ACTOR-MANAGERS.

I.

THE growth of the system whereby actors have acquired the control of the most important play-houses is simply a process of evolution. It need not, I think, be hard to show that it is a matter of good effect not only to those immediately concerned, and to dramatic artists in general, but even, in greater or less degree, to literature and the arts, and so to the great public.

The history of the Stage reflects the history of the Nation, and a short view of the history of legislation on the subject may help us to understand the process of devolution of stage power into the hands of the players.

From the first in England, players seem to have been regarded somewhat in the light of members of a craft or guild. Thus, in the sumptuary enactments of Edward the Fourth and Henry the Eighth, 'Players in their Interludes'—the earliest allusions to them in the statutes—are exempted from the penalties of wearing apparel not allowed to their degree. In the early days of the creation of the English Drama they were under the protection of the monarch or of great nobles; and this protection, which was at first of certain service, was practically a bar to the formation of any guild or mystery, so that they were deprived of this form of aid to corporate advancement.

It was not until the fourteenth year of Queen Elizabeth's reign, 1572, that the first Act was passed which mentioned players in any way constructively lowering to personal dignity. This Act related to 'Roges, Vacabonds and Sturdie Beggars;' but in its defining clause it included players as follows:—'common players in enterludes, and minstrels, not belonging to any baron of this realme, or towards any other honorable personage of greater degree;' or who 'have not licence of two Justices of the Peace at the least, whereof one to bee of the Quorum, where and in what shire they shall happen to wander.' That the Act was not levelled specially at the Stage is shown by the list of unlawful occupations also included in the Act:—'unauthorized proctors, gamesters, palmestrists, physnomists, bearwards, juglers, pedlers, tinkers, counterfeitors, scholars of Oxford and Cambridge begging without licence, shipmen pretending losses, and all such like folk.' This law has been much misunderstood, for it treats

purely of vagrants, being merely a re-enactment of former statutes from the time of Edward the Third down, and applies only to those itinerant players who have not complied with the conditions laid down as necessary. A decree of the Sovereign and Council in 1556 prohibited strolling players through the country, whereas this Act gives greater freedom and provides for proper licences from those able to enforce protection and to accept responsibility. This power of licensing was, by an Act of 1598, afterwards amplified as follows: 'common players in enterludes and minstrels not belonging to any Baron of this Realme, or any other honorable Personage of greater Degree, to be auctorized to play, under the Hande and Seale of Armes of such Baron or Personage,' &c. Some five years later this power of licensing by nobles was taken away by an Act of James the First.

The vagrant statutes, however, although they were in various ways amended during the reign of nearly every successive monarch so as to follow in some degree the growing enlightenment of the age, continued the proviso against strolling players 'not being duly authorized by law' down to 1822. In this year was passed the last statute in which even strolling players are mentioned as rogues and vagabonds *in posse*; for before two years were over a new vagrant law had been enacted in which they are not mentioned. Though the inclusion in the statutes of players as rogues and vagabonds, when lacking legal authority, lasted for some two centuries and a half after 1572, the only unsatisfactory mention which I can find of them is in a marginal note to the Act 1 James I. c. 7. Here the Statute of 1598, made against rogues and vagabonds in general, is referred to as follows:—'Recital of Stat. 39 Eliz. c. 4, § 2, declaring Players, &c. to be Vagabonds:' it seems as if it was intended to convey that the recited Act had been made primarily against players, whereas in this very Act of 1598 the *ipsissima verba* of the Act of 1572 are used, whereby unlicensed players are only included amongst a crowd of other delinquents.

As time went on, however, the bounds of dramatic effort became enlarged, and players and theatres were sufficiently numerous to require some special enactment to duly regulate their undertakings. This came in 1736, with the Act under the elephantine title:—'An Act to explain and amend so much of an Act made in the Twelfth year of the Reign of Queen *Anne*, intituled *An Act for reducing the Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, sturdy Beggars, and Vagrants, and sending them whither they ought to be sent*, as relates to common Players of Interludes.'

The passing of this Act marks a change in theatrical history. Hitherto the only statutes affecting players had been the Vagrant Laws, with the exception of the early sumptuary enactments above mentioned, and an Act of James the First, forbidding profane language on the stage. These Vagrant Laws had always had some sort of

economic or utilitarian basis, and had been enacted and re-enacted, enlarged or modified, to suit the exigencies of the time—the strolling players seeming to only share the lot of certain other wanderers from having been originally included in the comprehensive description of rogues and vagabonds given in the Act of 1572, and to owe their disability to neglect of legal obligations. The Act of 1736, however, lays down the law regarding actors as such, and states the penalties to which they may be subject for non-compliance with the laws thus made. The following provisions ruled the position of actors for more than a century afterwards:—

That from and after the 24th June, 1737, every Person who shall for Hire, Gain, or Reward, act, represent, or perform, or cause to be acted, represented, or performed, any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, Farce, or other Entertainment of the Stage, or any Part or Parts therein, in case such Person shall not have any legal Settlement in the Place where the same shall be acted, represented or performed, without Authority, by virtue of Letters Patent from His Majesty, His Heirs, Successors, or Predecessors, or without Licence from the Lord Chamberlain of His Majesty's Household for the time being, shall be deemed to be a Rogue and a Vagabond within the Intent and Meaning of the said recited Act, and shall be liable and subject to all such Penalties and Punishments, and by such Methods of Conviction, as are inflicted on or appointed by the said Act, for the Punishment of Rogues and Vagabonds, who shall be found wandering, begging, and misordering themselves within the Intent and Meaning of the said recited Act.

This Act of 1736, with an enlargement in 1787 continued in force up to 1843. An Act passed in this year still controls the management of theatres, subject to certain structural powers of the Metropolis Management Acts.

Briefly, then, the great Acts of Parliament affecting players were: (1) the Act of 1572 (14 Eliz. c. 5), which included them, if not under the protection of a patron or licensed by the justices of the shire, as rogues and vagabonds: (2) the Act of 1598 (39 Eliz. c. 4), which carried on this idea, having been accepted in successive reigns up to 1824; (3) the Act of 1603 (1 James I. c. 7), which abolished the privilege of great nobles to give licences; (4) the Act of 1736 (10 George II. c. 28), which recognised the existence of proper theatres, provided for the licensing of plays, and regulated the responsibilities of actors; and (5) the Act of 1843 (6 and 7 Vict. c. 68), which at present fixes the law on the subject.

Of course there have been other official ordinances besides statutes on the subject of theatres and players, but I have taken the Statute Book as the ultimate expression of the general tone or tendency of the law. There have been licences of the sovereign and great nobles, patents, royal warrants, and decrees of the Privy Council, and the Lord Chamberlain acquired certain powers under the common law; but all such were special exercises of power, and had some immediate purpose or motive in connection with individuals. It is in the laws made for all that we must find the general attitude of authority.

Let us, therefore, look at facts outside the Statute Book, and we shall see that all through the three centuries in which the Drama has flourished, public opinion has been almost invariably with the player, and not with the law, wherever and whenever it hampered the free development and exercise of the player's art. We shall see, moreover, that as public opinion became a more and more important factor in the government of the State, so such enactments became neglected, until they faded naturally out of the public view and became mere records of the existence of erroneous policy. Thus, certain statutes, whilst re-enacting the old laws, declare, not only by inference but even in words, that the previous law having fallen into disuse it now becomes necessary to enforce it, and so forth. Thus, again, theatres became organised despite the monopoly of patent houses, granted by Charles the Second, as when the theatre in Goodman's Fields was started without the necessary authority. When, in 1741, the two patent theatres remained empty through the rush to see Garrick, then commencing his great career, it was by a threat of appeal to the law that the manager was compelled into a compromise, and Garrick joined Drury Lane. Again, the Act of 1736, which professed to rule theatres absolutely, enacted, amongst other matters, that no theatre should be erected anywhere except in Westminster or its Liberties, or where the King might be in residence; but with the growth of the population this clause became so near being a dead letter, that theatres sprang up in many places in defiance of it, just as the demand for them arose, and certain temporary licences by local justices were empowered by an Act of 1787 (28 George III. c. 30). We may find another instance in the growth of the music-hall system, which has gradually attained such colossal proportions. At first these places of entertainment were merely dancing houses, whose character was such that they caused the passing of the Act of 1747–51 (25 George II. c. 36). As time went on their number increased, and greater privileges were allowed them, until the present draft Bill of the London County Council allows them all the privileges of theatres proper, as to the production of stage plays. The reason, then, for this wide difference between the theory of protection and restraint, as expressed all along in the laws, and fact, as exemplified by daily life, was that the art was acquiring greater dignity, and the players were achieving a higher status amongst their fellow-citizens by degrees: the exercise of the art helped in many ways to advance the artists. At the start, the players were worthy people enough, some of them having acquired wealth and honour; but as under the Stuart dynasty the age of grosser luxury flourished, so they often fell into the common errors of the time. It would be too much to expect that one class should be free from a common vice, but yet we find that the stage was never without some great actor whose worthy life was an example to his time. Betterton succeeded Burbage, and was

followed by Wilks. Garrick was succeeded by the Kembles, Young, Macready, Phelps, Charles Kean, and so on to our own day. Indeed, if we take the succession of actors from Shakespeare down, we shall fairly find that the one who was crowned by public favour wore the golden circlet of his own kingdom quite as worthily as even the Monarch of the State in succession. It is in this very fact of public favour that we find the rationale and the genesis of the actor-manager. The public has its own discrimination; and its judgment, being the resultant of varied needs and interests and wishes, is sure to be in the main correct—*vox populi vox Dei* has a basis of truth which wise statesmen and students of men do well to consider. Public favour, when bestowed on a producer of work of any kind, is a valuable commodity; and to a player it is especially valuable, since his work is purely personal and cannot be reproduced or multiplied, like literature or music or work in the plastic arts. Thus, when the player has won his place, fortune follows, and his power can be turned into wealth, influence, position—that which he may aim at and which it is in him to achieve. Why, then, should he not use this power in the best direction and in the manner most serviceable to himself? Actors could have early used their power to this advantage, but that the road was barred on the one hand by the system of patronage or by patents which limited the number of theatres, and, on the other, by the laws which deemed them, if not under protection or licence, rogues and vagabonds. In the seventeenth century this double disadvantage was prohibitive of any effort at advance, for the actors were few, there was no system of provincial theatres at all, and the Court party, to which the subservient patentees belonged, was all-powerful. But with the growing liberties and larger population of the eighteenth century, things began to mend. In spite of the Vagrant Laws players travelled about, though in but a rough way enough, and new theatres which arose in spite of the patents were in time recognised even by the authorities.

The system of actor-management grew with the times. The foremost and most progressive managements have always been those of actors; and to-day nearly every theatre in London where serious plays are seriously produced under wholesome and permanent conditions is thus managed. That the fact is one worthy of the time is manifest; and when we come to think that though in London, with its many theatres, there are only a very few whose work is known to the great world, and that these are nearly all managed by actors, it is not hard to estimate that the actor-managers must exercise an enormous influence on the dramatic art of the time. It would be a strange policy, indeed, to strike off, in the cause of art, the heads of these taller poppies in its garden.

I have already explained how to a player popularity becomes a valuable stock-in-trade or capital, which only requires to be properly used to become realisable. This form of incorporeal property can of

course be used by others than its immediate possessors—as, for instance, when such a one parts with some of his monetary capital in the shape of fixed salaries to popular artists; but manifestly the successful player can do best for himself by dealing at first hand with the public, if his capacities and opportunities allow of such an effort. He is certainly wise in making the trial, if he is satisfied that his prospects justify the risk, and if he have in hand sufficient capital of the more material kind to meet such engagements with others as it is necessary to make. He may be sure that if there were not at least some possibility—if not probability—of great reward, the middleman himself would hardly be willing to take the risk. A manager must have some attractive personality in his theatre. No matter how good the play or how complete and pleasing its environment, there cannot be success without good players. The successful actor, therefore, who goes into management, starts with one great attraction—his own reputation with the great public.

Of course the actor who would thus capitalise his popularity and become a manager, without ceasing to be an actor, should first be assured of the support of the public. This is best shown by the public approval of what he has already done. 'It is germ of the future,' says Cousin, 'which history seeks in the past.' No man can become a favourite of the public without the possession of qualities on which such favour can be based; and the public taste is constant. Though it may take years to achieve a place in public favour, when once that place has been won it is seldom indeed that it is lost, unless it be forfeited through misdoing. The player, then, who aspires to management under such almost assured conditions, may fairly calculate on the limited amount in the world of true artistic worth, and may feel himself fortified in his purpose by the words of a great writer when touching on the subject of art-intellect: 'You have always to find your artist, not to make him; you can't manufacture him, any more than you can manufacture gold. You can find him, and refine him; you dig him out as he lies nugget-fashion in the mountain-stream; you bring him home; and you make him into current coin, or household plate, but not one grain of him can you originally produce.'

Let us now, acknowledging the fact that actors have become managers, and with some understanding of how they have achieved the position, consider of what value are the arguments which have been of late advanced against the wisdom of the system. It has been asserted that the reign of actor-managers is responsible for the following:—(1) the exclusion, through personal jealousy, of players of superior excellence; (2) excessive expenditure on the mounting of plays to the starving of the outlay on the company; (3) the acceptance of inferior plays when suitable to the idiosyncrasies of the manager; and (4) an insufficiency of new plays.

First, then, as to the jealousy which excludes good actors. The charge when made is a general one, and, so far as I have found, is unsupported by a single instance of any kind: therefore, as it cannot be refuted in detail, the answer must be a general one. Let it suffice that the same cry has always been made, and will always continue so long as there are inferior artists. The same charge was made against Garrick, and yet hear the comment of Dr. Doran: 'I know of no proprietor of a theatre, himself an actor, who collected around him such a brilliant brotherhood of actors as Garrick did; yet, when any of these left him, or was dismissed by him, the partizans of the retiring player raised a cry of "jealousy!"' He played with Smith, Bensley, Yates, and Palmer; he had in his company both the Barrys, and when he heard of the excellence of Mrs. Siddons's acting he engaged her also. Kemble engaged George Frederick Cooke for Covent Garden, and played Richmond to his Richard, and Antonio to his Shylock. Macready, when he heard of Phelps, then a country actor making a mark, wrote to an intimate friend to engage him for his company—not because he was jealous of him, but because the new-comer was reputed a good actor. The same anxiety to get good actors in actor-managed theatres is to-day in existence, although more intensified, because the growth in the number of the theatres is greater in proportion than is the increase of popular actors; and yet the cry still continues. Let the charge, then, be refuted entirely by a journalistic utterance made but recently regarding the engagement of a company for the next season of a London theatre: 'The company is one of the most powerful that could be brought together. This is well for the theatre; but for the public it has its drawbacks. . . . It will be much to have one play peerlessly acted; but the theatres generally will be placed under contribution for its excellence.'

We may well ask, Where are the good actors who 'never get a chance' through jealousy or from any other cause? A very little examination of the facts will throw a somewhat sad light on the subject, for the unsuccessful ones will be found to fail from some defect of their own in the way of conduct, of self-value, or of personal equipment suitable for the task which they have undertaken. We must not accept a man as justly aggrieved because the world does not take him at his own valuation. Only a year ago there was a meeting of a large body of unemployed actors. They set forth their grievances, which the press duly recorded, and a committee was formed. A small body of some half-dozen actor-managers sent for the committee of the unsuccessful and asked them what they wished for. Their answer was to the effect that they wanted a chance of doing something for themselves, and of managing a theatre in their own way. The managers then and there gave them the sum of money which they said they would require. The experiment was made: they took

a theatre and produced plays. In a very few weeks the whole organisation collapsed—there were internal dissensions, mutual recriminations, and unpaid balances. The scope of the effort was, it is true, humble, but it was sufficient to afford an object-lesson in theatrical management. The effort failed, although the adventurers were actors—the elements of their failure were perpetual. There is no royal road to success in theatrical management. The matter is a business which must be conducted in a suitable manner and with due knowledge; and as a skilled actor is more or less of an expert in stage matters the probability of his success is greater, *ceteris paribus*, than that of a less skilled person undertaking the same venture.

The second allegation concerning excess of decoration, to the detriment of the salary list, is best met by the simple fact that since the number of theatres has increased—the leading ones coming into the hands of actors—salaries of capable players have, on the average, nearly doubled. The young people of promise now get, at almost the very start of their working lives, larger salaries than were formerly obtained by players on the hither side of greatness. It is hard to believe, in view of current salaries—even taking the relative value of money then and now into consideration—that Garrick, with London in a *furore* at his phenomenal success, got only a salary of 600*l.* per annum—twenty per cent. greater than was ever before given to an English actor; that Mrs. Siddons came to Drury Lane at 5*l.* per week; and that Edmund Kean, when the public fought for admission to see him play, had his salary *raised* to 20*l.* per week. In the face of such facts as are within the knowledge of every person in connection with the stage or concerned in the management of a theatre, it is actually absurd to say that the salary list suffers *because* the production is complete. On the contrary, the perfection of one aspect of a play as given shows up any weakness that may exist elsewhere in it, and in every actor-managed theatre in London to-day it will be found that small parts are, almost of necessity, played by a class of capable actors which a few years ago could only have been found in the second or third ranks of the cast.

Thirdly, any question of the influence of the system of management under consideration on the play-writing of the time touches both the acceptance of plays by managers and the material in the shape of new plays annually produced. The statement that managers only accept plays which suit their individual capacities as actors is really hardly worth serious consideration. Of course a manager only accepts plays suitable to his company, if the company is made up before the play is accepted; and it must not be forgotten that in actor-managed theatres the manager is presumably, at the least, one of the best actors in the theatre, and that, consequently, in the selection of plays the fact has to be borne in mind. It would be silly for any manager to accept a play which could not be properly per-

formed, and, indeed, the first person to object to such a thing would be the author, who would thus see his work imperilled. It is actually now a custom with some authors, when arranging for the production of their plays, to retain the right of a veto on the cast. A manager committed for a season to one company cannot profitably engage another; economic requirements must, as a rule, restrain such business arrangements. When a good play is nowadays accepted, a company to suit it is engaged; but this is done at a time and in a manner to suit the policy of the management and the length of its purse. Were a manager to refuse a good play simply because parts in it were too good for others of his company to suit his own vanity, the result of such unworthy and suicidal action would not be uncertain. The house so divided against itself would soon fall.

Fourthly, with regard to the alleged insufficiency of new plays, it must not be forgotten that even dramatists and actors are not always of one mind with regard either to plays or characters in them. Indeed, the statement may be made more general, for many a literary work when subjected to the opinion of a third party does not meet the reception expected by its author; there is not an editor in the world who has not experienced this. Of course, the judgment may err—even an experienced actor may fail to realise the worth of a play; but as it is the aim of the manager to get good plays, and of the actor to get good parts, surely when both conditions have to be fulfilled, the result must be manifestly better plays, though the excluded ones may be more numerous and the judgment more captious than before. But the fact remains that under actor-management good plays increase, and lacking it they decrease. From the time Garrick ceased to manage Drury Lane the production of plays declined. Moreover, there never was a time with regard to the immense output of plays like the present, when the system complained of is in vogue; so that we can only wonder at the abysmal ignorance which underlies the charge. Roughly speaking, from an average of the past few years, a new play of some sort or another is produced for each working day of the year in England, though out of these there is not one, on the average, in each month which makes a success—either financially or *d'estime*. During the good months of the year in London, new plays are produced in large numbers. Certain theatres are conducted with regard to matinées for the purpose; plenty of capable actors are always available; stage managers with all the requisite knowledge abound, and costumiers are ready to supply dresses at reasonable cost. There is then no possible difficulty in any author having a play produced on his own account; and a good play when once produced will not have long to wait for a purchaser, or for some manager who will pay fee or royalty. If his wishes and aims be modest the author can easily fulfil them, for, even if he have no

capital of his own wherewith to pay expenses, he may obtain the help required by the ordinary method of poor inventors. Where, then, is the difficulty? For what part in the great negative result complained of is the actor-manager responsible? I fear that the answer is too sadly simple to please the carpers. Actor-managers, as a rule, know their business, and they will not produce bad plays. Too often the seeker after dramatic honours is not content to avail himself of the means of testing his work open to all. He wants to secure the services of the best artists and to have all done under the most favourable conditions; and he would pick a theatre whose record is such that the public will accept the work of its manager blindfold—partly, indeed, because that manager does not produce anything which is not good. If such manager will not see sufficient merit in a play to warrant its production, the writer is aggrieved. Not long ago Mr. Irving put the matter in a nutshell. 'We are told,' he said, 'that if we do not produce abundance of new plays, we crush the rising dramatist; whereas, if we do produce them, the rising dramatist crushes us!' Let any man bring with him a name already made famous in any branch of art or letters, or of professional or public life, and he will readily be granted a special consideration, for he has something to bring into the venture in addition to the work, whose intrinsic worth is unknown. But such men as this never complain. In fact, the unknown aspiring dramatist wants too much; he wishes to share, without any risk or equivalent whatever, a part of the fortune or distinction which other men have won for themselves. It seems *prima facie* unfair to ask that the manager, whose position has been partially assured by discretion in his choice of work, should imperil his acquisition by a divergence, without adequate cause, from his habitual policy. It is, of course, not a pleasure for any man to thwart budding genius, or even to disappoint springing hope; but the serious matter of any business must be considered in its proper place and sequence.

As to the influence of the control of theatres by actors on the other arts there is nothing to argue, for the complaint is made by the modern critics themselves that the stage is overladen with scenic effect. This same charge has been in existence ever since the very dawn of the English Drama. It was made even in Shakespeare's time. It was made against Betterton, and was, perhaps, justified in the worst days of Charles the Second, when, for instance, he contributed 500*l.* for robes for the performance of *Cataline*. It was made again when Garrick introduced costumes which he thought suitable to the play represented, and gave a large salary to Loutherbourg as his scene-painter. Later still it was made against Macready, when Clarkson Stanfield and David Roberts lent the aid of their genius to stage effects. Charles Kean's name became almost a by-word through a persistent body of detractors, who called him 'the

upholsterer.' That there is large expenditure on the appointments of a modern production is manifest, and that the arts benefit thereby is equally apparent. From time to time some of our best painters and composers are engaged in work for theatres. Alma Tadema, Marcus Stone, Seymour Lucas, Edwin Abbey and Keeley Halsewelle, Sir Arthur Sullivan and Dr. Mackenzie are amongst the instances. Beyond this, again, literature itself owes much to the Stage and the player. Some writers have derived incalculable benefit from the suggestions and the help of the actors, and have not hesitated to say so, as when Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton handsomely acknowledged the great services rendered him by Macready. Many plays would not have been successful when produced, or would never have been produced at all but for the changes made by the players; and when these have, as managers, power to carry out their ideas, surely the benefit must be increased. Is it, then, to be said, or even thought, that the professors of the cognate arts have no advantage in the work done for the Stage—that the great world has no gain by another channel being opened, through which the head waters of genius can send streams to the great sea of man's higher labours? or can any one for a moment argue seriously that such example, followed at intervals proportionate to their powers, is not good for the rank and file of all the workers in connection with the various arts and crafts?

If any side light be required on the efficiency of the system of actor-management, let us look at the progress of other countries. The modern critics are perpetually quoting the French method as an exemplar in management. Certainly the Comédie-Française is a great corporation, and one which has done splendid work; but then in it the plays are selected by the actors. It requires, however, certain improvements to be effected. So long, also, as mere talent is held in corporate esteem without the discriminating admiration which the public has for genius, so long will the Rachels and Bernhardts and Coquelin secede from its ranks, unless accepted under their own conditions. The Germanic nations, too, which have a principle of subsidy in the Court and Stadt theatres, are beginning to find out that genius has an explosive force of its own. When we find already the best theatre in Berlin controlled by an actor—Barnay—we may well look for further development. Every system which works honestly can attain certain good, if not great, ends; but if we look for an ideal system of art development we must find it in some orders of things where individual freedom has a part, and where national life and opportunities admit of their adapting themselves to the growth. Some years ago a good many of the leading actors of the world met at a social gathering in London; it was a rare occasion, for there were English, Americans, French, and Germans. The opinion of almost every individual present was so interesting that conversation became formulated, and

each took the torch in turn. Various opinions were expressed, but the most impressive amongst them was the comment of a great German actor: 'State aid is good, subsidy is good, and in Germany and France the art of acting flourishes; but your English freedom is worth them all!'

It is in things theatrical as in all other affairs of life—put matter in solution and it will crystallise if such be its nature, or it will become a sediment in its own way. English freedom has, despite all troubles, evils, and mistakes, made England what she is, and has invariably worked out in time its own economic salvation. Why, then, should there be this one exception to all its rules? The natural result of power cannot be denied the men who have passed through the *Sturm und Drang* of artistic endeavour, and who by their knowledge and their gifts can, without losing touch with the people, help to direct public thought. No good object can be achieved by carping at natural laws which fix direction as well as strength in the resultant of multitudinous forces.

BRAM STOKER.

II.

I ENTIRELY agree with those whose anxiety for the welfare of the stage would relieve actors from the cares of management, for I have often wondered how actors have ever been able to retain, as managers, the popularity which they may have won as artists, or why, experiencing the troubles of management, they have ever continued to hold the reins. In the exercise of their art, they are in some ways desperately handicapped; for a large portion of the time and labour which would almost insure artistic success is required by the needs of the purely business aspect of the undertaking. No one can know, except by personal experience, the worries to which a nervous or excitable manager can be subject; and when to this is added the fact that frequently actors have sacrificed in the vortex of management whatever fortune they may have achieved in the practice of their art, the surprise is not diminished. The small competence with which some of our greatest actors have retired was generally made after they had relinquished management. Thus, regretfully as Macready retired from the direction of Drury Lane—and his regret was almost equal to that of the public, whom he had so well and faithfully served—he was compelled to play engagements throughout the country, in order to realise some provision for his later years. Such, also, is the record of Charles Kean, Charles Mathews, Webster, Buckstone, Phelps, and others. It would certainly have been better for them if they had resisted the blandishments of management, and relied for their fortunes on their individual powers as actors. That the public would have been the losers I believe, for none know better than actors the value of a well-cast play, or are more willing to give to the public the full excellence which they can command. They, as artists, are generally more fastidious than others, and therefore more anxious for that thoroughness and completeness which they so well appreciate. The fitness of artists to deal with artists ought never to be called in question.

The charge of jealousy amongst actors is nothing—they simply share this quality with the rest of mankind. A somewhat similar allegation is equally made against lay directors, who are now and again accused of favouritism.

It will be asked why actors should desire at all to be managers if the benefit of such labour is not mainly to themselves. The answer may be given that there are sometimes other and higher aims than the mere accumulation of money. Fortune may follow enterprise, but every artist does not make it the chief end or aim of his effort. He loves his work. What pleasure, for instance, can be greater than that of guiding the talent of younger people? Any effort in this direction is a public good. In a country where there is no Academy the only professors of acting are the actors, and the only true school for acting is a well-conducted playhouse. For the first three years of my early stage life I had engagements at theatres then under the management of actors—Mr. Davis of Newcastle, Mr. Wyndham of Edinburgh, and Mr. Glover of Glasgow; and each of them took pleasure in imparting to the younger members of their companies, as well as circumstances permitted, some of their own stage knowledge and the rudiments of their art. I then spent some years in another theatre, under the management of a proprietor not an actor. During the whole of these later years I missed grievously the sympathy and advice of my old actor-managers, and I had to grope my way as well as I could without counsellor or friend. Such was my own experience of the system to which—as well as to the individuals—I owe a lasting debt of gratitude. I make no attempt to argue the question as to the right and proper people to become the managers of theatres. This is a matter which the public decide for themselves. I speak from an experience of over thirty years, and of this country only; and I can say, without hesitation, that the managements which have benefited and advanced our calling and added vastly to the intellectual recreation of the people have been those of actors.

HENRY IRVING.

III.

An indictment, vague but vehement, has, I understand, been preferred of late against the system of management of theatres by actors, and I have been asked, as a member of the assailed class, to justify this species of pluralism in the pages of this Review. It is necessary, in the discussion of this subject, to propound three questions: (1) What is the substance of the accusation? (2) Who are the accusers? and (3) Who are the accused?

1. Out of all the 'paper pellets of the brain' which have been launched against the system of actor-management, I can only lay hold of one which has in it even the appearance of solidity, and that is—to put it plainly—the contention that actors who are also managers habitually give themselves the best parts in plays, to the exclusion of other actors who are equally or more meritorious; that they insist—figuratively always and sometimes literally—on having all the limelight to themselves, whilst the rest of the company are relegated to the limbo of Egyptian darkness by their more than Egyptian taskmasters; that by such means art is degraded and the artist is effaced; finally, that while this system prevails and the baleful star floods the whole sphere with the isolated and insolent majesty of his usurped beams, the galaxy of unrecognised genius around him must for ever pale their ineffectual light.

It will be seen at once how difficult it is to deal with a criticism of this sort by serious argument. The practice assailed can, by the nature of the case, only be justified by success; and, equally, it can only be condemned by failure. It is not suggested, I suppose, where an actor has acquired the necessary capital, that there is any impropriety in his expending such capital in the management of a theatre any more than in the conduct of any other lawful business. Can it be with any greater reason suggested that there is anything improper in the manager of a theatre utilising his own talents as part of the assets of the concern? If he has over-estimated the value of this particular asset, so much the worse for him, and so much the worse for the theatre, which is speedily left to its own devices and transferred at a loss to other hands. But it is equally bad for the business if the actor-manager has under-estimated the value of the asset in question, and

equally productive of empty benches. What, for instance, would the public say if a manager commencing business with his personal past artistic record as his principal asset should suddenly announce his determination to abandon for ever important parts and, in the interests of art, should propose to come on with a letter? Management of a theatre is, after all, *quâ* management, a business that succeeds or fails on precisely the same principles and for the same reasons as any other business. A good business man makes the most of everything he has; if it be money, he gets the best and safest return for it he can by judicious investment; if it be goods and merchandise, he gets the best price he can for them; if it be land or houses, he improves and adapts them as much as is necessary to insure the highest rent; if it be the talent of an assistant, he is careful to retain that talent in his service by a salary sufficient to prevent its going elsewhere; and if it be his own brains and experience, he utilises them so far, but only so far, as they will bring in a profit no less than he could acquire by paying for the services of another and more talented man in the same kind of work. This is his obvious interest. Now what is the capital of the actor-manager? A theatre, the furniture, the scenery, dresses and appointments of the stage, the plays in which he has dramatic rights, the services of his company, and lastly his own talents as an actor, and his personal influence with the public. This last is for him an asset, it may be the least valuable asset of all, or it may be by far the most valuable. It is for him to judge its value. He misjudges it at his peril. If he assigns to himself parts for which he is unfitted, to the exclusion of the more meritorious actor, the hard school of experience will soon land him in a position in which he will no longer be at liberty to make experiments in self-valuation. But if his popularity with the public is tried and proved, he would be a fool if he threw away or did not utilise to the utmost penny the value of what would then be the most important property in his business. There are some kinds of goodwill which are transferable, there are others which are not; and among the latter class are the talent and popularity of an actor. All assets which are not negotiable or communicable must be used if their value is not to be lost altogether; and exactly the same considerations which induce a particularly gifted and popular member of a medical or legal or other professional firm to dedicate his own personal time and attention and skill to the practice of his firm, knowing that the public expects it and would otherwise keep away, induces the actor-manager to utilise for the benefit of his business the talents and experience which have commended themselves to the public voice.

I do not deny, on the contrary I maintain, that the theatres often have been and still are and can be well conducted by a manager who does not himself appear in the cast. I do it myself six months

in every year. Such a manager, though not an actor, may be an excellent judge of acting, may be a judicious instructor (it is doubtful but not impossible), a capable business man, and a keen observer of the public taste; all that can be said is that he has one asset the less, compared with the manager who is also an actor. But the fact that a manager who is not an actor is wise in not putting a fictitious value upon that which is valueless, is in no way inconsistent with the proposition that the manager whose personal talents have been accepted by his play-going public is equally wise in not ignoring or throwing away the benefit of that which is valuable.

In the one case, the success is assured by the wise self-restraint of the manager who does not act, but no less, in the other, it is assured by the wise self-expression of the manager who does.

2. Who are the accusers?

They are certainly not the public. Complaint is, in their case, out of the question. A certain amusement is offered them for a certain consideration. *C'est à prendre ou à laisser.* They either approve of the manner in which the actor-manager casts himself, and go to his theatre, or disapprove and stay away. In neither case have they, or could they with any reason pretend to have, any legitimate grievance. Then if not the public, who? Surely not actors. The really good actor of small or important parts need have no cause for fear. The dramatic critics, and better still the play-going public who, unlike the former, are unbiased by any of the personal sympathies or antipathies inherent in the weakness of individual humanity, are quick to detect genuine talent though moving in the smallest of spheres, and equally quick to insist on adequate recognition of approved effort. Assuming for the purposes of the argument that every actor-manager is so consumed with vanity and jealousy that his own inclinations would prompt him to withhold such recognition from any other actor in his company, yet it it is manifest that the public will (though perhaps individually and by degrees) force upon such reluctant manager the advancement of the actor who has so attracted their attention; and that the manager, whose interest, after all, consists in satisfying, and if possible anticipating, the general desire, will be compelled to take into consideration the monetary value of the actor's drawing capacity.

If the manager's vanity be so great as to blind him to these considerations, then, as I have said, he will assuredly not retain for long a position in which he can oppress that or any other actor; but vanity is rarely strong enough, in the conduct of a business, to shatter the force of self-interest, or to prevent the realisation and development of assets.

Again, as I have hinted above, the actor is likely to be far better off under an actor-manager than a speculator pure and simple. The public do not know, when an actor is beginning to be known and

appreciated by them, how much it is frequently due to this very actor-manager's fatherly assiduity and attention. Nor do they know how rarely the actor-manager gets thanked for it, or how undeservedly he is gibed at as an oppressor and a 'sweater' of talent.

3. Who are the accused?

Now it is time to ask at whom is 'our friend,' the enemy, shooting? Will he be so good as to specify the objects of his denunciation? Who are the accused? There is sometimes a delicacy in introducing the names of individuals into a general discussion, but surely this is one of the cases in which such a delicacy would be entirely misplaced.

These general and gaseous indictments can only be exploded by the 'bare bodkin' of individual instances. Actor-managers, therefore, have a right to ask their assailants to condescend to particulars, to point out by name the actors managing theatres in this country whom they charge with allotting better parts to themselves than the public hold they are entitled to. The readers of this Review shall be the jury. The accusers are hitherto as personally unknown almost and anonymous as the informers who used to drop their damning charges into the Lion's mouth at Venice in the days of the Council of Ten. But, at least, let us know who are the accused. In general, human nature is so constituted that there is no uncertainty about the direction of the finger of scorn, particularly when that finger is anonymous. The number of London actor-managers is limited. Surely the framers of the indictment can fix on some one glaring example or ghastly warning.

Again, who and where are the rising actors who have been crushed by their actor-managers? Did Mr. Irving crush Mr. Terris or Mr. Alexander when they were at the Lyceum? Did I succeed in oppressing Mr. Tree when he acted in my company? Has Mr. Tree himself succeeded as a manager in extinguishing Mr. Fernandez? Has Mr. Thorne prevented Miss Emery or Mr. Maude from rising in public estimation? Did Mr. Wilson Barrett obliterate Mr. Willard?

The fact is lost sight of that every actor-manager has himself gone through the salutary experience of what the indictment calls 'being crushed'—a process which, while it lasted, his youth and vanity may have prompted him to call oppression, but which the advance of years has taught him to be grateful for as a discipline. Each actor-manager has been compelled to wait and to prove himself, till one fine day the public 'discovered' him. And the process is still going on. Do we now see any instances of the actor-manager dismissing the actor who may achieve a success? On the contrary, he tries to help him, knowing that if he does not other managers with a clearer perception of the value of artistic merit will soon snap him up, and that if some inducement be not offered to him to stay

where he is, in the shape of better parts and increased salary, he will seek a market for his talents elsewhere.

Until a specific answer to such specific questions as the above is forthcoming—until the demand for particulars is satisfied—I must claim to regard the indictment which is the subject of this paper as the merest wind-bag, and to doubt the ingenuousness of the pretended zeal for the drama from which it is alleged to issue. The charge rests on generalities only, and generalities never convince.

CHARLES WYNDHAM.

The Editor of THE NINETEENTH CENTURY *cannot undertake to return unaccepted MSS.*