

HOW TO MANAGE HOME PLAYS.



DURING the dark days before Christmas, when the unpropitious state of the weather prevents both the younger members of the family and the children of a larger growth from venturing out of doors, a difficulty sometimes arises as to how to pass away the time; and this is more

especially the case where large family parties are gathered together. Then, indeed, the amusement of the children becomes a perfect nightmare to the elders. At last some one suggests theatricals, or charades, and then follows the question—How are they to be managed? Having this state of things in my mind, I will endeavour to place before my readers a few ideas and instructions on the subject. I shall suppose that the play has been selected, and the parts “cast”—that is to say, it has been decided who are to perform the different characters. What I shall have to say will chiefly refer to a children's performance, under the management of the older members of the family. At the same time, I hope that my hints may prove useful to the “grown-ups,” should they think of “strutting their mimic hour” in a comedy or farce. For the sake of argument, I will imagine that the piece selected is one founded on a well-known fairy tale, written for the use and amusement of the young.

In the first place, I should advise the appointment of a stage-manager, whose business it will be to manage everything behind the curtain, and whose authority must be supreme. And I think if the stage-manager will follow up the ideas I want to give him, that he will be able, with a party of average intelligence, both to amuse them for many a day and to provide an evening's gratification for their friends and relatives.

The first thing is to select your room, and arrange your stage. If you have a large double drawing-room with folding-doors, you have your proscenium ready made; but if you have only a large ordinary room at your disposal, then the proscenium has to be constructed. But, whatever the room, it is necessary to have a communication with the house from behind the curtain. Of course, the chief thing to guard against is damaging the walls or ceilings, and therefore it is as well to personally superintend the carpenter you employ. I fancy I hear the prudent housewife exclaim at once, “Oh, if you are obliged to call in a carpenter, what an

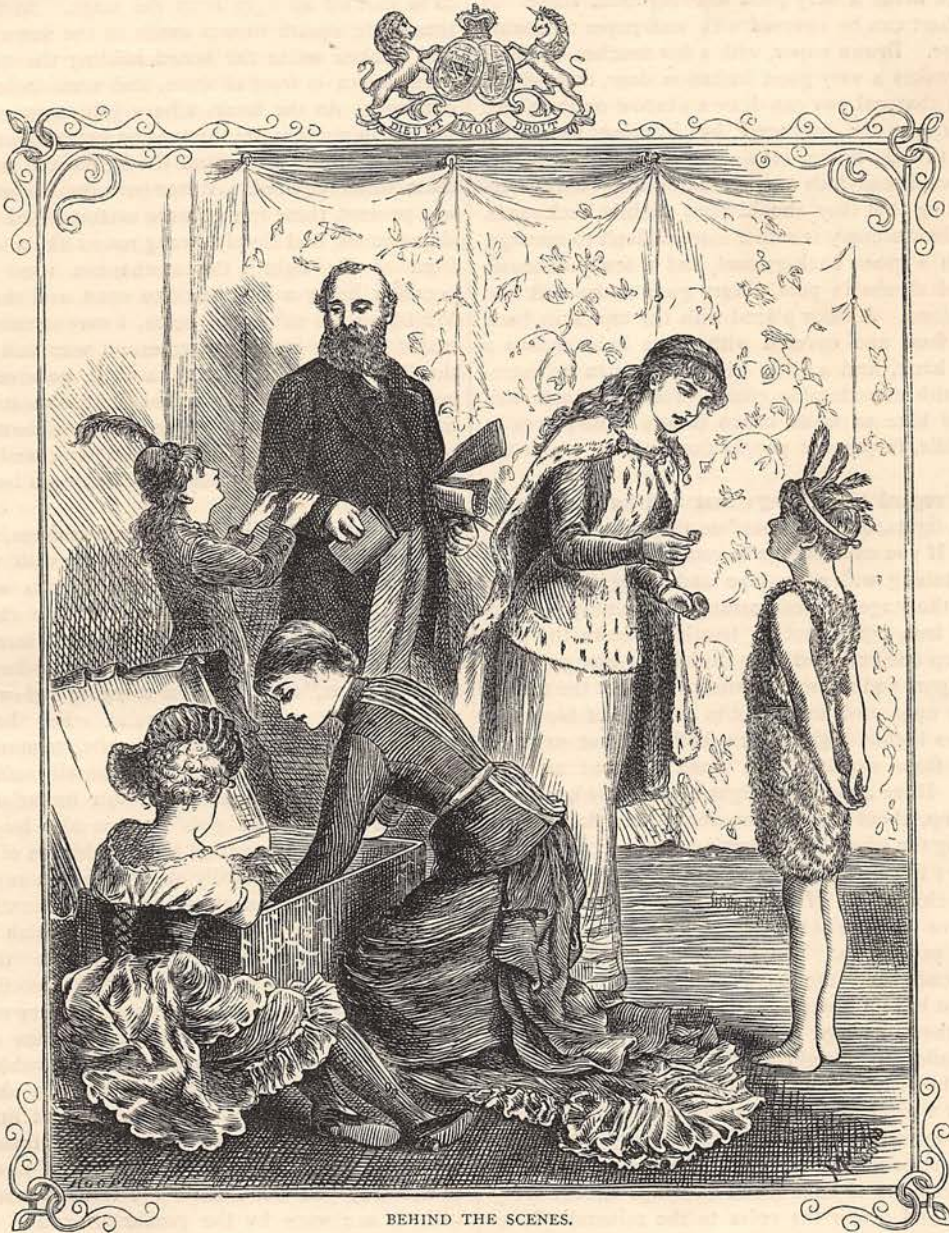
expense it will be!” And, in reply, I hasten to reassure her that the cost of the plan I suggest is a matter of shillings.

Having measured the height and width of your room, get two pieces of four-inch quartering—it does not matter how rough the wood is—and have them cut to within two or three inches of the ceiling—these form the uprights. Then take a similar piece of wood for a cross-piece, and having cut it exactly to fit the two uprights, wedge it up between the side-posts so as to fix them tightly against the wall, and then screw all firmly together. The uprights must be further secured to the floor by a couple of L brackets. Repeat the process half-way up, and again at the extreme end of your stage; or if your stage is more than twelve feet deep, at intervals of six feet. Then connect the three frames you have made with a piece of wood running along the top of each side. You have the skeleton of your stage complete, now you must clothe it. First comes your floor, and if your room is lofty enough it will greatly add to the effect if you raise the stage; and it is really very little extra expense, because you can always agree with your carpenter to hire the wood, then you have little else except the labour to pay for. I recommend a stage raised at least two feet from the ground, and rising gradually as it runs backwards, about six inches in every twenty feet. Here again your uprights come in useful, because you put similar cross-pieces to those used at the top at the required heights, and fix them with props all along the floor. Thus you form joists on to which you can nail flooring boards, which must project two feet beyond your first frame-work. Across your front frame-work, about a foot and a half from the top, nail a very thin board about six inches wide. You now proceed to decorate your proscenium with all the curtains, and valance, and fringes you can lay hands upon, and by the help of a few old muslin curtains, glazed lining, and skilful draping, it may be made very pretty. You must also hide the space underneath your stage with drapery and flowers. You ought to bring the top down about two feet, so as to hide the cross-board—the use of which I shall explain presently. The sides should be about two feet wide, so as to conceal a person on each side. The next thing to consider is the curtain. The simplest way is to have an iron bar underneath the top cross-piece, and let the curtains part in the middle and draw aside. By attaching a double cord to them and running it through a standing block they can be opened and shut at will from one side. I know, however, that many people prefer an up-and-down curtain, and I myself think it better as regards effect, but its arrangement is a little more complicated. In this case, you must first sew your curtains together—for, of course, I am imagining that you are using window curtains of rep, or some such material—and then nail them to a good strong bar of wood, which must be fixed about an inch or two below the top cross-piece. You must sew rings down from top to bottom, about

two feet apart, and these rows must be at intervals of three feet. On the cross-piece immediately over each row of rings is fixed a little brass pulley, and a stout cord is tied to the bottom ring and carried through the pulley and along the top. By attaching the ropes

turn round each end of the roller and carried back through pulleys to the side. This style, however, requires much stronger tackle, as the cords have to bear the weight of the roller.

Now comes the scenery. If you have plenty of time,



BEHIND THE SCENES.

to each other at a distance equal to the height the curtain is raised, they may by a little adjustment be finally concentrated in one string. It may be necessary to weight the curtain with a little lead along the bottom to cause it to fall easily. The third plan of a rolling curtain and act-drop is managed by fixing the curtain and drop to the top, and having it joined to a stout wooden roller at the bottom. One end of each rope is fixed to the top, and then taken with a half-

and a good-natured friend who is a painter and willing to help you, you are indeed lucky; the expense in this case is very trifling, the canvas being the most expensive part. The painting is done in distemper—that is, the colours are mixed with size, and not oil. The back scene should be made to roll like the act-drop, only the top piece to which it is nailed must be fitted into two sockets, so that it can be taken out and another scene put in its place. You will want wings

wherever there are side-posts, and these must be made on frames, about two feet six inches wide, which can easily be hooked on to the side-posts, and secured to a long screw partly screwed into the floor. Should scenery have to be extemporised, curtains hung across the back make a very good drawing-room scene. A white sheet can be covered with wall-paper to imitate a cottage. Brown paper, with a few touches of black chalk, makes a very good imitation door, and with a piece of charcoal you can draw a window on the sheet. Your wings are managed by hanging something similar to rods driven into each of the side-posts—I have found stair-rods answer admirably—always remembering that they should slant slightly backwards. Out-of-door scenery is rather more difficult to manage, but with a green back-ground, and a few judiciously arranged shrubs in pots, a very good make-shift can be obtained. A chair placed with the top of its back on the floor and covered with green baize makes a capital bank, and a little virgin cork can be introduced with considerable effect. You must also nail strips of blue or white calico to any cross-pieces in the middle, to prevent people from looking up to the ceiling.

With regard to lighting: first and foremost come the foot-lights, or the "float" as they are technically called. If you can manage to connect a piece of india-rubber tubing with a gas-pipe and bring it on to the front of the stage, you can arrange it capitably. Get a piece of iron pipe about six feet long, make the gas-fitter stop one end and then drill holes along it nine inches apart and screw in burners; connect the tubing with the open end, and lay it in a couple of blocks of wood two inches high, slightly hollowed out so as to keep it from slipping, and place in front of your curtain. Have a piece of bright tin, slightly bent over at the top, about four inches above your flames, and extending the whole length behind the pipe, to act as a reflector; if you bend this at the sides you will not require chimneys. If the gas is not available you must have recourse to the tinman for a few tin sconces to place candles in. You can stand a lamp-glass in each sconce, and the backs will act as reflectors. You must have a board as high as the glasses standing behind them, its legs being formed of two pieces of board nailed on at right angles and projecting about four inches each way. On the side nearest to the stage, fix a piece of stout wire to the projecting ends; this will serve to keep your glasses steady. Your top lights must be fixed to the piece of board nailed across the proscenium. I have found oil lamps answer every purpose, and prefer the colza to the mineral oils as being easier to manage. At any lamp shop these lamps can be got very cheaply. They are those used for hanging against the walls. A talc smoke consumer should be placed on each, both to diffuse the heat and save the colour of the ceiling. You must judge your number from the size of your room; I have found three sufficient for a stage fifteen feet wide. Having got all your light, you must now proceed to regulate it. If you have gas, of course it can be raised or lowered at pleasure, but with candles or lamps it is very difficult.

One plan I have seen tried successfully, and that was by means of a very light frame-work covered with black gauze in very thick layers; this was raised and lowered at will from the floor of the stage by a series of pulleys, and when up stood above the candles, so as to shut off all light from the stage. At the same time little square frames made in the same manner, and hooked on to the board holding the top lights, were drawn in front of them, and semi-darkness was obtained. As the hooks I have just mentioned were not put in straight, on the tension being released they naturally swung away from the lights and uncovered them when required. At one performance at which I was present, these frames were extemporised from old slate-frames, and simply swung round like a shutter in front of the light; the mechanism used on this occasion being a long stick to open and shut them. Whilst on the subject of lights, I may mention that a magic lantern burning magnesium wire will produce thrilling moonlight effects; a little powdered lycopodium blown through a naked light is most realistic lightning (in all these arrangements it will be necessary to take every precaution against fire), and accompanying thunder is imitated by shaking a loose piece of tin.

The next point I shall touch upon is dress, and this will be an all-absorbing topic, both with the performers themselves and with the friends who help them. Here you must throw yourself on the tender mercies of the ladies, and they will work wonders for you. Frequent recourse to the careful housewife's "piece-basket," and a world of snipping and contriving, will produce marvellous results. For boys, the ordinary velvet knickerbocker suits, trimmed with lace, ribbons, and gold lace, will generally suffice. By these means you can get a very fair imitation of the Vandyck style. The girls' dresses also lend themselves to almost any period by the addition of suitable trimmings. I need hardly observe that in any case of extravaganza a few anachronisms heighten rather than lessen the effect. In any fairy play in which animals are introduced, you must apply to a theatrical costumier, who has generally a varied assortment on hand, and who will lend them out at a very moderate rate. Much of this, however, may be done at home with hare or rabbit skins, nicely cleaned, rubbed with soap, and dried. The skins, when ready, should be stitched on to a dress made of calico, and fitting the performer. Hats may be manufactured from water-proofed paper sewn on a groundwork of newspaper. In this way you can imitate the three-cornered hats such as are worn by the *gendarmerie*, and covered with strips of gold-paper, and decked with coloured paper rosettes, they make first-rate head-gear for any soldiery required. This same paper, and American cloth, are well adapted for high boots of any kind. The wigs, when needed, are best procured from a regular theatrical perruquier. They may be hired at about a shilling a night for each wig. The same man will give you a little crêpe, or plaited hair, of various colours, which must be frizzed out and stuck on with spirit-gum for eyebrows, whiskers, and moustaches.

You can clip them back to the required shape with a pair of scissors after they are affixed, and they are easily washed off when done with. In fixing them, apply the gum on the face, and then press them on with a towel. There is much in this matter of dress, and in regard to "properties" also, such as fairy wands, swords, spears, and jewellery, which must be left to the ingenuity of the managers, who will have to devise them when there is need. Recollect tinfoil and gold and silver paper are very cheap and very effective, and may be applied unsparingly when brilliancy of scene is desired.

Another point may be mentioned here, and that is the "make-up," as the painting of the face is called. The materials are a little pearl-white and rouge, a little blue to imitate shaven chins, and yellow ochre. They must be applied dry with a hare's-foot. By these means you can get the complexions you want; then comes putting the expression on the faces. To do this, you must take a camel's-hair brush and a little water-colour paint, such as burnt sepia, and paint on the lines and shadows required. Here, and also in the dresses, keep well before you the effect to be produced. Remember that a strong blaze of light will be shining on the characters, and that the spectators are some distance off. Make your contrasts decided, and your lines firm and broad. What they look like to you is nothing, but how they will appear to the audience is everything.

And now comes the great point of all—the rehearsals. Without good and careful work, and continuous rehearsals, you are bound to fail, and to fail miserably.

With children, in one way, it is easier than with grown-up performers, because you can exact obedience, and teach them what they do not know; and if they are intelligent, it is surprising how apt they are at imitating and reproducing any gesture or trick of voice or manner that is shown them. With the elders it is more difficult to procure unquestioning obedience; but until you can get them all to submit to the authority of the stage manager, right or wrong, all rehearsal is vanity and vexation of spirit.

The parts having been cast and learnt, the rehearsals begin, and then the duties of the stage manager fall thick upon him. He has to watch that the crosses from one side of the stage to the other are made at the right time, and that the entrances and exits are made at the right places; nothing looking more absurd than to see a character walk through the wall of a room instead of the door close by him. He must attend to the crossing of one character past another, laying down the golden rule that the crosser always passes in front. It may not appear polite to pass in front of a lady, but it is certainly effective. Always before his eyes must be the living picture represented, and he must take every care that there is no crowding in little knots, or any confusion in getting to requisite places. Every position and change of position must be practised and re-practised, until the movement seems to follow naturally to the speech, and after a time the action becomes involuntary. Be sure always to let the character speaking be unimpeded by any one

in front; always clear away from the speaker. All business, such as giving a letter, drawing a sword, presenting a pistol, &c., should always be practised with the speech to which it is an accompaniment. Swords, and any unaccustomed dress or portion of dress, should be worn as much as possible in rehearsal, so as to get the wearers used to them. By these means you will avoid the necessity of many dress rehearsals, which cause a great deal of trouble, and are of little real good. Encourage appropriate gestures and business, and urge them to be used in rehearsal. That oft-quoted speech, "I shall be all right on the night," must never be admitted. At the same time, check any approach to over-straining for effect; in burlesque, especially, the unconscious gravity of the actor is the point of the fun. How comic is the effect produced when a small child in perfect good faith and seriousness delivers the most extravagant sentiments with an apparent utter belief in their reality! By exercising a little patience and tact, and, in the case of children, making the work play, you will be surprised how soon your company improves, and how interesting the task becomes as the work nears completion.

I must say one word with regard to the music. A piano is generally sufficient, but by the judicious addition of two or three stringed instruments and a flute well played you can increase the attractions; but beware of amateurs who will not come to rehearsals, because unless they have thoroughly practised a song or dance with the actors, it is impossible to fit it in. Music should always be introduced all through a piece incidentally. Stage music for entrances, exits, movements of a crowd, storms, struggles, combats, &c., is very easily invented, and is a great help to the performers; 12-8 time always appears to me especially adapted for stage movements.

I have hitherto omitted to speak of a very important personage of the company—the prompter. Not only does he prompt, but, with an attendant sprite as call-boy, sends word to the different performers as they are wanted. His book should be marked with the names for about a page before they are to appear, and then when he sees the name, he sends off to the owner to be ready. It is of the greatest importance to keep the wings clear during the performance, and all loitering about there must be prevented. It is easy to keep the actors waiting in the hall or an adjacent room, and have them sent for when they are wanted. The prompter has to see to the knocking at doors, ringing of bells, breaking of china, and such-like incidental business.

In conclusion, I can only say that the one great element of success is working earnestly together. All individual claims for prominence should be abandoned in the desire for a triumph of the whole. Often and often there will be great trials of temper, and unforeseen obstacles will arise. But in the necessary self-conquest, and in the development of the energy and perseverance necessary to surmount the difficulties, there must, I think, be some merit, so that it is not by any means time wasted should you decide to produce some home plays.