

VARIA

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Varia by John Ashton

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BY

JOHN ASHTON

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 'DAWN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY IN ENGLAND'
 'SOCIAL ENGLAND UNDER THE REGENCY' ETC.



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CHILDHOOD'S DRAMA

As Winthrop Mackworth Praed sang, ' I remember, I remember, how my childhood fled by ' ; but of no scene therein have I a keener remembrance than of my first stage—a present from my father—with plays all ready set up, and fit at once to give a dramatic performance. I have not the slightest doubt but that our intimate family circle might have differed materially from me as to the propriety of the gift, as it must have become an insufferable bore to them, whilst to me it was the source of pure and unadulterated enjoyment, and from the moment I was its proud proprietor I was its slave. My pocket-money was no longer my own, the all-devouring theatre, like many another belonging to grown-up men, claiming all my income ; for not only were new dramas imperative, but there were

heavy expenses to be met in the way of red and blue fire, oil for the lamps, cardboard, paints, &c.

These stages can be purchased now at the toy-shops, but they are not the theatres of my youth; the occupants of the stage boxes which take up the sides of the proscenium, who used to be dressed in the style of the dawn of the century, are now modernised, and are in consequence vapid to a degree, whilst the very orchestras are tame and unenergetic, and do not perform with the fervour of bygone days, as may be seen by the head-piece, which, however, is only a portion of a very varied instrumental orchestra which partially concealed the footlights from the spectators. These footlights were tin reservoirs for oil, with six wicks requiring constant attention and trimming—a proceeding which they resented by emitting a most evil odour of oil and a dense black smoke, which condensed into good greasy smuts. Besides this brilliant illumination in front of the green glazed calico curtain, there were single-wicked lamps placed at the side, which brought into greater prominence the beauties, architectural or arboreal, of the wings; clouds hung from the top, swaying in a most natural

manner with every breeze, whilst the scenes, mounted on stout millboard, were dropped from the top through proper grooves. There were two or three trap-doors, but they were difficult to work, and, except in pantomime, were very seldom required. The stage was provided with grooved slides for the reception of the characters, but if



SUSAN

WILLIAM

used they produced an unnatural effect—as, for instance, if William was on the same slide as Black-eyed Susan they must remain absolutely quiescent during the whole of their duologue, because, if William were to advance towards Susan she would retire in precisely the same ratio, and William would be no nearer to his love.

This drawback to the efficiency of the drama was obviated by having a number of independent tin slides, with long wire handles, by which means Susan might remain stationary or reciprocate William's advances and curvettings at the will of the stage-manager—besides, the poetry of motion was necessary for the other *dramatis personæ*, as, for instance, fairies, who are abhorrent and unnatural in a state of inactivity. Then there were set pieces, as Massaroni asleep, brigands carousing, &c., where no action was needed, and these had little blocks of wood glued behind them and could be left to take care of themselves.

The characters, scenes, wings, &c., were sold in sheets to suit the different sizes of the theatres, from one halfpenny each to threepence or fourpence plain, but double that price if they were coloured. No amateur could compete with the professional colourist; his best and most artistic efforts were tame and vapid in comparison, for he lacked the vivid colours of the professional, and especially was he wanting in boldness. Were it a garden scene, the colourist selected his brightest crimson lake for the roses, or he might paint them Prussian blue, which was quite as effective; whilst