

## "These Our Actors."

### The Youth of Eminent Actors.

Forrest and Logan's First Appearance—  
Edwin Booth's Early Ambition—He  
Wanted to be a Circus Clown—The  
Boys' Circus—Death of the  
Horse—Entrance on Legit-  
imate Business—Stuart  
Robson's First Ap-  
pearance, and also  
that of Edwin  
Booth and J.  
S. Clarke.

By CELIA LOGAN.

When one thinks of the immense number of people on the stage, the questions naturally arise, what led them there, how did they get there, what gave them the idea that they could act? If the name they bear is an old theatrical one, the matter is easily understood—they are the children of actors, and became actors themselves by the same order of things that a lawyer's son is apt to become a lawyer, a farmer's a farmer, a physician's a doctor. It would be curious to trace the progress of individuals from private life to the glitter of the footlights.

My father was born and brought up in Baltimore, and was destined by his family, staunch Catholics, to religion. For generations it had been the custom to make one of the sons a priest, and the lot fell on my father, but he soon found out that he was not fitted for so severe a life, and ran away to sea; the utter absence of literature decided him to abandon that mode of livelihood, and to seek one more congenial to his intellectual tastes.

He then became a printer, and in after life when out of an engagement he took up the composing stick.

#### MISTAKEN LINE OF BUSINESS.

As a boy he made the acquaintance of Edwin Forrest, and in an amateur theatre in Philadelphia—of which I can find no account—my father made his first appearance. He was deeply impressed with the belief that tragedy was his forte, as Forrest was certain that he would make a great low comedy actor; my father selected for his debut the character of *Young Norval*, Mr. Forrest appearing in the force in a broad low comedy part. They were both as astonished as chagrined at the result, for the audience almost went into convulsions of laughter over my father's tragedy, and were plunged into the deepest gloom by Forrest's comedy.

My mother has told me that both were so mortified at the audience refusing to recognize their talent, as they understood its direction to be, that they actually wept and mingled their tears together after the performance.

It chanced that a regular theatrical manager was in front that memorable night, and was so struck by my father's humorous rendering of *Young Norval* that he offered him an engagement as third low comedian in his company, which he was wise enough to accept, though in common with all low comedians, to his dying day he thought he ought to have been a tragedian, and further, like all funny men, was gloomy to the last degree, except when with companions, who would spur him to partake of their cheerfulness, when he would temporarily cast aside his melancholy and contribute a large quota to the general wit and gaiety.

My mother had a girl friend who had eloped with an actor, and secretly they continued their friendship.

Being fond of reading, and the facilities for gratifying that taste being few in those days, my mother's friend lent her play-books, one of which happened to belong to my father. Its return led to an acquaintance, a marriage, and the founding of a theatrical family.

Sometimes one boy—the son of an actor—will influence the taste of many others, for instance Edwin Booth.

No less than three of our actors became such by their companionship with him—J. S. Clarke, Stuart Robson and Theodore Hamilton. They were all born and brought up in the good old city of Baltimore, were chums, and spent their brightest hours together.

#### EDWIN BOOTH'S EARLY AMBITION.

Booth's ambition, expressed as soon as he was able to prattle, was to be a "thorn in a circus," Robson's to be a tragedian, and Clarke's—called by the boys "Sleepy"—was to be anything to "give a fellow lots of fun."

As the lads grew, Edwin, the eldest, led them into the usual boyish pranks, and some that were not usual, for he determined to start a circus of his own—that was his dream of management then. Robson went in with him heart and soul, and their ambition fired the emulation and the soul of the other boys.

Mrs. Robson had a large cellar; in it a ring was formed, and the requisite sawdust furnished by a friendly wood-yard. Booth cabbaged a few faded dresses from the wardrobe of his father. The first step being taken, the stock rapidly rose to two cents a share, and was quickly bought up by every public-spirited boy in the neighborhood. Still capital was wanting. How—oh, how to make a raise was the question eagerly debated by the young joint stock company. At last "Sleepy" had a bright idea—Stuart must "hook" his mother's stove; it was large, not in use, would never be missed, and Robson must effect the abstraction.

Little Stuart hesitated, not so much because of the *morale* as for the reason that his mother, when duty called, handled a switch with skill and dexterity; but, appealed to in the sacred name of Art, he could no longer resist, and the stove was purloined. It proved no hollow mockery, for it realized, when sold as old iron, the handsome sum of one dollar and five cents. Little Robson, with whole-souled magnanimity, turned the entire proceeds into the treasury, amid the applause of every squeaky urchin in the Ward.

#### OPENING A CIRCUS.

Excitement was at its height. They had now the cellar, the ring, sawdust, clothes and money to "open the house," but the first essential of a circus was missing—a horse. What's a circus without horse-flesh? One at least must be bought—but how, and where?

"I know," said Robson, whose iron exploit had made him a hero and a leader, "I know where I can snare one cheap. Follow me!"

"Where?" asked the young actors in concert.

"To the boneyard! ha! ha! to the boneyard!" Attached to the boneyard was an auction mart, where old worn out horses were sold for anything they would bring; if they were too worthless to be killed, they were turned over to the executioner, killed and converted into glue and bone dust. One dollar and seventy cents made the troupe the proud possessors of an old scarecrow of a horse, which was led or dragged by a rope in the hands of Booth, and helped along by the cuffs and shouts of the boys. The poor old beast in the fulness of time was anchored at the cellar window of the circus. The only street entrance to the cellar was this same window, and the horse had to be yanked through somehow; it was only about two feet wide, but the company, by uniting their bone and sinew, managed to squeeze him in.

After this feat it did not take long to inaugurate the show. Edwin Booth was proprietor and manager; Sleepy Clarke, stage manager and general business; G. L. Stout, recently at the Eagle Theatre, prompter and leading man; Stuart Robson, general utility.

Admission to boys one cent; to Irishwomen, three cents, because they were usually fat and took up the room of two boys. Indeed they would not have been permitted to enter *others* at that exorbitant rate but that they were mothers of some of the audience and threatened to "harrup" such of the spectators as belonged to them in case they were not allowed to see for themselves what "thin boys was up to in that there cellar."

An organ-grinder was engaged to play lively airs at eight cents an hour, the riding-master, Clarke, cracked his whip, Booth in a clown's queer old rags, did the funny business, and the greatest living bare-back rider, Stuart Robson, mounted his fiery, untamed steed, and beat and begged him to "go round the ring once—just once," but he wouldn't, or couldn't; his old head hung between his knees, and he wouldn't budge. The entire audience, as well as the actors were in despair, and wanted to ride the broken-down brute, singly or in a body. Suddenly the organ-grinder started a tune, and Rosinante pricked up his ears, something in the air may have reminded him of his early days, or he may in more prosperous times have been a real circus horse—that question will never be solved—but certain it is that the poor old horse shambled around the ring as long as the organ kept going, to the delighted shouts of the boys, and never stopped until the instrument did.

The circus became an institution, and lasted for weeks. Never a horse received better treatment; the boys fed him so well that he grew fat, shaggy, and so useless that it was decided to return him to the boneyard, but he had "fleshed up" so that he could not be dragged through the window, and it had to be enlarged. In order to encourage him to crawl out, the organ-grinder was stationed at the corner of the street and struck up an old familiar tune. It affected the poor old horse strangely—he drew a heavy sigh and gave up the ghost. Such a time then as there was getting out the carcass and carting it away!

#### IN THE LEGITIMATE BUSINESS.

These our boy actors then determined to go into the legitimate drama, and having made money by the circus—for on some nights they had over two dollars to divide—they clubbed together and bought a set piece for one dollar and twenty-five cents from the Kilmist Garden, when it was selling out old scenes. Old Baltimoreans will recall the Kilmist Garden.

They played all the scenes before this one set, but it did not detract from the delight of the audience nor the power of the actors when they produced the thrilling and classical tragedy of "The Slippery Purse; or, The Bloody Thieves." It was withdrawn to give place to "Alessandro Massaroni, King of the Bloody Thieves." Booth played the leading serious parts. When their list of dramas gave out, they

were thrown upon their own resources, and put up the farce of "The Tailor of Tamworth. In order to convert it into a tragedy, and to give the audience a genuine sensation, they chopped off Edwin's head with a wooden ax.

#### AN OPPOSITION SHOW.

As sometimes happens to children of a larger growth, disaffection had seized upon some members of the original company, and it was secretly arranged to start an opposition show in Theodore Hamilton's mother's cellar. But the new company having neither funds nor scenes, John Wilkes Booth and Hamilton broke into the Robson cellar and stole the set piece! When Edwin and the rest discovered the foul theft, there was mounting in hot haste, and that set piece was secreted in half the cellars in Baltimore. Reprisal followed reprisal until it was torn in shreds, each company was ruined, and both mother's exclaimed, "A plague on both their houses!"

#### STUART ROBSON'S FIRST APPEARANCE.

The love of acting was now irrevocably implanted in the hearts of the boy actors, and Stuart Robson, for one, determined to make a serious venture to go upon the stage. "Mose" had just then appeared, and had made a great sensation. John Owens, manager of the Baltimore Museum, brought it out there. A number of boys were required in the piece to personate newsboys, &c., and to dance little break-downs. Robson applied for a situation, and was accepted. Fortunately for him, he was not wanted until late in the play, so he went through the ceremony of undressing and going to bed at eight o'clock, and as soon as his brother was asleep he hurried on his clothes, slipped out of the house, and was off to the theatre, arriving just in time for his scene, his good mother the while supposing him sweetly reposing in his bed.

One eventful night his elder brother was permitted to go out, but where he was going was not confided to the younger child, who, as soon as the coast was clear, shot out of the house. He came on for his scene with a swagger, and had but just taken the first step in his little breakdown, when, to his horror and dismay, he caught sight of his brother in the very first row in the pit. His brother rose, and the comedian did not stop for the order of his going, but turned and fled as if for life. He reached home first and had but just bounded into bed, clothes and all, and drawn the covers over him, when the door opened and his mother came into the room, switch in hand, followed by the elder brother, who, seeing Stuart apparently in a deep sleep, thought nothing short of magic could have brought him there in such double quick time.

"There!" said the irate mother, "there he is, quietly asleep! Didn't I tell you so? I saw the boy go to bed myself. How could he get out of the house and I not know it? What do you mean by trumping up such tales to frighten me out of my senses? My son Stuart dancing a jig on the stage! The idea of such a thing! I'll teach you to tell stories on your poor innocent little brother—I'll teach you!" and she did, if there and then a good dusting of his jacket could induce a boy into the science of fabrication.

The scamp Robson still chuckles over this story in telling it, and declares he never enjoyed—vicariously—a whipping so much, but the mine was sprung on him, and he did not dare go back, for fear it would explode; consequently John E. Owens does not know to this day what became of nor why that little boy took to his heels in such an unaccountable manner.

#### FIRST APPEARANCES OF A TRAGEDIAN AND A COMEDIAN.

It was my fortune to witness the first appearance on a regular stage of two of the boys named in this sketch, Edwin Booth and John Sleeper Clarke. Booth was about seventeen years of age, and true to his boyhood's inclination, he appeared in a melodrama, "Therese; or, The Orphan of Geneva." He was dressed much in the style which he now dresses *Hamlet*. The house was crowded—the Baltimore Museum—and he was so calm and self-possessed that his voice never trembled, nor did he lose a single point, and but for his boyish and beautiful appearance, might have been mistaken for an old actor. Nevertheless he was nervous and diffident, had small confidence in his own powers, little foreseeing the career in store for him, and I never see him in "Hamlet" now, and hear him say:

"Tis not my inky cloak, good mother,"

but that the inexorable past seems "like the fierce vexation of a dream," to melt away, and he stands before me the light, willowy stripling of the olden time, whose voice made the air musical.

J. S. Clarke never mistook his line of business, but engaged at once for low comedy. He made his first appearance at the Walnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia, speaking some half a dozen lines, but they were so well delivered, and he threw into them some funny little original business, that he was marked at once as possessing that indelible something indispensable to the making of one of "these our actors."