

AN OLD ACTOR'S MEMORIES

WHAT MR. EDMON S. CONNER RECALLS ABOUT HIS CAREER.

AN OLD STOCK ACTOR'S STORIES OF THE DAYS OF STOCK COMPANIES—JOE JEFFERSON'S INFANCY—EARLY DAYS IN CINCINNATI—HIRAM POWERS'S WAX-WORKS—JIM CROW RICE.

Mr. Edmon S. Conner, who was, almost half a century ago, one of the foremost of American actors, is to-day, at the ripe age of 72, as hale, vigorous, and fluent of speech as if he were but 50. For nearly a score of years he has lived retired, in the enjoyment of ample means and the affectionate esteem of a large circle of friends; in private life, appearing upon the stage only upon special occasions. At a complimentary benefit recently tendered him by the citizens of Paterson, N. J.—of which city he is a resident—he appeared as Richelieu, and that made the one thousand and eleventh time he has performed the part. What is called the "marked book" of this play was sent to him by Macready shortly after he produced it in London. Mr. Conner, speaking recently about old players, said that he had several such prompt-books, with the "stage business"—that is, exits, entrances, crosses, positions on the stage, and other important minutiae—all marked by the great actor himself, and, as no possible improvement could be made upon his "original business," Mr. Conner had never deviated from it in a single instance.

Edmon S. Conner was born in 1809, and made his first appearance at the Walnut-Street Theatre, Philadelphia, on the 14th of April, 1829, on the same stage and in the same character in which, five years before, Edwin Forrest had made his debut, namely, Young Norval, in the tragedy of "Douglas." Mr. Conner made so great a hit that he was immediately offered a position in the regular company of the theatre, for people in those days did not as now immediately go starring after a successful debut. His rise in the profession was so rapid that it was not long before he was the "leading man" at the Chestnut-Street Theatre, under the management of Maywood and Pratt. While here the play of "The Lady of Lyons" was produced in London for the first time. Fanny Kemble sent a copy of it to her husband, Pierce Butler, who gave it to William Wood, commonly known as Old Billy Wood. Mr. Conner was given the part of Claude to study, but the old man was about to take a benefit, and as the book was his property he claimed the right to the rôle. He was then 72 years of age, and so poor of memory that he could not remember the lines of a part. He appeared as Claude on his benefit night, but as he could remember neither the name of the character he was portraying, nor that of the opposite part, he called Pauline "Claudine." Thus, it strangely happened that Old Billy Wood, aged 72 years, was the original impersonator of Claude Melnotte in the United States. After Wood's benefit Conner played the part the second time it was produced in this country, and was the original throughout the West and South. Forrest, having obtained a book from London, produced the play at the Park Theatre, Mrs. Richardson being the Pauline. She was formerly Miss Elizabeth Jefferson, aunt to Joe Jefferson, and, like all of that celebrated name, was an artist of brilliant powers. But Forrest was sadly out of his line as Bulwer's love sick hero, and soon realizing that he could neither look nor act the part, abandoned it to others, principally to "Ned Conner," as he began to be called when he had won the hearts of the public. The next week after Forrest played Claude at the Park Conner followed him, "old" Peter Richings—young then and a magnificent light comedian—being the Beauseant of the piece.

Mr. Conner recalls a circumstance regarding Mr. Joseph Jefferson. He says that the great comedian was a remarkably small child at the age of 7, being hardly larger than other children at 3, but that he was beautifully molded. A man named Fletcher had then just introduced into this country living tableaux representing the renowned statuary of the old world. They had created a great sensation. During a certain Summer season Mr. Conner, with others, was in Wilmington, Del. One of the most attractive features of their entertainments was that furnished by little Joe, who, in white fleshings, white wig, and chalked face, was placed upon a small round table, and gave imitations of Fletcher's statuary, "The Discobolus," "Ajax Defying the Lightning," &c. He was hardly longer than the legs of the table, but so admirably he struck the attitudes, and so perfectly proportioned was he, that the audiences were charmed with the graceful, lovely boy.

Mr. C. A. Logan, a then well-known comedian, was the manager of a traveling company, and Mr. Conner has preserved a bill of their cast of "The Lady of Lyons." The play was performed in 1830, in Lancaster, Penn., where John W. Forney was then the printer of theatrical bills. The cast of the play was as follows: Claude Melnotte, Mr. E. S. Conner; Deschappelles, Charles S. Porter; Beauseant, Harry Henkins; Glavis, J. Thoman; Lord, George Stone; Pauline, Susan Cushman; Widow Melnotte, Charlotte Cushman; Madame Deschappelles, Mrs. C. A. Logan. The Widow Melnotte of Charlotte Cushman was a grand performance, and she was called before the curtain several times. Although this romantic old love piece still holds possession of the stage, can any modern play-goer assert that he ever saw a "widow" honored with even one recall? C. A. Logan was successful afterward in the West and South as Sir Peter Teazle, in "The School for Scandal," and Peter Simpson, in "Simpson & Co." He became so identified with these characters that he was always called "Peter" Logan, and few, even among his associates, knew that his name was Cornelius, and not Peter. He was a poet and playwright, and a number of the comedies and farces of that era were from his pen; yet so little importance did he attach to his literary reputation that he hardly ever claimed the authorship of his productions, and but a single manuscript of his now exists. It is a comedy entitled "Chloroform," and is now in the possession of John E. Owens. It was originally produced in Cincinnati, and afterward in New-York. With the exceptions of Messrs. Conner and Thoman not one whose name appears upon that old bill of the "Lady of Lyons" is now alive. Mr. Logan died suddenly on the Ohio River many years ago. Charlie Porter, a fine "old man," is also dead; the Cushman sisters are both dead; so are Mrs. Logan Henkins, and George Stone. Harry Stone, his son, is the manager of the Opera-house in Paterson, N. J. Thoman is in the Forest Home.

Mr. Conner went to Cincinnati and joined the stock company at the old Columbia-Street Theatre which was the first regular building erected exclusively for theatrical performances in that city. It was built in 1820, and was destroyed by fire on the night of April 4, 1834. No one knew the cause of its conflagration.

THE YOUTH OF HIRAM POWERS.

Mr. Conner went to board in a house where two persons lodged with whom he became intimate. They were a Frenchman named Dorfeul and a youth named Hiram Powers. Mrs. Trollope had just erected her ever-memorable arcade, and Dorfeul had but just thrown open the doors of the first regular museum in the Queen City. One startling feature which he presented to the public was called "The Infernal Regions," the singularity and effectiveness of which have never been excelled. After wandering through the museum and inspecting many really notable curiosities, the visitor was invited to descend to the lower floor, and witness "hell upon earth." He there found himself in a small theatre, or what would now be called "lecture-room," with an iron grating separating the auditorium from the stage. Presently the light would be suddenly entirely extinguished. "The most infernal, unearthly, blood-curdling yell, groans, moans, shrieks, and shouts would be then heard commingling with the rattling of chains, hissing of serpents, and crashing of thunder-bolts, in the midst of which the curtain would be suddenly and quickly drawn up and the terrified spectators would see through the grating a number of lost souls writhing in lurid flames. The shrieks would continue, the wretches would struggle to escape their chains and fly from the pursuing, demoniacal fires. So hideous an realistic was this picture of what was then the popular belief of the interior no that the audiences would seem to be struck with fear and horror, and often, as if for mutual protection, they would instinctively grasp each other, and those near the grating would clutch madly at its bars, which being charged with electricity, would communicate a shock to the entire audience, who mingled their screeches with those of the lost souls. Women would faint and men would rush from the den of perdition as if, indeed, the arch-fiend were in pursuit of them. It was a highly successful performance, but was thought to be somewhat too thrilling.

Among the curiosities in this museum were some wax figures, made by the youth who thought he had a talent for sculpture, Hiram Powers. Three friends were finishing dinner one day when Dorfeul asked Mr. Conner to come right over to the museum, as Powers had just made a new figure and he wanted his opinion upon it; so saying, he hurried off. Powers and Conner remained awhile conversing. Dorfeul was a man of middle age, wore gold spectacles continually and was clad in a light gray Summer suit, a buff vest, and a hat of peculiar and noticeable shape. His figure, too, was unmistakable. When Conner reached the museum he found a crowd assembled before a large glass case, in which stood Dorfeul with a frog in his hand, apparently in the act of explaining its mysterious organization to the people. Conner made signs to attract his attention, as he had evidently finished speaking but as Dorfeul did not notice him he edged his way to the case and tapped upon the glass. As he did so, some one behind tapped him on the shoulder. He turned, and there stood Dorfeul! Conner had unconsciously pronounced his opinion upon the new statue. Alexander Drake announced that at his forthcoming benefit he would appear on both sides of the stage at once. Drake had made a great hit in a comic song called "Love and Sausages." He was dressed as a tramp, and so he sang the couplet:

"There I saw that faithless she,
Frying sausages for he."

He used to throw a ragged pocket-handkerchief over his right arm and strike a laughable attitude. On the benefit night, when the curtain drew up there stood, as the play-bills had promised, Drake "on opposite sides of the stage at the same time" in the well-known attitude in which he deplored

the perfidy of the "faithless she." The audience could not distinguish the living man from the semblance, and many bets were instantly made upon "which was alive." Round after round of applause shook the walls of the old Columbia, until at length, wearied with holding his arm outstretched so long, it began to shake, and Drake's identity was determined. The figure had been made by Powers for the museum, but was first exhibited in the manner described.

The young sculptor's ability induced Nicholas Longworth, the vine-grower of Cincinnati, to send him to Italy to study. Powers was a newly married man. Longworth maintained him and his family in Florence for six years, for it was all that time before he became self-supporting. Longworth had come to Cincinnati a poor cobbler, with but sixpence in his pocket, yet by thrift and economy he managed to buy at tax sales a great deal of real estate which afterward became immensely valuable. Longworth never got over the unpopularity which in those days attached to a man who bought property in that way, nevertheless he was public-spirited and charitable, having been the pioneer in developing the wine culture in the West, and in fostering genius, as in the case of Powers. Although a foreigner, he gave to our country one of her best industries and her greatest sculptor. Before the day of fire companies every house in Cincinnati was obliged to have a certain number of leather buckets hung outside of the windows. Many a night after he had fallen into a sound sleep, after a late performance, Conner would be awakened by the cry of "Fire! Fire! Turn out! Turn out!" Out of bed he would spring to help pass the water-buckets. Women and the larger children, all hardly more than half dressed, would form a line on one side of the street, the men on the other. The men would pass up along the line from the river to the fire the buckets full of water, the women and children pass back the emptied ones to be refilled. In Winter the water would splash and freeze on the feet. One night there was a fire midway between the river and the canal, and water was passed from both sources. The old Columbia stood on the site of Woodruff's bath-houses, and the old National was afterward erected on the same spot. The Drake family were a magnificent company in themselves. Samuel and his sons Sam and Jim were artists, each in their line. His daughter Julia was a transcendently lovely woman and fine actress. She was the mother of the renowned Julia Dean. Mrs. Alexander Drake, daughter-in-law of old Sam, was a favorite in tragic characters. In that part of the country she was the original Evadne, and played most of Ellen Tree's rôles. She was the grandmother of Ella and Blanche Chapman, known on the stage to-day. Frederick Henderson, whom Mr. Conner remembers as a glorious actor, was the first old man. Other members of the company were Mrs. Charles Muzzy and her husband, Henry Schoolcraft, who afterward became a celebrated vocalist; Charles B. Parsons, who subsequently attained fame as a Methodist preacher, and a young fellow playing small "business" named T. D. Rice.

DADDY RICE.

It was customary then always to have a song or dance between the play and farce, and young Rice was very good in either. Negro minstrelsy was then in its infancy and attracted little attention but Rice was particularly happy in "little negro bits." N. M. Ludlow took a Summer company to Louisville. Among the members were Sol Smith, Conner, and Tom Rice. It was the first regular theatre in that city. Back of the theatre was a livery-stable kept by a man named Crow. The actors could look into the stable yard from the theatre, and were particularly amused by an old decrepit negro, who used to do odd jobs for Crow. As was then usual with slaves, they called themselves after their owner, so that old Daddy had assumed the name of Jim Crow. He was very much deformed, the right shoulder being drawn high up, the left leg stiff and crooked at the knee, giving him a painful, but at the same time, laughable limp. He used to croon a queer old tune with words of his own, and at the end of each verse would give a little jump, and when he came down he set his "heel a-rockin'." He called it "jumping Jim Crow." The words of the refrain were:

"Wheel about, turn about,
Do jis so,
An' every time I wheel about,
I jump Jim Crow!"

Rice watched him closely, and saw that here was a character unknown to the stage. He wrote several verses, changed the air somewhat, quickened it a good deal, made up exactly like Daddy, and sang it to a Louisville audience. They were wild with delight, and on the first night he was recalled twenty times.

Rice became known as "Daddy Rice," and "Jim Crow" was immortalized—the successes of Rice are too well known to need recapitulation. He played, but three star engagements—one each in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New-York—before he went to England, and in London his business was so great that Macready closed his engagement at another theatre for lack of support, the town being mad after Jim Crow.

From Louisville Rice went to Cincinnati. During his engagement there a man lay in prison under sentence of death for the murder of his wife. He used to write from 20 to 30 most excellent Jim Crow verses daily, hitting off local and political matters, and send them to Daddy to sing at night. Rice was very quick at improvisation, and wrote many of his own farces, like "The Virginia Mummy," "Oh Hush," and "Otello." A number of them still are stand-bys on the minstrel stage. Not only was he the original of all the lame dandies who have appeared since, but he was the original of the dandy dandy. Spruce Pink, in "The Virginia Mummy," was the first dandy, and entirely his creation, followed by that of "Dandy Jim from Caroline." Rice did not play the dandies himself, but utilized the character, dressing and training another performer for that specialty. As for himself, he was always the lame old "nig."

Rice died in New-York in 1860, leaving a comfortable fortune. Among the members of the company under Ludlow's management in Louisville in 1830 was Mr. John Gilbert, now of Wallack's. It was his second season on the stage, but he was playing old men, and in consequence even then, though so young, was called "old Gil." Sol Smith was the low comedian; Rowley Marks, a celebrated actor in "character parts," the second old man. Mrs. McClure, afterward so great a favorite at the old Bowery, was the leading lady. The company would play from city to city the old legitimate pieces, tragedies, comedies, farces, and occasionally a good drama, but they always wintered in Natchez, Miss., then a splendid place for theatricals.

MR. CONNER'S OWN VIEWS.

The superiority of modern theatres over the old Mr. Conner will not concede. He cites the old St. Charles, in New-Orleans, built by James H. Caldwell, who was the first to introduce gas into a theatre—the Camp-Street Theatre, New-Orleans. He also built the first gas-works in Cincinnati and New-Orleans. The St. Charles Theatre was the largest in the world, with the exception of the San Carlos, at Naples, and that was but three feet larger. The chandelier alone cost \$30,000, and was so large that a man used to come down on a ladder from the dome to the inside and walk around within to light it. It was a most splendid specimen of prismatic coloring. When the St. Charles was burned it was said that the fall of this chandelier was heard eight miles away. The new St. Charles, always considered a large theatre, was built on only one corner of the ground occupied by its predecessor.

Stock companies were always very complete, and Mr. Conner says he could start on a starring tour from New-York or Philadelphia to Mobile, playing en route at all the important cities, and find in each one a full company, from the leading man and woman down to the smallest utility person, all "up in" the legitimate parts, and ready to "go on for them at a moment's notice."

"Sticks, stamperers, and blunderers were then unknown," continued Mr. Conner. "A leading man was always able to play the star rôle as well as the second, so that if he were a local favorite he would alternate rôles with the star—for instance, Othello and Iago; Pierre and Jaffier, in 'Venice Preserved'; Richard and Richmond, in 'Richard III.'; Macbeth and Macduff, Damon and Pythias, and so on. Only when a leading man could play the same rôles as a star and 'hold his own,' to use a familiar phrase, was he acknowledged a first-class actor."

Mr. Conner was asked to define the frequently used expression, "A school of acting." He replied: "When a man has studied everything there is to learn in his profession, the same as other men do their trades and professions, that study may well be termed a school. No carpenter would attempt to build a house before he knew how to plane a board; no musician to perform a *chef d'œuvre* before he knew the notes of an instrument. In the old days, a man who went upon the stage had to carry first a banner across it, or form one of the ballet until he learned how to make a proper exit and entrance. He was then permitted to deliver a mes-ago, such as 'My Lord, the carriage waits.' If he acquitted himself well so far he would next be given a few lines to speak, or a small 'utility' part, as it is called, and so from grade to grade, a step at a time, he gradually crept up until he was capable, by experience if even he had no talent, of becoming a leading man. If he were possessed of talent merely, he could not fail of being a good actor; if endowed with genius he became a great one. This system produced a finish and polish on the stage that is almost foreign to it now."

"Then you do not think there is as much talent among our present players as there was among the former?"

"Oh yes I do," replied Mr. Conner, "Quite as much talent, but it is very crude. With the decline of the old legitimate there has passed away that necessity for close and arduous study and experience which give intellectual force, smoothness, and finish to histrionic renditions. Kings, Queens, and noble, self-sacrificing heroes, such as the old players in classic tragedies were forced to impersonate, are no longer seen upon the stage, and much dignity has vanished with them. Nowadays actors impersonate themselves, as it were, or people just like them, and for that little is required but "slap-dash," "hurry-scurry," and piquancy. The pieces correspond with the players. I speak generally, but a little reflection will convince any thoughtful, observant play-goer that the best of our living artists are those who have passed through such a training as I have described—for example, Joe Jefferson, John McCullough, Salvini, Bernhardt, and Rose Eyttinge."

"But surely you find some improvement in theatres now, do you not, Mr. Conner."

"Oh, yes—in the furniture." C. L.