

SECOND EDITION.

# A SCOTCH PLAY-HOUSE;

BEING

THE HISTORICAL RECORDS OF THE OLD  
THEATRE ROYAL, MARISCHAL STREET,  
ABERDEEN.

BY

J. KEITH ANGUS,

AUTHOR OF "SO SINKS THE DAY-STAR."

"Yet was the theatre my dear delight."

*Wordsworth.*

ABERDEEN:  
D. WYLLIE & SON, BOOKSELLERS TO THE QUEEN;  
EDINBURGH: JOHN MENZIES & CO.;  
LONDON: SIMPKIN, MARSHALL & CO.

1878.

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TO  
**My Father,**  
THESE, THE WRITTEN RECOLLECTIONS OF  
MANY PLEASANT CONVERSATIONS,  
ARE INSCRIBED.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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ABERDEEN, in old days, played an honourable and prominent part in the advancement of the drama into Scotland, and her old play-house in Marischal Street was the scene of many gala dramatic days. The theatre, however, met with much adverse feeling in Aberdeen; and, as a prologue to the more immediate biography with which we are concerned, it may not be out of place to briefly chronicle the items of theatrical history connected with Aberdeen, as these will lead up to the date of the birth of the Marischal Street house. Not dealing, at this moment, with the general progress of the stage in Scotland, these introductory epochs will be curtly given; for, though there is trace of a strong dramatic feeling existing in the north of Scotland from nigh two centuries ago, the records left are fugitive and fragmentary in the extreme.

From the earliest advent of the play into Scotland, it was a pitched battle between Church and Stage; the magistrates sided with the clergy, and every effort was made to discountenance the theatre. To this subject brief passing mention only will be made while relating the advance of the play, but it may come conveniently in to quote from a pamphlet which was printed in Aberdeen—written by an Aberdonian, or, at least, a resident in Aberdeen—and

which, in its crude, uncharitable, and even blasphemous vehemence, ranks side by side with the verbal crusades of the old and ignorant Puritans. This is a specimen of the wild ravings :—" Thus we see that God not only requires personal adoration, but universal obedience to all the precepts enjoined in his book"— a statement very old and very true, and universally accepted—" and he will not give his glory to another, nor suffer the mockery and immoral exhibitions of a stage to take precedence of his Holy Word ;" summing up a volume of illogical cant\* with the remark that those who are stage-players, or supporters of them, have this to look forward to, that " God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city." The same writer proclaims that the universal voice of competent judges is, that the drama never produced good in any nation, individual, or age,† which George Meredith, in his lecture at the London Institute seems to doubt, by his saying that one excellent test of the civilization of a country

\* Those who have denounced the stage have always eschewed all argument, and have rested their case upon vague, loose, abusive phrases.—*Truth*, March 15th, 1877.

† Here are two opposite arguments :—

The stage, judging from its history in all ages, and from evidence of its moral bearing at different periods, is, as a whole, and ever has been, injurious to the best interests of mankind.—*Dean Close*.

A good play, acted before a well-bred audience, must raise very proper incitements to good behaviour, and be the most quick and most prevailing method of giving young people a turn of sense and breeding.—*Steele*.

Regarding the effect of the drama in Aberdeen, see concluding sentences of Appendix B.

was the flourishing of comedy;\* but the previous writer, taking for granted that the damnation of an actor is certain, quotes the brilliant language of Bishop Hall on the funeral obsequies of a lost soul, and echoes this direful wail over the player:—"Would it suffice for the sun to veil his light, and the moon her brightness—to cover the ocean with mourning and the heavens with sackcloth—or were the whole fabric of nature to become animated and vocal—would it be possible to utter a groan too deep, a cry too piercing, to express the magniture and extent of such a catastrophe?" †

Strangely enough, the earliest plays were all founded on Biblical stories, were mainly written by monks, and the itinerent play booths were erected in the grounds near the church; sometimes the pieces were played in the church itself. This fact contrasts oddly with the fierce opposition which the more modern church waged against the stage. These religious plays were common in France and Spain; they soon found their way across to England, and they appear to have wandered up to the north of Scotland, for we find mention also made of them in the history of Aberdeen—"a city," writes Malone, "noted in every

\* *The Idea of Comedy.*

† Sermon on the death of the Princess Charlotte of Wales.

The book from which these quotations are culled is *An Essay on the Stage*, by Alexander Sutor, Surgeon, and published in Aberdeen in 1820.

How different in its arrogance and in its oharity, to the words taken from the last sermon preached by Charles Kingaley in Westminster Abbey—"God forbid! it is not for me to pronounce the doom of any soul!"

age for hilarity." There, however, instead of being guided and directed by the monks, they appear at an early period to have been conducted under the auspices of two personages, styled *The Abbot and Prior of Bon-Accord*,\* who were represented by two young citizens, probably sons or connections of some of the magistrates, in whom the nomination of their popular offices was vested. The salary which was annexed to them for supporting their charges was generally five merks—equal to 5s. 6½d. sterling—or the fines of admissions of two burgesses of Guild; but it was increased from time to time according to the addition which was made to such fines. The earliest exhibition of this kind occurring in the record is the play of *Halyblude*, which was performed in the year 1440, in the Windmill-hill, under the direction of the Abbot and Prior of Bon-Accord. The expense on this occasion, being five merks, was defrayed in the manner above-mentioned. In the year 1479, we find announced, on the feast of Corpus Christi, a similar play, which was attended with a like expense. The record is silent on the particulars of these plays, but probably they represented some of the most interesting

\* The characters of Abbot and Prior probably bore analogy to the "Abbot of Misrule," known in England in the time of King Henry VII., or else the idea was borrowed from France.—*History of Ancient English Poetry.*

"Bon-Accord" is the motto to the Armorial Bearings of the city—given them by King Robert the Bruce for killing all the English in their town in one night, their word being that night, "Bon-Accord."—*Charter for Blazoning the Arms of the City.*

Later on it will be found that the magistrates of Aberdeen joined the clergy in the prohibition of stage-playing.

scenes in the Passion of our Saviour ; and, perhaps, some of the higher class of the citizens may have been the principal performers.\*

Tracing briefly, then, the drama proper, we find that in 1562, Mary Queen of Scots visited Aberdeen, and her entry into the new town was celebrated by the inhabitants with every demonstration of respect—spectacles, plays, and interludes being devised.† From 1599 to 1601, a company of English players visited the chief towns in Scotland, and in the year 1601 King James made an application to Queen Elizabeth for her company of comedians to be sent down to Scotland, which was readily complied with ; and, after they had tired His Majesty and the people of Edinburgh with their entertainments, the king ordered them to repair to Aberdeen to amuse the citizens with the exhibition of their “ plays, comedies, and stage-plays.” They were recommended by his special letter, addressed to the magistrates, and were under the management of Lawrence Fletcher, who, with the celebrated William Shakespeare ‡ and others of their company, obtained the first licence to perform plays in Britain. It was granted by King James, within two months after he had ascended the throne of England. The company of players who came to Aberdeen performed several times before the town, and were presented by the magistrates with thirty-two merks for their services, besides

\* Kennedy's *Annals of Aberdeen*.

† *Life of Mary, Queen of Scots*.

‡ See Appendix A.



being entertained with a supper on one of the nights of performance. At the same time, the freedom of the town was conferred upon Lawrence Fletcher, the manager, and each of his company.\*

In 1745, the Edinburgh company—probably while the new Cannongate theatre there was being built—went on a provincial tour, and visited Aberdeen, where, however, they were not allowed to perform, the clergy and magistrates objecting to and prohibiting them from acting.† And in the same year David Beat—who afterwards, conjointly with

\* Kennedy's *Annals of Aberdeen*.

From the fortieth volume of the Registers of the Town Council of Aberdeen :—

“ Nono Octobris, 1601.

“ Ordinance to the Dean of Gild.

“The samen day The Prouest, Bailleis, and Counsall ordanis the svme of threttie twa merkis to be gevin to the Kingis Seruandes presently in this burcht . . . quha playes comedeis and staige playes Be reasoun they are recommendit be his majesties speciall letter and hes played sum of their comedies in this burcht and ordanis the said svme to be payit to tham be the dean of gild quhilk salbe allowit in his comptis.”

Under the heading of “Did Shakspeare visit Scotland?” Charles Knight, in chap. viii., vol. 8, of his *Shakspeare*, fully discusses and most conclusively proves that Shakspeare did visit the neighbourhood of Perth, and, with almost equal certainty, judging from scenes in *Macbeth*, and passages from *Othello*, was in Aberdeen. The freedom of the city was conferred on a number of visitors to Aberdeen at that time, as well as to Fletcher and his company, but Shakspeare's name does not appear on the Council minute.

Spottiswoode, in his *Church History*, says :—“The Manager's name only is enrolled in the list of burgesses.”

Malone says :—“Fletcher was not one of the actors of Shakespeare's plays, nor is there any evidence to show that he was an actor at all. He might receive the appellation of ‘fellow’ from being a partner in the property of the theatre.”

† Kennedy's *Annals of Aberdeen*.

Dawson of Newcastle, was interested in the theatre in Edinburgh—proclaimed the Pretender at the Cross.\*

In 1751 the Edinburgh Company again visited Aberdeen.† It was a detachment from the Cannongate theatre at Edinburgh, under the direction of Mrs. Ward. Being again prohibited by the magistrates and clergy from acting within the city, they erected a wooden building at the Spital, but meeting with little encouragement, withdrew in a short time.‡

In the year 1768 we hear of a company under one William Fisher, playing at Aberdeen. A hall was fitted up as a theatre in the New Inn, but the visit was not a pecuniary success.§ This New Inn was situated at the junction of Castle and King Streets, on the site of the building now occupied by the North of Scotland Bank. Fisher was accompanied by William Woodfall, the proprietor of the *Public Advertiser*, in which the celebrated *Letters of Junius* appeared. He took to the stage, and travelled with Fisher. Returning to London, he founded the *Morning Chronicle*, introduced the verbatim reporting of Parliamentary debates, and adapted Savage's play of *Sir Thomas Overbury* for Covent Garden Theatre, in 1776.|| Jackson,¶ too,

\* *Memoir of Lee Lewes.*

† *Kennedy's Annals of Aberdeen.*

‡ *Book of Bon-Accord.*

§ *Book of Bon-Accord.*

|| *Biographia Dramatica.*

¶ For many years the manager of the Edinburgh theatres, and author of a *History of the Scottish Stage*. The chief aim of the publication, however, being for his own self-glorification, and to explain a quarrel he had with an actor, which, at the time it occurred, caused considerable stir.

in the same year, erected a theatre in Shoe Lane—probably where Fisher and his company acted—and another house was subsequently built in Queen Street, the street where Byron, when an infant, lived on his mother's first visit to Aberdeen. Of these play-houses no records of interest remain.

In 1780, a small but neat theatre was built at the back of an Inn in Queen Street. It had no boxes; the price of admission to the pit was half-a-crown, to the gallery, one-and-sixpence; when filled, the receipts amounted to nearly forty pounds;\* they rarely were below twenty pounds. A remarkable object in this house was a chair placed in the centre of the second row of benches in the gallery, for the exclusive convenience of an eccentric schoolmaster, popularly known by the name of "Mad Sinclair."† This individual took upon himself the weighty office of directing the opinions of the gods who surrounded him; a signal from him produced thunders of applause, or drowned the voices of the actors in disapprobation—

"And all Olympus to the centre shook."

Another theatre, in which boxes were introduced, was erected about the same period in the alley now called Chronicle Lane. From the profession of its proprietor it

\* The present theatre, at ordinary prices, holds about £125. Corbet Ryder, in 1817, was managing the Theatre Royal at Aberdeen, and Kean appeared there for six nights. The receipts of the house on the last night of performance were £160. The charges for admittance were—Boxes, six shillings; Pit, four shillings; Gallery, two shillings.

† *Aberdeen Observer.*

was known by the name of "Coachy's play-house," and was under the control of one Sutherland, who first adopted what is designated the "starring system." He was deserted by a great part of his company, and became a ruined man.\*

In 1789, however, a triumph came about for the religious opponents of the stage, as the following advertisement which appeared in an Aberdeen newspaper in the same year shows:—

"Theatre in Queen Street. The public are respectfully informed that it is in contemplation to convert"—there is a sly significance in the use of this word convert—"the late theatre in Queen Street into a chapel; as such, a sermon will be preached there next Lord's day evening, the 25th curt., by the Revd. C. Chandler, D.D. To begin at half-past five o'clock, and so to continue every Sunday evening until further notice."

Whether this Dr. Chandler were an enemy to the advancement of the drama is not known, but there is a touch of worldliness tacked on to the end of this notice, and running thus:—

"N.B.—Dr. Chandler continues to teach ladies and gentlemen the English language"—this seems rather hard on talkers of the northern Doric—"both at home and abroad, and returns thanks for favours received since his arrival in this city."

Did he teach these northern lads and lasses the art of Elocution, and did he lower and debase their minds, yearning for this study of declamation, with the pure thoughts, the beautiful exercises, and excellent reasonings of William Shakespeare? Did he preach from the pulpit—built whereon the

\* *Book of Bon-Accord.*

youthful and veteran players were wont to stalk—as eloquent sermons as he who discovered—

“Tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything!”\*

There is, strangely enough, in Aberdeen a parallel to this, for almost within a stone’s throw of the theatre in Marischal Street there is a Music Hall,† the building thus used having been once a church! The galleries still exist, most church-like, where Jack and his Poll revel with delight at the contortions of the acrobat, and beat time to the chorus of the comic song with their heavy boots and shoes upon the floor. The conducting of this house, so far as order and entertainment are concerned, is all that could be desired, but the chance which “converted” the church to the Music Hall was, to say the least of it, most unfortunate.

In 1794 a certain Lee Lewes was in Aberdeen. He was a player of some little repute in his day, and an intimate friend of Oliver Goldsmith. Some street preacher denounced him and his craft, which led to Lee Lewes rushing into print, and publishing a defence of the stage and of himself—and, clever though this pamphlet is, and interesting as his memoirs are, they are fully more egotistical than even Jackson’s. ‡

\* *As You Like It*, Act ii. sc. 1.

† Macfarland’s Music Hall in Market Street.

‡ This tract will be found, bound with the author’s Memoirs, in the British Museum.

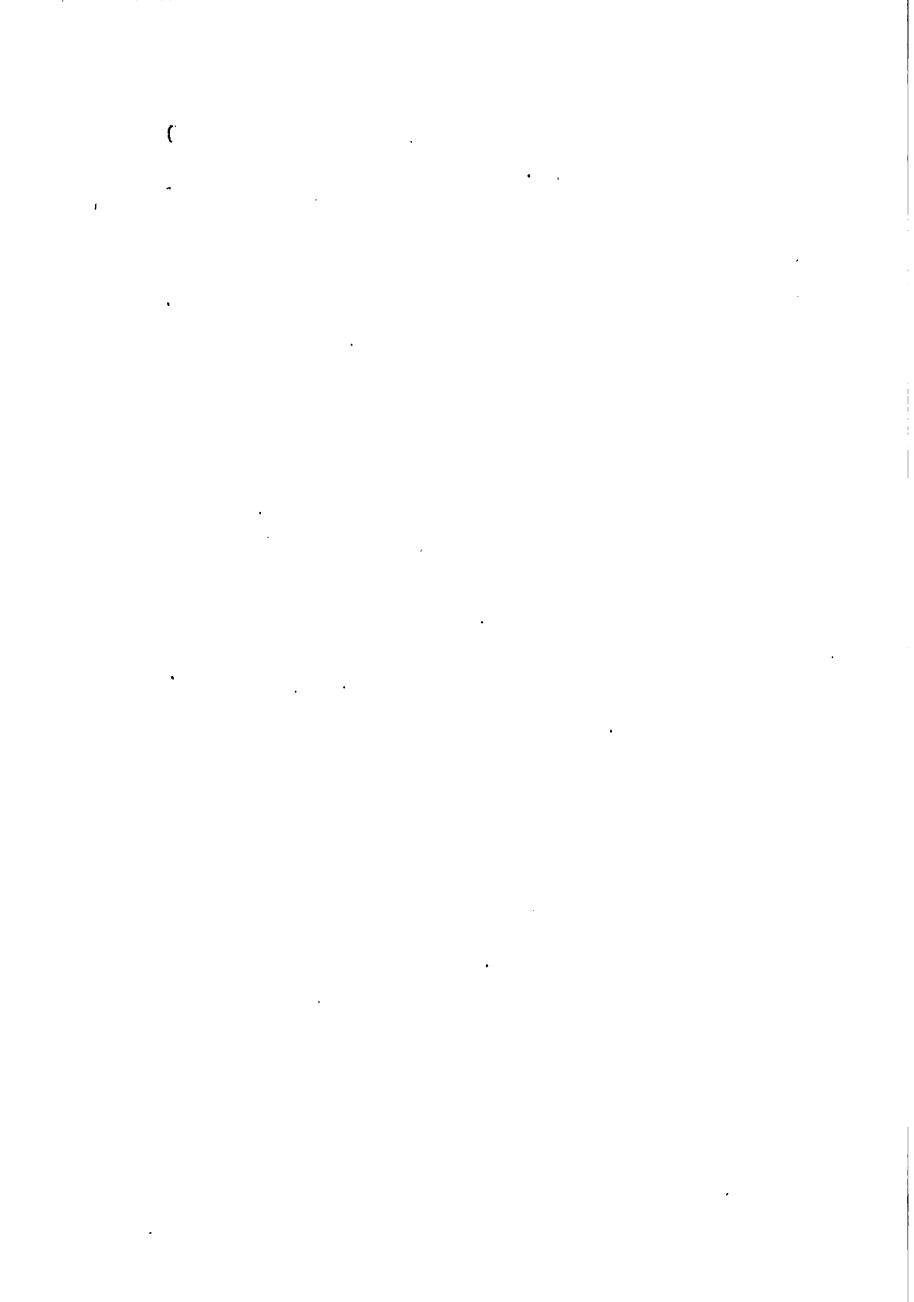
And let me here remark how strange it is that Lee Lewes should have published in 1805, at a time when Goldsmith’s fame was thoroughly established, four volumes of anecdotes about himself and his theatrical life, in which, while all sorts of insignificant things on persons are treated at tedious length, not a single syllable appears to the writer’s transactions with Goldsmith.—*Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith.*

In 1779 there is a fragmentary record of a theatre being run in Shoe Lane, by West Digges, also from the Edinburgh stage, and who was one of the husbands of George Anne Bellamy, the actress, whose life, as recorded by herself, is one of the most astonishing of biographies.

NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

A REVIEWER in the *Sporting and Dramatic News*, of August 31st, 1878, concludes his notice by saying :—" There is one item of the older theatrical records of Aberdeen, however, which Mr. Angus appears to have overlooked, in which, under the date May 13th, 1580, it is mentioned as a usual thing that on the occasion of the King visiting Aberdeen the citizens should show their joy by making 'glaid the Kynges Majestie with farseis (farces), playes, historeis, antikis (antics), &c.'"





## A SCOTCH PLAY-HOUSE.

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*Hamlet.* "What players are they?"

*Rosencrantz.* "Even those you were wont to take delight in."

It was in 1795\* that a house in Marischal Street of Aberdeen† was turned into a theatre, and its first manager was no less a man than Stephen Kemble.‡ The drama had evidently made an impression on the minds of some of the less strait-laced citizens, for we discover that subscribers came forward—not, though truly national in this respect, placing their hands too deep into their purses—to aid in the erection of what was intended to be a permanent theatre. An extract from the scanty archives of the management of the house, dated 3rd December, 1794, says, "Mr. Kemble intending to purchase the property in Marischal Street be-

\* This structure was commenced about the year 1788, by Mr. John Jackson. . . . The edifice was not far advanced when, this gentleman becoming bankrupt, the progress of the work was suspended for several years.—*Book of Bon-Accord.*

† In 1795, the population of the City of Aberdeen may be put down at 25,000. In 1871 (last census), it was 88,125.

‡ Brother to John Philip Kemble. The *Biographia Dramatica* says he conducted successively the theatres of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Newcastle, and several others.



longing to Messrs. Brebner, Gibb, & Co., in order to finish and fit it up as a theatre, We, the subscribers, in so far to enable him to accomplish this scheme, oblige ourselves each to advance the sum of twenty-five pounds sterling, to be applied in the first place towards defraying the expense of roofing in the theatre, and the surplus to be paid over to Mr. Kemble howsoon the inside work of the theatre is half finished. It being understood that the subscription shall shut howsoon twenty-four subscribers are found. The subscribers are to receive 5 per cent. for the money advanced, and heritable security upon the premises for repayment of it within seven years, but optional to Mr. Kemble to discharge the debts sooner, if convenient for him. It is also conditional that Mr. Kemble shall give each subscriber a gratis ticket for admission to the theatre during each season of performance, transferable at pleasure." These subscribers proceeded with great caution in their enterprise. We can imagine their scheme being denounced with all the uncharitable rigour of the pulpit:—

" And pulpit, drum ecclesiastick,  
Was beat with fist instead of a stick."

and hear anthemas being relentlessly hurled against the promoters of it, for this, as it was quaintly termed in their common diction, "louping"—or leaping—"against the Lord;" and so, with the possibility of failure ahead, and consequent loss of subscribed capital,

it became needful to observe the strictest rules of the strictest economy, and buy their building material in the cheapest market. This Stephen Kemble was the owner of a circus in Edinburgh, which he had transformed into a theatre, and as the wood-work\* of this establishment was for sale, and evidently being offered at a low price—"that the wood alone was far beyond the price demanded by Mr. Kemble, £300," adds the minute which records the venture—it was resolved to purchase this and send it on to Aberdeen. It would, of course, have to be sent first to Leith, the seaport of Edinburgh, and even then there lay a long distance to transport it. But fortune seemed to favour the efforts of these bold men who were bent, despite all opposition, on having a theatre in their venerable city, so, "in the meantime, as a good opportunity had occurred of freighting a vessel at a cheap rate, the agent in Edinburgh had done so." Thus far all was well; capital had been subscribed, the walls of the future temple had been secured, and the material for its inner decoration imported from the south, when, suddenly, there presented itself a difficulty in this respect, that there was no architect nor builder in Aberdeen possessing the necessary technical knowledge of how to plan a theatre. But it was eventually agreed

\* The Olympic Theatre, London, was built in 1805-6, by old Astley, the stage being made of the timbers of the *Ville de Paris*, a French man-of-war, captured some years before.—*Records of a Stage Veteran.*

that "Mr. Dodd, of Edinburgh, who was constantly employed by Mr. Kemble in such work, and who is willing to assist in furnishing this theatre, should be immediately engaged on as reasonable terms as possible, as otherwise the work will be at a stand."

The work progressed, and soon a further shrine was dedicated to the great dramatist, William Shakespeare—

"And if the stage or theatre be  
A little world, 'twas chiefly he  
That, Atlas like, supported it  
By force of industry and wit.

All this, and more, he did beside,  
Which having perfected, he dy'd ;  
If he may properly be said  
To die, whose fame can ne'er be dead."\*

A year saw the building completed and opened, it having cost in construction some £3000, and it was seated for between five and six hundred persons. And whether the venture were a pecuniary success or not, Mr. Kemble, at all events, was credited in the books with having paid his rent for seven weeks' occupation, at the rate of ten guineas a week. Kemble did not retain the lesseeship for long, and after him various smaller managers tried their fortunes. But there always seems to have been considerable trouble in

\* Lines written on the death of Sir William D'Avenant, 1668.

Campbell has expressed an idea similar to that contained in the last two lines—

"To live in hearts we leave behind,  
Is not to die."

collecting the rent. In 1799, the name of Bell appears; in 1802, that of Hamilton; and next we find it in the hands of a Mr. Beaumont, who got terribly arrear in the payment of his rent, a debit balance of £318 3s. standing against his name, and "Mr. Beaumont not having paid up . . . orders were given to proceed against him with diligence upon the tack." Having got rid of this obnoxious client, a Mr. and Mrs. Mudie appear, but with a like result. In 1811, under their management the rent again fell behind, and the canny proprietors issued a mandate that, for the future, if the rents were not paid weekly, the house would be summarily closed. In February of that year—and civility has, from time immemorial, never been known to have been associated with dunning for money—we find that "At same time it was mentioned by several of the gentlemen present, that they understood that Mrs. Mudie had acted in a very improper and unbecoming manner towards Mr. Kennedy,\* their treasurer, for having insisted on payment of the weekly rent in future before she could have the use of the theatre, which having been considered by the meeting, they expressed their disapprobation of Mrs. Mudie's conduct towards their treasurer, as considering it extremely improper on her part after the indulgence that had been given; and ordered this to be intimated to her accordingly."

\* Subsequently author of the *Annals of Aberdeen.*

No rents coming in, and religious scribes contending in hot strife against them, the owners "ordered the theatre to be advertised for sale by public roup, as soon as possible." But the Thespian Temple did not go to the hammer, for, in 1812, comes in the name of Fraser; in 1817, Ryder—a name subsequently traditional among the small school of Scottish actors who rose to any fame—who maintained the theatre till 1842. This was Corbet Ryder, who played Rob Roy as no one has been able to play it since.

Corbet Ryder was succeeded in the dictatorship of the theatre by Langley, then by Adams; while about this period Barry Sullivan started in winning his histrionic spurs in this little out-of-the-way play-house. Up to 1862, Mrs. Pollock, an actress of considerable merit—who unwisely for her own, and unfortunately for theatrical fame, reserved her talents for local appreciation—assumed the reins of government and maintained them with dignity and more than fair success. This estimable lady died in 1875, shortly after having been presented, on her final retirement from the stage, with her life-sized portrait in the character of Lady Macbeth. Mrs. Pollock appears as she reads the words:—

"Glamis thou art and Cawdor, and shalt be  
What thou art promised,"

the painter being Mr. Innes, formerly President of the Edinburgh Society of Arts.

This portrait is placed in the present and new theatre in Aberdeen, a house modelled after the design of the Gaiety Theatre in London, and styled Her Majesty's Opera House.

This Mrs. Pollock, whose maiden name was Fraser, began her stage career at the age of fifteen, and for the greater part of her life was associated with this theatre. She was first married to Corbet Ryder, and after his death she "continued to manage the theatre on her own account with singular spirit and energy; her great stage experience, not to speak of natural abilities, rendering her an admirable manageress. She had a quick and generally accurate appreciation of 'talent' in young beginners, and though the training in her school was a severe one, it produced all the better fruit for that; and we shall be quite within the mark in saying that hundreds in the theatrical profession could speak gratefully of the days they spent under her tuition. After some years of widowhood, Mrs. Ryder married Mr. Pollock, one of the members of her company, and together they conducted the theatre till about 1853, when her second partner died. She had seen and acted with most of the great performers of the last half century, was full of the traditions of the stage, and therefore it need scarcely be said, was a rare mate for an evening when congenial spirits assembled around a friendly board. Of course she believed in, and stuck

by, the old wine of the drama. She had doubts about the draughts from the new bottles—the Robertsons, Gilberts, Alberys, Byrons, and Hallidays. Where be your men of the Beaumont and Fletcher, Sheridan, Goldsmith, and Tobin stamp? she would ask, either for scene, invention, elegance of dialogue, or spontaneity of humour? ”\*

Following Mrs. Pollock came, in 1869, Mr. M'Neil, the present successful lessee of the Princess' Theatre, Edinburgh. Mr. Edward Price, a metropolitan and provincial actor of much merit, came after him—both of whom married daughters of Mrs. Pollock by her first husband. And then rose the new building already mentioned, under the direction of Mr. Gomersal, the son of “the Napoleon of Astley's.”† This elder Gomersal played in this Marischal Street theatre his great assumption of Napoleon in *The Battle of Waterloo*.

Amateur performances, chiefly supported by the officers of the regiment quartered in Aberdeen, were common in the old theatre. One noticeable amateur night may be recorded. Assisted by the professional ladies of the company, the senior pupils of a Mr.

\* *Aberdeen Free Press*, July 3, 1875.

† So excellent was the impersonation of Gomersal's Napoleon, that a French imitator used to advertise himself as “The French Gomersal.”

“What's here? At Astley's every night, the play of Moscow's fall; Napoleon, for the thousandth time, by Mr. Gomersal.”

Thomas Barclay, a Divinity student at the King's College of Aberdeen, and who then taught English reading and Elocution, gave a performance in aid of the funds then—the year was 1817—being raised for the benefit of the labouring poor. The pieces played were Dr. Young's tragedy of *The Revenge*,\* followed by recitations of *The Farmer's Blunder*, and *Lochiel's Warning*, Burns' tale of *Tam o' Shanter*, and the farce of *The Deuce is in him*.† This was a red-letter day in the records of the old play-house. It was crammed, seats and passages, hours previous to the rising of the curtain, and a considerable sum of money was collected for the charity. Two names may be mentioned in connection with it—that of Mr. Barclay, who undertook the part of prompter to his pupils on this occasion, and who sustained in after years the dignified post of Principal of the University of Glasgow; and Mr. Angus, who afterwards—and for nigh half a century—held the office of Town Clerk to the city. The Aberdeen Musical Society, composed of ladies and gentlemen of the city, were wont to hold occasional concerts in this house. One they gave for behoof of the Shipwrecked Seamen's fund. "On that occasion there were, I rather think, the largest muster of stringed instruments that Aberdeen ever produced.

\* First played at Drury Lane in 1721.

† By George Colman, first played at Drury Lane in 1763.



There were eight violins, two or three tenors, a couple of violoncellos, and a double bass. Archibald Duff was our leader, and I never saw him do better. Mr. Robertson of Foveran—of that day—was a good player, and Mr. W. Thomson, brother of the late Arthur Thomson, was the best amateur violinist that Aberdeen ever bred. I remember that our friend Archy Simpson and I stood next to each other in the orchestra. His brother Alexander played the flute, second to Mr. Stephen Pellat, manager for Maberly & Co. Dr. Skene and Mr. William Brown—father of the Rev. R. Brown-Borthwick, Vicar of All Saints, Scarborough—played violoncellos, and Mr. Ross, organist of St. Paul's, the grand piano. Clarionets, trumpets, French horns, bassoons, &c., were played by professionals, and Jamie Davie, precentor of the psalms in the old East Church, performed on the kettle-drums. We numbered about thirty in all, and I alone survive of the whole to tell the tale.” \* This was in 1814.

Interwoven with the history of this theatre, dating from 1815 to 1824, steals in one of the most important and interesting associations. It is a story by itself. The story, self-told in his reminiscences, of the wooing and wedding of William Charles Macready. This famous actor had been repeating his principal charac-

\* From a Correspondent.

ters in Scotland—treading in the footsteps of Kean, who was receiving £100 per night—and during an engagement in Glasgow an incident happened which tinted with bright colouring all his subsequent life. Oddly, it happened on his benefit night. Let the prologue to his marriage be told by himself:—“a pretty little girl about nine years of age was sent on at a very short notice to act the part of one of the children in Dimond’s pleasant farce *The Hunter of the Alps*. She was imperfect in the words she had to speak, having had no time to learn them; not being aware of this, I scolded her on coming off the stage for her neglect, which I was afterwards sorry for, as it cost her many tears.” Time passed, and in the interval Sheridan Knowles had written his play of *Virginus*, which Macready had accepted and produced. He had been acting in Dublin. “From thence,” he writes, in continuation of his narrative, “to Aberdeen was my point of travel, and on account of my wounded knee”—he had suffered a fall during his Irish engagements—“and the necessity of journeying all night, I hired a carriage at Newcastle, setting out after the play on Saturday night. On Saturday midnight I reached Woodhaven on the shore of the Frith of Tay, where I had to wait two hours for the tide to cross to Dundee. Dressing and breakfasting at Montrose, I reached Aberdeen about noon, where I saw my name announced in the

playbills for *Richard III.* as I passed from my hotel to the theatre. Two young girls were walking up and down the stage, apparently waiting for the business of the morning to begin. One, the manager's daughter, was a common looking person; the other, plainly but neatly dressed, was distinguishable for a peculiar expression of intelligence and sprightly gentleness. She rehearsed with great propriety the part of the Prince of Wales, and was introduced to me by the manager as my Virginia for the next night's play. On the following morning she came an hour before the regular summons, to go through the scenes of *Virginia* and receive my instructions. She was dressed in a closely fitting tartan frock, which showed off to advantage the perfect symmetry of her sylph-like figure. Just developing into womanhood, her age would have been guessed more, but she had not quite reached fifteen. She might have been Virginia."

This is the word-painted picture of the heroine of the play, as created by Sheridan Knowles:—

" I know not whether in the state of girlhood  
Or womanhood to call her. 'Twixt the two  
She stands, as that were loth to lose her, this  
To win her most impatient. The young year,  
Trembling and blushing 'twixt the striving kisses  
Of parting Spring and meeting Summer, seems  
Her only parallel."

Macready continues:—"The beauty of her face was more in its expression than in feature, though no want

of loveliness was there. Her rehearsals greatly pleased me, her acting being so much in earnest. There was a native grace in her deportment and every movement, and never were innocence and sensibility more sweetly personified than in her mild look and speaking eyes streaming with unbidden tears. I soon learned her little history; she was the support of her family"—her father was engaged as scene-painter at the theatre—"and was the same little girl whom I had rebuked some years before for supposed inattention at the Glasgow theatre. My engagement with Mr. Ryder was for three weeks, divided between the towns of Aberdeen, Montrose, Dundee, and Perth; and as the same plays were repeated by the same performers, my opportunities of conversation with this interesting creature were very frequent, which, as they occurred, I grew less and less desirous of avoiding. Her strong good sense and unaffected warmth of feeling received additional charms from the perfect artlessness with which she ventured her opinions. The interest with which I regarded her I persuaded myself was that of an older friend, and partook of a paternal character. All the advice my experience could give her in her professional studies she gratefully accepted and skilfully applied, showing an aptness for improvement that increased the partiality she had awakened in me. I could have wished that one so purely minded and so naturally

gifted had been placed in some other walk of life ; but all that might be in my power for her advancement I resolved to do. On the last night of my engagement at Perth, I bade her farewell, desiring her, if at any time my influence or aid in any way could serve her, to apply to me without hesitation, and assuring her she might rely on always finding a ready friend in me. As I gazed upon her innocent face, beaming with grateful smiles, the wish was in my heart that her public career might expose her to no immodest advances to disturb the serenity or sully the purity of her unspotted mind. My way lay far away from her, but her image accompanied me in my southward journey, and I may say indeed, never after left me."

Though not following directly on the track which led to and from associations with the play-house under review, there still exists, in the continuation of Macready's courtship, sufficient groundwork to trace it to its culminating point of marriage. So far, its mental and actual scenes have been enacted on the boards of the old theatre, or in neighbouring towns in concert with the Aberdeen company. It is, at least, suiting to our narrative to follow it out. Macready had wandered south, increasing in popularity and vigour, when, mindful of his proffered aid in the early part of 1821, Mr. Atkins, the father of his wife-to-be, wrote "a request that I would recommend his daughter to some

respectable theatre on the expiration of her engagement with Mr. Ryder. I could answer for her kindly treatment nowhere so securely as at Bristol, and on my recommendation, she with her family was received there, where she continued for two years her course of improvement. On her route through London she called with her father to thank me, and impressed on me more deeply the opinion I had formed of her innocence and amiability."

Macready was in love! Yet that course of love which in his case ran so true, had to encounter the usual rough usage in its progression. He had risen to almost the zenith of his fame. He writes:—"My professional career was now no longer subject to the painful anxieties which each new attempt had formerly cost me. I was established as the leading tragedian; the principal character, therefore, in each play fell to me as a matter of course, and it was sufficient incentive to my best exertions to maintain the place I had won." The flame on the altar of the great tragedian's heart still burned at the shrine of the actress he had met on the boards of the old Scotch theatre; the story of his life written by himself, from this time—1822-23—is full of the domestic colouring, and his own simple telling of it reads with tints of more impressive truth than would any condensing which a second biographer might presume to make. Here is the last quotation it

will be necessary for us to make—it is the key to the past and the future. “During my absence on the Continent, the young actress, Miss Atkins, whose innocence and beauty had made so deep an impression on me, had removed with her family to Dublin, where her talents were appreciated, and were in the course of successful development. Our correspondence continued there, and became more frequent and more intimate. A sudden and heavy calamity befell her in the death of her father and brother, who were drowned with most of the passengers in the Liverpool packet, wrecked through the misconduct of the captain in a calm sea at mid-day, on the Skerries Rocks. Such a disaster could not fail to weigh with most depressing influence on her spirits, and to draw forth the tenderest expressions of sympathy and condolence from me. The actual state of my feelings I could no longer conceal from myself. I indulged in the pleasing dream that my interest in this young creature was limited to a friendly and paternal solicitude for her welfare and professional advancement, and now awoke to the undeniable conviction that love was the inspiration of all the counsel and assistance I had rendered her. This disclosure was no longer withheld from her; her answer to my declaration and proposals was acquiescence in all my views, and under her mother’s sanction it was settled between us that our marriage should take place

as soon as possible compatibly with the arrangements to which I was bound. It is but simple justice to her beloved memory to repeat the truth that, although in a worldly sense, I might have formed a more advantageous connection, I could not have met with qualities to compare with the fond affection, the liveliness, and simple worth that gave happiness to so many years of my life."

Nor will it be out of place, for a little, to follow the fortunes of this Katherine Atkins, the daughter of the scene-painter attached to the old Theatre Royal of Aberdeen. She deserves some note of recognition as the future wife of so great a man as Macready the actor. Her engagement to him was arranged and complete, but met with some temporary obstruction. Macready had become famous, and why should he marry a poor Scotch actress? So thought his sister, when introduced to Miss Atkins, who was living and studying at Worthing. The matter was argued over, and the influence brought to bear on the betrothal led to this, that the marriage was postponed so as to give the humble actress, through continuation of study, a better chance of assuming a position in the acting world more in accordance with the status which the wife of Macready would be expected to hold. "To this proposal," sadly writes her lover, "humbling to her pride and trying as it was, the gentle girl assented



without murmur or reserve." From Worthing she went to reside in Kensington, where she advanced in the prosecution of her studies. Meantime a reconciliation came about between her and Macready's sister, and a sudden breakage in the actor's engagement at Drury Lane, because Kean refused to act with him—he "did not mind Young, but he would not act with Macready," was the green-room report of Kean's remark—sent the lover home on the night of the 23rd of June, 1824, having filled his term of penance, and on the next morning—red-lettered day in the great tragedian's career—he was married to his patient sweetheart at St. Pancras Church. He lived to the ripe old age of 80, and died on the 27th of April, 1873. His first wife—Katherine Atkins—died in 1852.

To this old house in Marischal Street, Aberdeen, however—viewed in the light of its being an early home of the drama in Scotland, and more particularly, as will be hereafter shown, the ground on which so many famous actors and actresses began their proud careers—some fame is attached. It can easily be seen how difficult it was to secure the services of even an average stock company; for the long distance from other theatrical towns thwarted the attempts of professionals of any repute to travel so far north, and the expense of such a journey in old days—and no mean

figure in the present—was a weighty item to place against the size of the salary likely to have been given for services. Play-houses existed at Montrose and Perth, but, at the present time and for a considerable period back, Dundee is the only town lying between Aberdeen and Edinburgh which sustains a theatre with its regular seasons. And it is a somewhat curious fact that, in the days when stage-coaches were the only means of conveyance, a larger number of greater actors and actresses visited Aberdeen than are to be seen now, although the speedy railway has usurped the rights of coaches. Perhaps, too, the scroll of really great players is not so genuinely long as it used to be.

There is no trace of there having been in this theatre what was common in the Edinburgh play-houses—a Footman's gallery. This was a part of the house given up, with free admissions, to the footmen who accompanied their employers to the play. One idea in this was to restrain these servants from going to public houses. When the farce of *High Life Below Stairs*\* was played in Edinburgh—the plot of which was to open the eyes of the great, and convince persons of fortune what impositions, even to the ravage and ruin of their estates, they are liable to from the waste-

\* Written by a parson named James Townley, and played at Drury Lane in 1757.

fulness and infidelity of their servants—it received prodigious opposition from the footmen, who created a riot in the theatre, and even threatened the lives of the players.\* And Arnot tells how this led to the abolishment of the Footman's gallery and to the custom of fees to servants. The gentlemen of the county of Aberdeen first brought this resolution into effect, and for some time the pernicious system of “tipping” was done away with.† But Mr. Arnot would weep to see how the old custom which he had so warmly denounced had come into vogue again in the nineteenth century.

The stage of this old theatre was very small, as indeed was the auditorium, while the acting of the stock companies was very poor. They had to act chiefly to the pit—not so polished nor cultivated an assemblage as the pit of an English theatre contains—and gallery, whose occupants' amusement was divided between the drama proper, as enacted on the stage, and their own social little dramas in the shape of whistling, yelling, throwing orange-peel at one another, and the rapid consumption of mutton-pies‡ and small beer.

\* *Biographia Dramatica.*

† *History of Edinburgh.*

‡ The gentlemen in the gallery pelted the orchestra with mutton pies; at first, indignation was uppermost, but on reflection we made a virtue of necessity, and collecting the fragments of the not very light pastry, ate them under the stage, and whatever they were made of, considered them ambrosia.—*Benjamin Webster*, at Croydon.

The combining of eating and drinking with every sort of occupation—do they not hand round sherry and biscuits ere funeral processions start?—appears to be a right on which the British public insists. The nightly eating of cakes and ices in the London theatres is a national slur on our dinners and our cooks. But eating in the theatre is no new phase of enjoyment.\* Dutton Cook says that “it seems clear that the Elizabethan audiences were rather an unruly congregation. There was much cracking of nuts and consuming of pippins in the old play-houses; ale and wine were on sale, and tobacco was freely smoked by the upper class of spectators, for it was hardly yet common to all conditions.”† Dekker continually refers to ladies being treated with apples. Nuts and fruit were sold in great profusion between the acts, but it was only following out old custom. Ben Jonson speaks of—

“The vulgar sort  
Of nut-crackers.”

Carey says—

“Your aged fathers came to plays for wit,  
And sat knee-deep in nut-shells in the pit.”‡

\* The writer has a vivid recollection of how, years ago, forgetting his old love the circus, with its clowns and paper hoops and spotted horses, he made “his first appearance in any theatre,” in the upper boxes of this house, and, following the fashion, beckoned the “refreshment basket man” up from the pit, and got supplied with apple tarts. Sir William and Lady Don were the “stars” of the evening. Both are dead. Sir William died at Hobart Town in 1862, and Lady Don in 1875.

† *A Book of the Play.*

‡ *The Generous Enemies.* By J. Carey, 1672.

Stephen Gosson describes how "young men treated ladies to apples."\*

" Had fate fore read me in a crowd to die,  
To be made adder-deaf with pippin cry,"

sings Fits-geoffrey. And, adds Hentzer, "In these theatres, fruits, such as apples, pears, and nuts, according to the season, are carried about to be sold, as well as ale and wine."† The audience did more, however, than merely eat their apples, for in a letter discovered in Lambeth Palace, referring to some French players performing in London, it is written, "glad I am to say they were hissed, hooted, and pippin-pelted." This was done because the women on the stage were shameless—do modern actresses ever stand in need of pippin-pelting?‡

To return. There is a story, well-known to frequenters of this theatre in old days, of a Mrs. D——, the widow of an Aberdeen schoolmaster, who had a great passion for the theatre, and who attended it nightly for a very long period. She always purchased a season ticket for the gallery, as she considered it the best part of the house for witnessing the performance.

\* *A School of Abuse.*

† *Travels in England*, 1598.

‡ During the violent opposition in the fifth act, an apple hitting Lee, who performed Sir Lucius O'Trigger, he stepped forward, and with a genuine rich brogue, angrily cried out, 'By the powers, is it personal? it to me or the matter?'—*Celebrities I have known.*

The boys styled her the "Queen of the Gallery," and as she always occupied the front seat, they used, on seeing her enter, to exclaim, "Mak' way, there ; mak' way for the Queen!" Her son, a medical gentleman, on his return from India on a visit, had a party one night to the theatre, and on their arriving at the box door, he expected his mother to enter along with the rest, when she remarked, "Na, Na! the laddies wad be cryin' oot, 'Eh! there's the wifie that sits wi' us, in the boxes the nicht.'" And she accordingly went and occupied her usual seat. It is said that her attendance saved her fire and lights, and kept her from gossips. A London actor having observed her nightly attendance exclaimed, "I declare, there is the old lady here again! I must call on her." \*

The audience of this theatre lustily protested against delays and stage waits. They shouted with stentorian lungs for "music," as if in derision of the feeble efforts made by a still more feeble orchestra, who laboured vainly on their fiddle-strings to mix some harmony with the uproar—

"The noise . . .  
Most musical, most melancholy."

And if a popular air were introduced, every boot and shoe—even some bootless, shoeless feet—in pit and

\* Communicated.

gallery, and every mouth that could contort itself into an attitude for whistling, kept tempestuous time—

“ So was hire joly whistle wel ywette.”

“ Caller Herrin’ ” and “ Johnnie Cope ” were favourite cries to the musicians, as also yells for “ Maggie Shinie’s Rant,” the heroine of which was an old woman, who kept a sweetmeat stall in Castle Street of Aberdeen. The gallery also had a strangely chosen phrase with which to demand the raising of the curtain—they shouted, “ Up wi’ the hippin’ ! ” The word “ hippin’ ” was not one of polite conversation, being reserved for the parlance of the nursery, where, in material, it was related to one of the many parts of underclothing worn by babies !

They had no scented programmes in this rudely-mannered house, but long play-bills, most worthy of the name, damp and finger-colouring from the scarcely dry printer’s ink. It was, as a diversion between the acts, a common practice to tear these into strips, and fastening them end to end, to dangle the paper string from the gallery to the pit, where their reception met with extreme welcome and merriment ; or to tickle by the same agent the heads and faces of the front row in the dress circle, where their reception caused infinite disgust and annoyance. Loud conversations were carried on between friends recognizing each other from

pit and gallery. But when the curtain was up they knew when to cheer; they were uncharitable enough to know when to sneer and deride, these hard-headed critics in the classical city of the north. And they met stage-hitches with sarcastic remarks couched in the quaintest of Doric sounds. Instead of being at the time-honoured traditional Victoria Theatre in London, it might have been in this house where the gallery critic observed, "We don't expec' no grammar, but you might make yer flats jine!" The house was small, and it is recorded how, during an exciting pause in a villain's soliloquy, when silence had possession of the theatre—

" There was silence deep as death,  
And the boldest held his breath  
For a time,"

a voice from the lower boxes, quoting in an audibly Scotch accented whisper from *Hamlet*, muttered, "Ech! cōscience mak's cooards o' us a'!" It can easily be imagined how the "gods" received that addition to the play.

In the absence of any particular theatrical star, who brought with him the more elevated and classical plays, melo-drama generally served as the stop-gap in the programme of entertainment. Edwin Waugh, the Lancashire poet, gives a terse description of his visit to this ancient seat of the drama—this old Scotch play-house. The play he witnessed was *Ingomar*, the



*Barbarian*; or, *The Son of the Wilderness*; and he records his night's experience thus:—"When we got to the theatre we found that our first impression was right. The check-taker looked like a worn out bum-bailiff; the wood-work of the interior looked as if it had been made out of old orange-boxes and ruined market-stalls. The tragedy was a farce; the comedy was down-right murder; and the music sounded like an accompaniment to tooth-drawing. But the scanty audience, chiefly sailors, very evidently enjoyed the whole thing; and so did we. It was so gloriously ill-done that it was impossible not to be pleased with it. And I question whether the fingering of Sivori, or the baton of Julien, could have delighted us half so much as the comical antics of the stolid wretch who misled the orchestra of three split fiddles and a hoarse cornopean that night. The last tune they played reminded me of a dog-battle. But the sweetest enjoyments of life come to an end. We had a good view of one of the side wings, and "Ambriar the barbarian," after taking a strong pull at something in a pitcher behind the scenes, was rehearsing his countenance for the agonies of death in the next scene when we came away."\*

But though unpoetical and unpicturesque descriptions such as the foregoing carry with them much that

\* *Fourteen Days in Scotland.*

is true, still a higher view of the rise and progress of the drama within the walls of this old theatre can be gathered. In it Edmund and Charles Kean acted in their best and brightest days, ere they died, the former in 1833, the latter in 1868. Charles Mackay, whom Sir Walter Scott admired so much as the Baillie in *Rob Roy*, followed them; he died in 1857. "I remember," writes a correspondent, "Edmund Kean's visit very well, and saw him each of the six nights of his performing here. After his visit, Mackay used to give excellent imitations of him, chiefly in *Richard*. Indeed, the play was repeatedly performed with Mackay as the hunch-backed tyrant. It was suprisingly well done. I have often seen Charles Kean in the character, and used to think there was no mighty difference between the two. Both were mimicking the great actor. Charles Kean had, of course, the advantage of finish by constant study and practice, but certainly the 'Baillie's' mimicry was wonderful."\* John Vandenhoff, who died in 1861, left his name among great actors, who laboured vigorously in early days to win repute; and Meggat, his compeer. John Philip Kemble was here—he who was friend to—

"The travelled Thane, Athenian Aberdeen."

\* An Edinburgh critic, writing in 1839, on Charles Kean, asked, "When will our public be weary of the contortions of this galvanised carcase?"

Sheridan Knowles, who died in 1862, acted in his own plays in this old house, with his leading lady, Miss Elphinstone, whom he admired so much.\* Sheridan Knowles was described to Macready by his Glasgow friends as "a man of original genius, and one in whose fortunes his fellow-citizens took a deep interest." Macready had accepted his *Virginus*, and, as has been shown, while acting the hero of that play, fell in love with and married the heroine. Sheridan Knowles' writings are full of exquisite word-painting; a reviewer compares him to the writers of the Elizabethan age:—"He occasionally copies their conceits and deviates into their verbal obscurity, but he never emulates their coarseness, or heightens a plot by their unnatural and revolting extravagance. Above all, he draws a woman as if he loved and revered her—with a delicate and admiring hand, with a fervent and devoted heart."† Towards the close of his life he left the stage, and became a lay preacher in a Baptist communion. Miss O'Neil,‡ who played Mrs. Beverley in *The Gamester* with such tender pathos; T. P. Cooke, the hero of the nautical drama, who died in 1864; and G. V. Brooke made for himself here a name and a fame, kindly revered in connection with his brave and heroic

\* Miss Elphinstone made her first appearance as Meeta in the *Maid of Mariendorph*, at the Haymarket Theatre, in 1838.

† Cole.

‡ Thackeray sketched Miss O'Neil and her father in *Pendennis*.

facing of death, as, dressed in his red flannel shirt, he worked manfully at the pumps of the ill-starred steamer *London*, till he, with nearly all the company, sank in the cruel Bay of Biscay. It was to names such as these, with their attendant traditions, that the present writer composed the following address, which recalled these good old days. It was spoken on the 18th of August, 1876, by Miss Ryder, the wife of Mr. Price, a quondam manager, on the occasion of her benefit in the new theatre, after her successful delineation of the character of Jo, from Dickens' *Bleak House*\*:—

I sometimes think my life resembles Jo's,  
Though I receive the ha'pence, he the blows—  
I'm always "moving on," yet make amends  
By coming back each year to see old friends ;  
You never "chivey" me, nor thrust away  
My plea to come—you rather bid me stay.

For there's a kind, warm link 'twixt you and me,  
A bond of union—as each one may see,  
Who, passing up those stairs, the features meet  
Of her who reigned so long in Marischal Street ;  
That kindly face, preserved by painter's skill,  
Binds common sympathy between us still.†

\* Played with immense success by Miss Jennie Lee, at the Globe Theatre, London. Mr. Price then acted Sir Leicester Dedlock, but took the part of the Detective when playing in Aberdeen.

† Alluding to portrait of Mrs. Pollock—Miss Ryder's mother—painted by public subscription, and hanging in the box-lobby of the Theatre.

*A Scotch Play-house.*

I come—of course, in later cirque of time,  
 A humble follower of great names—to climb  
 Ambition's ladder, and with work sincere  
 To aid the Drama's ancient claims up here.  
 With you it rests what kind of fare to choose,  
 What to accept, what utterly refuse—  
 The Lessee-doctor's dish is ne'er misplac'd,  
 Suiting his physic to his patients' taste ;  
 The Lessee-cobbler, sticking to his last,  
 " Nothing like leather," gives you, as his past  
 Tenure of office shews, for I am sure  
 He but supplies the wholesome, good, and pure.  
 Be your's the task, by presence and applause,  
 Well to maintain the Drama's honour'd cause ;  
 See that it moves in dignity's clear sheen,  
 Worthy of you and classic Aberdeen.  
 Think of your grand traditions—history's page  
 Records that Keans and Kembles trod your stage ;  
 Sheridan Knowles his own plays did reveal,  
 And boastful plaudits greeted great O'Neil ;  
 John Vandenhoff was here, and T. P. Cooke.  
 Have you no memory for G. V. Brooke ?  
 Macready's case a warmer proof affords,  
 Who came and choose his wife from off your boards.  
 A host of others, at whose shrine we stand,  
 All passed away—that silent actor band !

But I must now move on, else (*looking off*) he'll be  
 here—

And yet with friends like you why should I fear ?

MR. PRICE (*entering*)—Come, Jo, move on !

MISS RYDER (*shrinking from him and assuming Jo's stage voice*)—I ain't done nothink : spoke to them (*pointing to the audience*), d'ye see—

For they wos always wery good to me !

MR. PRICE—But this is not the play, you understand—

(MISS RYDER *comes forward, examines him, and then bursts out laughing*)—

We'll both “move on” together—

BOTH (*joining hands*)—

Hand in hand !

Mrs. Warner, too, played her many parts, and died in 1854. Names and memories seem alone to last. John Bannister, the pupil of Garrick ; Daniel Terry, who took snuff from a gold box with a more natural movement when on the stage than perhaps when he was off it.\* He married a Miss Nasmyth, a daughter of Alexander Nasmyth,† the eminent landscape painter, whose portraits of Burns adorn the Academy at Edinburgh, and who was wont to paint scenery for this same theatre. She afterwards became the wife of Mr. Richardson, author of an English Dictionary. Weekes, “Paddy Weekes,” as he was nicknamed, who died at Perth in 1838, and over whose grave, in the

\* Miss Pope said of the actor Dodd that no one took snuff like him—this was a trifling circumstance, but he made it produce a good effect.—*Geneste.*

† The building of Inversnaid fort was contracted for by — Nasmyth, builder in Edinburgh, grandfather of Alexander Nasmyth, the well-known landscape painter.—*Domestic Annals of Scotland.*

absence of a clergyman, an Aberdeen layman said an impromptu prayer. Charles Mayne Young also; and Catalani, the celebrated singer, who electrified her audience by her powerful singing of *Rule Britannia*, "by which it was alleged she made the rafters dirl and the ceiling shake with her mighty voice."\* She died in 1849. Miss Helen Faucit, now Mrs. Theodore Martin, also played here; and Miss Braddon, whose correct description of matters theatrical in her novels shews a close knowledge of stage life, is credited with having played on these boards; and Samuel Phelps, † the veteran, who, with the two preceding ladies, is still alive, wandered thus far north, and added to his laurels in the fitting applause he got. Oxberry—the "unctious," as Planché calls him—always dated himself as of the Theatre, Aberdeen; and Sinclair, who afterwards became a famous public singer, ere he took to the stage, was a drummer in the Aberdeenshire Militia, along with Mackay, who was a bandsman in the Argyllshire Militia, when that regiment was quartered at Aberdeen during the Peninsular War. Calvert, too, whose son, under the name of Talbot, now acts Shakesperian *roles*, was for long the stock tragedian. He died in 1877, having given up the

\* Like a singer described as "a brave roaring fellow, who would make the house shake again."

† His command of the Scotch dialect is wonderful in an Englishman.—*Blackwood's Magazine*, 1852.

the stage and taken to teaching Elocution at the chief schools of Edinburgh, as well as periodically at Aberdeen. Three favourite old actors were Barton, Atkin, and Waldron. Here are criticisms on these from the local critic :—" Barton, in tragedy, is both classical and judicious, without allowing his genius to be subservient to any sort of restraint. In comedy, that is, dignified comedy, he is chaste, natural, and elegant. This is sweeping praise, but it is well deserved, and to him who differs from us we must just allow the full enjoyment of his own opinion. . . . Atkin had genius, but it was too often displayed by fits and starts ; and one very good thing in most of his performances was over-balanced by his general carelessness throughout. . . . Waldron had judgment and genius, but he allowed his judgment too severe a mastery over his genius, and had not daring enough to pursue a bold flight. . . . Barton in a great degree blends the portraying of these two performers, Atkin and Vandenhoff, together, and possesses the power of using them with effect. . . . The scene with the Grave-digger \* did not strike us as being so happy, but the whole of the scene was rendered highly interesting, perhaps from the graphic manner in which Mr. Ryder played the Grave-digger. It is too often made a scene of foolery, and actors take a considerable latitude . . . Mr. Ryder never does.

\* *Hamlet*, Act. v. sc. 1.



The many waist-coats, however, is an established gag which ought to be avoided." \*

This brings us to Corbet Ryder, who managed the house so long, and was, in all he did, so good a player. And the memory of poor Tom Ryder is pleasingly remembered. His life was not heroic at the end. He loved, loved and lost, loved and—died. There is a story told of how he was accused of having circulated defamatory reports concerning a county laird and one of the actresses. Poor G. V. Brooke was examined by the Public Prosecutor, and in his evidence said that he had heard Tom Ryder make use of *double entendres*. "Dooble ong-what?" demanded the Prosecutor; "and what's that?" "It's French," answered the actor. "Then why don't you speak English," rejoined the Scotch lawyer.† He died in 1872, in poor circumstances, and the following obituary notice spoke the last kind words over the player:—"Many will hear with regret of the death, on Tuesday last, at the age of 61, of this well-known and talented actor, the son of the late Mr. Corbet Ryder, formerly manager of

\* *Aberdeen Chronicle*, 20th December, 1828.

I was present the last time old Ryder acted, a very short time before his death, and the character he then played was the Grave-digger; he had been ailing for a considerable time, troubled with gout, and he had a little difficulty in stepping out of the stage-grave.—*Communicated*.

Chatterly, when he played the First Grave-digger at Bath, in 1815, left off the old stage trick of pulling off numberless waistcoats to make the gallery laugh—he said if he could not gain applause without having recourse to such an expedient he would go without it.—*Geneste*.

† *Communicated*.

the Theatre Royal here. The name of Ryder has been long and honourably associated with the drama in Aberdeen, and old playgoers can recall many pleasant and brilliant evenings spent in the old house in Marischal Street, when the subject of this notice was in the zenith of his fame and popularity. In Scotch comedy he was unrivalled; and Jock Muir may almost be said to have died with him; but, in fact, to every part he played, he imparted that artistic finish which genius only can give. Of the latter years of his life many pleasant memories forbid us to speak, except with a feeling of friendly regret that one so highly gifted should have thrown away such rare opportunities of reaching the very top of his profession, and of being able to spend his closing scene in ease and affluence. But his 'last part is played;' the curtain has fallen on him for ever; the lights have been put out; and this once gay and favourite actor has gone home to—

'The undiscovered country, from whose bourne  
No traveller returns.'

Peace to his ashes! he was

'A fellow of infinite jest and of most excellent fancy,'

and, in his own particular walk, it may safely be said,

'Take him for all in all,  
We shall not look upon his like again.'\* \*

These are some of the actors who gained early

\* D. G. C.—the initials of a well-known Shakesperian scholar and local critic—in the *Aberdeen Journal*.

histrionic distinction in the far north, while, in the histories of most of the leading players of the present day it will be found that now and again in their journeyings they drifted to the classic boards of the old Theatre Royal, Marischal Street, Aberdeen.

Where is this old theatre now? History repeats itself, for it, too, like its predecessor in Queen Street, has gone over to what, unfortunately, is called the opposition—it has become a church!

\* \* \* \* \*

“Will it please you to see the epilogue?”

“No epilogue, I pray you . . . for when the players are all dead, there need none to be blamed.”



**APPENDIX.**



## APPENDIX.

### A.

*Kitty.* Shikspur? Shikspur? Who wrote it? No, I never read Shikspur.

*Lady Bab.* Then you have an immense pleasure to come.

*High Life Below Stairs*, Act ii. sc. 1.

### “DID SHAKSPERE VISIT SCOTLAND?”\*

CHARLES KNIGHT devotes chapter viii. of his Biography of Shakespeare to an argument as to whether the dramatist did or did not visit Scotland. The chapter is worthy of being read. It is pointed out that the descriptions of Forres, Inverness, and Glamis, where the scenes in *Macbeth* are laid, are so correct as to leave no doubt but that Shakespeare actually saw the places he afterwards intro-

\* Being Chapter VIII. of the Eighth—or biographical—Volume of Knight's *Shakespeare*.

It is always pleasant, I find, to have some object in view, even in the direction of a journey of pleasure; and this was supplied me by Mr. Knight's request that I would explore the topography of Shakespeare's Scotch play now. . . . 'Do this for me,' said Mr. Knight, 'and I will give you ten copies of my *Shakespeare*.' . . . In like manner we now traced out the haunts of Macbeth, living and dead. When we were at Lord Murray's, at Stachur, his brother gave us a letter of introduction which opened to us all the recesses of Glamis Castle. We sat down and lingered on the Witches' Heath between Nairn and Forres, and examined Cawdor Castle. . . . I do not know whether any of the air of the localities hangs about those notes of mine in Mr. Knight's *Shakespeare*, but to me the gathering up of knowledge and associations for them was almost as pleasant work as any I had to do.—*Harriet Martineau's Autobiography*.

duced into his plays. If he visited Forres, it is reasonable to suppose he visited Aberdeen, and most probably along with Laurence Fletcher, in whose company he was. The chapter is too extensive to quote at length, but the following extracts refer to Aberdeen :—

Referring to the witch scenes in *Macbeth* :—“ On the 2nd of February, 1596, a commission was issued by the King of Scotland ‘ in favour of the Provost and Baillies of the burgh of Aberdeen, for the trial of Janet Wishart and others accused of witchcraft.’ Other commissions were obtained in 1596 and 1597, and during the space of one year no less than twenty-three women and one man were burned in Aberdeen.\* . . . The popular belief through which twenty-four victims perished in 1597 would not have died out in 1601. Had Shakspeare spent a few weeks in that city, it must have encountered him on every side.

“ . . . Reginald Scott, with his calm and benevolent irony, says, ‘ no one endued with common sense but will deny that the elements are obedient to witches, and at their commandment, or that they may at pleasure send rain, hail, tempest, thunder, lightning, when she, being but an old doting woman, casteth a flint stone over her left shoulder towards the west.’ . . . *Macbeth*, in the incantation scene, invokes them with—

‘ Though you untie the winds, and let them fight  
Against the churches.’

In the ‘ Dittay against Issobell Oige ’ at Aberdeen, she is

\* See also the first volume, published in 1841, of *The Miscellany of the Spalding Club*.

thus addressed :—‘Thou are indicted and accused of practising of thy witchcraft in laying of the wind, and making of it to become calm and lowdin (smooth), a special point teached to thee by thy master, Satan.’ In those humble practices of the witches in *Macbeth* which assimilate them to common witches, such as ‘killing swine,’ in the third scene of the first act, Shakspeare would scarcely need the ample authority which is furnished by charge upon charge in the trials at Aberdeen.

“ We have seen that in the enactment of Henry VIII., the superstitious belief that the power of witchcraft could waste the body was especially regarded. Shakspeare need not, therefore, have gone farther for—

‘ Sleep shall neither night nor day  
 Hang upon his pent-house lid ;  
 He shall live a man forbid :  
 Weary sev’n nights nine times nine,  
 Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.’

But the extent to which this belief was carried in Aberdeen in 1596-9, is almost beyond credence. There was, no doubt, a contagious distemper ravaging the city and neighbourhood, for nearly all the witches are accused of having produced the same effect upon their victims—‘The one half day rossin (roasting) as in a fiery furnace, with an extraordinary kind of drought that she could not be slockit (slaked), and the other half day in an extraordinary kind of sweating, melting, and consuming her body as a white



burning candle, which kind of sickness is a special point of witchcraft.'

“The witches’ dance can scarcely be distinctly found in any superstition of the south. In *Macbeth* the First Witch says :—

‘ I’ll charm the air to give a sound,  
While you perform your antique round.’

The Aberdeen trials abound with charges against those who partook in such fearful merriment. They danced early in the morning upon St. Catherine’s Hill ; they danced at twelve hours at even round the Fish Cross of the borough. The devil, their master, was with them, playing on his form of instruments. Marion Grant is thus accused :—‘ Thou confessed that the devil thy master, whom thou termost Christsonday, caused thee dance sundry times with him, and with Our Lady, who, as thou sayest, was a fine woman, clad in a white walicot, and sundry others of Christsonday’s servants with thee, whose names thou knowest not, and that the devil played upon his form of instruments very pleasantly unto you.’

“But if it be not to inquire ‘too curiously,’ may we not trace one of the most striking passages in *Othello* to the humble source of an Aberdeen superstition ?

‘ That handkerchief  
Did an Egyptian to my mother give ;  
She was a *charmer*, and could almost read  
The thoughts of people ; she told her, while she kept it  
’T would make her amiable, and subdue my father  
Entirely to her love.’

In the information against Isobell Straquhan, it is alleged that, 'the said Isobell came to Elspet Mutray in Wodheid, she being a widow, and asked of her if she had a penny to lend her, and the said Elspet gave her the penny ; and the said Isobell took the penny and bowit (bent) it, and took a clout and a piece red wax, and sewed the clout with a thread—the wax and the penny being within the clout—and gave it to the said Elspet Mutray, commanding her to use the said clout to hang about her crag (neck), and when she saw the man whom she loved best, take the clout, with the penny and the wax, and stroke her face therewith, and she so doing, should attain in to the marriage of that man whom she loved.' The 'clout' sewed 'with a thread' wants, indeed, the poetical colouring of the 'handkerchief' of Othello, but still—

'There's magic in the web of it.'

More curious in the effects produced is another example of the 'prophetic fury' of the 'Sibyl' Isobell Straquhan. She could not only produce love, but remove hatred. 'Walter Ronaldsone had use to strike his wife, who took consultation with Scudder (alias Straquhan), and she did take pieces of paper and sew them with thick thread of divers colours, and did put them in the barn amongst the corn, and from thenceforth the said Walter did never strike his wife, neither yet once found fault with her, whatsoever she did.' He was *subdued* 'entirely to her love.' "

## B.

Andrew Halliday,\* referring to theatricals in the far north, says :—“ The *Ultima Thule* of the ‘ theatrical world ’ in this island, is Aberdeen. Further north than Marischal Street of the Granite City the theatre goeth not. Take the map, place your finger upon Aberdeen, and behold what a large tract of the kingdom lies out in the cold, unwarmed by the genial influence of the drama ! Not only is there no regular theatre north of Aberdeen, but in these days strolling players never venture beyond that city. This was not always so, and the fact proves that the dominion of the drama is contracting.† Five-and-twenty years ago several towns and villages lying many miles north of Aberdeen were regularly visited by the players ; not common strollers or ‘ buskers ’ by any means, but professional ladies and gentlemen of ability and repute, from the Theatres Royal of Aberdeen, Dundee, and Edinburgh. Railways had not yet penetrated into this distant region, and the players came northward by the mail coach, sending on their scenery, property, and dresses by a waggon, or by the ordinary

\* Born in Banffshire in 1830, and educated at Marischal College and University, Aberdeen. In dramatic literature he has chiefly devoted himself to adaptations of Dickens’ and Scott’s novels.—*Men of The Time*.

He died in 1877.

† On the contrary, a glance at the pages of the *Era* will show that nearly every place of any consequence throughout the country, even so far north as Lerwick, has its permanent or improvised theatre open.

carrier's cart. Their scenery was never extensive, consisting only of three or four drops, or 'clothes,' which, being rolled up, were easily carried about. The dresses, however, were in tolerable variety, and always good and appropriate. The 'fit-up stage' was erected either in the Town Hall or the Free Masons' Hall. It was seldom raised, and gas being as yet in its infancy in those parts, the stage and the body of the theatre were lighted by candles. I saw my first play in the Free Mason's Hall of one of these northern towns. The coming of the players was talked of with gleeful expectancy for weeks beforehand; their arrival was hailed by the juvenile population with the wildest delight, and by their seniors with real interest, and anticipations of an intellectual treat. By the gentry and educated classes the players were treated with all due respect. They were not superciliously regarded as buffoons, come there to pick up a few shillings by amusing the vulgar, but as trained artistes and capable exponents and representatives of the thoughts and characters of the great dramatic poets. And generally they were found not undeserving of the high regard which their art bespoke for them. The players sometimes remained for as long as a month, giving representations three times a week. Families of distinction came from their seats in the country, and remained in the town for several days, on purpose to see a play. The great man of the neighbourhood, an Earl, who had lived much in London and seen the most famous actors of his time, was a most liberal patron of the players. He not only attended the theatre in person, but bought and gave away a large

number of tickets. The grounds and gardens of the castle were thrown open to the actors ; and each lady and gentleman on taking a benefit, was sure to be waited on by his Lordship's butler with a sealed packet containing a handsome present. The gentry and the well-to-do people generally bought tickets and distributed them among their servants and the poor children of the town. An eccentric country Laird brought all his people down in a cart when his favourite play was performed. The Laird's favourite play was *Venice Preserved*, and when the pathetic passages were being delivered, Sir John used to turn round to the girls in the back benches and urge them to weep. 'Greet queans, greet,' Sir John used to say, and the girls immediately plunged their faces into their pocket-handkerchiefs and appeared to be deeply affected. Sir John also led the applause, and shook his fist and frowned when the back benches failed to take up the points. You will say that these were primitive times indeed, when a Baronet of ancient lineage condescended to put himself on terms of familiarity with the shop lads and servant wenches ; but Sir John was a character, and was privileged to say and do many things. He was the last of the type. There are no such Scotch Lairds now. And again you will say they were primitive times, when I tell you that the theatrical performances at the Freemasons' Hall were announced to the inhabitants of the little town by the public drummer. There was no local newspaper then, not even *four-sheet* posters were yet dreamt of. A few small hand-bills were used ; but the advertisement chiefly relied upon was the 'Row-de-dow,

row-de-dow, row-de-dow, dow, dow,' of the town drummer. Twice a day the little old man went round the streets with his drum and two sticks, pausing every twenty or thirty yards to beat the well-worn sheepskin, and give notice that, —' This evening at the Freemasons' Hall, will be presented Shakespeare's tragedy of *Hamlet*. Reserved seats, three shillings ; back seats, one shilling. To commence at seven o'clock precisely.' At the sound of the drum, windows were thrown open and heads were popped out, and at the mention of the play every face brightened with anticipation of pleasure, either for itself or for others. The limited space and resources of the stage in the Freemasons' Hall did not admit of startling effects or sensation scenes. Shakespeare was acted with rigid simplicity. Banquo did not affect the supernatural. The Ghost of Hamlet's father had neither ramparts to walk upon nor a pale moon to shine on him, but walked on at the wing and spoke his lines *like a man*. The grave was indicated by a barrowful of mould —there was no hole for the grave-digger to stand in while he wielded his pick and sang ; and the skull was a thing of pasteboard. Realism and scenic effect were not so requisite to stir or sustain *our* interest. Shakespeare pure and simple, acted with the barest accessories, was treat enough for us. There was continual excitement in the little town the whole time the players were with us. All classes, from the highest to the lowest, voted the 'play the thing.' We were a dull community usually, but the players stirred us up—set us talking, reading, thinking, criticising. The rector of the Academy had seen some of the great London stars in

Edinburgh. He did not pooh-pooh the strolling company because he had seen Kemble and Siddons. He said they were 'very good, very good, indeed!' and gave all his big boys tickets to go and see them. The criticisms did not appear in any newspaper. They were talked over the toddy at night, or on the 'Plain Stanes' between business hours. It was a happy, pleasant time when the theatre was open in the Freemasons' Hall, and I am sure the community gained both intellectually and morally by the performances. We were all, of course, much interested in seeing the actors by daylight; and we saw them every day, and at all times of the day; for our town was very small, and they could not move from their lodgings without attracting attention. There was a green hill in the neighbourhood, whither they were fond of resorting for study. A fantastic temple stood on the top of this hill, and I have seen an actor in every niche conning his part. I used to follow them, and stand afar off to wonder and admire. I was particularly impressed by the leading lady, who enacted Lady Macbeth; but little did I dream then that I should write a piece, and that that lady's daughter would act in it. Little did I dream—though he, as he told me twenty years afterwards, was dreaming of it even then—that the slim young man who played Hamlet and Macbeth in our Freemasons' Hall would become the manager of a great London theatre, and attain to wealth and fame. It is a standing complaint of the small towns in the distant region of which I am speaking, that the railway has done them no good. They say it brings country people in at one end only to

take them out at the other, hurrying them onwards to the big towns in the south. So the railway has been detrimental to local theatricals. The better classes go to the theatre when they visit Aberdeen, Edinburgh, or London, which they do frequently, and there is no inducement for the players to travel beyond these boundaries. This, however, is a great loss to the thousands who cannot spare the money or the time to travel far afield. When I was in our little town last autumn, I found the hall of former dramatic triumphs occupied by a billiard-table. The actors had not visited the place for many years. One half of the people had turned fanatically religious, and sought excitement in Revival Meetings; the other half, I heard, amuse themselves dismally in the winter evenings with Penny Readings. I may be a partial witness, but my impression is, and it is the positive conviction of many of the inhabitants with whom I conversed, that the town has of late years fallen off intellectually very much, while morally there is no trace of any improvement whatever." \*

\* *Theatricals Far North*, from the *Era Almanac* of 1868.







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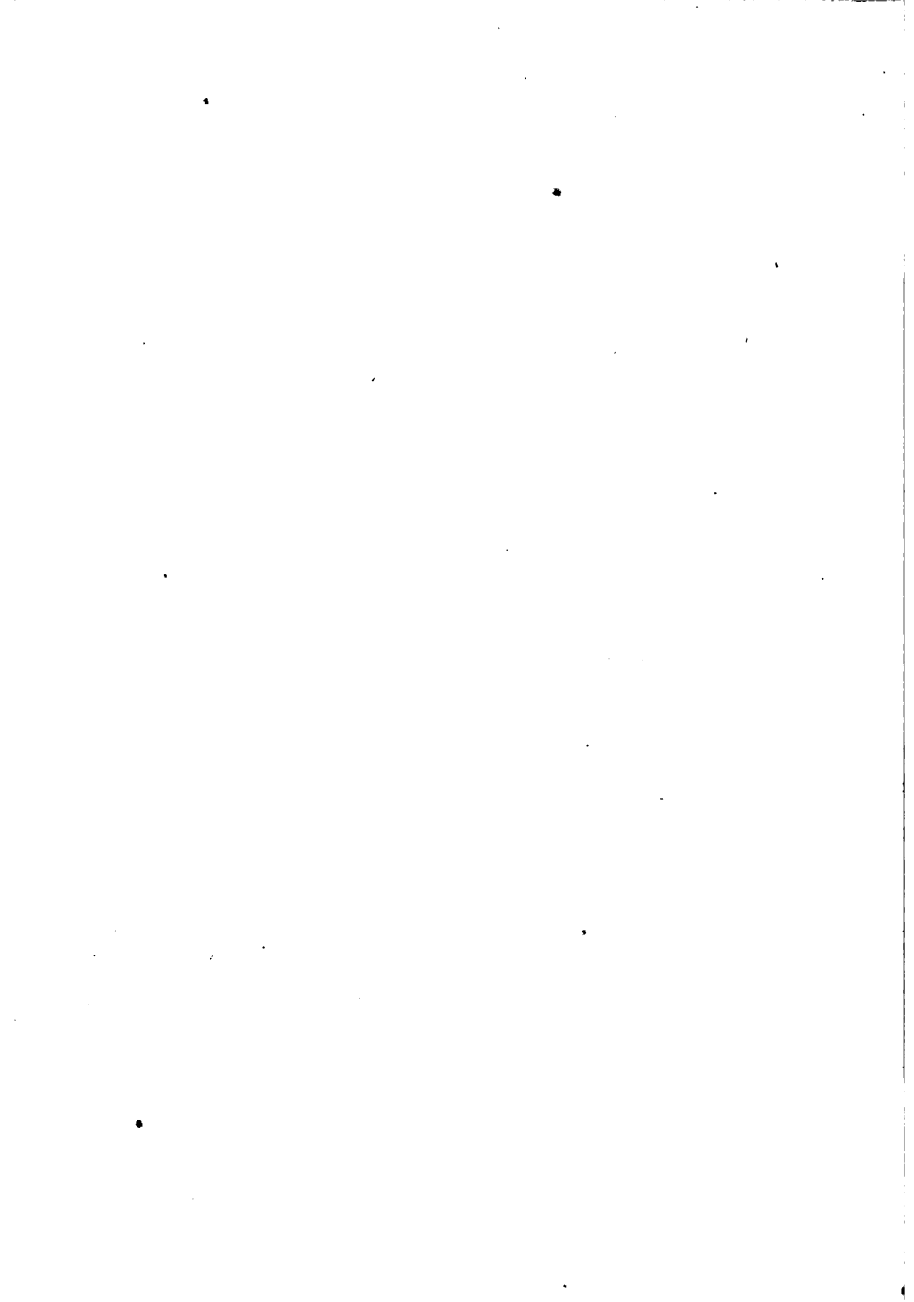
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