

Ferguson—Who Saw the Greatest Murder in Modern History

Still an important actor on Broadway, where he has been playing for forty-seven years

By Merle Crowell

IT WAS hard to believe that William J. Ferguson—one of the actors at Ford's Theatre on the night of Lincoln's assassination—was still playing on Broadway.

"There must be some mistake," I protested. "Where is he?"

"Up at the Casino. Drop around and see for yourself?"

I did see for myself—and rubbed my eyes to look at the program again. For in the rôle of Oliver Butts, a sentimental butler, Ferguson was leading several of the funniest numbers in "The Little Whopper," a girl-and-music comedy. His work included bits of eccentric dancing and snatches of song. To me it was the comedy hit of the whole performance.

Between acts I went back-stage.

"You'd like to have a chat with me?" repeated Ferguson. "Well, I'm pretty busy these days, but—"

"Oh, any time will do, Mr. Ferguson," I hastened to assure him. "Forenoon, afternoon, or evening."

A smile came into Ferguson's deep blue eyes and broke out a moment later on his lips.

"Suppose you listen to my daily program, young man," he remarked. "My home is out in the other end of Brooklyn. I get up every morning before seven o'clock, ride for half an hour on the trolley to the nearest subway station, travel about ten miles in the tube, cross the Hudson River on a ferry, and then take another trolley to the studio in Jersey where I am kept busy at the 'movies' all day. I arrive back here at the theatre in time for the evening performance, and when I get home again it is one o'clock in the morning. Really, the only spare time I seem to have"—and the smile grew broader—"are the six hours that I waste in sleep."

"How long have you been keeping this up?"

"Oh, for three months," he replied—and dodged back onto the stage. Ferguson has been playing before Broadway audiences for half a century. All the stage folk look on him as a sort of "miracle man;" and they were not at all the actors and followed their lines as best he could, for he was determined to master the details of their art. Soon he was entrusted with small parts—in which he made good from the start.

Shortly after the assassination of Lincoln, Ferguson went out in repertoire. For several years he was on the road, playing one-, two-, and three-night stands

surprised, two years ago, when he decided to break into motion pictures—where he scored an immediate success.

"I wasn't going to let a lot of youngsters get the jump on me in an entirely new field," he declared.

Grant's guns were still hammering the walls of Vicksburg when Ferguson first faced an audience across the footlights. Since then he has appeared before millions of people in hundreds of characters. He has taken all the male rôles in every one of Shakespeare's popularly acted dramas. With the adaptability of the true craftsman, he has played leading, comedy, heavy and juvenile parts at will. He has trod the boards with practically every great figure in American dramatic history since the Civil War. And to-day—with the Psalmist's three score years and ten well behind him—he is actually busier than ever before. Richard Mansfield, Edwin Booth, Joe Jefferson, Mary Anderson, Madame Modjeska, and Clara Morris are among the great actors and actresses with whom his name has at times been billed.

FERGUSON was born in Baltimore, Maryland. At the age of eleven he became a printer's devil on the Baltimore "Clipper." Although he soon learned how to arrange and set type he found little fascination in newspaper work. Already the theatre was beginning to beckon.

An opening came when he was sixteen years old. John T. Ford—a fellow elder with Ferguson's father in the Third Presbyterian Church of Baltimore—needed a call boy in his Washington theatre. Young Ferguson was offered the job at five dollars a week, plus what money he could pick up by serving as amanuensis to the actors. This latter work consisted in copying individual parts from manuscripts at the rate of eight cents for forty-two handwritten lines.

The double duties kept the youth occupied from nine in the morning until eleven in the evening. During every performance he watched *(Continued on page 86)* in Pennsylvania and New York. At one time he had seventy-five rôles in which he was able to take part on a day's notice.

There is no element of chance in the fact that Ferguson has been on Broadway almost continuously since he landed at Wallack's in 1873. Such was the program of life he deliberately chose.

"I had seen so many good actors ruin

their health in barnstorming tall-grass towns that I decided to stick right here in New York," Ferguson explained to me. "As soon as I was married I bought a home in Brooklyn, where I have lived for the last forty years. Rather than give up home life, I have turned down bigger salaries and bigger parts on the road.

"Some folks seem surprised that I'm still as active as ever. But why not? I've taken care of myself and lived a quiet, normal life. The only Broadway glare that has meant anything to me has been the glare of the footlights behind which I have worked. I've always been busy, and I have made it a point to keep cheerful and optimistic. If there is any better recipe for retaining vigor, I don't know what it is.

"I have little sympathy with those people who eternally croak about the stage going to the 'demnition bow-wows.' The theatre has merely changed with the times. Actors used to be more versatile, it is true. During my early work at Wallack's, our company had more than thirty old comedies and other standard plays ready to produce at a moment's notice. In those days we all knew Shakespeare so well that when one of his dramas was announced we welcomed the relief.

"Wallack's was a great school. I remember when Sir Charles Wyndham came there, at the start of his career, he was so awkward that he knocked over everything he touched. He couldn't even shut a stage door without slamming it. Under Lester Wallack's tutelage, however, he soon gained grace and ease. Eventually he developed into London's greatest light comedian.

MODERN audiences are easier to play to. A crowd of to-day comes to the theatre to be amused, and hoping hard that it will be. First-nighters, however, are a critical lot. Their attitude takes me back thirty or forty years.

"Of course there is no comparison between lighting and scenic effects, then and now. Instead of electric spotlights and colored footlights and borders, we used to have only gas and kerosene lamps. The lamps gave out more heat than light, and often in warm weather we would find the grease paint streaming down our faces.

"Joe Jefferson knew more about lighting effects than almost any man I have ever met. I believe he could give some good pointers to the electricians of the modern motion picture studios if he were alive to-day. When he was on tour, Jefferson carried with him a number of pieces of gas pipe, each equipped with a dozen burners. He got really fine lighting effects by hanging these up near the first entrance on both sides of the proscenium arch.

"Jefferson had a theory that dogs and other animals should not be brought onto the stage—that they could not be trained to respond to cues. Once, however, he was persuaded to use in "Rip Van Winkle" the dog that appears in Irving's story. On the second night the dog got hungry and chewed up the hose connecting the gas pipes. The company had to play that night with Jefferson's lighting plant *hors de combat*.

"There, I told you so!" Jefferson declared, and the canine rôle ended then and there.

"Once when I was playing in 'Jack Sheppard' with Ben de Bar at Montreal,

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every light in the theatre suddenly went out. But we kept right on with the play. Each actor came onto the stage with two lighted candles. He held one to show up himself and set the other down as a foot-light. By the time the play was over the candles had all burned out and the audience had to find the exits in the dark."

FERGUSON'S most successful rôles have been self-selected from the manuscript. Mansfield tossed him the script of "Beau Brummel," and Ferguson chose the rôle of Mortimer, which was one of the features of that successful comedy.

Incidentally, "Beau Brummel" gave Ferguson the opportunity to win a twenty-five-dollar bet from Mansfield. He was sitting in his dressing-room one night just after the comedy opened, when Mansfield paused at the door and commented on the attractiveness of a wig that Ferguson had just bought.

"It ought to look good," replied Ferguson. "It cost me twenty-five dollars."

"That's too bad," remarked Mansfield. "This play won't last. We'd better start rehearsals at once on something else."

"Do you think so?" challenged Ferguson. "Well, I'll bet you the price of the wig that the play is a big success."

Mansfield took the wager, and Ferguson's judgment was more than justified. The comedy ran three years in New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco.

When Mr. and Mrs. W. J. Florence were preparing to stage "The Mighty Dollar" at the Park Theatre in '75, Ferguson was scheduled to play the part of an eccentric English lord who carried a white umbrella. One day at rehearsal Ferguson opened the umbrella above his head. Thereupon, Mrs. Florence promptly fainted. Upon being revived she declared that the play was now doomed for certain failure. Stage folk are naturally superstitious, and the feeling spread through the company.

One of the actors was speaking dolefully of the prospects, when Ferguson wagered him a box of cigars that the play would run one hundred nights. He seemed destined to lose his bet, for the production drew poor houses from the start. At the end of the fourth week, just before the evening performance, a van backed up to the door and took away the furniture, which had not been paid for. Mrs. Florence succeeded in raising the money to redeem it and the play resumed the following night. Shortly afterward it became immensely popular and was the success of two seasons.

His ability in the art of facial expression—an early tutelage which he got from Joe Jefferson—has made Ferguson a particularly good subject for the movie camera. Among the silent dramas in which he has played since the spring of 1918 are: "Kittie Mackaye," "Little Miss Brown," "Old Dutch," and "The Deep Purple." In another motion picture, a revival of the melodrama, "The Fatal Card," he took the identical part that he played at Wallack's several decades ago.

"Dozens of actors have 'lined their pockets' from watching 'Billy' Ferguson's face and hands," remarked Andrew Mack recently. "He can do more with a look or a gesture than some folks can get across in a two-minute speech."