

**THE STAGE LIFE OF MRS.  
STIRLING: WITH SOME  
SKETCHES OF THE NINETEENTH  
CENTURY THEATRE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649282562

The stage life of Mrs. Stirling: with some sketches of the nineteenth century theatre by Percy Allen

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Cover @ 2017

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**PERCY ALLEN**

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MRS. STIRLING AND MISS MARY ANDERSON IN "ROMEO AND JULIET."

[Photo: Dorney & Co.]

Frontispiece

THE STAGE LIFE OF  
MRS. STIRLING: WITH  
SOME SKETCHES OF THE NINE-  
TEENTH CENTURY THEATRE. *By*  
PERCY ALLEN. *With an Introduction*  
*by* SIR FRANK R. BENSON

UNIV. OF  
CALIFORNIA

E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY  
681 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

TO  
SIR FRANK R. BENSON  
IN RESPECTFUL APPRECIATION OF WORK WELL  
DONE, FOR MRS. STIRLING'S FRIEND,  
AND HIS—SHAKESPEARE

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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN I first saw Mrs. Stirling act, the theatre and the footlights disappeared. One seemed to be looking at incidents in the life of one's fellow men and women, to be overhearing their conversation, watching their struggles, their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, witnessing the evolution of their inmost soul and being, whether in the person of a great lady or a faithful retainer. The rest of the audience shared this feeling; all round one heard: "That's just what I should have said, or thought, or done." One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.

I did not know then that I should shortly have the pleasure of acting with her at the Lyceum in Sir Henry Irving's production of "Romeo and Juliet." When that day came, my first professional engagement as Paris, I met the Capulets' nurse on the stage, and again I felt the same sensation of enlarged life which I had experienced when one of a delighted audience. I was not in the company of Mrs. Stirling, but of a mediæval Italian nurse, so mediæval, so Italian, that she belonged to all time and to all nations, in the midst of the people, the environment, the period of the character she was representing in the spacious days of long ago at Verona, in a place where the ever young heart of the gray old world beat rhythmically, where life was full of sunshine and showers, of laughter and tears. This quickening influence produced in this instance by an artist of three score years and ten is surely a mark of the highest excellence and dramatic and artistic work. On whatever stage, in whatever age the scene was set, the same might be said of her.

To a greater or less extent this vitality seemed to me more frequent in the school of acting to which Mrs. Stirling belonged—including under this heading the Terrys, Kendals, Bancrofts, Sir John Hare, Sir Charles Wyndham, Dame Gêneviève Ward, J. D. Beveridge and the like—than among the younger artists. Not so noticeable, perhaps, in plays dealing with modern subjects, here we seem to have more than maintained the standard of British acting, as in romantic, poetic, and classical drama. Their methods were founded, not on a desire merely to exploit their own narrowing interest, eccentric personality, or self-conscious temperament round which the popular author of the day might be tempted to write an individual character sketch, but rather to enlarge their technique, sympathy, and understanding, so as to gain a capacity to represent as many human souls and bodies as a Garrick, a Talma, or a Robson. Charles Glennie in "Three Wise Fools" is a recent illustration of this sympathetic versatility, equally at home in romantic, melodrama, or domestic comedy. It was this which gave such poetry to that wonderful old nurse in the garden scene with Ellen Terry as "Juliet." I remember my own old nurse, after seeing the play, trotting round to all her acquaintances, asking everyone, "Did you see me on the stage at the Lyceum? Oh, I did laugh when I saw myself there with Miss Ellen Terry and Mr. Irving all so fine." In leisure moments "Nursie" was kind enough to favour me with many an interesting reminiscence and useful hint on stagecraft. From that day to this I carry recollections of wise saws and sayings uttered by her, by Phelps, Miss Terry, Irving, J. B. Howe, Fernandez, Haviland, Tom Meade, and many another. Thus Phelps' "Self-advertisement tends to kill an actor's chief asset, artistic sensibility." Mrs. Stirling in a duet with Irving: "In twenty-five years there will be no poetic or romantic drama, there will be no actors sufficiently trained to present it. Go and work as we did, six new parts a week sometimes; learn to get through your performance thoroughly and perfectly, taking infinite pains whether the audience be large or small, whether they or your fellow actors are drunk or sober; what though there is a hole in the roof through which the rain pours down on