, will accomplish; more especially where genius, giant-like, proceeds hand-in-hand along with it. She commenced her theatrical career as a singer, announced as a pupil of Mr. Maeder, her voice pronounced to be of a most extraordinary nature, rarely possessed by a female. She failed, whether from loss of voice, or deficiency in her musical education, or both, I cannot record; but nothing daunted her. Repudiated as a singer, I find her grasping at once at the honors of tragedy—attempting the part of Lady Macbeth, (since so admira-

bly sustained by her,) but at this time beyond her powers. Not discouraged by this second failure, if it is not too harsh to term it so, I find her descending from the stilts of the Bowery Theatre, under Hamblin—occupying the humble station of a walking lady at the Park Theatre, in New York, cheerfully performing any part allotted to her by the manager, at the same time closely studying the manners and peculiarities of all the European actors, male or female, with whom her position brought her in contact; and, as subsequently appears, carefully hoarding the knowledge of her art thus acquired for future action, yet not advancing with rapid strides in the favor of the audience, by whom she was tolerated, but not supposed to possess the talent which they afterwards became proud to honor. Her masculine mind at once perceived, that the only means of success was to cultivate the acquaintance of the gentlemen conducting the newspapers; fugitive pieces of poetry appeared in the papers, and in the popular periodical magazines, under the signature of “Charlotte Cushman.” These answered the double purpose of placing her name before the public, as a lady of literary talent, and securing the notice of the publishers to her dramatic career. At length, Nancy Sykes, in “Oliver Twist,” gave her an opportunity of proving what she was capable of accomplishing. As a portrait of female depravity, it was painfully correct: and in all her future career, she never surpassed the excellence of that performance. In leaving the Park Theatre, to join Burton in Philadelphia, she at once opened the road to that fame which she rapidly acquired; here she had a field for the prosecution of her abilities, which was at this time filled by older and abler favorites in New York. The success of the “Naiad Queen” carried her name triumphantly along with it; and at the end of the season, she had assumed a position, which enabled her to return to the Park Theatre, as the leading actress of the American stage; and her ambition will not be satisfied, until she can add the leading actress of the English stage, as she progresses in her future career. The visit of Mr. Macready to the United States, and the high opinion he entertained of her merit as an actress, opened the road to London, where her success will secure not only renown, but fortune, on her return to her native country.

Of late years it has become the fashion to place theatres under the direction of ladies, and Miss Cushman has figured as the manager of the American Theatre, in Walnut Street, under my successor, Mr. Marshall; but even the popularity of her name could not command success in such an undertaking,—here she proved incompetent. At the end of one season, W. R. Blake was an-

nounced as her assistant, (but, in fact, her manager,) to give her an opportunity of retiring, without wounding her feelings, sufficiently mortified by the knowledge, that the reins of power must pass from her hands, or the doors of the theatre be closed for want of patronage. Here is another defeat to be over-mastered; and I risk little in prophesying, if ever a National Theatre is erected in New York, upon purely American principles, Miss Cushman will be one of the great promoters of the design, and not unlikely the lessee and manager; she is fully impressed with Richelieu's motto—"There is no such word as fail," and in the spirit of good feeling I say to her, go a-head.

The Chestnut Street Theatre was opened under Pratt and Dinmore, (the late treasurer,) on the 29th of August. One night previous to the opening of the National, Murdoch was announced as the stage manager; the performance, the "School for Scandal" and "Popping the Question;" stars announced, Fanny Ellsler, E. Forrest, Power, Mr. and Mrs. Wood, and Buckstone. The last-named gentleman made his first appearance on the 7th of September, as Jemmy Wheedle and Selim Pettibone; one of the few authors who have proved themselves also good actors. Buckstone's reputation depends more upon his writing than his acting, yet there is a quaintness of manner and peculiarity of voice, which renders him, without any claim to greatness, a valuable member of a theatrical company. As a star, he has no pretensions to notice, and wisely joined his fortunes to Mrs. Fitzwilliam, who found in him an able assistant, and thus maintained a position which alone he never could have held with success.

On the 7th of September, I announced the opening of the Arch Street Theatre, under my direction. Hielge had re-decorated the house; the gas had been introduced; scenery painted for a new piece, entitled the "Provost of Paris;" Hadaway had been appointed stage manager, and every thing wore the aspect of a prosperous commencement. Mr. Thomas Newton marred all my prospects; he had promised me faithfully, if I would permit him to take off the hands employed at the Arch Street Theatre for two days, to enable Mr. Burton to open, whose gas fixtures he was also making, he would bring down all the force from the National Theatre on the Tuesday, and be ready for me in time. I assented; but the gas fixtures were so incomplete, on the first night, at the National, Burton would not permit a single hand to leave his place until all was finished. In this he was perfectly right; but the two days lost on my work were attended with most disagreeable consequences. At six o'clock, on the evening of the 7th of September,

Mr. Nicholson, the Superintendent of the Philadelphia Gas Company, sent me word that the pipes had not been proved, and the gas could not be turned on. In vain I pleaded the ruin which must follow such a disappointment; he replied, the rules that governed him were imperative, and could not be departed from. The crowd, assembled before the doors, waiting for admission, became clamorous; they were sufficiently numerous to reach across Arch Street, in front of the theatre. I was compelled to inform them that the gas could not be turned on. While I addressed them from the piazza, Mr. Hadaway performed the same kind office on the opposite side of the street. We persuaded them quietly to disperse; and thus, instead of opening to five or six hundred dollars, which appearances indicated, on the 7th of September, I opened on the 8th, with Rice (Jim Crow,) to \$152. Who can control the uncertain chance of fate? Had I known or dreamed of the possibility of such an occurrence at twelve o'clock, I would have ransacked the city of Philadelphia, and been prepared with oil to light the house upon this unfortunate night. It was the first time in my managerial career I had ever appointed a certain night for any certain event to come off, and failed to accomplish it, (excepting only Addams as Jack Cade.) If Mr. Newton had been an actor, such an occurrence would have been impossible. Why he deceived me, who had obtained for him the contract, in opposition to the opinion of several of the members of the board of agents—who procured for him the job from Burton, and also the alteration of the fixtures of the Walnut Street Theatre, is a problem I have attempted to solve more than once, but it is inexplicable to me. The consequence was, ruin. My resources had been crippled by my last season in Walnut Street; the aid of my friends taxed to the utmost, to enable me to prepare for a campaign, which terminated, as far as I was concerned, without a blow. On the following night, the gas was very imperfectly lighted; and it was half an hour after the time of beginning before the lamps in front of the theatre could be lighted, giving to those who presented themselves to purchase tickets, ideas that we could not be ready for performance. The 8th of September yielded \$152, the 9th, \$61, the 10th, \$93, the 11th, \$98, Rice's benefit, on the 12th, \$195—the receipts of the five nights, \$601; out of which, Rice, by contract, was to receive \$250. On the Monday, a new piece, and a very good one, entitled "The Sixes; or, the Devil is in the Dice," produced only \$90, Tuesday \$43, Wednesday \$30, Thursday \$18. On Friday morning I assembled the company in the green-room, told them

that a contest like this must be useless, entailing misery all around ; that they had better, before it was too late, provide themselves with situations for the winter ; and thus disbanded those who were willing to depend upon my exertions. They deserted not me, even in these apparently desperate circumstances ; I deserted them, conscious that distress, starvation, and misery alone could attend a further attempt to prosecute such a commencement. The ladies and gentlemen deserve my thanks, which I am proud thus to tender them, for their kind intentions. On Friday, I did not attempt to open the doors ; and strolling into Burton's theatre, found myself much amused by a good representation of a piece in which old Time had provided a safe receptacle for all managers. Moyamensing Prison, my friend Burton, it is dangerous to tamper with ; true jokes ; a few months found you, among others, ready to avail yourself of this same sanctuary. Who would have thought that I, who felt myself strong in the affection of a certain portion of the play-going community, should have been the first to run, before a shot from the enemy had reached me, a victim to the treachery of a friend. I went to Baltimore, where no better fate awaited me. There politics had turned the heads of the whole population, who were themselves nightly engaged as actors in large processions, bearing lanthorns, banners, and soul-inspiring mottos. Harrison and Van Buren night after night engaged the minds of all, either as active partakers in the exciting scene, or as passive spectators, admiring the splendor with which each party strove, in this contest, to outdo the other. Theatres, or any place of public amusement, were superfluous ; even those who possessed the right of free admission would not honor us with their presence. Thus it proceeded from bad to worse, until, on the 30th of November, I returned again to the Arch Street Theatre, and opened with Hill, having reduced my prices to twenty-five cents, boxes, and pit, twelve and a half cents, to contend against a similar movement on the part of Marshall and Dinneford, at the Walnut Street Theatre. I opened this time to an excellent house, although Mr. Newton had not completed his gas fixtures, and I had been obliged to call in another to finish his work. I had \$246 ; the pieces, "Sudden Thoughts," "The Green Mountain Boy," and "O. K." Booth opened in Richard, on the 12th of December, to \$300. All promised hope of success, when he again placed the thermometer below zero by appearing upon the stage drunk. Down went the houses to \$70, and \$80, then to \$24, and \$18. The theatre continued open until the 30th of January, when I requested the stockholders to release me from all engagements, cancel the lease, and

I retired, heartily disgusted with every thing connected with the Arch Street Theatre, which to me had been one source of annoyance after another, entailing a loss upon my already crippled resources of three or four thousand dollars.

Rice, Hill, Booth, Sandford, Williams, Wood and his dogs, and Tom Flynn, were the stars. "O. K." "New Notions," "A Wife for a Day," "the Lion of the Sea," "Norman Leslie," "the Serpent Lady," "the Convict's Child," and "the Brazen Drum," the new pieces; the whole season sixty-three nights, ten weeks and a half; the whole receipts, \$5630, of which \$1000 were paid to the stars, leaving an average of seventy-three and a half dollars per night. During the last few weeks, arrest for debt followed arrest, execution followed execution, until, to keep my person out of gaol, I was compelled to apply for the benefit of the insolvent laws, a discharge under which I received at the March term of the court in 1841. My large establishments were completely broken up. Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh Theatres, all passed from my hands—my property disposed of under the sheriff's hammer, at a time when real estate would hardly be taken as a gift—ruining me, without aiding my creditors. A theatrical wardrobe, the most extensive in the United States, which ten thousand dollars could not replace, sold for one hundred and thirty-six dollars!!! The Pennsylvania Theatre, which cost me fifteen thousand dollars, exclusive of the mortgage of five thousand dollars, sold, subject to the same mortgage, for sixty-two dollars. The month of April, 1841, found me without one cent, crushed, heart-broken and degraded in my own estimation, by the white-washing process I had been compelled to undergo. I have never been the same man since. Difficulties which, previous to this epoch in my life, I gloried in surmounting, have been suffered to master me. My energy of character, which gave me nerve to face any emergency, seems to have deserted me, and I have lived to be refused an engagement in the Philadelphia theatres at one-fourth of the amount at which my services therein were formerly eagerly sought for. In all this, let me not forget my obligations to *my good friend*, Mr. Samuel Hays, the grocer, at the corner of Eleventh and Water St. He was the first, as early as June, 1840, to place the sheriff upon my back, in return for the exertions of myself and all the members of the Strembeck family, to recommend him customers, when he first located himself in the neighborhood of Eleventh and George Street. I had paid him yearly several hundred dollars, and refused to avail myself of the law's delay in discharge of this claim: he was the first to cry mad dog, and loose the officers of the law upon my falling,

but not then hopeless fortune. It was a greater satisfaction to me to pay him than it could have been to him to deprive my wife and children of the few comforts which years of untiring industry had placed around them. For the attempt, he has not been, or will he be, forgotten in our many pleasant recollections. Should he ever be placed in a similar situation, may he meet with no such urgent creditor. As a foil to this, thank God, there is one bright spot which cheered me in misfortune. Mr. Wilson, and the carpenters of the Walnut Street Theatre, when they heard of the distress which existed in my family, entered into a subscription from their hard-earned wages (although they were also my creditors to a larger amount than a mechanic ought to lose by his employer,) and tendered it to me. Although I did not accept the offering, the kind feeling which dictated it is imprinted upon my heart; and to those men I feel grateful for the first really pleasant hour I experienced from the time of my failure: it was a balm which soothed my feelings and turned them once more into their proper sphere of action. Mr. Wilson had been placed in his present position by my recommendation to the stockholders, and thus proved that his heart is in the right place.

Having thus brought my connexion as manager of a Philadelphia Theatre, for the present to a close, let me return to the rivals whose movements now occupied the public attention. Mr. E. Forrest was at the Chestnut Street from the 21st of September until the 3d of October, when Power succeeded him, retaining possession until the 24th. On the 27th, Mr. and Mrs. Wood, and Mr. Brough, with Mr. Leffler, commenced an opera season. No sooner was the name of the Woods seen on the play bills, than Burton announces in large capitals, the engagement of Miss Clifton, Mr. and Miss Vandenhoff, Mr. Buckstone, Mr. Braham, Mrs. Fitzwilliam, Mr. Power, Mr. Guibelei, Miss Poole, Mr. and Mrs. Seguin, Mr. Hackett, Mr. Browne, and the promise of an Italian opera. The steam was evidently rising fast—boilers preparing for expansive action, to burst with a terrible explosion, scattering dismay on all around. Either these announcements were a managerial device to attract attention from Old Drury and the Woods, or the managers must have fallen into a sleep, or have been guided by wrong counsel, to loose thus their hold upon these stars, who alone could enable them to resist the energetic movements of their younger opponent. On the 10th of November, Fanny Ellsler and Mons. Silvain, followed the Woods. Half of Fanny's attraction is gone—the houses good, but not great—the treasury gasping in agony, and the theatre evidently *in articulo*

mortis, playing only four nights a week, not opening the doors the nights on which the graceful Fanny did not appear. Forrest comes once more to the rescue—a powerful ally, but unable to command success: Then *Le Compte* and a *corps de ballet*; and, finally, an announcement that the theatre will be closed on the 4th of January, to prepare for Bellini's opera of "*Norma*." No want of amusement in this our Quaker City—four theatres open; the Chestnut, the National, the American, and the Arch Street; Raymond and Waring's Circus, with *Le Fort* and Otto Motty; Promenade Concerts at the Museum *a la Musard*, by Frank Johnson and his celebrated band, to usher in the year 1841.

Burton produced "*Nicholas Nickleby*," for the purpose of giving Richings an opportunity of displaying his powers as Mantalini, and Miss C. Cushman, as Smike. Mr. Henry Knight was a better representative of this part, and had the advantage also of the first impression; yet Miss Cushman, if not equally successful, proved she possessed powers of great versatility, a quality of rarest value to an actress. Buckstone played Tim Twopenny, in "*Poor Jack*," at the National, on the 28th of September. Browne also was here. Miss Josephine Clifton, increased in size if not in reputation, and played Pauline, in "*the Lady of Lyons*," on the 26th of October. Oxley also assisted Burton. On the 7th November, Burton and Buckstone, two funny gentlemen, announced their intention of appearing in the third act of "*Othello*," in the most serious manner, and requested the people not to laugh at them.—Who could help it, to see Burton as Othello, and Buckstone as Iago? Whether it answered the manager's purpose, or the announcement was so preposterous as to prevent the people from visiting the theatre at all, is not matter of record; but on the 9th of November, the citizens of Philadelphia gave Mr. Burton a proof of the high estimate they placed upon his exertions, by a full attendance to see "*Ups and Downs*," "*O. K.*" and "*Le Dieu, and La Bayadere*," announced for his benefit, for the first time at his own theatre. Lots of applause—a call for the manager—a speech—and a few hundred dollars in the treasurer's hauds more than usual, and you have the result.

On the 16th of November, Tyrone Power, so long the able support of the Chestnut Street Theatre, deserted Old Drury, for the newly erected National, where he appeared as Sir Patrick O'Plenipo, and Doctor O'Toole. Whether he profited by the change in a pecuniary point, is not the question if he lost "*caste*:" Burton gained credit for indefatigable exertion to annihilate Pratt and Dinmore, who seem, in Murdoch, inexperienced as he was in ma-

nagement, to have placed the reins of government in hands too weak to compete with such an adversary as Burton. On the 30th of November, 1840, one of the brightest names in the annals of English Theatres was announced at the National—

MR. JOHN BRAHAM,

who appeared as Henry Bertram, in "Guy Mannering." In his best day, he was a miserable actor; but singers—and *such* singers, so rarely heard—are not expected to be actors. His fame as the first tenor singer of the English stage had long been undisputed: the "little orange boy" was received with acclamation wherever he went—his name sufficient to fill the largest theatre, and no musical festival was considered worth attending where Braham was not. Cathedral, concert-room or theatre, he was the magnet of attraction. Who that heard "Jeptha's Rash Vow" could ever forget the volume of voice which issued from that diminutive frame, or the ecstasy with which "Waft her Angels through the Skies" thrilled every nerve of the attentive listener? He ought to have visited the United States twenty years sooner, or not have risked his reputation by coming at all. Like Incledon, he was only heard by Americans when his powers of voice were so impaired as to leave them to conjecture what he had been, and mourn the wreck that all had once admired. His very fame prepared his condemnation, and he committed a fatal error in selecting a concert-room for his debut in North America; thus dulling the edge of curiosity which would have filled the theatre to overflowing on his first appearance. Then, in visiting the city of Philadelphia, he should have gone to the Chestnut Street, which, like the Park in New-York, can alone give an actor lasting reputation. This every star has discovered, who, in their eagerness to secure better terms at any other place of public amusement, dig the grave of their reputation. No failure to attract an audience was ever more apparent than his; while but one opinion—that of disappointment—was heard from every body. Whatever sum Burton promised to give him was intended to be fully paid; but the artist failed to draw the crowds anticipated, and the manager could not fulfil his contract. He took his benefit on the 14th of December, as much displeased at the result of his engagement as any auditor with his efforts to amuse. Braham, as a composer, enjoys a reputation which will survive even the recollection of his American failure. Some of his ballads, for simplicity and beauty, have never been excelled.

Twenty-six years of the life of an actor and manager. Interspersed with sketches, anecdotes and opinions of the professional merits of the most celebrated actors and actresses of our day. By Francis Courtney Wemyss ...

Wemyss, Francis Courtney, 1797-1859.
New-York, Burgess, Stringer and company, 1847.

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