

## THEATRES AND ACTORS.

ONE of the greatest pleasures in life to me is to witness a good play properly placed on the stage, and well acted. Theatres always had—provided there is something worth seeing there—a fascination for me. In fact I go so far, as I remarked once before, as to agree with Charles Lamb when he says that “the smell of a theatre is worth all the money?” Opera I delight in; but what I like best is one of Shakespeare’s plays—a tragedy for choice. My first impressions of a theatre were of a very mixed kind. One night, some centuries ago now—instead of the paternal order to go to bed—I was directed to put on my cap and muffler, and accompany a friend of ours to the theatre. What an announcement? I was to be taken inside a veritable theatre—that big, building where all the placards and pictures were, at which I used to stare and wonder when passing to school. I was very young at the time, had never been to a theatre, and yet my hands trembled with excitement when tying on my muffler, and my heart thumped with glorious expectations, whence derived I know not. I was soon in the open air running along with my companion in my efforts to keep up with him, and wishing that the streets were not so terribly long. The shops and houses were all illuminated, to celebrate what event I do not remember; but I do remember that my companion would stop, much to my vexation, and admire them. I dared not remonstrate. I was too young for that, and I had not been born in the colonies. Young people were brought up differently in my day from what they are now. At last, however, the fairy palace comes in sight; we enter the vestibule, the delicious aroma, which Charles Lamb so loved, salutes my nostrils. My companion shows some pieces of paper, and speaks a few magic words to the man at the door, and we pass up stairs. On the landing is another man, and beyond him is a door thrown open, through which I can see lights and a great crowd of people, and a green curtain. How my young heart beats! Why don’t we go in? Surely my companion cannot be admiring illuminations again—there are none here in the passage to admire. Shall I interrupt the conversation between him and the man by pointing out the beautiful illuminations inside that big room where the green carpet is hanging from the ceiling? I had better not, for evidently the subject is rather serious. “Well sir,” the man says, “You had better go and see the manager about it.” I am bid to remain where I am, and my companion goes off, I presume, to see the manager. What can all this mean? There is a hitch of some kind evidently. Crowds of ladies and gentlemen are meanwhile passing me into fairy land, from the entrance of which my eyes are never for one moment diverted. Suddenly the illuminations increase, and music is played. Oh! if my companion, who has such a taste for illuminations were only here now, he surely never could resist going in to see them. Why does he not return? And now a bell rings, the music ceases, and the green carpet goes up to the ceiling. What a sight bursts upon me! I must at all hazards go closer to that door. I make an eager step forward, when a hand is laid upon my shoulder, and a voice—my companion’s—says, “I am sorry I must disappoint you; but you must understand that this is what is called a benefit night, and my free passes are consequently not available, we have no alternative but to return home.” I was young, and, as I remarked before, I had not been born in the colonies. If I had, I might have known what free passes meant, and that there was another alternative, and I have no doubt I would have observed that admission was to be obtained by paying for it. And if that had not “fetched” him, I might have offered to “stand sam” myself, but home I certainly should never have gone. However, not having been born a colonial, and all this taking place many thousand miles the other side of the line, home I went with a heavy heart. Why my companion did not buy tickets when he found it was a benefit night, I know not, except that I have discovered since that those persons who are generally possessed of free passes look upon paying for admission to a theatre as the most wanton and sinful waste of money. They hate it worse than poison. Shortly afterwards we made another attempt, and as it was not a benefit night the little bits of paper had the desired effect, and landed me safely in the desired haven. On that occasion I saw the great American tragedienne, Miss Cushman, perform “Meg Merillies.” The most vivid impressions I carry away from that—my first play—are the staff which Meg Merillies bore in her hand, the buff boots donned by the actors, and that I with difficulty repressed a scream when Dirk Hatterick was shot. Of the acting of Miss Cushman I have no remembrance, and it has been a source of regret to me since that I was not a few years older when I saw her. She had, I have been told, great tragic power, though nature had not been kind to her in the matter of feature, and her accent plainly intimated that she came from Yankee land. Her Lady Macbeth nevertheless afforded by its breadth and vigor great intellectual enjoyment. I have often thought what a great treat it must have been to those who saw Edmund Kean in his best days—he, whose acting was, as Hazlett says, like reading Shakespeare through flashes of lightning. I wonder whether our actors have degenerated, or is it that we are not so enthusiastic in these matters as our ancestors. I know one “eminent tragedian” who, at all events does not think his profession has degenerated, for he asserts that “Garriek and Edmund Kean were all very well in their day, but it requires men of superior ability to please audiences of the present day.” Notwithstanding the assertion of this “world renowned artist,” as he is fond of styling himself, we never hear now of the great effects produced by actors as in days of yore. It is related of Garriek that he played the balcony scene in “Romeo and Juliet” with such fervor that the audience was in momentary expectation of seeing him jump into the balcony to embrace the lady—whereas “Spranger Barry”—his great rival—infused so much warmth and love into his portrayal of the part that the lady was considered no better than a block of ice because she resisted jumping down to him. A good story is told of these two actors. “Spranger Barry” was so successful in the part of Romeo that the

whole town crowded to see his performance. Garriek, who was playing at the same time at the rival house, was left without an audience. As a means of drawing back the public he determined on playing Romeo also. One night during his performance, after Juliet exclaims, “Oh, Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?” a voice from the gallery—pitying the poor lady, no doubt—cried out “because Barry is at the other house.” Though a greater actor than “Spranger Barry,” Garriek could not touch him in Romeo. The former, if we are to believe his contemporaries, was fitted by nature in every way for such a part—he had a tall and graceful figure, strikingly handsome features, a voice that earned for him the title of “Silvery-toned Barry,” and he was the best lover that the stage, up to that time, had ever known. He had, moreover, —what is no mean adjunct for success on the stage—a perfect taste in dress. He looked on the stage—as has been said since also of Mario—like a picture of Titian’s stepped out from its frame. In these colonies we have had instances of what aid proper dressing is to the success of an actor or actress. Barry Sullivan paid particular attention to it and was always appropriately, and when the character permitted it, most magnificently apparelled. He had good taste in stage dressing, and carried it off well. His Iago and Richard III. were models of picturesqueness in this respect. Many who had no great love for his acting would be drawn to the theatre merely to see his “make-up” in a new piece. Madam Ristori—the greatest actress of the age—who certainly did not require any extrinsic element of this kind to render more enthralling her wonderfully vivid acting, showed colonial audiences in her late tour that true genius does not disdain the smallest minutiae which may help stage effect. In several of her characters she changed her dresses over a dozen times, and each dress was an education to skilled modistes. Mrs. Scott-Siddons, likewise, is another artiste who has the art of borrowing from dress a substantial aid to her success. She charms you with her taste. The vanity of actors has passed into a proverb; but for my part I think you will find many amongst their audiences who are as deeply afflicted in this way. The difference lies more in the fact that the vanity of the actor is more transparent—it is a child-like and harmless species of offence. You are amazed to find the actor, who on the stage gives expression to noble and elevating thoughts with such fit gesture and accent as if to the manner born, passing a sleepless night because Tom Jones’s name has been printed a quarter of an inch larger than his. It is little matters such as these, when put properly before him, which help to cure the poor stage-struck youth of his madness. But the most effectual method of opening the eyes of such a one, is, in my opinion, to bring him behind the scenes during a rehearsal. In my tender years I was taken very bad with this complaint. During the paroxysm of the fever a celebrated actress visited the town which I then called home to give some Shaksperian performances. This lady was acquainted with the elders of my family; and she one day promised to bring me behind the scenes to witness a rehearsal. I was as much excited as on the night of my first visit to the theatre, and, as on that occasion, my feelings were at the end rather mixed. The day came, and I set out with beating heart, proud to be seen escorting one of the greatest and most beautiful actresses of the day. We directed our steps towards the back of the theatre, through a dirty lane reeking with foul smells, and inhabited, for the most part, by Chinamen. Once inside the back entrance, we had to mount a long flight of wooden steps devoid of handrail. It was so gloomy that I had to grope my way up them with my hands. I could not see them well, but I guessed from the state of my hands when I reached the top, that that part of the theatre and the scrubbing-brush had long been strangers to one another. We then went down a dim corridor, which brought us directly on to the stage, on which were gathered a number of slovenly, ill-dressed, greasy men and women, most of the former smoking bad cigars. These, I was told in a whisper by my conductress, were the actors and actresses. These, then, were the heroes and heroines I had so long worshipped. I could hardly credit it. My friend sat down on a chair, took out a piece of embroidery, and started working it. The rehearsal then commenced, and, shade of William Charles Macready, what a rehearsal! This great actor tells us in his biography, that up to the last hour of his stage experience he was in the constant habit of retiring to his chamber, repeating over and over again such well-known pieces as “To be or not to be,” etc., until he caught the true expression; and Edmund Kean would repeat a speech over to his wife twenty times until they were both satisfied with his mode of delivery. But on this occasion, on the rehearsal of a tragedy, the actors and actresses cracked jokes the whole time, and if a long speech occurred, the speaker would pronounce the first few words and then gabble, gabble, and wind up with the last few words spoken audibly. The sentiments which stirred my blood at night, when I heard them spoken, now had the effect only of disgusting me. It was so contradictory to hear a greasy, dissipated, and ill-looking specimen of humanity, strutting up and down the stage, bawling out that he would die for love and honor, and, “to make assurance doubly sure,” as it were, striking the boards with a heavy bludgeon, which was, indeed, not out of keeping with his general appearance. The actors and actresses, the dimly-lighted, vacant theatre, the dingy half-faded scenery and drapery, and my friend sitting like a queen in the midst of death, all made up a picture which will not easily fade from my memory. Contrasted with the performance at night, it put me in mind of a skeleton as compared with the living human figure. It dispelled my madness, though I was glad to hear from the star that all luminaries were not as these actors, an assertion which many a pleasant hour spent since in the company of members of the sock and buskin has only tended to confirm. X.Y.Z.

WE wish to draw the attention of our sporting readers to the Taieri Races, which will be held at Mosgiel, on Saturday, the 17th instant.