

EDWIN BOOTH IN LONDON.

BY E. H. HOUSE.

I.

ANXIETIES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS.



THE letters written by Edwin Booth in London during the theatrical season of 1880 and 1881, and published in *THE CENTURY* for December, 1893, give evidence of the great tragedian's inability to escape the depressing experiences which await all American actors who seek for an English confirmation of their title to distinction. Among the many who have left this country with the expectation of winning renown upon the British stage, few have come near a realization of the hopes with which they set out, or found it possible, even after long and persistent effort, to secure a recognition commensurate to their standing at home. In most cases the higher the desert the deeper the disappointment has been. Yet the ambition to shine in the land of Shakspeare and of noble dramatic traditions constantly asserts itself, and the hazardous experiment is repeated year after year by artists of approved rank, who forsake their fixed course, put aside the certainty of large pecuniary gains, and renounce the popularity dear to them, for the sake of tempting fortune in a field where the recompense of intellectual appreciation is not more valuable than in their own, and where the material rewards are so inferior as to be unworthy of consideration. Neither the example nor the warnings of those who have gone before and have often suffered bitterly are ever heeded. The spell must indeed be powerful that could induce a man like Booth to break away from his prosperous career, and exchange the absolute assurance of brilliant and uninterrupted fortune for a term of trial and anxious doubt, the issue of which was dependent upon the caprice of an alien community. In subjecting his established fame to the foreign test, he exposed himself to chances that were far from even; for, on the one hand, he risked the possibility, if not of failure, of a merely tolerant reception, which would have been to him as humiliating as the worst of failures, while, on the other, the extreme favor of his new

judges could have conferred no such profusion of honors as had been lavished upon him for the best part of a lifetime by his own people.

But the longing was irresistible, and though the ordeal was in some respects severer than most of his friends could have foreseen, he passed through it manfully, betraying no impatience with uncongenial surroundings, even when his artistic sensibilities were most rudely jarred. From the beginning he had the satisfaction of knowing that he was understood by the small circle whose sympathy was most needful to him, and before the end his triumph was attested by the acclamations of the multitude. This final acknowledgment of his power was gratifying when it came, but the long delay was irksome to one whose control over audiences at least equal in intelligence and cultivation to those he now encountered had for years been boundless and unquestioned. Actors to whom great successes have become habitual cannot suddenly find themselves regarded as suppliants for applause without some disturbance of their composure; and although it was not Booth's way to complain or to show vexation, there were periods when his discontent and dejection could not be wholly concealed. The financial barrenness of the undertaking was more of an annoyance than he would have liked to admit except to those who knew how lightly any burden of personal loss would weigh upon him. He was happily free from pecuniary cares, but in the estimation of the broad theatrical world high achievement counts for little unless accompanied by the ability to acquire money rapidly and abundantly. An actor's position among his fellows is apt to be measured by the amount he can earn in a season; and no matter to what eminence a «star» has been exalted, the habit of applying the same criterion to his own reputation will always cling to him. No one who was acquainted with Booth will suppose that questions of profit or loss entered largely into his calculations while in London; yet with the remembrance that for a single performance in America he was accustomed to receive from five hundred to a thousand dollars, it was natural and inevitable that he

should feel chagrined to know that he was playing night after night to bare expenses. Outbursts of approval from the slender audiences were frequent and cordial enough to encourage him for a while in the belief that «the public was with him»; but the record of nightly attendance at the Princess's Theatre gave little warrant for the hope that in the short time at his disposal the expectation he had cherished could be realized.

I had just returned to New York, after a long absence in remote parts of the world, when the opening of the London engagement was announced. Knowing from close observation in previous years what had befallen other American actors in that city, and apprehending the possibility of an unsatisfying result in this instance, I desired that the occasion should not pass without an emphatic public declaration of the esteem in which the tragedian was held by his countrymen, and an equally emphatic assurance that, whatever the outcome of his foreign enterprise might be, his position at home would always remain unchanged. A suggestion that an article to this effect be published in the «New York Herald» in connection with the report of the *début*, was cordially approved by Mr. Bennett, who furthermore proposed that a critical review of the relative abilities of Booth and Henry Irving should be introduced. The outspoken editor had no hesitation in stating his belief that any comparison, justly made, must be to the advantage of the American actor; but it did not seem that the moment was suitable for an examination of this sort, and the original plan alone was carried out. The article called forth a letter from Booth, in which his first views of the prospect ahead are indicated:

ST. JAMES'S HOTEL, PICCADILLY,
Novr. 23d, 1880.

MY DEAR H—: Welcome home! I wondered what unknown friend had been roused up to *Herald* my claim, or right, to something better than the faint praises with which the London critics are vainly striving to damn me. I cordially thank you for standing so stoutly by me. You will be pleased to know that the public is with me, and that from many *high private* sources I daily receive the warmest congratulations and most flattering letters of acknowledgment. . . .

If I can continue here through the Spring season, I feel pretty certain that I shall get all I came for—an unequivocal English endorsement, after which I hope to try the German temper.

If you *do* come to London next February, I hope you will find me still at the Princess's — my present engagement terminates the sixth of that month.

Again thanking you, and with renewed welcomes and kindest regards, I am sincerely yours,
EDWIN BOOTH.

Before the end of the year his anticipations were somewhat modified, and he wrote in a less confident strain:

Decr. 22d, 1880.

. . . My work is harder than I have been used to, and I do not receive the support I need from the company. If I get no other benefit here, I shall learn to appreciate the good will that has always stood by me in the American theatres. I am not doing myself justice, though I am told I ought to rejoice at the warmth of the audiences. An excellent, worthy old fellow in the company, one of the approved veterans of the London stage, assures me I draw a class of people seldom seen at the play in late years, and seems to think this a sufficient stand-off against the lack of bounty. But things cannot go on the same way forever. Spite of the applause, which is intelligent and well-directed, and hearty enough in all reason, everybody inside the business must know there's no money in the show, and the effect of this upon future engagements may be discouraging.

If I could have my own way in everything, it might be in me to command all the success I want, but I am too much a stranger to take the whole control. . . . These frequent changes, allowing no fixed impression to be made, are not to my liking, but they are part of the burden, and cannot be avoided. It is a satisfaction to see the audiences accept each new part with increased favor. Though the newspapers are not cordial, the public is. Financial success, as we reckon it, is a thing unknown in this country.

In February, 1881, I went to England, and from that time I was in close communication with Booth. His term at the Princess's was drawing to a close, and the engagement with Irving at the Lyceum had not yet been proposed. He was frank in avowing that his hopes had been too buoyant, and had begun to regard the first half of his year of exile as little better than wasted. It was not long before I heard him give free expression to this feeling in a memorable interview presently to be recorded.

The illness of his wife had already become so alarming that he had little inclination for social diversions. His circle of acquaintance included most of the men and women distinguished in art and letters, and he would have preferred rather to contract than to enlarge it. There was, however, one author and dramatist whom he strongly desired to know, but who was living in a seclusion which made access to him extremely difficult. Since the death of his friend Mrs. Seymour, Charles Reade had withdrawn almost entirely from

the world, and it was supposed by many that no intrusion upon his solitude was permitted. The idea was exaggerated, but as it was generally credited, Booth had done nothing toward arranging a meeting. The following note of inquiry reached me a day or two after my arrival in London:

DEAR H—: Here is a matter I will ask you to consider. I should be really ashamed for not paying my respects to Charles Reade long ago, had I not believed he objected to visitors. As you are living with him, you will know if he still shuns strangers. If not, will you take me there, without any formality or preparation? For the present I am not master of my time—always on the jump. But I hope for some freedom before the end of the month.

Wish Mr. Reade could see «Lear» in the meantime.

During the spring of 1881 a cheering influence came into Reade's life, under which the gloom of his temper gradually gave way. He was induced to break his home-keeping routine by first going to a theater at which one of his own plays held the stage, after which he gladly accepted an invitation to the Princess's. His interest was always great in everything that related to Americans, and he was especially pleased to welcome the «star» of the season, having in his boyhood frequently seen the elder Booth, of whose performances he retained a vivid remembrance. Early in March he witnessed a representation of «Lear,» to which reference is made in the following note from the actor, dated the 6th of that month:

DEAR H—: A very, very sick wife, and the wear and tear of my nightly strain (to say nothing of innumerable demands upon my time), make it impossible, just now, for me to appoint a day. . . . I'm sorry that Friday was the night that Mr. Reade saw me, for I was unusually disturbed then. I shall call on him, but not before I get through my *job* at the Princess's.

On the evening in question, Mrs. Booth, who, notwithstanding her feebleness, often desired to accompany her husband to the theater, had been seized in his room by convulsions so violent that the physician who was hastily summoned seemed for a while doubtful if she could leave the place alive. Yet the tragedian's self-control was such that, though «unusually disturbed,» his agitation was attributed to no exceptional cause by the spectators, but was regarded as part of the simulated emotion of the character. Reade was deeply impressed by the impersonation, which, as was his habit when under the spell of really fine acting, he ap-

peared to accept as a reality, and not a fictitious portrayal. His comments were not those of a critic, but of a sympathetic observer moved to pity by an actual revelation of human suffering. Even when the calls before the curtain were answered, his thoughts clung to the heart-stricken king. «Poor old man,» he said; «they have broken his mind, but see how he holds his dignity.»

In spite of the forbidding weather, unusually harassing in the early part of that year, Reade made several visits to the theater in Oxford street, sometimes occupying a box entirely alone—«to shut out England,» he said,—and, presumably, to let in Italy or whatever country might be in view. Thus he beheld «The Merchant of Venice,» concerning which he was ardently enthusiastic to his friends. «I would not have missed *Shylock* on any account,» he declared. «The scene with *Tubal* is the biggest thing I have seen on the London stage this many a year.» After dilating on the striking contrasts of the famous dialogue, he remarked sententiously, «The London press is an ass!» This was at a time when Booth's spirits were at their lowest stretch. «Am half dead just now,» he wrote, «with dyspepsia and raging headaches. My wife is steadily growing worse, and for two days past has been quite insane. . . . The announcement of the Lyceum combination knocked my business flat.» With the hope of giving his thoughts a less despondent turn, I sent him all I could recall of Reade's eulogistic words, the perusal of which appeared to gratify him, and the acknowledgment of which came in this form:

Mar. 29th.

I wish Mr. Reade would say as much for poor old *Shylock* publicly as he does privately. No matter—I thank him most heartily for his good opinion of my efforts. His judgment is to me beyond all price.

It consoles me, too, for the necessity of playing *Shylock* at the end of this engagement. I would have made a different selection but for the miserable poverty of Gooch's resources. Nothing that I wanted to produce could be decently done; but the end is near.

The falling off in attendance at the Princess's was no doubt correctly attributed by Booth to the announcement of his appearance at Irving's theater. It was what every one expected; but, worn out as he was by domestic anxieties, each untoward incident added grievously to his discomfort. It seemed to his associates that he allowed himself to be unduly disturbed by this particular circumstance, though it must be admitted that they

felt it pretty keenly themselves. As a solace to my own vexation, and not without the wish that it might afford some little reminiscent satisfaction to my friend, I took pains to publish in a London evening paper a statement of the average annual income drawn by him in his tours through the United States, and to contrast this magnificent revenue with the vastly inferior amounts secured by British actors of the foremost rank. It was not the most delicate method that could have been devised for celebrating our countryman, but it suited the occasion, and it was soothing to be able to show conclusively that at least he had not come to England as a needy adventurer in quest of gain. I am not sure that the story I told was credited on all sides; for the fact that an American actor's customary earnings exceeded one hundred thousand dollars year after year was too stupendous to be accepted with unresisting docility. But I was careful to keep within bounds, and to assert nothing the accuracy of which could not be established in case of need. That Booth was ready to indorse my statistics may be shown by an extract from a letter dated March 29:

Thanks for the clippings. You are quite correct in the figures. I look back now at my folly with self-contempt, to think what I might have done had I first banked my dollars, and built the theatre later — say now, for example. As it is, I have now lost all interest in management, «great revivals,» etc., and feel too tired to accept large offers for prolonged tours about our country, by which I could in a few years recover my losses.

That the unfruitfulness of his English adventure had by this time made it desirable to put some limit upon his personal disbursements is apparent from another paragraph in the same letter:

My expenses here are so terrific, — and will be increased if I remain through the season, — that I have resolved to move at the close of my contract on Thursday next. I have seen rooms, very comfortable and convenient, but not so cheerful as these, where I can live for less than half I pay here — and yet quite expensive.

II.

MEETING WITH CHARLES READE.

BEFORE the end of March the wearing labors at the Princess's were finished, and he was relieved of a portion of his cares. «I am indeed very thankful,» he wrote, «for this idle month; wish it could be trebled.» The most distressing cause of disquietude remained, but he now had leisure to prepare

for the series of performances with Irving, to which, as his mind recovered its elasticity, he looked forward with growing confidence. He was in a brighter mood than I had before seen him in England when he started to make the promised call on Reade; and the cordiality with which he was greeted banished all somber thoughts, for that day at least. The interview took place in the drawing-room of the pleasant house at Knightsbridge, described by its occupant in «A Terrible Temptation,» and lasted through several hours of the afternoon. Following an old newspaper habit, I noted most of what passed while the incidents were fresh in my memory, not with any distinct view of ever narrating them in detail, but mainly to prevent certain facts and critical suggestions from escaping me.

Those who knew the brilliant novelist are well aware that he did not ordinarily shine in society. He was more an observer than a talker, or even a listener—his partial deafness making it difficult for him to participate in or follow a general colloquy. Of all celebrities he seemed the least desirous to make himself attractive, and a more silent man than he in company could scarcely be found. Persons unacquainted with his works or reputation might have passed months with him, in constant intercourse, without suspecting that he was in any way distinguished above his fellows. On very rare occasions he threw off his habitual taciturnity, and discoursed not merely with animation, but with the earnestness and glow of an enthusiast. The faculty of arousing himself was not readily at command. Some touch of lively sympathy, some happy recollection, or the impulse to vindicate some cherished principle, was needed to spur him into full activity; but when thoroughly stirred he was easily the first of any circle in which he mingled. Without an effort, almost unconsciously, he held control; and while the career of his imaginative humor lasted the charm he exercised was irresistible.

I must hasten to guard against the supposition that he was in his most luminous vein on the occasion I am attempting to describe. If he had been, it would be beyond me to reconvey the magical effect of his speech. The flash of his singular magnetic power was visible only once or twice during the afternoon, when combating dramatic heresies odious to his judgment. But the meeting with a man whose genius had captivated him was an inspiring relief to the isolation from which he had barely emerged,

and a stimulant to his long-dormant energies. It awakened memories of the period when Junius Brutus Booth was still a commanding figure on the British stage, into which he plunged with ardor, relating incidents of probably slight public significance, but deeply interesting to his guest, who listened eagerly while various familiar traits of his father's personality were recalled. As a literal transcription of the conversation might be cumbersome, I confine myself, at this point, mainly to the share of the aged author. It will be understood, however, that he did not maintain a continuous monologue, and that much of what he said was prompted by remarks or inquiries.

"You know," he began, "what a round of the theaters would mean to a college lad up for the holidays. We don't forget the acting of our youth, and from about 1830 I had my chance at all that was worth seeing. Your father held his own when he appeared; there was no question about that, though his appearances were few. He was not so grave as you, young sir—not when I saw him. He was full of life, full of fire, and made the others look tame beside him, though they did their best to bestir themselves, for there was no lagging in those days. They called Kean impetuous, but Booth was more so. He never waited for effects, not he, but sprang upon them the moment they were in his reach. Very few things escaped him. If his body was not moving, his eye was always busy. It went to its aim like a dart. Yes, the stage was all his own while he was on it. That was the time of reaction from the pomp and deliberation of the Kembles. Kean began it, and Booth followed. Perhaps they carried it too far between them—high pressure, and no repose. They talked about Kean's moderation at the end, but he never meant to be subdued. His strength failed, that was all. His spirit was always riotous—and superb. May I ask how it was with your father? Did he change after he left England?"

Edwin suggested that his host had perhaps witnessed only such impersonations as demanded constant force and activity. He could not concede that his father's range was limited to any single class of characterization.

"Likely enough," Reade admitted. "You see, passion and vehemence carry young critics away, and blind them to other qualities. Yet it would spoil my remembrance of your father to think of him apart from his boldness and vivacity. Of course he knew his craft and how to choose his methods. Some

things, let me tell you, he had studied to good purpose. He did not trifle with Shakspeare's lines. Blank verse came from his lips like music. You have the art, too—his example, no doubt. I wish you could restore it on our stage. Give our actors a metrical speech to deliver, and—endure it if you can. They either gabble away the sense or hammer the melody out of it, one or the other—or both. You have been taught better than that, my young American, and I congratulate you. I think, too, I caught an echo of your father's voice in *Shylock*. I have a good memory for voices. If I had the faculty of imitation, I could tell you exactly how he delivered some of his favorite lines. You have the same accent—the very same. With my eyes shut, I think you might lead me back to my place in the pit fifty years ago.

"At the time I did not know much about the famous rivalry. Kean, I dare say, had worked hard for the first place, and meant to keep it, no matter how. Being in possession, all the odds were in his favor. I doubt if the public ever gave Booth reason to believe he could supplant the older man. When an actor gets his degree here, he is pretty sure to hold it as long as he has anything left in him. And Kean was a giant almost to the last. It seems to me your father was better off in America than he could have been here. Kean could n't touch him there, I am told; and from all I learn, there is more to be proud of in an American reputation than an English. I have heard your father regretted England, but can you tell me why? For intelligence and judgment our public cannot be compared to yours; and for liberality, the highest winnings here look like a pittance beside yours."

It was explained that the era of great theatrical prosperity in the United States had not begun in the lifetime of the elder Booth.

"Ah, but there was always the satisfaction of acting to people with brains. Do you think nothing of that? Upon my word, I wonder why such a lot of you come over to London without considering how your time and money may be thrown away. I am very glad, for my part; I see the best Americans without having to cross the ocean; but I am sorry for *them*. What phantom was it that brought Forrest here? A lusty cock on his own dunghill, he runs abroad into his neighbor's barn-yard, and gets crowed down for his pains; and then he sulks, and tries to set two countries by the ears. I think myself he was badly treated. There was a great deal

to admire in him. People may say what they like about Macready's superiority, but I can testify that Macready was not above taking the (business) that Forrest invented, and using it as long as he stayed on the stage. Some of the best points he made in (Macbeth) were Forrest's, not his own. I don't blame him for that any more than I blame Forrest for copying Kean's effects. An actor is permitted to strengthen his parts, according to Molière's maxim. But I do blame him for not offering a friendly hand to the stranger, and for letting his name and influence be so misused as to drive a savage-tempered hothead to frenzy. The responsibility for the bloodshed in New York does not belong wholly to the man who incited that riot. If the Englishman who bragged of his cultivation had kept his arrogance and vanity in hand, in the first place, the catastrophe would not have occurred. That is what I have always believed and said."

"The circumstances," Booth remarked, "were exceptional in every particular. If the two men had not been just what they were, the quarrel would have taken no serious form. Forrest, I think, was not half so self-confident as he pretended, and that made him the more sore under reproach. A little kindness from Macready would have won him; but Macready had no indulgence for anybody's faults, as I understand, and he made an enemy without caring for the consequences."

"Until it was too late," said Reade; "he cared when it came to be a matter of life and death."

"Probably; and so did Forrest, I suspect, if the truth were known. The event was a warning, at least. No such thing could happen again."

"Do you think so?" Reade asked. "I hope you are right; but when a personal rivalry is taken up as a national feud, people lose their senses on both sides, and both sides will go wrong. I suppose they cannot stay wrong forever."

"Not with us," said Booth. "If anybody in America remembers the affair, it is only to be ashamed of it."

"I am not surprised to hear that. I have more faith in the quick generosity of your countrymen than in the slow justice of mine."

"My countrymen have no cause to complain of *your* lack of justice, Mr. Reade. You should go and hear what they will say to you on that subject."

"Ah, yes; they would treat me well—very well—too well. I used to think of going, and

have laid out many a plan with our friend here. Lectures—no! It would have been teaching my children to suck eggs. I might have read them a new story, or put a new play upon the stage. It's too late now. I am too old to go through such a round of hospitality as they would give me. I should never come back alive."

"I think you could indicate your wishes in that matter, and they would be respected."

"Impossible. A guest must not dictate the manner of his entertainment, and it would be ungracious to reject any welcome kindly offered. And even if I asked it, I should probably not be too well pleased to be left alone. Besides," Reade added, with more seriousness than he had yet shown, "there is another consideration. I could not be at ease—it would go against my conscience—to accept what I should get in America, thinking all the time of the niggardly way we use your people. You don't remember, perhaps, what the Americans did for Thackeray. I do. And for Dickens, who had given them little reason to like him. He had many doubts about his wisdom in facing them again. I never had. They had shown what they were made of when, in spite of their unsettled grievances, they sent pity and help to Lancashire. I told Dickens his suspicions were unworthy of him, and I am bound to say that one of the first things he did when he came back was to send for me to Gadshill and confess how wrong he had been. He spoke with tears in his eyes, and said he envied me—think of that!—envied me for being the first English author to win the American heart by keeping clear of injustice. He said, too, that from that time forth he would write for the whole of his race, which he had never done before. He meant this, I know, and he would have proved it if he had lived."

"We have no Thackeray or Dickens to send you," Booth remarked; "but if we had, do you think their claim to gratitude would be denied?"

"I judge from what I see," answered Reade. "At least those who come in your line of work mostly get the cold shoulder. There was Jefferson, whose acting was the finest of fine art. Small satisfaction for him in England. Your brother-in-law, Clarke, had to fight tooth and nail only to get a place that was worth nothing compared to what he left at home. I admired his pluck, though I never could understand why he struggled so hard to gain so little. Your own case, if you will let me speak frankly, is a very striking illustration of the cold-blooded indifference that

irritates me. Is it credible, I ask you, that the leading actor of England should visit America, and be received there as you are here? What have we given you? Only a certain amount of fame, if I may call it so; and even that is probably grudged you by high and low in theatrical circles.»

«I have no reason to think that,» said Booth. «If Irving had anything but the best feeling, he would not have made the opening for me at the Lyceum. I had no expectation of it. So far as I know, it is wholly his conception.»

«He may have many motives,» replied Reade, «and they may all be good ones. It is a feather in his cap undoubtedly. If he makes a tour in America, and they say he thinks of it, his courtesy to you will turn out one of the luckiest hits of his life. Mark my words, his earnings, as he counts them here, will be doubled, at the least, in your free-handed country. I don't say that this is in his calculations,—though it may be without any discredit to him,—but the result is certain. Your friends will not forget his service, or let it go unrewarded.»

«Not if I can help it!» Booth exclaimed.

«Surely; and so it should be. I think, also, that Irving may be conscious of some American obligations in the past. He owed a great deal to the industry and devotion of his American manager, Bateman. We know what he is to-day, and we believe his success is deserved; but he might have waited for it many a long year without Bateman's helping hand. I have watched Irving since he first set foot in London, and I know that for four years he made scarcely a step ahead. Then, under Bateman, he went up like a rocket. They used to say the manager overdid it, but I like a man who will fight through thick and thin for his faith and his friend. Poor Bateman! His championship cost him dear in the end. His last tilt in behalf of his leading man brought the stroke of heart-disease from which he died. I suppose Irving has not forgotten that.»

«A man who can do a good turn is not the sort to forget one,» said Booth, with emphasis.

«Let us hope so. Certainly I shall always think the better of him for what he is doing for you. May I ask what the plans are?»

«Nothing is decided beyond the production of (Othello.) You may not know that I first had the notion of engaging the Lyceum, with Irving's people, and giving a series of afternoon performances on my own account, just to set myself right with the public in several

matters. My support at the Princess's often did me more harm than good. Every one there wanted to be the star of the play, whatever it was. Miss —— was determined from the beginning to act her tragedy of (Ophelia,) with my assistance as the lover. She had arranged it privately with Dion Boucicault, and nothing I could say would make her take the slightest interest in (Hamlet) or Shakspeare. It was the same with others, and only a few, like old Ryder, were loyal and trustworthy all through. I wished to present myself, before going away, with a first-class company, though of course I did not expect Irving himself to take any part. The scheme as it now stands is entirely his proposition. He does not believe in theatrical afternoons. He suggested our appearance together in (Othello,) taking the two parts alternately. It was a great surprise to me. I could not have asked for anything better, or expected anything so good. The advantage is all on my side. I gain in every way, and any one can see that Irving runs serious risks.»

«I don't see that,» Reade observed; «but there are plenty of details too deep for me. Is anything besides (Othello) on the cards?»

«Irving has suggested (Venice Preserved,) but I have no fancy for it.»

«Right you are! A fossil, in spite of its strong situations.»

«Something has been said, too, about (Julius Cæsar.) It would cost a fortune to mount this in the Lyceum style, and I surely would not encourage the idea. I ought to be content with (Othello,) which will run safely through all the time Irving can spare.»

«Is it true that the prices will be changed?»

«Doubled, I believe. Irving says they must be. That is one of the risks I speak of, but he is full of confidence. He does it more for my sake than anything else.»

«Then I hope it will turn out well. What are the indications?»

«Very good, I hear. I cannot judge myself; the conditions are all different from what I am used to.»

«I understand. We are too slow—and thrifty, I suspect—to run the swift American pace. Yet I can't see why there should be such an amazing difference in your theatrical business and ours. The stories we hear of New York profits sound fabulous. I should say they *were* fabulous if I had not seen the returns of Wallack's when one of my plays was produced there. A hundred pounds a night are nothing to you, it seems.»

«Two or three hundred would not stagger

us," said Booth, smiling, "nor four or five for a very great and special attraction. For several years the prosperous houses in New York considered one thousand dollars a fair average the year round. (Stars) traveling through the country, for whom the regular prices were raised, could sometimes draw much more."

"Were you at all prepared for the lower receipts here?"

"Not really prepared. I was told what to expect, but paid no attention. Clarke said I should get nothing at the Princess's, but I did not take his (nothing) literally. I thought I might count upon a thousand dollars a month at the very worst. He was right, however."

"I can't make it out," said Reade. "Your theaters are not larger than ours, and the prices of tickets are about the same. Yet I see the Adelphi or the St. James's packed, with about one half the result that Wallack's shows. It beats my arithmetic. You can't get more people into a place than it will hold."

"We do that, too, sometimes," laughed Booth. "But, as I say, you must come and find out all about it for yourself, Mr. Reade. Your audiences *will* be larger than the halls can hold, so you can study the problem under the best conditions."

"No, no; you tempt me to my destruction." But the compliment greatly pleased the author, who liked to hear such things said, though he affected a lofty indifference to praise.

Renewed inquiries respecting the forthcoming production of "Othello" led to a discussion of the power of Shakspeare to attract in modern times, and a lament on Reade's part over the abandonment of most of his plays. Beginning by expressing the opinion that a subsidized theater in England might be advantageous in keeping the neglected dramas alive, as the Comédie Française gives permanent vitality to the works of Corneille, Racine, and Molière, he launched into the theme upon which he could always be eloquent, and opened his heart in eulogy of his transcendent idol. It would be useless to attempt a reproduction of what he said. The words put on paper would convey a very imperfect impression of their effect as uttered. He had no rhetorical arts, nor even the gift of a good voice; but when his mind was filled with Shakspeare, and he chose to hold forth, he could enforce assent to any theory it suited him to propound. The absolute self-conviction with which he spoke carried hear-

ers away from their standpoints of judgment, and the mass of erudition at his command not only enabled him to strengthen many doubtful propositions which he sturdily maintained, but for the occasion to make fallacies appear impregnable.

As the afternoon drew to a close, the current of conversation grew livelier. Booth told, with spirit and merry humor, the story of his first impromptu appearance as *Richard* at a New York theater, in obedience to his father's eccentric mandate—a story too generally known to be repeated here. "I must note that in my collection of stage anecdotes," said the host. "I have a fine lot of them at Oxford. If you will come and see me there, I will dig you out some choice bits worth reading—some about your father, perhaps." Booth answered that, for every reason, it would delight him to visit Oxford under Reade's guidance. He knew what that meant from his brother-in-law Clarke. But he could not leave his wife a single day, and must forego the pleasure.

"If you stay through the year," Reade continued, "you might try Magdalen College at Christmas. We will hope for Mrs. Booth's recovery long before that. She and your daughter might like the place, though I could not ask them to sleep inside. Our ungallant founders forbade that. But by daylight my quarters would be at their disposal, and they could pass their nights at Mistress Davenant's tavern, where Shakspeare took his ease."

"That would be a treat indeed," the guest replied; and he may well have said so, for Noël at Magdalen, with Charles Reade to summon and vitalize the traditions of the venerable college, of which he was a "learned and authentic fellow," was an experience never to be forgotten by those who enjoyed it. "I looked," added Booth, "for signs of the old English holiday spirit last year, but could find none in London. If it survives anywhere, it ought to be in Oxford."

"You shall see plenty of it, I promise you." And with a cordial renewal of the proposition, and pledges of continued intercourse on both sides, the visit ended. But the two men never met again.¹ Booth would not go far from the

¹ I mentioned to Reade, some days later, that I had made notes of this interview, whereupon he expressed a desire to see how the conversation looked "on cold paper." His examination was laboriously minute, and I suggested that he was taking more trouble than the occasion warranted. "If you use my words," he said, still poring over the memorandum, "I must be sure that I can stand by them." He asked if it was quite fair to repeat what Dickens had told him in the freedom

suffering invalid, although a very brief and illusive improvement in her condition after the removal to Weymouth street seemed to warrant another suggestion for his diversion. On April 6 he thus referred to the situation:

. . . Thanks for your invitation. . . «I'm not i' the vein» for touring, even so short a distance as Richmond. While in this distressed frame of mind, waiting from day to day for some relief to this monotony, I can enjoy nothing. All I do in the way of recreation is for my daughter's sake—dine out when she is invited, and go to the theatre now and then to brighten her up a bit.

After a while, perhaps, I shall remind you of the drive to Richmond. I know I should enjoy a quiet dinner there with you two, were it not for this anxiety which I cannot subdue.

My new abode is in some respects quite satisfactory. 'T is a cold house, and the chimneys smoke; but I can't move my wife again, and therefore must endure.

Her mother arrived day before yesterday, and this relieves my anxiety somewhat. . . . When this way, drop in for a chat. 'T is not far from the Langham.

Kind remembrances to Mr. Reade.

From this time forth the records of Mrs. Booth's decline grew more and more ominous. I give her husband's last letter on the subject, showing that as late as the middle of May he had not wholly prepared himself for the fatal result, and presaging events which were prevented from taking the expected course by the evidence, soon after the return to America, that the end was near:

MY DEAR H—: In vain have I attempted to «go for» you several times since you called; it seems as though my life here is to be kept in a ceaseless whirl. When not «on the go» I am obliged to play nurse, my wife's reason having so far returned as to render her wretched unless I am with her. I fear I shall have to return with her to America at the close of my engagement with Irving,—at the end of June, I think,—but my engagements in the provinces will compel me to be back early in September. The parting will be dreadful, . . . but the doctor and her parents still think (and so do I) that 't would be better to go with her, and separate there, than send her away with them. It's a very hard choice to make. . . .

III.

«AN UNEQUIVOCAL ENGLISH ENDORSEMENT.»

THE latter half of April was fully occupied with preparations for the Lyceum perform-

of private intercourse, but presently concluded that it would be «just what Dickens would like.» Afterward I handed the record to Booth, who was not at all curious about it. He had gone «to listen, not to talk,» and did not recall having had much to say. But when he read

ances. Booth and Irving were thoroughly in accord, and it was interesting to observe how keenly the American actor and ex-manager was impressed by his confrère's excellent methods of stage direction. An extremely cordial feeling was exhibited by most of the company, though by certain outside coteries the alliance was not regarded with high favor. At the earliest announcement of Irving's plan, strenuous dissuasive efforts had been made by persons who saw, or affected to see, nothing but discredit and loss in the undertaking; and as these first devices proved unavailing, the subtler scheme was resorted to of circulating reports that Booth was distrustful of the Englishman's good faith, and was seeking an opportunity for throwing the whole business over. Having once had to do with theatrical management in London, and being familiar with some of its mysteries, I foresaw the evil that must ensue if such rumors should gain sufficient strength to excite misleading suspicion; and although reluctant to add to annoyances already oppressive, it was plain to me that Booth might suffer serious vexation, to say the least, if not put on his guard against the malicious intrigue. How the necessary disclosure affected him appears from a note written on the 13th of April:

DEAR H—: I am amazed at what you tell me! No such idea has entered my head. Only yesterday I sent some music, for *Desdemona*, to Irving, and now await his reply to questions I asked concerning rehearsals, etc.

Who the devil (sure 't is a devil) has concocted this lie? Perhaps I'd better see Irving at once about it. 'T is likely my wife's illness, and the reports of her dying, have given the cue to some wiseacre or mischief-maker. I hope it will cause no trouble.

I scratch in grt. haste—your note has this moment reached me, and I am *called out*.

Being promptly confronted, the damaging stories were made harmless; but it was pitiable to discover how many agencies, inspired by various motives, had been at work to sow dissension. Irving's over-zealous friends—those who professed, and perhaps really felt, an anxiety on his behalf—were not alone active. His rapid rise in the last few years had brought countless enmities upon him, and any cherished purpose to which he committed himself was sure to encounter bitter opposi-

the lines referring to Irving, he seemed pleased that his grateful acknowledgment might be made public. He could not have supposed, nor could I at the time, that sixteen years would pass before his remarks would be brought to light.

tion. The ineradicable aversion of a faction to everything American manifested itself in eager coöperation, and even some of our tragedian's own countrymen distinguished themselves unpleasantly by throwing in their mite of misdirected energy. It was not from any ill will toward Booth that these latter abetted the injurious proceedings: apparently quite the reverse. Resentful because their ardent expectations had not been realized during the engagement at the Princess's, they now thought it would make them happier to nurse their grievance, as they regarded it, than to admit the possibility of reparation at another London theater. Better, from their point of view, that their favorite should retire in dudgeon than accept the finest chance of establishing his fame that could be offered in all England. Thus, without the slightest unity of impulse, many parties joined in the endeavor to provoke discord by stratagems which, though unspeakably mean, might have imperiled the harmony of the enterprise but for their timely exposure.

The caprices of popular opinion were never more curiously illustrated than by the contradictory estimates of Irving's action at this time. The majority of observers recognized at once his friendliness and good-fellowship, but the small army of detractors pretended to discover in him nothing but selfishness and trickery. In their judgment, the prosperous manager was bent upon turning the personal misfortunes of the stranger to his own professional account, and exalting himself to the detriment of a foreign rival. The absurdity and injustice of these imputations would have been self-evident if rationally examined. Instead of being a promising speculation, the adventure was rash to the extremity of imprudence. The Lyceum was at its highest level of prosperity when Booth closed at the Princess's, and was filled each night to its utmost capacity by the entertainment already provided. Every one familiar with theatrical business knows the danger of altering a program during a term of success, and in this instance the alteration involved the unusual experiment of raising the rates of admission to a large part of the house. It was announced that in order to give the newcomer a reasonable share of remuneration, double prices would be demanded for all places except the pit and the gallery. This was at once resented as an unwarrantable invasion of popular privilege. The right of a manager to impose additional charges is one that the London public has always been slow

to recognize. In consequence of a memorable attempt to enforce it in the early part of this century, Covent Garden Theatre had been wrecked by rioters. And now the Lyceum was flooded with protests from all quarters, threatening a general withdrawal of the favor that had so long sustained it if the objectionable levy should be exacted. Many persons in Irving's position would have felt justified in yielding to such a storm of remonstrance; but from the moment his resolution was taken no sign of wavering was allowed to appear.

There was another matter for consideration which would hardly be called dangerous, but which might have touched a prominent actor in his most sensitive spot. Irving had led the dramatic race in London for some years, and expected to hold the first place for many more. But among the types of fickleness and inconstancy which the world contains, that volatile essence called popularity stands supreme, and the strongest-nerved man might hesitate a little before inviting such hazards as the proposed combination might entail. Some of the greatest of English actors have taken extreme pains to avoid them. Booth, indeed, had always been distinguished for his efforts to secure coöperation from eminent artists; but his exceptional position in America justified a hardihood which others might not think it wise to emulate. Old playgoers who had witnessed many mutations of fortune on the London stage were heard asking in the clubs and coffee-houses if it might not be the whim of the multitude, or of a portion of it, to exalt the visitor unduly, and cancel for a time the just claims of the native tragedian. Such a revolt would have proved nothing, and done no lasting harm; for it was not to be supposed that the freak of a wayward audience could permanently override the fair judgment of the community; but no event could have been more unwelcome to Irving than the conversion of his theater into a field of competition between himself and the American, and any endeavor by injudicious admirers on either side to set up a rivalry would have destroyed the whole purpose of the friendly union, and led to lamentable, if not disastrous, results.

Looking at all the possibilities of the case, I hold to the opinion now, as I did then, that Irving risked more than people supposed—more, it may be, than he himself took into full reckoning. I will not further enlarge upon what might have happened to his disadvantage. As to his hope of gain, what was

it? He could win approval for extending a consoling hand to a distinguished brother actor, and helping him to recover some of the equanimity he had lost through untoward circumstances; he could commend himself to the good will of the American public, and set up a particular claim to its cordiality, in case he should visit the United States; and he could identify himself and his establishment with a Shaksperian representation of uncommon nearness to perfection. I do not see that there was anything else to his side of the account. He certainly was not so weak as to imagine he would outshine Booth, and add to his own reputation at the other's expense. Pecuniary benefit was out of the question. The profits of the combination could not be larger than those of the regular Lyceum performances at ordinary prices. There might be a certain pleasure in «taking the chances» of so novel an enterprise; but Irving was not the sort of man to whom the excitement of a gambling operation would be especially alluring. There is no evidence that he was moved by a single unworthy impulse. Though the trip to America may have been in his mind, it does not follow that he was sordidly influenced by expectations of a material recompense for his hospitality. I doubt, indeed, if he could have formed any conception in advance of the acknowledgment in store for him. Few Englishmen can understand, without convincing testimony, how intensely responsive to generosity the American people are. Charles Reade knew it by intuition, as he seemed to know many other things which he had never learned by experience. Irving's knowledge came later. If he was actuated by selfishness of any kind, it was on behalf of his theater, to maintain the supremacy of which was always one of his dearest objects. An actor who is also a manager may care as much for the character of the productions at his house as for his personal elevation. Booth had once been thus inspired, and had lost a fortune because he was more ambitious for the beautiful edifice he had created than for himself. To have it recorded that the most brilliant Shaksperian illustration of the day had been given under his auspices, and within his own walls, was doubtless worth more to Irving than any calculation of present or future remuneration—more, probably, than any renown he could hope to win by the impersonation of *Iago*, which he was preparing with diligent study.

Reviewing all the circumstances, of which, before the consummation, the propitious seemed fewer than the adverse, it is a luxury to remember the superb result of the venture. The first performance was an event so far beyond the common course as to arouse enthusiasm even among those who thought the days of ardor and sentiment had long gone by for them. I cannot bring myself to acknowledge an unqualified respect for the London play-house populace as a rule, having witnessed too many demonstrations of the density and ignorance, not to speak of downright brutality, of which it is capable; but I recall that the audience of that night was one to which the least emotional of Britons might point with pride. Not that it was in any unusual degree aristocratic or fashionable,—these attributes would not have increased its worthiness for the occasion,—but it represented the very best intelligence of the community, artistic and literary; and while glowing with intellectual vitality, was most thoughtfully and sensitively appreciative of the conditions under which it had come together. To describe the reception accorded to Booth is no more possible than to analyze the effect of a great victory upon the imagination. It carried everything before it, like the rush of a stately river. Noisier welcomes I have heard, but never one more eloquent. It must have gone far to compensate the troubled stranger for the petty miseries he had endured. I think it shook him a little; for, though his acting was all his friends could have wished, a few deviations from his accustomed manner were perceptible in the early scenes, unaccountable except by the supposition of some overmastering strain upon his composure. And the plaudits were not confined to the first greeting. As often as he appeared, a wave of sympathy thrilled through the assemblage, and the house resounded with exhilarant acclamation. Not till then had Booth received his just tribute from England. He had conquered, and conquered completely, at last. Thenceforward through his brief engagement the tide of triumph rose steadily, until at the close he was made to feel that the purpose set forth in his letter of the previous November was thoroughly fulfilled; that he had obtained in the fullest degree «all that he came for,» and would carry away as his trophy, without the slightest drawback of a doubt as to its genuineness and sincerity, «an unequivocal English endorsement.»