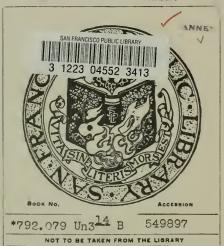
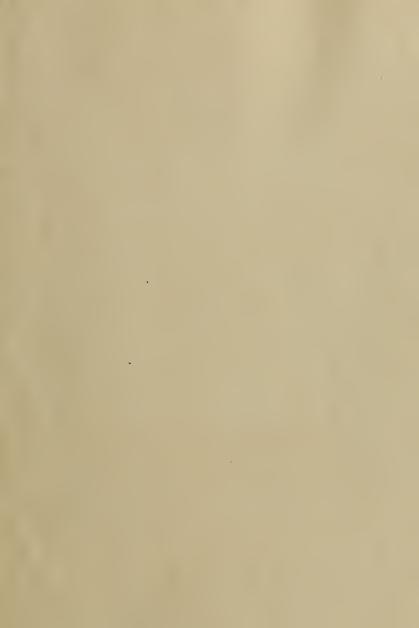


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# SAN FRANCISCO THEATRE RESEARCH

VOLUME XIV



BURLESQUE



Work Projects Administration Northern California 14 B 549897

Vol. 14

#### SAN FRANCISCO THEATRE RESEARCH SERIES

\* \* \*

A Monograph History
of the
San Francisco Stage
And Its People From
1849 to the Present
Day

\* \* \*

Edited by LAWRENCE ESTAVAN

\* \* \*

Volume XIV

A HISTORY OF BURLESQUE

By ETTORE RELLA

\* \* \*

San Francisco
Spensored by the City and County of San Francisco
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#### EDITOR'S NOTE

As in the case of MINSTRELSY, which has not yet achieved the distinction of separate historical treatment in the literature of the stage, the growth and development of that familiar, unrefined entertainment called BUR-LESQUE has not attracted an historian, and is to be traced only in scattered sources. This monograph, of commercial book .length, should prove a fair first step toward remedying the situation, for though the locale is San Francisce, the national, even international aspects of burlesque have not been deprived of brief notice. Similarly, the outstanding burlesques performed in San Francisco were performed also in New York and other centers throughout the country, often with the same stars or casts. Public reaction, too, was similar, so that this history may be said to be a representative one, at least as far as the general may be inferred from the particular.

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The monograph takes up burlesque in its earliest aspects, though the form is not ancient -- even as a literary appellation -- and certainly the character of performance so designated on the modern American stage is quite young. John Hollingshead, writing in 1898, pointed out that the very word "burlesque" was unknown in France or England before 1640 or 1650. Historically, we have burlesque which was, as this monograph explains, "an unceremonious take-off on a staid original," composed progressively in rhymed verse, partly in prose dialogue, and finally in prose. Today, a development of the nineteenth century, we have an extension of all these forms, and especially of the era of the sixties and seventies, of ""tiaraed and plumed nudity," the smutty double entendre, the obscene gesture -- all of this a development or off-shoot of the Manhattan musical revue, with the radicalism of its runway over the seats and heads of the audience to the final anarchism of the strip tease. This monograph has carefully and authentically woven into a significant narrative the story of burlesque in all its varied form and color.

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#### EARLY BURLESQUE STARS



WORLD FAMOUS RERESOR'S STARS WHO ROSE TO CONOURS

- 1. LOUISE MONTAGUE
- 2. LYDIA THOMPSON
- 3. PAULINE MARKHAM

- 4. MABLE SANTES 5. ADAH RICHMOND 6. VIOLA CLIFTON





#### HISTORY OF BURLESQUE IN SAN FRANCISCO

#### PART ONE

(1850 - 1870)

#### I -- IN THE BEGINNING

Colley Cibber was moved to write an "Apology" for the condition of the contemporary English stage of the late eighteenth century:

"...(the playhouses of London)...were reduced to have recourse to foreign novelties: L'Abbe, Balon, and Mademoiselle Subligny, three of the then most famous dancers of the French opera, were at several times brought over at extraordinary rates, to revive that sickly appetite which plain sense and nature had satiated. But alas! there was no recovering to a sound constitution by those merely costly cordials; the novelty of a dance was but of a short duration, and perhaps hurtful in its consequence; for it made a play without a dance less endured than it had been before, when such dancing was not to be had."

The age of Alexander Pope, the age of compressed, aristocratic wit, the age of a deliberately circumscribed complacency, of narrow, upper-class, classically schooled communication was over. The people crowded into the "minor

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Eurlesque 2

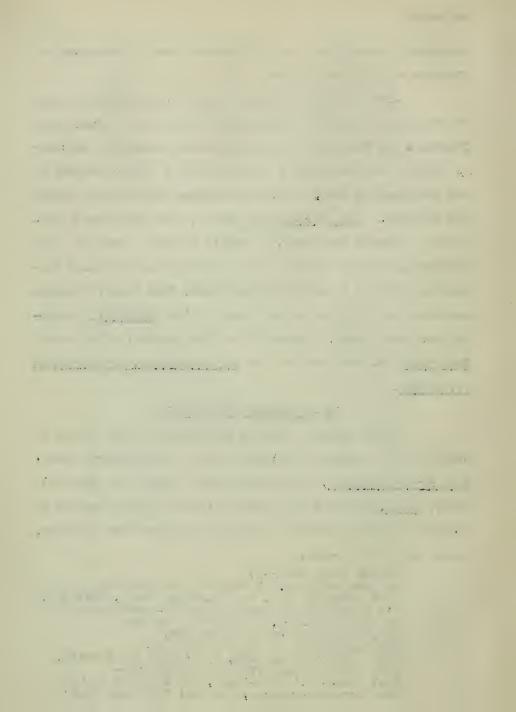
theatres looking for and applauding some approximate reflection of their own lives.

James Stark heroically sounded the abandoned ideas of the classic reportory across the boards of the Jenny Lind Theatre of San Francisco for several weeks commencing November 5, 1850. When Stark and his wife headed a return company to San Francisco in 1860, a decade of change was there to muffle the applause. The Bulletin for June 8, 1861 announces a theatrical benefit for Stark. Stark's friends were not only bolstering him up with practical sympathy; they were also laying the ghost of a noncontemporary form. That benefit program consisted of a portion of the second act of Henry IV, including the death scene, topped off by the farcical afterpiece of Jumbo Jim; and the drama of the Irish Emigrant, or Temptation vs. Riches.

#### II -- GILBERT AND PLANCHE

W. S. Gilbert learned the tricks of his trade by deflating the romantic afflatus of the contemporary opera. The Pretty Druidess, an extravaganza founded on Bellini's opera, Norma, the last burlesque written by Gilbert before he stepped over the faint line dividing burlesque from operetta, closes with this speech:

(Norma comes forward)
So ends our play. I come to speak the tag,
With downcast eyes, and faltering steps, that lag,
I'm cowed and conscience-stricken--for tonight
We have, no doubt, contributed our mite
To justify that topic of the age,
The degradation of the English stage.
More courage to my task, I, p'rhaps might bring,
Were this a drama with real everything-Real cabs--real lime-light, too in which to bask-Real turnpike-keepers, and real Grant and Gask:



Burlesque 3

But no--the piece is common-place, grotesque,
A solemn folly--a proscribed burlesque!
So for burlesque I plead. Forgive our rhymes;
Forgive the jokes you've heard five thousand times;
Forgive each breakdown, cellar-flap, and clog,
Our low-bred songs--our slangy dialogue;
And, above all--oh, ye with double barrel-Forgive the scantiness of our apparel!

And the people did forgive, because they were forgiving their own familiar world. They were beholding and
forgiving their own rowdy discomfiture with the artistic
niceties and subtleties of the upper classes. And the absolution was legal and complete because it was administered
in a public place and openly paid for. This excerpt from
Gilbert -- aside from its merit -- is valuable because it is
so self-conscious of the form of the burlesque.

One of the repercussions to the rise of the burlesque was a corresponding rise of the fairyland morality play. Appended to the outline of "The Argument" of such a play (Babil and Bijou by James Robinson Planche') is this note:

"This scene is intended to shadow forth the revolutionary changes that are taking place in poetry and art. Our aspiring meditative spirit (Melusine) has descended from the world of ideas to the world of business. The purer power is dethroned, and fact (Pragma), with her son, investigation (Skepsis), are the reigning influences in our minds. The working-classes of thought are thus displacing the higher powers of imagination."\*

<sup>\*</sup> This note was written by Dion Boucicault, one of the many well-known actor-playwrights who came to San Francisco in the 1870s, to star with the famous stock company at the California Theatre on Bush Street. He was later Maxine Elliott's tutor.

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#### III -- TAKE-OFFS AND PUNS

Both of the foregoing quotations, no matter how revealing of the sensibility of the period, to the present-day reader seem tangential to the burlesque itself; and this is always the case with contemporary descriptions of an object, the exact details of which were taken for granted.

How, more particularly, can the burlesque be distinguished -- the burlesque in its true form, as apart from the more muddled forms which preceded it, were coexistent with it, and followed it?

In the first place, the burlesque was an unceremonious take-off of a staid original. Burlesques were often described as "travesties." Not only the current opera, but the current polite "cup-and-saucer" play as well, stimulated its own distorted, critical reflection in a counterpart burlesque. Norma in one instance became Mrs. Normer; La Sonnambula became The Roof Scrambler; The Bohemian Girl became The Merry Zingara, or The Tipsy Gipsy and The Pipsy Vipsy; The Bayadère, or The Maid of Cashmere was twisted around to Buy It Dear, It's Made of Cashmere; Manfred was merely hyphenated into Man-Fred; La Figlia del Reggimento was made obvious by La Vivandière or True to the Corps.

The puns inherent in these titles indicate a quality inherent in the whole burlesque; inherent in the whole nineteenth century which pursued an aggravated pleasure in the mesmerizing thoughtlessness of endless puns:

#### 

TILBURNIA:

Papa! Listen, and forgive me. He once paid his addresses to me.

GOVERNOR:

Did he? He doesn't do it now, or he'd have PUT A STAMP on his letter.

TILBURINA:

If a ship's feminine, how can she be a MAN-of-war?

ESSEX:

To business:The Governor of Tilb'ry we suspect
Of doing ev'rything that's not correct.
He is accused of systematic robbery,
Of bribery, corruption and of jobbery;
Of mixing birch brooms with the tea: 'tis odd
If where he's spared no birch we spare the rod.
His men he's worked, half wages, overtime;
He has sent coals to Newcastle!--a crime
So coaled--I mean, so called--by those who've spoke
On law, see BLACK-STONE, LYTTLE-TON, and COKE.
His books, which not one proper entry leavens,
Will all be found at sixes and at sevens,
Like gloves. If proved, he'll be, the law advises,
Tried, at the FITTING TIME, at the next 'SIZES.

These quotations, italics included, are from Elizabeth, or The Invisible Armada, an "Original Burlesque" by F. C. Burnand. Joseph Severn, with forward, unseeing solicitation, accompanied John Keats to his death in Italy in 1820. From quarantine in the harbor of Naples, Severn wrote to their friend William Hazlitt in England:

"...We are in good spirits and I may say hopeful fellows--at least I may say as much for Keats--he made an Italian pun today--the rain is coming down in torrents..."\*

Early in the 1870s, F. C. Burnand wrote a burlesque "partly in prose dialogue, which was a new departure."\*\*

<sup>\*</sup> Sharp, William The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn.
\*\*Burnand, Sir F. C. (English dramatist) Records and Reminis-

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Burlesque 6

A departure from another typical quality of the "classical" burlesque: coupleted iambic pentameter. The elegant, incisive couplet of the late eighteenth century had relaxed in burlesque to the limited subtlety of a two-faced rhyme.

And the audience craned their necks for the double meaning throughout the traditional five scenes of the story, played without interval. It was not until approximately 1885 that the three-act form of the burlesque appeared.

If the staid original was an opera, the musical element of the burlesque was conveniently available. If the burlesque referred to a serious play of the period, or was "original," the music became an eclectic, nearly as possible appropriate, embellishment. Elizabeth by F. C. Burnand is described on its title page as an original burlesque. The music however commanded the following universality: an air from Herve's Chilperic; a trio from Balfe's The Bohemian Girl; an air by Christy, "Would I Were a Little Bird": another air. "The Mermaid" by Macfarren; together with a number of tunes so popular that the authors are not indicated: "Turn it Up": "Love Not"; "Where Has My Dolly Gone?"; "Rocky Road to Dublin"; "For England, Home and Beauty." The solo singing was enhanced by choral backgrounds of introductory music, finales, and intermediate dancing. The group dancing derived from the Italian school of the ballet, based on shorter, more stricted movements than those of the Russian school which gained currency at the turn of the century. Most of the ballerinas of the burlesque houses of the nineteenth century

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Burlesque 7

were Italian or at least shrewdly favored Italian names.

These particular characteristics of the burlesque took earliest and clearest shape in France. William Dunlap, in his <u>History of the American Theatre</u> published in 1832, writes:

"It appears, however, that in France, as well as in England, the minor theatres take the lead in popularity and fashion. The most prolific and successful dramatists of Paris have devoted their time and talents to the vaudeville or petite comedie, and other productions, distinct from the legitimate tragedy and comedy of good old times. Legitimacy is out of fashion even at the theatre...But what is most extraordinary, these French manufacturers produce wares of a very superior quality, at least in comparison with their English neighbours, and supply not only the Parisian, but the London and American market ... Mons. Eugene Scribe and his collaborateurs pour out comedy, opera, farce or pieces uniting the three, and a spice of tragedy in the bargain, and all full of interest, wit, incident -- in short, delightful performances.

#### IV -- BOX AND COX

With a single, swift gesture, the Gold Rush placed a makeshift city of twenty to thirty thousand people on the shores of San Francisco Bay where a few months before had been only five thousand. Culture did not have time to become indigenous. The theatrical traditions of New York and London came West intact.

In 1848, even before the Gold Bush, California's first theatre at Monterey was resounding to the same farcical humor that had already titillated the crowds in the big eastern cities. Colonel Stevenson's volunteer regiment at the

placement of the same as and a

Burlesque 8

Monterey garrison had been disbanded. By way of amusing themselves (there was no audience to speak of), several famous English farces were presented: Damon and Pythias. Nan, the Good for Nothing, and especially Box and Cox. John Madison Morton's conception of Cox, the journeyman hatter, and Box, the journeyman printer proved to be the perennial idea in all the nineteenth century farces. At one point, Arthur Sullivan wrote music for a libretto taken by F. C. Burnand from Morton's original. The old quarrel for the room in which Cox slept by night and Box by day, is still very lively in W. H. Auden's Dance of Doath and Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock. Sullivan called his duet "The Stranger":

COX: Who are you, sir? Tell me, who?

Box: If you come to that sir, who are you?

Who are YOU sir? Cox:

What's that to you, sir? Box: What's that to who, sir? Cox:

Box:

Who, sir?--You, sir. (aside): Yes! 'tis the printer. Cox: (aside): Yes! 'tis the hatter. Box:

But farces were mere "afterpieces" to the big show. The big show was a burlesque, an extravaganza. Stephen C. Massett\* knew that. Anybody "in the theatre" in 1850 knew that. And Massett was handicapped; he was alone. When on June 22, 1849, Massett gave his historical "One Man in the Courthouse on Portsmouth Square the makings of a burlesque company were certainly not -- for any man's asking --

<sup>\*</sup> See Monograph on Stephen C. Massett, Vol. I, this series.

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in San Francisco. The male aggression on the gold fields had dehumanized itself, and it was not until the successful (and unsuccessful) miners fell back again upon the rising town that they demanded their lives be completely furnished. Massett, reflecting the theatrical spirit of the time, heroically interspersed the sentimental ballads on his program with three burlesque numbers:

"Imitation of an elderly lady and a German girl who applied for the situation of soprano and alto singers in one of the churches of Massachusotts.

"Imitation of Madame Anna Bishop in her song, 'The Banks of the Guadalquivir.'"

"Yankee Imitation, Deacon Jones and Seth Slope. !"

On October 22, 1849 the Philadelphia Minstrels performed at the opening of the Bella Union gambling resort. October 29, 1849 Rowe's Olympic Circus\* was opened with a company made up of three equestrians, one clown, two slack-rope dancers and a ringmaster. January 16,1850 a group of professional players, after great success in Sacramento, started an engagement in a second story hall at the rear of the old Alta California newspaper office. Their opening night consisted of The Wife by J. Sheridan Knowles; Charles II, or The Merry Monarch by John Howard Payne and Washington Irving; and the "laughable farce" The Sentinel.\*\* During the following

<sup>\*</sup> See Monograph on <u>Joseph A. Rowe</u>, Vol. I, this series.
\*\*This company found it almost impossible to procure dramatic scripts in California. They paid one ounce of gold dust for a copy of the farce, <u>Box and Cox</u>.

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summer on August 13, 1850 the Athenaeum was opened by Dr. Collyer and his model artists in their living tableaux.

### V -- DOCTOR COLLYER

The Doctor and his company had been driven from their New York success by that same Philistinism which made museums of all the new and popular music halls -- a camouflage of educational taxidermy, concealing a theatre somewhere in the dark interior. This same uncritical spirit denounced the polka as the "Hungarian camp dance, a step for boorish soldiers." In the Brooklyn Eagle for February 8, 1847, Walt Whitman lent his hand to the flagellation:

"We don't like to make these sweeping assertions in general, --but the habit of such places as the Bowery, the Chatham, and the Olympic theatres is really beyond all toleration; and if the New York prints who give dramatic notices, were not the slaves of the paid puff system, they surely would sooner or later be 'down' on those miserable burlesques of the histrionic art."

In this same article, Whitman goes on to deplore both the English influence upon drama, and the star system. He ends with the plea:

"...some American it must be, and not moulded in the opinions and long established ways of the English stage, --if he should take high ground, revolutionize the drama, and discard much that is not fitted to present tastes and to modern ideas, --engage and encourage American talent..look above merely the gratification of the vulgar and of those who love glittering scenery--give us American plays too, matter fitted to American opinions and institutions--our belief is he would do the Republic service and himself too, in the long run."

With a swarm of much less intelligent statements than this one of Whitman echoing in his ears, Doctor Collyer opened his show in San Francisco. His troupe of shapely girls exhibited (with "classical accuracy" according to the Evening Picayune) their incarnations of cliche-paintings and encylopedia sculpture. The Evening Picayune of August 30,1850, very pleased with the show, stepped forward for Doctor Collyer:

"So far, however, as we can understand the designs of the exhibitor, it is the farthest possible from his wish or intention to pander to any morbid curiosity or vicious imagination. His purpose is to illustrate by living forms, the works of some of the greatest masters in sculpture and painting that ever lived....

"We understand...that the Doctor has determined to erect a new and spacious Hall, that shall be amply commodious for his own representations, and such as shall afford conveniences, not now to be had, for all other forms of rational entertainment and amusement.

"We are happy to learn that the conductors of the Museum and of the Circus, are about to imitate the example set by Dr. Collyer, in giving the proceeds of an evening's performance to the fund, for the relief of distressed emigrants. The amount realized and contributed by Dr. C. for the object was \$158.00."

The "new and spacious Hall," erected by Collyer on Clay Street between Kearny and Montgomery, and called the Adelphi, was opened October 17, 1850. The following advertisement appeared in the <u>Picayune</u> for the November 14 performance:

"Adelphi Theatre--Clay St. The performance will commence this evening with a representation of ancient deities by the Model Artists. After which the Maudit family will dance in costume. The Cossack Dance to conclude with The Combat of the Mac...(illegible).

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"Private boxes, \$3, Parquette \$2, Upper Tier \$1. No smoking allowed. An efficient police officer in attendance."

And so we find Doctor Collyer intrenched in the life of the town to the extent of delivering a lecture on cholera, accompanied by the conspicuous publicizing of testimonial letters from "the great Dr. Cooper of London, and confirmed by Dr. Valentine Mott of New York."

In the meantime, the Model Artists were doing excellent spadework for the burlesque. The vociferously justified "living pictures" were, after all, a line-up of girls. The arrested dynamics of these disclosed limbs were the pseudoclassic progenitors of the full-cast tableaux which later were to punctuate the scenes of the burlesques. The good doctor was trying to bridge nineteenth century prudery (with its concemitant sentimentality for the old and classical) and the popular demand. He was doing little more than presenting burlesques without action or music. The prudes in New York for a short time were victorious, and Dr. Collyer was forced to retire to immense popularity in San Francisco. With clever solemnity and with a time-hallowed original as alibi, he was giving the people what they wanted.

## VI -- LOLA'S PAS SEUL

The fourth of San Francisco's six great fires occurred June 14, 1850. The meteoric renascence of the phoenix city commenced again on a higher level; San Francisco, almost as if by means of the conflagrations, was catching up with the Eastern Seaboard. At the corner of Kearny and Washington Streets,

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facing Portsmouth Square, the third Jenny Lind theatre was persistently constructed out of the wreckage, and was opened October 4, 1851. At this theatre, March 17, 1852, was presented a burlesque by J. S. Coyne titled Pas de Fascination: Lola Montez, or A Countess for an Hour. This piece (first performed in London in 1848) was really a one-act farce. A song at the opening and several possibilities for dancing during the progress of the action, are the only real marks of burlesque. The contemporary designation of this farce as a burlesque was no doubt based entirely upon its satirical character.

The list of players at this performance is, so far, not available. But the text itself is extant, and in a not too deadly fashion. The characters included: Count Muffenuff (Russian governor of Neveraskwehr), Kyboshki (Privy Councitor), Slickwitz (Treasurer), Major Kutsoff Galopsky (an Equerry), Tittlebatz (a Page), Michael Browsky (State Barber), Grippenhoff (Chief of Police), Stiffenbach (Gentleman Usher), Zephirine Joliejambe (Lola Montez costume: ruby velvet riding dress, hat and feather; change to a peasant boy's costume), several court ladies, and then Katherine Kloper, a clear-starcher.

The story briefly: Zephirine, in flight from overassiduous Russian attention, abandons her carriage in Neveraskwehr. She induces Katherine to impersonate her at the court until she will have had time to evade the police. Katherine, the poor, simple clear-starcher learns a great deal at court and exhibits to a high degree the supposed characteristics of the famous Lola. Michael, the state barber, who is betrothed to Katherine, unmasks her during the intimacies of a hairdressing; Zephirine, despite her ruse, is apprehended; and Katherine, with a fine, high, homely philosophy, renounces her quickly-acquired splendour and returns to the coarse-spun simplicity of the song which opens the play:

"In pattens and stuff, through the street I'm a marcher,
For nobody looks at the little clear-starcher.
I'm free as a bird; and I would not change places,
To ride like a duchess in ribbons and laces."

As for the dancing, one stage direction reads: "Katherine does Lola's celebrated pas seul." Another: "Katherine dances a mock Cachuca, in which the governor, whose delight is unbounded, joins; they finish by Katherine throwing herself into an attitude on one leg, supported by the governor." There is the moment, too, when Katherine, before a scandalized court, ogles the governor during a polka.

Lola Montez, however, often leaves the spotlight of this farce for satire directed against the ladies of the court and the government officials. After the sudden downpour of gifts, Katherine ponders the open-sesame:

"This purse was slipped into my hand with a mysterious hint about a government contract. This beautiful shawl is the homage of a munificent soap-boiler; and this diamond ring is connected in some way with the leather monopoly."

The peak of the writing is reached in Michael's desolation upon the discovery of Katherine's momentary interest in her new position:

. . . 

"Tis too clear--I'm a betrayed and blighted barber! How dare you look at me with that false front! Don't come near me--don't--I'm desperate --I'm in a state of revolutionary excitement!-- (in an exalted tone) I'll return home, and slaughter myself and my four innocent bears!" I'll pile our agony upon the virtuous hearthstone, whose peace you have broken forever. (with emotion) Oh, Katherine! I never thought our love, as was, would ever come to this, as is. Farewell! Farewell! perfidious maid, forever!"

The use of prose in Pas de Fascination points yet again to the farcical nature of the piece; genuine burlesque at this early stage was definitely metrical.

## VII -- BLACKFACE BURLESQUE

The Gold Rush decade was also the burnt-cork decade. A large part of the early evolution of American burlesque took place behind a Jim Crow grin and against a background of back-bar murals. Bones and Tambo first marked the confines of the proscenium which was to witness the transition from the sharp satire of early burlesque to the formless expansion of musical revue splendor. The tradition of burlesque and extravaganza was being crystallized in England by such writers as Burnand and Planche; the tradition of the minstrel show was taking shape in the American cities of the Eastern Seaboard. For several years these two theatrical forms were to converge often on the American stage. In San Francisco, June 14, 1852, a blackface burlesque of Balfe's much maligned Bohemian Girl was given at the Adelphi Theatre.

<sup>\*</sup> The reference to the pet bears is undoubtedly another jibe directed by the author at Lola Montez's eccentricities. The fact that she had a bear for a pet caused much comment and criticism.

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On July 29, 1853 Dion Boucicault's The Corsican Brothers acquired the P. T. Barnum sideshow title of The Coarse-Haired Brothers in another blackface burlesque given at the San Francisco Hall. Macbeth, transformed in our own time by an all Negro cast in New York City into a study of Haitian voodooism, was given a burnt-cork lampooning in San Francisco in 1855. From 1850 to 1859, sixty-six titles of burlesque, extravaganza, or musical farce appear on the regular bills of the minstrel shows to which the whole population of the new city was crowding.\*\*

An advertisement in the Daily Herald for July 1, 1855 announces the first night of the "laughable burlesque" of Domino Noir, or The Masquerade. This burlesque, with Auber's The Black Domino for unfortunate original, was performed by the San Francisco Minstrels. Although the burlesque was played by such characters as "a genuine down-Easter," "an opulent pawnbroker," and a "lovesick colored girl, foud of music" -this main part of the program does not sound as interesting as the epilogue which was described as "Actors in a Quandary, or Noisy and Barbarous Amusements." The characters for the epilogue form an incredible coterie: "Hamlet, Mose in California, Irish Woman, Lady Macbeth, Bleeding Nun, and Othello." A duet, "Old King Crow," a "Polka Quadrille," and a musical finale are announced as "incidental to the burlesque." The customers are assured "a perpetual feast of nectared sweets, where no crude surfeit reigns."

<sup>\*</sup> See Monograph on Minstrelsy, Vol. XIII, this series.

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Of the burlesque opera Oh Hush, or The Virginia Cupids, which the San Francisco Minstrels performed on July 6, 1855, the Daily Herald has preserved very little information. We know that the character Gumbo Cuff was played by the famous minstrel, Eph Horn. Beyond that we have only this short notice in The Herald for July 7:

"By particular request the burlesque of Oh Hush will be repeated. The piece is full of rich scenes illustrative of Negro life, and one may witness it without becoming tired of its humor and characteristic songs and dances."

Scant notice of another burlesque by the San Francisco Minstrels appears in the press of <u>The Herald</u>, August 11, 1855:

"Mrs. Julia Collins takes her first benefit at the hall this evening. Mrs. Collins has succeeded beyond all expectation in adapting herself to the peculiarities of Negro delineation-a line of character never attempted by a female. Her accomplishments as an actress and vocalist lose nothing of attraction, by the disguise of her person. The burlesque on the opera of the Bohemian Girl, which was received last night with torrents of applause, will be repeated on the occasion, with other performances."

Of the blackface burlesque <u>Conrad and Medora</u> by William Brough, which opened at Maguire's Opera House on September 17, 1859, the Bulletin has this to say:

"The burlesque (of Conrad and Medora) is the old Corsair, produced by Mrs. Wood here: but with several new pieces of music introduced."

This is an instance of a "legitimate" drama becoming a burlesque by the addition of a vocalized ballet. The

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drama referred to is Corsair, or The Little Fairy at the Bottom of the Sea, by E. C. Holland, produced at Maguire's Opera House early in 1858. It cannot be said that Holland's drama was the undeniable, rock-bottom original for the take-off of the later burlesque: for the genealogy of a burlesque is very much like a Greek palimpsest, or more simply, an onion. And, further complication, when the parentage has been traced in one direction to the last obscure, deep-buried notation, a fresh. startling parentage crops up in another direction entirely. Burlesques were very eclectic jobs. The climax of Conrad and Medora, for instance, was a rousing ensemble to the tune of "Home Sweet Home." Medora, abducted (or saved) from a slave market (in Turkey, not Alabama), finds deep-sea oblivion in the arms of her abductor, the black-mustached corsair, Conrad. Submarina, Serena, and the other Sea-sprites dance about the happy vision which ominously resolves into a cheerful picture of deadly respectability:

SERENA:
Madam, I've heard of fast young men in town,
Desperate dogs, by marriage settled down-Men, who for years would not go home till morning,
Found the domestic tea-table adorning;
Smokers, I've heard, have put their pipes out--nay,
I've even heard of latch-keys thrown away.
Can love do this, and yet be unavailing
To cure a paltry pirate's little failing?
Let Conrad only get a loving wife,
And on my word, he'll lead another life.

### SERENA:

You will retire from Corsair trade; Marry and live respectably.

#### CONRAD:

Agreed; I've long been weary of the life I lead;

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So I'll reform.

SERENA:

This is indeed felicity!

CONRAD:

Turn steady, and go in for domesticity; Stand for churchwarden, and the vestry sit on, Aye, and pay rates and taxes like a Briton.

We have no record as to what the British taxes became in the California production; we can be sure that the line was localized in some sharp political manner. Birbanto, the leader of the rebellious Corsairs, a Lucifer of nineteenth century dimensions, minces no words, as the spokesman for the forces of evil, when their old leader, Conrad, first shows signs of his virtuous collapse:

BIRBANTO:

...we've stood him long enough:
A spoony, pining, sentimental muff:
He's not at all my notion of a Corsair,I like black worsted curls and beard of horsehair:
The good old heavy style of melodram,
More like the individual I am.
Yet the band love him: well, it is but right
To own he is the very deuce to fight
When he begins. No matter! we shall see
Which they prefer to lead them--him or me!

The miner down out of the hills in the Gold Rush decade had bought some new boots and a fine wool shirt. With the odor and swagger of barber shop rejuvenation, he had sauntered up to the bar of the Bella Union; nothing on his hands but time and a pouch of concentrated pay-dirt. The town was his. The drink in the glass sparkled with unbelievable magic after the tin cup and bottle of the camp in the hills. And the French restaurant around the corner had been almost intolerably comfortable, the meal a trifle elaborate, and

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the cutlery somewhat complicated. And now while life in the all-night houses accelerated, there was the safe, economical relaxation of the theatre; more than likely a blackface burlesque. On February 3, 1856, it was Damon and Pythias, or The Executioners Outwitted, which recalled to the miner a night in the summer of 1855 when he had witnessed the undignified appearance of La Gazza Ladra as Cats in the Larder. In June 1856, the play would be Forty Winks, or a Darky in Diffs. In 1859, the alluring title would assume the cynicism of Medea, or The Best of Mothers. Or, for the exacerbating lack of women in San Francisco at this time, there was the consolation of such a burlesque as Married and Buried. It was a great night, although the miner returned to the Bella Union and lost the rest of his cash in a few desperate flings at tho wheel. But he would return, several months later. "heeled" again, -- and the barber shop lotion would be as refreshing, and the drinks as sparkling, and the food as fancy, and the play even more diverting.

### VIII -- ARRIVAL OF THE ENGLISH

Straight burlesque in the English tradition, without the addition of a burn-cork setting, also gained momentum in this same period, 1850-1859. Abon Hassan, or Hunt after Happiness, the burlesque performed at Maguire's Opera House, September 24, 1859, is honestly described as a "semi-original fairy extravaganza in rhyme." Francis Talfourd, the author, gives us no source for the "unoriginal" half of the burlesque;

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Nights. The burlesque writers themselves owe no debt to the characterization or subtlety of the oriental tales; the debt was entirely that of the costume designer. This romanticized Orient is but one more of the many heavy curtains between the nineteenth century and reality. An extravaganza or burlesque needed color; silk and tinsel were beautiful; "exotic" contours were exciting. The English were a little weary of the too native star on the forehead of Queen Mab; the international conglomeration of deracinated folklore came on the scene.

The splendor of the burlesque extravaganzas originated in the superficial sheen and texture of decayed myth. The burlesques had something to say; they were critical. But the words were angled through a spectacular facade of suspicious design. The musical colossi of the twenties, present-day descendants of the old burlesque, abandoned the underlying framework completely; a meaningless flash of frantic and competitive expenditure was all that remained.

The critical framework however, still protruded angularly through the fantastic pastiche of <u>Abon Hassan</u>. After the leads in the play are listed, the mob is spoken of as "lots of other people, who 'like the air, are rarely heard save when they speak in thunder.' Four courtiers appear before Abon in scene VIII:

1st COURTIER: With your permission

We offer to your notice a petition

From people who want bread.

2nd COURTIER: From those who make it!
3nd COURTIER: From those who grow the corn!

4th COURTIER: From those who bake it!

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lst COURTIER: From those who pay the tax imposed upon 'em!

ALL: Complaining all of rank injustice done 'em!

ABON: (bewildered) What does it all mean?

GIAFFAR: Sire, beyond a doubt

'Tis what is called pressure from without.

ABON: Flour's the right thing to make a stir-about.

GIAFFAR: The farmers, Sire, say but a loss

ABON: they reap.

ABON: They hold it dearly--make them sell

it cheap.

GIAFFAR: The bakers, Sire, want bread and

make much of it.

ABON: Declare it death to sell at a profit!
GTAFFAR: The bakers, Sire, no money have to pay.

ABON: Tell them the staff of life we'll give away,

And for the nation's food the state shall pay!

GIAFFAR: But how to carry out your gracious thought?

ABON: Why, tax the people for their own

support!
'Tis fair that those who pay for

food should eat.
And, if the eaters pay, why both ends meet.

GIAFFAR: The people, Sire, accept with acclamation

The cheap bread--but, object to the taxation.

ABON: Ungrateful slaves! Hang all who

dare complain.

GIAFFAR: There'll be none left, then, Sire to

tax again.

ABON: What's to be done? It seems my last

desire

Has been a case of frying pan and fire: In short, to the humiliating pass

I'm brought, of owning that I've been an ass!

The tension of Abon Hassan's Hunt after Happiness was relieved often by incidental music. One of the songs was "The Other Side of Jordan." One of the musical interludes was a burlesqued scene from Il Trovatore.

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Burlesque admitted no national boundaries. The uprooted, nondescript nationalisms of the "burlesque and pantomime, <u>Lalla Rookh</u>," by William Brough, gathered this reaction from The Bulletin of Feb. 10, 1859:

"The spectacular burlesque of Lalla Rookh was produced last night in a style of unusual splendor. So far as new scenery of the most brilliant description is concerned, the piece is a great success; the closing scene indeed, exceeds in beauty anything that has ever before been exhibited at his house (Maguire's Opera House), or perhaps in any other theatre in the city. A multitude of supernumeraries adds much to the pleasing effect. The piece is founded on Moore's poem of the same name. The principal characters are filled by Miss Adolaide Gougenheim, (Lalla Rookh), Miss Jocy Gougenheim, (Feramorez), and Mr. Lewis Baker (Fadladeen). It is somewhat lengthy for a burlesque and but for the magnificence of scenery, would probably prove tedious. The usual play on words pervades the piece. A considerable number of songs are sung by the characters, but the music is not romarkably beautiful."

### IX -- THE RISE OF THE MELODEONS

In the early fifties there had been enough of the heroic in the first vigorous search for gold to make the amplified strut of Shakespearean tragedy sympathetic to the expanding, hopeful, Western mentality. San Franciscans could take the grand manner because they were living in the grand manner. The artificial declamation of the classical school -- of the elder Booth, of James Stark -- did not seem hollow as long as the afflatus of discovery buoyed up the heavy body of pioneer optimism. In the middle fifties was heard the first dull thud of collapse. Real estate values tumbled from a

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dazzling height. Gambling racketeers boldly attempted to outwit the depression. The vigilantes went to a strait-laced extreme which threatened to put out all the lights of culture. A new, progressive movement was not felt until the discovery of silver in Nevada. The theatre of San Francisco (and that meant the Western theatre) reflected all these broad, underlying economic changes. The full-rigged metaphors of "legit-imate" drama, the magnified passions of operatic embonpoint, collapsed with real estate. Theatre-goers were bored with the pretentious, and embarrassed with the heroic. The idea of California as an isolated El Dorado was being shaken; California was realized as part of the national tribulation, and no haven.

On February 3, 1853 Edwin Booth appeared in The American Fireman\* at the San Francisco Theatre (second nomenclature of Tom Maguire's San Francisco Hall later to be dignified as Maguire's Opera House). But the feeble groping prophesies of the critics did not stimulate any overwhelming reaction. The Sable Harmonists, with their new brand of "Ethiopian burlesque" at the Adelphi Theatre, were the most popular entertainers in town.

In June of this same year Lola Montez\*\* tried again to maintain a serious note in entertainment. But her simulation of the antics of an arachnid in her famous "Spider Dance" did not even win the encomium of a successful tour de force; the newspapers parodied her movements on the stage until,

<sup>\*</sup> The Golden Era Feb. 6 (Saturday) 1853. McCabe's Journal gives Feb.2, but is obviously in error. Booth had made his debut on July 30, 1852, playing a small part with his father. Junius Brutus Booth Sr., in The Iron Chest. \*\*See Monograph on Lola Montez, Vol. V, this series.

rather than a symbol of grace, Lola became the tarantula with wire legs which the Barbary Coast bartender could lower suddenly from the ceiling down upon the bar, right before the startled drunk who had outstaid his joviality and was prepared to believe in the evil vision.

Old Doc Robinson certainly had a showman's thumb on the public pulse when he concocted his burlesque Who's Got the Countess or The Rival Houses. Large vociferous audiences at the San Francisco Theatre rewarded him. Caroline Chapman, indefatigable and ever-popular in the early theatre, was delighted no doubt to play the lead. For ten nights, a long run in those days, the people of the city were refreshed by the spectacle of a satirical spider, well-versed in its model, but thoroughly irreverent.

In August 1853, the papers made a big advance splash for James E. Murdoch, famous East coast tragedian. But the public response was hardly remunerative and Murdoch, with some enthusiastic reviews in his pocket, was forced to give way at the American Thoatre to a French ballot troupe.

Several months later, the two actor families of the Bakers and the Proctors who had long endeavered, with disastrous financial results, to revive "the sacred flame of the legitimate drama," desorted San Francisco for the East coast. At the sumptuous New Metropolitan, Mrs. Sinclair was short-sightedly indulging herself with an unattended revival of Italian grand opera. This was during the winter of 1854 and 1855. Tom Maguire's San Francisco Minstrel Troupe was

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quick to grasp the opportunity; he announced a series of burlesque operas. Such nationally known minstrel stars as John Smith, Eph Horn, and Mike Mitchell were in the company. As a dead give-away to the temper of the times, several of Mrs. Sinclair's singers together with George Loder, her conductor, defected from that lady's quixotic venture and joined the burlesquers. For several weeks Italian aria and recitative took a very successful rap at the hands of the minstrels. The grand manner was become ridiculous armor decorating a hallway.

All this time, Edwin Booth, under the management of his brother Junius, had tenaciously held out for the legitimate drama at the little Adelphi Theatre. Edwin Booth's gradual isolation as the real genius among a number of very competent actors enabled him to hold an audience for the "great, old plays" where all other tragedians had failed. But even the Booths failed in 1856. The time was definitely decadent. The California venture, as a whole, lost money. The boisterousness of the salcons was quickly sharpened to a number of embittered shootings. The vigilante spirit decided that what the city needed was a thickly-applied coat of puritanical monotone. As a result almost no vegetation at all survived.

In the middle of this low-point summer of 1856, the San Francisco Minstrels again struck the cheerful note, both for the city and Tom Maguire's pocketbook. They announced a "Grand Shakespearean Festival." Macbeth, Richard III,

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Othello, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet (along with countless, unnamed notables) were taken for a refreshing ride by the iconoclastic minstrels. Caroline Chapman might prod her satirical spear point at the inflated reputation of a Montez, but she, in turn, would have to endure, graciously, a burlesque interpretation of her performance as Juliet to Booth's Romeo. The deadened response of the town's theatre-goers was eager to be quickened; despite (and also because of) the panicky conditions of mining and real estate, the unsanctimonious minstrels played to crowded houses.

Professor Risley, with no business acumen and less theatrical insight, appeared on the San Francisco scene at about this time with an expensive, ambitious, solemn living-picture of Washington Crossing the Delaware. Maguire's minstrels, with a merciless hilarity, swooped down on their new quarry: a series of uncontained "tableaux vivants" croated a furore. The minstrel troupe was again, very clearly and efficiently, performing the historic, artistic function of a sterilizing parasite.

In the late summer of 1856 Lola Montez returned to San Francisco from Australia. On this return trip, Lola's latest amour had been lost overboard from the brig Fanny Major. The circumstances of his death were recreated and falsified with the usual propensity of the public towards vilification. The newspapers loft Lola no talent whatsoever: her dancing, it seemed, was sadly out of form, and completely dull. Lola, with a large gesture, auctioned all her diamonds

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for the benefit of her lover's orphans. But even this indication of nobility did not deter Caroline Chapman from the final turn of the screw. Immediately upon Lola's departure for the East, Caroline, who had been employed in Lola's last acting company, presented her original and scathing (the newspapers said "unprincipled") burlesque: A Trip to Australia, or Lola Montez on the Fanny Major.

September 3, 1856 Edwin Booth in a farewell performance presented King Lear. The departure of the great actor for the more propitious East Coast was an inadvertent admonishment to the cultural conditions of the West. It is hardly credible that Tom Maguire was sensitive to this criticism; with his astute showmanship, however, he sensed that the public might be surfeited with burlesque; that perhaps this was the time for a series of legitimate dramas by a capablo stock company. The opening production of the new company starred Mrs.Julia Dean Hayne in The Wife, the play which in 1850 had commenced both the history of the theatre in San Francisco, and the careers of Mr. and Mrs. James Stark.

The other theatres in town followed Maguiro's load, but this attempted revival of stock companies and heavy drama may be said to have "drawn a deuce." In the middle of the 1856-1857 season, the only show in town that was making any money was the burlesque Mother Goose, played by the Ethiopian Burlesque Troupe at the American Theatre.

With a high, colored flame from its recoes polychrome, the Metropolitan burned to the ground August 15, 1857.

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Through these last unsettled years, the Metropolitan had been the stronghold of the legitimate drama. Maguire, the "Napoleon of Theatrical Managers," whether through a remorseful twinge of aestheticism or another hard-headed gamble of showmanship, refurbished his stock company and injected another blood transfusion into the languishing body of the "great, old play." Two new stars in his company were to wax large in the history of the San Francisco theatre; they were both from London: Miss Emma Grattan, from the old Adelphi, and Harry Courtaine, from Drury Lane.

The city of San Francisco might rise, phoenix-wise, out of each successive fire, more resplendent -- but not the legitimate drama. Within a few months Maguire permitted the "great, old play" to be buried again. In January 1858 Maguire's Opera House announced Mrs. John Wood, the famous musical comedy star. Forty-four sold-out nights proved both the temper of the public and the ability of Mrs. Wood.

In such pieces as <u>Josephine</u>, or <u>Tho Fortune of War</u>, <u>The Invisible Prince</u>, and <u>The Corsair</u>, Mrs. Wood, throughout 1858, scintillated without competition as the cynosure of California's theatre-goers. Three times during the year she returned to San Francisco from tours of the mining camps and from other cities; and each time she achieved a spectacular run. Of her it was soon said: "No more popular actress ever visited the Pacific Coast."

<sup>\*</sup> Leman, Walter. Memories of an Old Actor.

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The Gougenheim Sisters, lesser luminaries than Mrs. Wood, were nevertheless popular enough to accumulate in the California theatres a fortune estimated at one million dollars. Early in 1858 they alternated with Mrs. Wood's appearances at Maguire's Opera House; on November 29 they appeared at the Lyceum; the following March they were back at Maguire's in a widely publicized, farewell performance of Lalla Rookh.

The success of the Gougenheims and Mrs. Wood was the big-scale, main street victory of the new theatre. less conspicuous efflorescence of this same theatre was taking place on the side streets of the late eighteen-fifties; the London music hall was become the San Francisco melodeon: the Barbary Coast saloon lifted the haze of Havana and quieted the unintelligible brawl by means of a minstrel burlesque. The Bella Union, one of the oldest of the gambling resorts, from its very beginning had eased the strained nerves of the roulette players and muffled the cries of the croupiers with instrumental trios, ballad singers, and a variety of noisy saltimbanques. From 1855 to 1860 saloon entertainment assumed the definite shape of burlesque: Winn's Union Saloon, the Adelphi Saloon, the Bella Union, all employed minstrel troupes. The baroque angels of the uptown prosceniums were sentinels of propriety; but the simple stages of the saloons admitted no curb to the incisive satiro of the players. Here the spirit of burlesque was completely free.

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### X -- NEW FURNITURE FOR AN OLD HANG-OUT

The Olympus of early nineteenth-century drama had been a rather dull hand-out for bewigged, false-toothed deities. each draped in an English ulster rather than a peplos against the sodden rain of the times. Eighteen-fifty to eighteen-sixty was the very special period of transition. Theatrical Square was loud with the clamor of contenders for the position of Deposed Monarch, each one sure of his link with history as the next successive symbol in the development of the drama; sure that it would be his horse whose hoof would be lifted and held in a bronze clangor above the inscription on the pediment. Planche, \* famous English writer of burlesque extravaganza, has recorded these contentions in one of the most intelligent burlesques of the period. Planche called his work The Camp at the Olympic \*\* renamed The Camp This work was played several times at the Unat the Union. The stage is trailed ion Theatre in San Francisco in 1854. across by a comprehensive assortment of disconsolato, nervous, hopeful figures: Tragedy, Comedy, Burlesque, Opera, Ballot, Melo-Drama, Pantomime, Hippo-Drama, Ghost of the Old Italian Opera, Harlequin, Clown, Pantaloon, Columbine, The True British Sailor, and Sylphidos. Fancy harangues the crowd and relays the real dope to the audience:

<sup>\*</sup> Planche, James Robinson. (1796-1880) An English dramatist and archaeologist. \*\*With reference to The Royal Olympic Theatre of London.

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#### FANCY:

"The Camp at the Union" is the thing!
Here all the drama's forces we'll review,
And see what troops will flock her standard to
At Fancy's call. The Play-Household Brigade
Shall turn out for inspection. on parade!

#### TRAGEDY:

Not in a passion! When I see the state
Of Denmark rotten! When I hear the fate
Which hath befallen both the classic domes,
'Neath which my votaries once found their homes!
Where Garrick, Monarch of the mimic scene
His spectre passed from Kemble down to Kean.
Where Cibber's silver tones the heart would steal,
And Siddons left her mantle to O'Neil!
The drama banished from her highest places
By debardeurs and fools with varnished faces
Fiddling like Nero, while her Rome is burning.

### COMEDY:

Wit, oh my dear, don't mention such a thing!
Wit on the stage, what wit away would fling?
There are so few who know it when they hear it.
Wit! If to theatres for wit they'd come
Would Farquhar, Congreve, Wycherly be dumb?
Or even the poor devils now-a-days,
Who can't--scribbling--hawk their hapless plays
From house to house, to hear the sentence chilling
"Your piece is clever, but won't draw a shilling."

MR. W: (a sort of interlocutor in the play) Then, what will draw?

#### COMEDY:

Mercy, tell me, prayWhat horse will win the Derby, Sir? You may,
I'm sure as easily as I tell you
What the American public will come to:
Just what they like--whatever that may be-Not much to hear, and something strange to see:
A Zulu Kaffir, with his bow and quiver;
A Pigmy Earthman from the Orange river;
An Aztec Lilliputian, who can't say a
Word, from the unknown city Iximaya:
Any monstrosity may make a hit,
But no one's fool enough to pay for wit!

#### MR. W:

Talking of humour, where on earth has fled Our broad old English Farce, or is he dead?

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(1) 10年 - 17年 - 17年 - 196 GREAR - NEW HOLLSER 1988 - 1887 - 1 FANCY:

No, but too homely for this polished age, He's lately taken French leave of the stage; But there's a substitute still more grotesque We often find him--He's called Burlesque.

TRAGEDY:

Avaunt and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee! Unreal mockery, hence! I can't abide thee!

BURLESQUE:

Because I fling your follies in your face And call back all the false starts of your race; Show up your shows, affect your affectation, And by such homeopathic aggravation Would cleanse your bosom of that perilous stuff, Which weighs upon our art--bombast and puff.

MR. W: Have you so good a purpose then in hand?

BURLESQUE: Else wherefore breathe I in dramatic land?

MR. W: I thought your aim was but to make us laugh?

BURLESQUE: Those who think so but understand me, half.

In this biased manner, Planche jockeys himself into the saddle of the bronze horse in the square. Time however has confirmed his ruse as a true ascendency. Burlesque is firmly seated on the horse of Marcus Aurelius, and the dramatists of our own day who are worth their salt recognize their lineage. Too bad that Campidoglio itself, where the flanks of the old bronze horse are green with the sea of many years, cannot ring with the satirical glee of the critical spirit; but from that land, burlesque, along with anybody who looked like or remembered Garibaldi, has been banished to the islands.

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### XI -- A BURLESQUE TEMPEST

Before quitting this first decade of burlesque in San Francisco it is illuminating to observe the rough handling Shakespeare endured at the hands of the Brothers Brough. They gave their burlesque the following much-amplified title:

"The Enchanted Isle, or Raising the Wind on the most Approved Principles: a Drama Without the Smallest Claim to Legitimacy, Consistency, Probability, or Anything Else but Absurdity; in which will be found much that is unaccountably coincident with Shakespeare's 'Tempest.\*"

The Enchanted Isle, first performed at the Adelphi in London, opened at Maguire's Opera House, April 5, 1858. The characters were very thoroughly explained: Alonzo had become "one of the numerous instances nowadays of a Monarch all abroad and quite at sea"; Ferdinand was described rather cryptically as "Alonzo's son, a part man, thrown loose upon the waves"; Gonzales, easily adapted to satire, became "a Minister in a queer State; with many hankerings after the Home Department"; Prospero and Ariel were not particularized; but Caliban had become "a smart, active lad, wanted (by Prospero) to make himself generally useful, but by no means inclined to do so -- an Hereditary Bondsman, who, in his determination to be free, takes the most fearful liberties"; Miranda is fully reckoned with as "the original Miss Robinson Crusoe -- Prospero's pet and Ferdinand's passion"; the Courtiers have "no Court to shelter in"; and the Lords are "doomed to short Commons." As for the "Foreign Propagandists," there is Easa di Baccastoppa "captain of the Naples Direct Steamer, first

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seen in the paddle box, but subsequently discovered in the wrong box" and Smuttlefacio "a Neapolitan Stoker, very badly off in the commodity of Naples soap." And finally, the Fairies of legend achieve a very practical solidity: "in consequence of the disturbed state of the times, it has been found necessary to swear them in as Special Constables."

Prospero and Miranda are reclining upon the bright, green banks of the happy island. Miranda, out of her fatigue, recalls her dream in a song to the tune of "Such a Getting Up Stairs."

I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls
'Midst richly gilt and papered walls,
With mirrors large on all the piers,
And great big cut-glass chandeliers.
Such a pleasure-ground too,
With a fountain in the middle,
Such a very nice place
You never did see.

(During the chorus, Prospero produces a pair of "bones" from his pocket and accompanies her a la Ethiopian Serenadors):

I dreamt that all the fine folk thero Deemed nought for me too good or rare. And to serve my lightest wish Tall men, in powdered wigs and plush. Such a very nice place, And such very pleasant people, You never did see.

To the tune of "Guy Fawkes," Ariel tells Prospero of the shipwrock of the king and his party. An ominous conversation follows the song:

PROSPERO: The King is safe, then?

ARIEL: Safe as Kings can bo

In these quoer times of hot Democracy.

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PROSPERO: The Prince, you say?

ARIEL: Though a grown man, he floated like the buov.

The outline of the story itself follows Shakespeare rather closely. In scene IV, Caliban suddenly develops his character to the tune of "Gregory Barnewell, Good and Pious":

Sons of freedom hear my story, Pity and protect the slave; Of my wrongs the inventory I'll just tip you in a stave.

Tiddle ol. etc.

From morn till night I work like winkin', Yet I'm kicked and cuffed about, With scarce half time for grub or drinkin', And they never lets me have a Sunday out.

And if jaw to the gov'nor I gives vent to, He calls up spirits in a trice, Who grip, squeeze, bite, sting, and torment--oh! Such friends at a pinch are by no means nice.

But I'll not stand it longer, that I'll not, I'll strike at once, now that my mettle's hot. Ha! here he comes! Now soon I'll make things better, "Hereditary Bondsman", hm, Et Cetera.

From this point on, Caliban's political development is very rapid. He is next seen in a wild part of the island singing to the music of the "Marseillaise Hymn." He enters in a martial manner, "with the Cap of Liberty on his head, a red flag in one hand, a small bundle of firewood in the other":

I'm resolved--I'll have a revolution--Proclaim my rights--demand a constitution.

With Caliban and Easa di Baccastoppa deep in machinations for the seizure of the island, the other situations of the old plot are resolved and "a delightful ship appears for the trip - AC オル - M Wash Treated + Devent A C - 中間 - - Fight pd

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to Naples." Caliban steps forward and demands:

"What's to be done for the people -- meaning us?"

The burlesque ends with the very modern (and profound) trick of directly involving the audience in the response:

ARIEL: (to Caliban) You--what do you deserve?

CALIBAN: (smiling and looking at audience) I hardly know-What do we all deserve? But put it so.

ARIEL: (to audience) Ay, what?

CALIBAN: (pushing forward and interrupting)
Excuse ne. pray: my lawless acts

completing

With stirring language I'll inflame

the meeting. (to audience:)

Be noisy--and excuse the observation--Get up a devil of a demonstration;

But not with arms -- no, only with a hand --

(indicating clapping)

That's all we want. And, please to

understand

Tho' noise 'mongst you we're wishing to increase

Here on the stage we wish to keep the piece.

### XII -- MELODEON UNDERCURRENT

During the years of 1860 to 1869, in the "respectable" theatres in town, an endless, dreary shift was made from grand opera to legitimate drama and back again. Famous tragedians such as Kean and Forrest received well-studied acclaim in the press but no overwhelming public response. The sleight-of-hand of such a man as Professor Anderson, Great Wizard of the North, was successful in drawing a few dollars from the people in the street. Japanese juggler troupes were

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emblazoned brightly on alluring posters. The unconscious mock-heroics of Roman chariot races were offered as the last, great. final thrill. In desperation, the opera companies were dissolved and reorganized in an effort to enhance their drawing power. The stock companies deserted the homely, overstuffed morality of the English plays for the American "sensation" dramas. Maguire's Opera House, the Academy of Music, and the Metropolitan were in a constant condition of precipitate insolvency. Art considered as "old, serious and great" was definitely in a funk at the big playhouses. Thomas Maguire, still Napoleon of the San Francisco theatre even in adversity, controlled only two of the few golden threads in the theatrical pattern of the time: he was still manager of the San Francisco Minstrel troupe which usually played at the Academy; and the Martinetti-Ravel Pantomimists, on their frequent visits to the city from 1860 to 1870, were with few exceptions, presented under his aegis.

All this time, however, there was an undercurrent of successful theatre; the music hall melodeons were flourishing. The "men-only" limitation somewhat circumscribed their effect but this deficiency was taken care of by the opening of the Alhambra where performances were diluted from the direct stimulant for masculine customers to the spicy innuendo for the whole family.

The exact content of the melodeon programs is as lost and irrecoverable as some handbill, perhaps for a new

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show at the Bella Union. blown into the street mud of those times. The melodeon shows were rarely reviewed by the newspapers; and their only advertisement were these ephemeral handbills, hastily printed and distributed. Doubtless a good part of these melodeon entertainments would be unintelligible nowadays anyway. The burlesque element was immediate and particular: some detail of city government; the ludicrous or lugubrious angle of some public incident; the suppressed gossip about some bigwig. And the whole life of the "respectable" theatres was reflected with flamboyant emphasis. The voice and carriage of Harriet Gordon, "late of London" and "now at Maguire's Opera House" in a season of musical extravaganza. were no doubt given excessive tremolo and embonpoint at the Bella Union or the Olympic; the acrobatic legerity of the Martinetti-Ravel Troupe was no doubt heavily clowned across the boards of some smoke-filled hall. Adah Isaacs Menken as Mazeppa at the Opera House in 1863 was reflected in a Bella Union Mazeppa, who, it is recorded, was played by a different actress in each scene.

As for Shakespeare, the slightest indication of kingly panoply or balustraded romance at the Opera House or the Metropolitan released some riotous vulgarization to the hooting delight of a music hall full of miners. An anecdoto concerning Charles Backus,\* the minstrel, and Charles Kean,

<sup>\*</sup> See monograph, Minstrolsy, Vol. XIII, this series,pp.171-72

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the tragedian, survives. Backus was playing at the Eureka. Among other numbers on his program, he conceived a satire of Kean's Hamlet. The piece was very successful and gained the attention of the whole town. Kean, with thorough-going dignity, invited Backus to his hotel, where he thanked Backus for his attention, but expressed his desire that if he were satirized he would appreciate a thorough job. He promptly rehearsed for Backus the intricate acting problems of the role. There is no means of determining whether or not Backus continued with further burlesque of this same subject.

### XIII -- GREEK MYTH THROUGH LONDON FOG

Throughout the decade 1860 to 1870, in between poorly received seasons of opera and legitimate drama, even the most sanctified halls turned to burlesque for economic stability. These so-called burlesques at the big theatres actually tended away from burlesque toward the uncontroversial extravaganza. The Bulletin published the following notice February 6, 1860:

"On Wednesday night, the new musical and spectacular extravaganza of Pluto and Proserpine will be produced on a scale of unusual magnificence. One scene alone in this piece cost, it is said, \$2500, and was taken from London to Australia, and brought thence by Mr. Simonds on a recent occasion. This spectacle will exceed in beauty and grandeur everything heretofore brought out in this city. Mr. and Mrs. Simms, and other principles, and a host of supernumeraries will appear in this piece. The music introduced will be from Il Trovatore and other recent operas."

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The evening of the production at Maguire's Opera House, the <u>Bulletin</u> ran another notice on February 8, 1860:

"Here is 'ample room and verge enough' for the playwright, the poet and the wag to construct an extravaganza that should surprise and please by its splendor, its contrasts of scenery, its poetic turns and its tomfoolery. The burlesque to be performed tonight on the subject (Pluto and Proserpine), is expected to be one of the finest ever brought here, the management having been exceedingly liberal in the expenditure necessary to produce the piece effectively."

The comedy element in burlesque extravaganza was usually heightened by the casting of men in some of the feminine roles and vice versa. This custom was maintained in Maguire's production of <u>Pluto and Proserpine</u>, with Harriet Gordon as Pluto, and Harry Courtaine as Ceres. Walter Leman was cast as Charon. Of Mr. and Mrs. Simms, mentioned in the February 6 notice, there is no further mention.

The <u>Bulletin</u> completed its coverage of this production with a critical article February 9, 1860:

"The extravaganza of Pluto and Proserpine passed off pretty fairly for a first representation. There were a few hitches in the working of the scenic machinery, and in some of the leading personages not being fully acquainted with their parts, but subsequent representations will rectify all these things. The piece as a burlesque is somewhat long and tiresome. Much of the humor consists in an endless string of puns, that pop off with a feeble noise like a pack of Chinese crackers—some of them being only understandable in London, (where the piece was originally produced,) and the others being so dull and far-fetched as to provoke a feeling of weariness and contempt. The feature of the extravaganza is Mr. Courtaine's droll impersonation of Mother Ceres—although he was by no means perfect in the part. The chorus singing

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was excellent. Miss Gordon does not improve in rendering operatic airs. She is pleasing in a ballad....The closing scene of the extravaganza is nearly as beautiful as gilding and gaudy colors, pretty girls, rich dresses and red fire can make it."

A low point in the "feeble noise" of this piece by Francis Talfourd was given to Harry Courtaine to declaim in the role of Ceres:

The Earth, by the hard times of Winter, made Insolvent, now resumes her thriving trade; Before your eyes her treasures are unrolled, The fields she prodigally tips with gold; And, lavishing her wealth with hand unsparing, The first trees have a heaving claim on bearing; Damsons are worth a plum, and its surprising To see how rapidly the stocks are rising; For any interest in winter lent The flowers will now return you scent per scent.

The creaking enormity of revived myth gives way a couple of times to a more direct reflection of the author's London environment: Pluto, ushered into the reception room of Minerva's seminary where he asks for Proserpine, declares after the vanishing attendant:

I feel as many here have felt before Who've left their first farce at the theatre door, When all anxiety to learn its fate, They tremblingly hand in their card and wait; Meantime the pot-boy, with unconscious lear Passes unquestioned with the Gas-man's beer; How the young aspirant for dramatic fame Longs for the time, when he may do the same; And as he hears the slamming door of baize, Veiling stage glories from his stranger's gaze, The author's pride is for the nonce forgot, In envy of that happier pot-boy's lot! Why, where's that dog? Here, Cerberus, I say! And take your nose out of the butcher's tray.

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At the grey nadir of his frustation, Pluto delivers himself of his melancholy with some lines that create a sharp picture of the contemporary London milieu, once they get beyond the Shakespearean echo of their commencement:

Let's have a disquisition upon graves
Or sit upon the ground, and, in the damp,
Discuss the probabilities of cramp;
Or buy the Times, and read through the debates;
Listen with interest to Christmas waits;
Pot-house harmonic meetings go among,
'Till we have, by perseverance, wrung
Delight from senseless comic songs ill sung;
Let's go to parties where you get a cup o'
Cold tea, a little music, and no supper!
Where all are strangers, without even so great a
Relief as the acquaintance of the waiter.

The following malediction pronounced by Ceres upon the chorus of the show for the disappearance of Proserpine, and the stage direction which succeeds it, recreate not only one of the ballet movements of the production but also something of the costumes and their coloring:

Upon the land a withering blight shall fall; (All bow their heads)

And used-up rakes ne'er seek their beds at all; Axes fall powerless to lop a twig, And spades enjoy their "otium sine dig," Your ploughs you may as of no further use bury; I'll with the champagne country play old gooseberry; 'Twill be such still champagne you won't know it; In vain you may apply yourselves to mow it. Now having made these cursory observations, To realize your pleasant expectations-Poppies! ye Red Republicans, with whom I've long waged war, your hour of triumph's come! Rear your proud heads o'er the surrendered plain, With poisonous kisses choke the golden grain, And whisper in the dying ears of corn 'Till Ceres finds the daughter from her torn! The land shall of her sorrows be partaker, And every rod on the earth's back an acher.

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(She waves her hand. Poppies start up everywhere through the corn and choke it, bending over it as in triumph. The load of corn becomes a load of poppies, and the whole scene is red with a field of them. Thunder and lightning.)

After this passage it is not difficult to see a line of red-costumed ladies pop up from behind a line of yellow-costumed ladies, the red dominating the yellow with an aggressive, forward movement. The costumes of both lines no doubt bore overtones of vegetation: red-petaled hats for the poppies, and gold feathers for the corn. Foliate scallops of bright green probably carried the motif into the dancing skirts. At any rato, the eye of the beholder was being constantly knocked out by the splendor of extravaganza and, thus floored with color, it is at least conjectural how receptive the nervous system could be to the stubborn persistence of such puns as the one upon "acre" and "acher." A diseased malice or delight infests these old English burlesques with a word-spinning which was surely rarely intelligible beyond the eye of a careful reader. A last too typical example from this Pluto and Proserpine burlesque by Talfourd:

> Diana declares: A husband? no, give me my own field sports; The whole he-race I'll er-ase from my thoughts.

## XIV -- A MINER SEES A BURLESQUE FAUST

The spring season of 1860 passed off with a halting series of bigger and better spectacle burlesques. A heavily-punned Romeo and Juliet, enlivened by Walter Leman's acting as the Apothecary, was repeated several times at Maguire's

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Opera House. Late February brought the most ambitious production of the year -- Faust and Marguerite. According to the Bulletin, "The present dramatic version was originally produced at the Princess Theatre, London, by Charles Kean, where it had a great run." Before the opening, it was rumored about town that the carpenters at Maguire's were being overworked. The ex machina apparatus for the deus was clearly going to be more refulgent and startling than ever before. It was announced by the Bulletin that "the principal characters will be performed by Miss Gordon (Marguerite), Mr. Leman (Faust), and Mr. Thompson (Mephistopheles)."

"Tonight, a new piece here, entitled Faust and Marguerite, will be produced. The story 1s founded on the old popular legend of The Devil and Dr. Faustus, which has been treated in various forms, in different countries, by many writers, from Marlowe to Goothe."\*

The miner is down from the hills. He is not at all sure that he will return; there is rumor of higher wages in the booming silver camps of Nevada. He has just extricated himself from a nearly violent argument at the music hall concerning Separatism or Union. His head buzzing with the last pugilistic phrases and the last belligerent drink, he turns from the street into the Opera House and tries to settle down.

"Mephistopheles occasionally utters some stinging remarks on the frailties and follies of mankind, but otherwise there is nothing particularly striking in the language of the drama." \*\*\*

<sup>\*</sup> Bullotin, February 27, 1860. \*\*Ibid. February 28, 1860.

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The life in the music hall and on the street outside from which the miner has just plunged into the dark auditorium is still much brighter and more dramatic to him than the lighted stage where a silly and, as far as he is concerned, irrelevant continuity is attempting to enmesh him. His fingers itch for a more immediate and realistic grappling when Mephistopheles seizes the stout and rejuvenated Faust of Mr. Leman and carries him bodily into the lower regions. Then things begin to happen:

"The walls of the building represented on the stage sink through the floor, and the form of Marguerite, supported by two angels, is seen to rise slowly heavenward. The flowing white robes of these female figures, resting upon the delicate blue of the sky, which is all around, produces a very beautiful effect."\*

With a vague hush of respect that has something to do with the religion of his boyhood, and with an active mechanical interest in the elevation of the angels, the miner decides that perhaps this is a good show. He shuffles out with the crowd and returns to the music hall where the context of the entertainment is intensely present-day, and the reactions called forth are neither vague nor disturbing.

#### XV -- INSIDE A MELODEON

The music halls and melodeons of the period were always packed, which is something not to be said for Tom Maguire's Opera House. And no outlay for advertising -- a mere

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin. February 28, 1860.

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handbill. Handbills are easily destroyed; few have come down to us. But the records are full enough to indicate the superficial routine of a melodeon performance. A sleight-of-hand artist perhaps; a daring designer of tableaux; a blackface comedian: and often as not, a stinging, full-blooded burlesque of the current legitimate plays in one of the big theatres. Whatever the program at the music hall, the flurry of excitement was immediately and directly exploited in the hurried handbills which marked the walls and windows of the town with color for a few days before the performance. The excitement died as rapidly as the advertising had appeared, but a definite threat to the big theatres was being established.

Gradually the programs of the variety halls or melodeons assumed a traditional pattern. There were three main parts to such a show. The first part took over the confirmed minstrel form, with Bones and Tambo officiating. An olio followed, during which most anything might happen before the painted drop close to the proscenium, while the backstage was being prepared for the conclusion of the show. The final section of the entertainment by this time had been built up to with careful gradation. The audience was prepared for the abandon of the afterpiece: sometimes the rowdiest kind of burlesque, sometimes an original. If an original, it was evidently in the sense of the photographic. Clay Greene complains that "all too often (the afterpiece) was based on an

immoral story and its lines bristled with poorly concealed smut."

During the intermission, between minstrel show and olio, the subtle revelation of nineteenth century pulchritude in glove-fitting tights descended as a bevy upon the gentlemen of the second tier, ostensibly with the purpose of stimulating business at the bar; ostensibly, and (always remembering the margin of human frailty) sincerely, inasmuch as the admission charged enabled the managers to hire professional actors and entertainers. Prostitutes were not allowed to enter the melodeons.

The miner in town from the hills (February 13, 1860) has passed up the tragedy of Othello at the Lyceum theatre on the corner of Washington and Montgomery Streets. There are brighter lights on down the street. He turns in at the Bella Union Melodeon on Kearny Street. He walks the length of the long, crowded barroom, and enters the little theatre. A four bit admission gives him entrance to one of the diminutive boxes, suggestively curtained off around the sweep of the second tier. He is late: the first part of the show is over; the ridiculous, scenic backdrop is rippling its canvas stream in readiness for the olio entriactes; the orchestra, in Mexican costume, is rousing the pattern of a weary nostalgia.

The miner sits down beside the table; gets his feet comfortably perched on the railing, and is about to survey the

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crowd when one of the girls of the chorus steps with a rustle of curtain into the box. Smiles are easy, but she holds out for a bottle of the best imported champagne. With a gradual deflation of her ego down through all the levels of the wine list, and with a gradual evaporation of smile, she finally settles for a straight whiskey. The olio variety acts are over. The drop curtain rises on the first loud lines of a thoroughgoing farce. The conversation intensifies with the tempo of the farce; there is a gradual ascent back through the wine list. The farce is very well received.

A handbill for such an evening at the Bella Union Melodeon is still extant:

Bella Union Melodeon
Nightly
A Constantly Varied Entertainment
Replete with Fun and Frelic
Abounding in Song and Dance
Unique for Grace and Beauty
Wonderful Eccentricity
And Perfect in Its Object of Affording
Laughter For Millions
In Which

Harry Courtaine
Sally Thayer, Maggie Brower, Sam Wells,
J. H. O'Neill, William Lee, J. Allen,
Marian Lee, Nellie Cole, A. C. Durand,
J. H. McCabe, C. Staderman, Amanda Lee,
Ellie Martell, H. D. Thompson, Joe Mabbot,
T. M. Wells, G. Woodhull, and a host of
the best

Dramatic, Torpsichorean and Musical
Talent Will Appear
Emphatically the
Melodeon of the People
Unapproachable and Beyond Competition

<sup>\*</sup> Reproduced from an article by Pauline Jacobson in the San Francisco Bulletin, August 4, 1917.

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#### XVI -- THREE FAST MEN FOR TEN NIGHTS

The noble attempt of H. A. Perry in March 1860, to hold out with a Shakespeare repertory at the Lyceum, gave way to the burlesque of Metamora, or The Last of the Pollywogs. The performance of Edwin Forrest as Metamora in the original play was the springboard for Perry's satire. He received very little attention, however, and spent the rest of his engagement in unprofitable productions of the old, supposedly sure-fire plays such as Richelieu and The Belle's Stratagem, with occasional attempts at such new sensation plays as The Hidden Hand and Six Degrees of Crime.

Prompted by the apparent inability of the other big houses to gain an audience, the American Theatre was reopened in April "under the general management of Messrs. Booth and Ryer and the stage management of Mr. Baker...The prices are reduced to half the usual rates at a first-class theatre here, viz: 50 and 25 cents." (Daily Evening Bulletin, April 12, 1860.)

A description of the production with which the American was reopened appeared in the <u>Daily Evening Bulletin</u>, April 13:

"A numerous audience was present last night at the re-opening of this house. (The American Theatre.) The local drama of The Three Fast Men of San Francisco (so called probably because the words Stockton Street and Sacramento are occasionally spoken by the characters) is a long, dreary farce in five acts. There is no plot of the slightest interest, and the piece only shows the buffconeries of a few personages

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who successively visit a gaming house, a thieves' den, a fortune-teller parlor, a masked ball, etc. The grand feature in the farce is the imitation, by a number of females, of the Negrominstrelsy, Ethiopian jokes, stale conundrums and Alabam' dancing of Billy Birch and Joe Murphy's troupe. There is a great deal of coarse animal life exhibited. The fists are freely used, and hats are knocked over the victim's heads; a cry of police is heard and everybody runs, etc. These things produce a laugh, but immediately afterward one is sorry that he has been tempted to indulge in mirth at such absurities. The piece will be repeated tonight."

Despite censorious handling by the newspapers, the production of <u>The Three Fast Men of San Francisco</u> held the boards for a ten-night run. The <u>Daily Evening Bulletin</u> in a second attack, inadvertently discloses some of the reasons for the success of the production:

"We have been particularly requested by those interested to pitch into the farce of The Three Fast Young Men of San Francisco. (They say) anything that shows how vulgar, gross and indecent a play it is will be sure to persuade a San Francisco audience, particularly the ladies. to visit the theatre. We are reminded that the present Ryer-Baker-Booth Company have produced of late some of the finest dramas in the English language, but they were played only to a 'beggarly account of empty boxes.' Finding San Francisco weary of the refined and intellectual, the management produced the present piece and at once crowded the house nightly and put money in their purse. Latterly, however, the 'rush' has commenced to slacken, and it is thought that a good sharp censure of the piece will bury it hard. Well, we can only repeat that the piece is worthless as a drama, that the management who produced it, and the actors, and especially the actresses, who perform in it should be ashamed of themselves and their calling; that the men who persuade women to see it cannot be their well-wishers; and that who-ever see it, voluntarily a second time, or who sit

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it out a first time (unless under duress) has a taste for very low pleasures...The piece is announced to be repeated tonight."\*

This agitation of the <u>Daily Evening Bulletin</u> against the burlesque crudities of the <u>Three Fast Men</u> indicates the adjustment the "arbiters of taste" would have to make to the inevitable arrival of the "leg-show" toward the end of the 1860 decade.

#### XVII -- THE MARSH JUVENILE COMEDIANS

The dull round of experiment from opera to legitimate drama to "sensation play" to extravaganza was three
times broken successfully by the Marsh Juvenile Comedians.
Their first two appearances were in the spring and summer
of 1860; their third appearance, in the fall of 1863.

The performances of this juvenile troupe were a saccharine variation of the new theatrical modes; the repertoire was made up of farces, fairy extravaganzas, sensation plays, and burlesques. Daring exposure of limb for an adult became sweet exposition; riotous farce became cute fancy; sex appeal of Greek myth became tinseled daintiness; crime page sensation plots became intellectual exercises. The dramatic critic of the <u>Bulletin</u> (April 5, 1860) was not completely taken in:

"The Juvenile Comedians were welcomed last night by a very numerous audience. To seriously criticize these youngsters is out of the

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, April 13, 1860.

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question. The stronger emotions and passions that animate men and women in the drama of the stage, as in real life, cannot be supposed to fill their minds; and they must often necessarily repeat their parts as the parrot speaks. One views their acting with something of the same feeling he has when gazing on dancing dogs, learned pigs, or performing monkeys. It is not altogether so, indeed, for children do experience...."

Twenty-six girls and four boys, with ages from six to sixteen years, made up the company. George and Mary Marsh (born Guerineau) were the stars. Louise Marsh (really Miss McLaughlin) was the second leading lady light. George Marsh proved to be a comedian of almost mature ability:

"His powers of imitation were marvelous, and his Toodles, a miniature copy of Burton's Toodles, in which all of the business and many of the gags, even to the profanity at the mention of Thompson, were retained, was almost as funny in its uproariousness as was Burton's Toodles stuff, and certainly better than many of the imitations that have been seen since Burton's day."\*

The same source says of Mary, that she was "an uncommonly attractive child, bright eyed, graceful, fresh, and fair"; and goes on to add this sad detail of her death:

"While playing in one of the Southern cities, her dress took fire from the footlights and she was fatally burned, living but an hour or two after the accident occurred." \*\*

The Bulletin for April 6, 1860 admits lukewarmly the success of the Marsh juveniles in San Francisco:

<sup>\*</sup> Hutton, Laurence Curiosities of the American Stage \*\*Ibid.

"There was another crowded house last night when the company of juvenile comedians repeated Black-eyed Susan and Toodles. The tender years, the sex, the pretty faces and soft voices, the handsome costumes, the dramatic ability and excellent drilling and the general sprightliness of this youthful troupe make a very charming whole. Some of them sing very sweetly, though without much expression, and others dance lightly and gracefully."

#### XVIII -- MAGUIRE AND THE SEVEN SISTERS

The Martinetti-Ravel pantomimists (they are discussed in detail in a later section) bridged December of 1860 and January of 1861 with a forty-five night run. This high level of public response was not achieved by any other at-The theatrical season was as jittory and shifting as the political factions of the whole nation. In 1860, California, against all prognostications, had elected itself into support of the Union and Lincoln. On April 24, 1861, with news on the Pony Express that Fort Sumter had fallen and civil war was definitely and terribly begun, there was a city-wide flare-up of political animosities. Offices of Confederate newspapers and businessmen were wrecked and ransacked. General patriotic fervor rioted in the streets. The completion of the transcontinental telegraph was peculiarly stimulating at this time; that the first use of this revolutionary means of communication should be for the controversial dispatches of an internecine war, kept the people on their toes for the least flicker of a telographic signal.

The fact that the latest military dispatches were read from the stages of most of the San Francisco theatres during performances, certainly contributed to the up-curve

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of a dull season. Maguire, always first (or close and often legally defended second) in the theatrical mode, announced a July 2nd opening of "the grand operatic, spectacular, diabolical, musical, terpsichorean, farcical burletta of <u>The Seven Sisters</u>" with a fervid, pro-Union epilogue written especially for the occasion by Walter Leman.

The Seven Sisters was one of the most successful of the extravaganza burlesques. The San Francisco production followed upon a run of eight months at the Laura Keene Theatre in New York. The <u>Bulletin</u> for July 5, 1861 maintained its usual hauteur in burlesque matters:

"The Seven Sisters will be repeated tonight. This piece, as a very juvenile critic remarked, has neither head nor tail, and we may add, there is not much body too. It is a forage of theatrical stuff, which, from its excess of absurdity, is occasionally amusing. The 'political hits' give it a sort of artificial spasmodic life; while the number of 'supes,' male and female, and the new scenery please the spectators who love show. The scene 'behind the scenes,' the drill of female Zouaves, the dialogue between Columbia (Mrs. Woodward) and Uncle Sam (W. Leman) with the illustrative tableaux are the chief points in the piece."

Walter Leman's epilogue was an elaborate obituary for Colonel Ellsworth, quick hero of the Union cause. Leman used old Doctor Collyer's technique of the tableaux vivants, up-to-dating it as <u>Uncle Sam's Magic Lantern</u>.

The <u>Bulletin</u> of August 24, 1861 printed further details:

"The spectacle of The Seven Sisters is still on the run here. Last night, Mr. Leman, in the character of 'Uncle Sam' recited the following

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original lines, peculiarly appropriate to the times, drew down 'thunders of applause' repeated again and again:

"How many braves have fallen to uphold that flag, Which men, misled, through treason's ditch would drag!

No more shall gleaming blade or booming gun Wake Ellsworth, Corcoran, or Cameron, Or Lyon, --fallen in the bloody fray, Which Sigel's valor has redeemed the day!

Sigel! With face turned ever toward his foes, Making his bloody record as he backward goes. Peace to their dust! While love of country leads The nation's sons to emulate their deeds, Around their graves her daughters shall repair, And, weeping, lay their blooming chaplets there; Which every Union heart--whate'er botide-
Beats firmer for the cause for which they died.'

"As Mr. Leman is well known to the readers of this journal for his patriotism and poesy, we presume that he is the author of the spirited verses given above. The Seven Sisters will be repeated, once more, this evening, when a new audience may hear 'Uncle Sam' himself relieve his mind in these lines...."

became involved in one more of his numerous first-rights controversies. Production of Boucicault's <u>Colleen Bawn</u> was the issue and the management of the Metropolitan was the plantiff. When Maguire lost the case and was forced to close his run of the play, he showed his astute showmanship by reopening immediately with the patriotic display of <u>The Seven Sisters</u>. For several nights, the Union sympathy of the city packed Maguire's Opera House and reacted as expected to Leman's flagwaving finale.

#### XIX -- A FREE RIDE FOR THE STATE SENATE

The 1861-62 season was particularly embittered: directorates of the theatres were dissolved and realigned; the

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legal entanglements for first dramatic rights became more and more inscrutable: the temperamental gorge of the stars rose easily and there was a great deal of firing and rehiring. Norton the First, a musical burlesque of the self-styled "Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico" achieved a comparative success at the Academy of Music. Cherry and Fair Star (also called The Children of Cyprus) trailed its foggy and ornamental machinations across the stage of the Opera House for brief acclaim. More than once. The Saven Sisters was unceremoniously thrown into the breach made by the receding failure of legitimate drama or opera. In December 1861. even the austere bigwigs of the State Legislature (temporarily housed in San Francisco because of the Sacramento Valley flood) voiced their concern for the execrable taste of the theatre-goers; seventy-five of the marooned senators voted their unrepresentative confidence in the art and life of Mrs. Hayne, courageous upholder of legitimate drama's pale beacon.

The vaudeville, minstrelsy, and burlesque of the melodeon shows took more and more shape in the threatening background of theatrical life. It was clear that before long the censored modes of the music hall would step down aggressively and take over the big theatres. In March 1862, Maguire tried to get his affairs adjusted to the inevitable. First he moved his dramatic company from the Opera House to the Metropolitan in which he had recently bought an interest.

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Here he continued operatic and dramatic performances, thus salvaging his persistent love of culture. He, perhaps sadly, reopened his Opera House as The Varieties, engaging Frank Hussey as manager.

Programs at The Varieties proved as flexible as the name. Maguire very deliberately tried everything. As a result, the programs were shapeless potpourris without any particular drawing power: elements of minstrelsy were thrown in; short farces were played as afterpieces; costume-stifled extravaganzas were headlined. The tone of the whole show was innocuously mild; Maguire was out for a compromise between the obvious taste of the times and a profitable, whole-family program. Interspersed ballet, with a daring kick or two, was the only light touch at The Varieties.

The Opera House during October 1862 shook off its brief indignity and survived by alternate runs of minstrelsy and grand opera. In December, Maguire organized an excellent, new minstrel troupe, including such featured players as Billy Birch, the Misses Jennie and Alicia Mandeville, and Harry Courtaine. Harry Courtaine offered the most intense light of the company. Without a doubt one of the great talents of the California stage, he continued to truncate his career with all-absorbing, well-publicized intoxication which usually delivered him into the hands of the law. He also, however, continued to reappear in theatrical history, as now in Maguire's new company, with apparently undiminished vigor and artistry,

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filling the roles of burlesque clowns (which he usually chose) with ironic finesse. The press invariably praised his performance.

Survival of the fittest is apparently in the long run a sound enough rule. But the run has to be rather long. For instance: Harry Courtaine's burlesque of King Lear as King Blear is lost; (his performance would be irrecoverable anyway) but beyond that loss, there is the loss of that sort of burlesque script which was perhaps never more than a series of crude cues on the player's cuff, and swift flashes of imagination in production. Meanwhile, the innumerable scripts of respectable burlesque are carefully preserved. They have assumed for the most part a graveyard complexion to be looked upon only by the scholar; the law of survival has duly worked out. The liveliest part of the early San Francisco burlesque, that of the melodeons and such men as Courtaine and Leman at the big theatres, is irreparably faded.

It is interesting to remember that the early European theatre was in many respects burlesque of the church dogma; this early drama has in large part survived because of its central reference. There was an established path in people's minds by which to transmit it. The folklore of an early California, however, was a rapidly fluctuating, decentralized mass of immediate political issues; there was neither the mental predisposition nor the desire to transmit the

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Early in 1863 it was disclosed that lobbying at the State Capitol had assumed the rather substantial nature of bribery. On February 14, <u>King Caucus</u>, Walter Leman's satire of the scandal, opened at the Opera House. The San Francisco opening of the burlesque, which had already been successfully shown in Sacramento, was announced by the <u>Daily Alta California</u> of February 14, 1863 in these ironic terms:

"Maguire's Opera House: Mr. Walter Leman's extravaganza, King Caucus which made such a hit at Sacramento, will be produced this evening, and of course will attract all who dabble in politics."

Leman, in his <u>Memories of An Old Actor</u>, includes the following description of this play:

"The biennial session of the State Legislature occurred that year, and certain charges of bribery with respect to the election of one of its honorable members, made a great commotion in political circles; the matter was ventilated in the House, and was for the time the talk not only of Sacramento, but of the whole State. I took advantage of this public exposure by composing a political squib, under the title of King Caucus, or The Senatorial Muddle, which hit the public fancy, and filled the theatre for a week. This little extravaganza was arranged in 'four sessions,' and the characters were 'made up' and recognized as prominent members of the Legislature. The bill was headed with the couplet:

'Scheming Rogues with forms to mock us, Straggling one by one to Caucus.'

"And to enhance the effect, the 'original wardrobe' in which one 'honorable gentleman,' was
charged with proposing to a third 'honorable
gentleman,' was brought from the 'Golden Eagle
Hotel' and used for the same purpose on the

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stage. The squib answered completely the purpose for which it was intended, and caused a good-natured laugh all around."

The text of <u>King Caucus</u> is not extant. At any rate, its references would be so particular as to be almost unintelligible.

### XX -- MAZEPPA COMES TO TOWN

The spring season of 1863 was taken up at the Opera House by a number of romantic extravaganzas. Maguire observed the dull response of the audience to the clumsy attempts to present contemporary situations through the doad weight of mythological paraphernalia. He also observed the immediate liveliness of the audience when the ballet kicked out for its Evidently he assumed that a ballet corps was the routine. key to public enthusiasm; he immediately employed as maîtres de ballet the famous dancers, Mlle, Caroline Acosta and M. Hippolyte Wiethoff, and then advertised locally for a corps de ballet which finally included fifty San Francisco women. With determined faith, Maguire then injected a ballet routine into the most staid regions: the heart-wringing denouement of a serious play would be either stalled or crowned with a sudden line-up of puffing danseuses.

That something was wrong is indicated by the next twist in the season. The ballet experiment gave way to a high pressure series of sensational plays: East Lynne, The Dead Heart, and The Mistake of a Life appeared with no interims whatsoever for breathing.

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And still the audiences trickled into sparse conformity: empty rows, and empty spaces within rows -- the lost teeth of theatrical ventures. Something sensational was needed to turn the tide from the melodeons, something violent. Adah Isaacs Monken did it -- an attractive woman in tights, strapped to the back of a real horse, riding her charger dizzily up a scenic ramp and offstage. Maguire brought "The Menken" as Mazeppa to San Francisco in August 1863. The lassitude of theatre audiences was instantly jerked up to a thrilling response. It was not the person of Menken herself: other Mazeppas followed all over the city. The hoop-tearing, acrobatic quality of Mazeppa's Pegasean ascont polarized the San Francisco theatres for more than a year. Lotta Crabtree was moderately successful in a season of farces and a musical burlesque of Jenny Lind; Peter and Caroline Richings held out without loss in a season of romantic opera: several of Boucicault's new plays had short, well reviewed runs: the San Francisco Minstrels maintained their steady popularity at the Eureka Theatre. But throughout 1863 and 1864 there was a constant and profitable reversion to Mazeppa's enwrapt disappearance into the terror of the Gothic scenery. Six of the San Francisco theatres opened the fall season of 1864 with some version of Mazeppa, each being advertised as employing the wildest horse, the most beautiful woman, the longest ramp, the most convincing rocks. Surely the most entertaining was the burlesque version of Mazeppa at

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#### XXI -- BOUCICAULT'S ARRAH-NA-POGUE

Mazeppa's omnipresent flight into the empyrean left a boredom in its wake which theatrical managers strove to dispel. Events in the country itself were moving with such rapidity that the stimulation of the theatre could hardly be felt. Maguire, as always throughout his career, continued his protean antics in the eye of public taste. With Charles Kean and his wife, the former Ellen Tree, engaged at the Opera House in a season of Shakespeare, Maguire kept his hands on a sure thing in the fall of 1864 with Backus and his minstrels at the Eureka. The burlesque elements of these minstrel programs are lost along with the satirical subtleties of the melodeons. But there is assurance, time and again in the press, that the minstrels held a constant audience with their irrepressible humor in the face of all events.

The moribund condition of the theatre in the middle sixties was symbolized by the opening of Mechanic's Pavilion in December 1864. Under the management of John Wilson, the public was subjected to a hippodrome hypodermic. Roman chariot races, fancy riding, and educated horses were presented.

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But with hardly an audible neigh, this horse show foundered, and the newspaper columns of the time furnish no telltale word of wreckage.

The year 1865 brought signal honors for Maguire's San Francisco Minstrels. They had been subjecting personalities, local politics, and national events to a brisk patter of burlesque for months at the Eureka Theatre. The success of this phenomenal run at the Eureka pointed to an Eastern tour. Before their departure, Maguire installed the company at the Academy of Music for a series of benefit performances. With occasional benefits, the troupe played at the Academy for almost two months in the spring of 1865.

As a madman's catharsis for the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln arrested the life of the whole nation in April. The Worrell sisters, Irene, Sophie, and Jenny, received scant notice for their season of burlesque at the Opera House. There was no upswing in the theatre until the fall of 1865. Maguire and Wheatleigh engaged in a well publicized controversy for first rights to a new Boucicault play, Arrah-na-Pogue. Wheatleigh, victorious, produced the play very successfully at the Metropolitan. Maguire retaliated with a burlesque of the play, which he called Arrah-no-Poke, or Arrah of the Cold Pomme de Terre. The Bulletin for November 15, 1865 carries a valuably detailed announcement of the opening of this burlesque at the Academy of Music:

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An original burlesque on Arrah-na-Pogue, styled Arrah-no-Poke, or Arrah of the Cold Pomme de Terre, will be performed tonight, Mr. Setchell personating "Shun the Post," and Miss Clarkson, the Worrell Sisters, doing up the excruciating and melodious business....

# Cast of Arrah-no-Poke, or Arrah of the Cold Pomme de Terre:

- Shun the Post, a Highlow Hod-Carrier, with the song of "Eatin' of the Greens," and several enchoruses:
- Arrah Melissa, called by the peasantry, for short, Arrah Meliss, and nicknamed by others Arrah-no-Poke, or Arrah of the Cold Pomme de Terre--not a small potato part at all--with several songs:

  Miss Louisa Clarkson
- Squeamish but Cool, the old Cool himself who has a weakness for taking things--with several songs:

  Miss Sophie Worrell
- Fanny Steampower, a descendant of the powers that B. McCoul--with numerous songs, to say nothing of a duet:

  Miss Irene Worrell
- Col. Bogtrotter O'Gravy, the Original Gravy--his first entry for the plate in this engrossing character:

  Harry Wall
- Majority Coughlin, a hack of the Hinglish Harmy, with a strong haccent and a hacking cough:

  George Pardey
- Francois Finnegan, an F. F. of no character at all, but a Ficacious though misused individual, with song and a sonorous opening snorus:

  Woodhull
- Skaty Welshrabbit, fond of a swig and a jig, and of beating Finnegan--in which latter taste she is no exception to the company she keeps--with any number of "Barndoor Jigs":

  Little Jennie (Worrell)
- Mod. L. Pliceman, who makes his prisoners comfortable, and does not object to the beating of informers.

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Alphonse de Riley, Rudolphe O'Rourke, Theodore Mulligan, and other of the gentry, with peasants and peasant girls too renumerative to mention, etc., etc. By others of the Pleasant Company.

Synopsis of Scenery and Incidents:

Scene lst: A street in a city with a lamp-post to it--Shun the Post does not appear till afterwards. The lamp-post has a patent Finnegan attachment. It is discovered that the attachment is an aeolian one. Arrival of a rival--the sleeping Finnegan is robbed by Squeamish but Cool, which difficult and dangerous feat is performed in full view of the audience. Enter Shun the Post with a hod and a soliloquy. Fanny Steampower appears. The story of Arrah and the Poke. An attempt to bear good stock; it fails. Enter Arrah with reproaches, the whole closing with a grand concerto.

Scene 2nd: Grand effect of changing the flats, but leaving one flat without change. The faithful Finnegan still sticks to his post, and here an effect never before observed will be produced. The interior of a High-low barn. Enter a number of honest but respectable people. A High-low Wedding--opening Chorus.

Enter Squeamish but Cool--it is fly-time with him. Song--"Dear Mother, I've Come Home to Drink." Love and jealousy, but no murder. Song by Steampower-a perfect Calliope: "Kiss some more Ladies, Kiss some more." Exit two. Skaty Welshrabbit comes to the chalk. Barndoor jig. After a dance, a song-- "The Eatin' of the Greens." Entrance of O'Gravy, Coughlin and others too numerous to mention. rest for the virtuous, and the arrest of The fight and the finding of the Arrah. Noble Conduct of Shun, who owns the boots. leather. He is hurried off to prison and invites Arrah to accompany him. The result Duet -- "I Won't Go, Sir."

Scene 3rd: (Very short fortunately; thrown in principally to give time to set a longer one.)

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Interview between the O'Gravy and the Steampower. He asketh and she consenteth. Exit Colonel and enter Squeamish. The Colonel's dish is upset, and a dew wet is the natural result.

- Scene 4th: Showing how Court-martials are conducted in Ireland. Finnegan wins his suit but gets beat all the way through. The Straightforward conduct of Shun. Enter the Steampower and the old Cool--no coolness between them now. The greenbacks of the Colonel gone back upon, in consequence of which he goes back upon Shun. The tearful sentence and the Pirate's (Boo C. Coe's) Chorus. It is a BOUCICAULTROUS.
- Scene 5th: In a cell. Modern improvements, -Shun and the model Policeman. Enter Finnegan
  who gets licked. He returns to his Post-held there by an of-coated tale. The voice
  of the Arrah is heard outside. Escape of
  Shun, who avails himself of a favorable opera-tune-ity.
- Scene 6th: Perilous situation of Shun. Grand illusion produced by the sinking of a ladder with a lad upon it. The beautiful fidelity of Arrah who refrains from poking her husband off the ladder. F. F. may now be construed to mean Fiendish Finnegan. He attempts to upset a rival. Vengeance comes down upon him like a thousand of bricks. He dies to slow music, which is heard in the distance. Grand entry of every one who can be bought, borrowed or stolen for the occasion.
- Grand Finale: Closing Chorus by the strength of the company, assisted by the reformed Informer. Moral: it does an Informer good to kill him.
- Grand Tableau: Showing Old Ireland in Her Glory. Friday Evening-November 17th: First Benefit of Miss Emily Thorne."

On November 16, 1865 the critic of the  $\underline{\text{Bulletin}}$ , bravely threaded his way through the amazing intricacies of the plot:

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"The new burlesque of Arrah-no-Poke, written in this city, was produced last night to a full house. It is neatly written in the usual mock heroic verse of its class, sprinkled with mild witticisms, local hits, and thrusts at Boucicault, and interspersed with well-performed music. The burlesque is broad without vulgarity. The song 'Eatin' of the Greens' is quite laughable, but the sentimental songs introduced were out of character....Mr. Setchell, as Shun the Post, kept the audience almost constantly laughing. The burlesque of the sensation climbing scene is produced by 'Shun,' carrying a hodful of bricks, climbing to an upper window in the Occidental Hotel on a ladder which sinks as he rises. 'Arrah Melissa' (Miss Clarkson. who showed more spirit than usual), awaits his approach, singing the plaint which the original 'Arrah' pours forth to the moon on the Castle heights. A few bricks dropped on the sneaking, mock representative of Feeny produce the catastrophe of the parody. Arrah-no-Poke will be repeated tonight together with the comedy of California Diamonds, in which appears Miss Thorne, who will also sing the popular patriotic song of 'Shout for our Banner.'"

The burlesque was repeated on the 23rd, 25th, and 27th of November. The <u>Bulletin</u> for the 27th discloses the author of the piece:

"The performance tonight, for the benefit of C. H. Webb, author of the clever burlesque Arrah-no-Poke, will consist of the farce Stage Struck, in which Miss Thorne and Mr. Setchell appear, and the burlesque aforesaid. Several speeches and a 'banquet' are promised."

The <u>Daily Alta California</u> for November 27,1865, brought the curtain down on the much discussed burlesque in an interesting manner:

"Author's Night.--This evening Arrah-no-Poke will be presented for the last time, the occasion being the benefit of the author, Mr. C. H. Webb. The burlesque has proved a decided hit.... Its chief merit, and one which commends it to eulogy as a burlesque, is the closeness with

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which the original play is adhered to in spirit and plot. The Court Scene in Arrah-na-Pogue is almost a burlesque in itself, but in Arrah-no-Poke its absurdities are broadened and brought out in bold relief by stripping the scene of all sentiment and pathos. It would have seemed that so clever and successful a burlesque should have had a larger run when it is considered that the original was played fifty nights, but it must be remembered that the latter brought out a class of people seldom seen at theatres, while the former has not so many pathetic and patriotic elements to commend it to the national pride of our Celtic residents. though the beautiful tableau with which it closes is evidently intended as a set-off for having been obliged to travesty the Irish character. But the travesty is most good-naturedly done, and bears not a single grain of malice."

With the <u>Pomme de Terre</u> controversy cold and buried there was no pronounced theatrical flurry in the winter of 1865-66 other than the appearance of the Buislay family. The Buislays, talented exponents of the Martinetti-Ravel pantomime technique, presented their spectacle-pantomime <u>The Sheep's Foot</u> to crowded houses. This was followed by a production of the faery-spectacle of <u>The Elves</u> with Caroline Chapman as collaborating star. Burlesque was still floundering around between the costume-heavy extravaganzas of the big theatres and the unprintable satire of the melodeons.

As a sure bet, Maguire revived the dormant Seven Sisters. In March it was announced that fifty ladies had been engaged for the Zouave Drill, and a third act entitled An Allegory of the Union had been added. It is clear even at this distance that any sharp burlesque point was muffled by that extra flounce or two which was essential in order that each successive extravaganza might be the best yet and the

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grandest. The <u>Seven Sisters</u> conducted the fifty ladies through fifteen nights of successful Zouave drilling at the Academy of Music. The Opera House had been closed for redecoration in deference to the engagement of Edwin Forrest, announced for May.

#### XXII -- LADY DON

The engagement of Forrest definitely raised Maguire's prestige, but from all indications depressed his finances. Forrest attacked his roles with a heavy attempt at his old form, and the public was politely respectful but somewhat bored. The announcement that Lady Don, English comedience, had been engaged by Maguire for August, got the public again on edge.

George E. Barnes published his reminiscences of Lady Don in the Bulletin for March 13, 1897:

"Another episode illustrating the romance of dramatic life is that of Lady Don and her erratic husband, Sir William Don, baronet. This peculiar individual, who was Scotch by birth and of good family, was unfortunately, like the proverbial princes of his own country, 'poor, but proud.' Too proud to work, and therefore resorted to all sorts of haphazard means of existence, the stage among others. While flirting with the drama, he also flirted with and married Miss Emily Saunders, an actress whose father kopt a sort of amusement garden near Liverpool, England. He brought her nothing, excepting his small title; but a woman dearly loves such a trifle, and her gratification was that from being plain Emily Saunders, actress and daughter of a caterer, she became Lady Don. The baronet was a man of great stature, a son of Anak, measuring six feet and a half or more in his stockings; but this exceptional height instead of impairing his usefulness

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stage, rather added to it in burlesque, the line which he adopted....

"Lady Don, his widow, appeared in this city for the first and only time in 1866, at the Washington-street Opera House, under the engagement of Mr. Thomas Maguire, and the poor old 'Napoleon' had a world of trouble with her. She was in a republic and seemed to think it was necessary to her self-respect to assume all the hauteur belonging to such an aristocrat like herself. even in a small way, as a Scottish baronet's She made it very warm for the attaches of the theatre if they defaulted in the slightest manner toward the ladyship, and the lives of the property-man and of Cheeks, the director of the stage, became a burdon to them. Maguire was kept busy listening to her tearful protests -- for she cried as easily and as often as Job Trotter. Alfred Jinglo's confident -- and keeping the peace between herself and the worried stage hands.

"Lady Don was a fine figure of a woman on the stage. In height she was exceptionally tall in regard to her sex as her departed husband had been as a man. She was a marvel of graceful proportion and harmonious action. Dressed as Leicester in the burlesque of 'Queen Elizabeth'\* -- to which most of her engagement was confined-she was a picture; and the natural symmetry of her ladyship's lower limbs was the admiration of the golden youth of the city and the envy of all the ladies.

"She had a clear, leading soprano voice, and a very expressive one, withal, when heard in 'Good-by, Sweetheart,' a song that she made popular in all quarters. While here Lady Don lived at Occidental Hotel, but in 'splendid isolation,' as Joe Chamberlain said about the international position of the British Empire. Many ladies called to pay their respects to her ladyship; but they were 'not-at-homed' and, did not repeat the visit. When Lady Don returned to England she took the theatre at Nottingham

<sup>\*</sup> Correct title: Kenilworth, in which Queen Elizabeth was a character. cf. Next page.

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and married a Mr. Wilton. Her ladyship and her title have long ago gone the way of all flesh. 'Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers, come to dust,' according to the song in Cymbeline."

The Opera House was packed for Lady Don's opening night, August 6, 1866. The <u>Bulletin</u> for August 7 attempted a restrained impartiality:

"It is no exaggeration to say that she achieved a brilliant triumph. It was evident from the first movement of her appearance that she was at home on the stage. Her manner is pleasing; her movements are graceful; her figure is attractive and commanding. If she is not a very great, she is a decidedly clever artist. She is thoroughly natural, and evidently has a profound contempt for anything like dramatic affectation. As an actross she is full of grace and vivacity; as a cantatrice she takes high rank. She has a fine soprano voice, which is under thorough cultivation. As a balladist she is among the bost we have heard on the Pacific Coast .... In the clevor burlesque of Konilworth she was ably sustained by Miss Kato Denin."

The reviewer for the <u>Daily Dramatic Chronicle</u> adds some illuminating details (August 7, 1866):

"We were glad to notice that there were a great number of English people present last night as we were sure that this portion of the audience quite enjoyed the very clever burlesque of Kenilworth which concluded the entertainment. It is a little too much to expect that an American audience can enjoy a burlesque like Kenilworth, which occupies about an hour and a half in representation when they are entirely unable to discover the point of what were -- when the pieco was produced some fifteen years ago at the Strand Theatre. London -- its best jokes. The piece would require a little freshening up, even for the London stage at the present day. The dialogue is very witty, and the action of the play brisk and amusing; yet in spite of this, long before the fall of the curtain, people commenced leaving the theatre, and the

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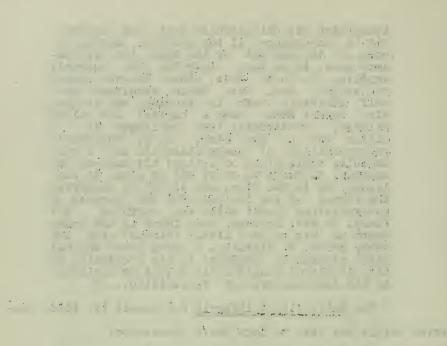
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atmosphere was delightfully cool and comfortable in consequence of the audience having become so thinned out by the time the performance came to an end. Lady Don has scarcely anything to do in this piece beyond singing two songs. Mrs. Kate Denin acquitted herself admirably both in singing and acting; Miss Sophie Edwin made a capital Sir Walter Raleigh, considering that burlesque is a little out of her line. H. D. Thompson's ropresentation of Queen Elizabeth was a wonderfully comic piece of acting; his make-up was capital. W. Barry is sadly out of place in burlesque; he is too slow, and is apt to sacrifice the rhymes of the dialogue for the purpose of interpolating 'gags' which are anything but funny. He was, however, very funny in the scene where he has to do a little 'circus' with the hobby horse. H. Sinclair, a young actor who has made remarkable progress in his profession of late displayed considerable talent for burlesque in his imporsonation of Tressillian .... "

The <u>Daily Alta California</u> for August 13, 1866 reacted warmly but late to Lady Don's appearance:

"Lady Don, and the entire Opera House Company, now fill that establishment to overflowing nightly. Kenilworth, as it is now presented, combines the qualities of both historical and local burlesque and is put on the stage with a cast and scenic effects such as would ensure its success even if far less meritorious in its way than it is. The character of Queen Elizabeth by Thompson, is 'dressed to kill' but it strikes one that he gives too much of a good thing--straining the burlesque a trifle beyond the point required. The steambeat scene on the Thames is immense. Lady Don as Leicester, pleases all by her exquisite vocalization, and by a lavish display of personal attractions merits the approbation of some who are perhaps not fully capable of appreciating her artistic abilities."

With Lady Don as international attraction, Maguiro attempted to build up a dramatic company to support her. Harry Courtaine, recently refurbished from another session



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of drunkenness and incarceration, was engaged. Lady Don and Courtaine, with the assistance of Kate Denin, kept Maguire's fortunes afloat for a short time with a series of burlesques. These burlesques were still of the tediously punned, mythological, London befogged variety. The <u>Bulletin</u> for August 16, 1866 has this to say of Orpheus and Eurydice:

"Orpheus and Eurydice formed the afterpiece. It is the broadest possible burlesque, and is adapted rather to the meridian of the circus than to the playhouse. It abounds in the most execrable puns and the most cast-iron jokes, and would be insufferably stupid were it not apparent that the aim of the author was to see how ridiculous he could make everything appear. Lady Don, Miss Kate Denin and Mrs. Harry Jackson made the most of their respective parts; Mr. Barry was irresistible as the chaste Clotilda; Mr. Thompson's Pluto had some excellint points to it (but the idea of Pluto wielding the trident is a novel one); while Harry Courtaine did the crusty old ferryman marvelously well, considering he had only ten minutes to prepare in. The closing tableau was very beautiful."

The performance of <u>The Beggars' Opera</u>, the first in San Francisco, seems however to have offered no light whatsoever to the reviewers:

"The management of the Opera House is attempting too much. Six or eight new plays a week are more than any company in existence can master. As a consequence, some of the performances, especially within the past few nights, have not been up to the requirements of the occasion. The Beggars' Opera, Saturday night, was wretchedly murdered, while the Black Domino last evening was almost as shabbily performed."

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, September 11, 1866.

The <u>Bulletin</u> for September 8, 1866 had announced that in "Gay's celebrated production of <u>The Beggars' Opera</u>, with the original music, Lady Don would appear as Polly, Kate Denin as Lucy, and Mr. Courtaine as Captain MacHeath."

This tripartite stellar company closed their engagement at the Opera House, September 22 without any great fanfare. Lady Don returned to the East, and eventually to her "theatre in Nottingham, where she married a Mr. Wilton." Harry Courtaine makes another of his periodic disappearances from theatrical history, again carrying with him the honors of the show. Kate Denin stayed on at the Opera House in a series of stock plays starring Madame Céleste and John McCullough. Evidently Madame, who "came as near making a failure as it was possible for a great actress to do," is not to be confused with the Mademoiselle Céleste who furnished such thrilling outdoor entertainment to the gaping hundreds on August 6, 1866:

"Yesterday hundreds went to Hayes Park to see Mile. Céleste walk a tight-rope with a wheelbarrow. It is almost needless to say that she fulfilled her engagement as advertised, as she has never yet disappointed the public, although an accident occurred which almost disabled her from performing the feat....Some villainous wretch--perhaps the friend of a rival--cut one of the connecting ropes to the main rope, and had it not been discovered in time, Mile. Rosa Céleste would have made her last ascension yesterday. The rascal was, however, thwarted in his murderous design, and 'may his guilty conscience smite him in his lonely hours.'"

<sup>\*</sup> Dramatic Chronicle, August 6, 1866.

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Other strange but genuine goings-on were coincident with Lady Don's loudly touted engagement. The unadorned raillery and fearless attack of melodeon burlesque continued to keep this theatrical form pared down to something recognizable. The <u>Daily Dramatic Chronicle</u> for August 9, gives the following description of a program at the Olympic Theatre:

"Tonight a tremendous bill is offered on the occasion of a complimentary benefit tendered to Johnny de Angelis, one of the funniest Ethiopian comedians on the American stage-by the Olympic Company. Two splendid burlesques will be produced this evening. Miss Charlotte Crampton will appear in her great character of Richard Ye Third in the burlesque of that name, and Miss Jennie Briggs will make her debut in the burlesque of Mazeppa. In addition to these extraordinary attractions, a fine First Part performance will be given, and a Second Part, in which the beneficiary will appear, in connection with Lew Rattler, in the funny act of the Strolling Actors. We are informed that Johnny de Angelis has great hopes that everyone who witnesses the performances tonight will cast a vote for him as independent candidate for the office of Chief of Police."

#### XXIII -- THE ELFIN STAR

The winter season of 1866-67 was taken over entirely by Alice Kingsbury, "The Elfin Star," and the Martinetti-Ravel Pantomimists. Nightly, from November 19, 1866 through the whole of February 1867, the pantomime troupe kept full houses at the Metropolitan enthralled with their colorful gymnastic satire. The magnetism of the "Elfin Star," however, was inscrutable. Alice Kingsbury's roles at the Opera House, where she played from October 10 to December 1, 1866,

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were as elastic as the distance from romantic comedy to broad farce. The critic of the <u>Bulletin</u> finally threw up his hands November 5, from any attempt to pin down the personality of the little star:

"The popularity of Miss Kingsbury is a phenomenon in our dramatic annals. Coming here unheralded and unknown, she has carried the public heart by storm. She enters upon the fifth week of her engagement with undiminished prestige, and promises to draw crowded houses for an indefinite time to come. It is useless to attempt to explain the cause of her success. We can hardly account to ourselves for her witchery over us. Judged by the ordinary standards she is not a great artist. She can hardly be said to have any clearly defined style. She has not a good voice: her enunciation lacks distinctness; sho even mispronounces familiar words; her gestures are not always graceful, while her carriage lacks the dignity inseparable from high dramatic culture. But yet she charms us in spite of our conviction of her faults, and makes even the most hardened graybeards laugh or weep at her sweet will. forget the artist in the woman, and resign ourselves to the spell of her genius with a happy obliviousness of there being any such thing as criticism or the need for it in the world."

This bewitchment of the critic was no doubt arrested by the angular clarity of a troupe of Japanese jugglers at the Academy of Music. These jugglers, together with the Martinetti-Ravel pantomimists, kept the winter season going at a good clip, right up to the appearance of Robert Heller, the musical magician, at the Metropolitan in March. An announcement for Maguire's Opera House quickly appeared in the Daily Dramatic Chronicle, March 16, 1867:

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SECOND SERVICE SPILE

### SCENE FROM THE SPECTACULAR BLACK CROOK



REPRODUCED FROM THE POLICE GAZETTE

IN VAN EVERY'S "SINS OF NEW YORK"

WHO THE STREET TO SELECT

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"A burlesque of Heller's entertainment, originally written for Charles Mathew when Professor Anderson was the rage in London, is in preparation."

Heller's one-man show as magician, comedian, and pianist, must have offered plenty of vantage for burlesque. There was not only the Opera House program, where

"On three evenings also, Harry Jackson's Great Gun Trick, a clever imitation of some of Heller's wonders, was performed."\*

there was also a music-hall reflection of the big theatre success:

"Heller's tricks were performed in a somewhat novel fashion at the Olympic, by Joe Murphy, Johnny de Angelis, etc. and the Dead Shot drew well."\*

Heller's serious talent received its last deflation March 22 at the Opera House:

"Maguire's Opera House: Masonic Benefit: Harry Jackson will give his 'grand feats of legerdemain,' in imitation of Heller, and will exhibit the marionettes."\*\*

The complete vapidity of the spring season seems symbolized in Maguire's departure for the East, his eye out for talent. The news of importance to this history is the simultaneous announcement, April 3, 1867, by three theatres, of forthcoming productions of The Black Crook.

#### XXIV -- THE BLACK CROOK

The opening of The Black Crook at Niblo's Garden, New York, on September 12, 1866 foreshadowed not only the

<sup>#</sup> Daily Dramatic Chronicle, March 23, 1867
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future of burlesque but of the whole American stage. The best element in burlesque, the broad satire of the melodeons, had been carefully kept within those gay confines. The dullest element in burlesque, the pun-weighted, mythological extravaganza, was obviously playing a losing game with the public of the "respectable" theatres. The production of The Black Crook took the least valuable element of melodeon burlesque; exposure of limb, thrust it into the "respectable" extravaganza and the miracle was performed. Daring height of exposure, revealingly swathed in flesh-colored tights, was the secret stigma of theatrical thrill for crowded houses during a New York run of four hundred and seventy-five performances. Plot was gone; satire was gone.

Burlesque ceased to develop in the direction of puncturing the excessive or false dignity of a legitimate play; or re-scaling the megalomania of personality stars; or making public farce of back-handed political machinations. Shapely legs and ballet routine became the sine qua non of what was still called burlesque. The proscenium kick of an ever longer line of neat ankles was to become the dominating action of the American stage. Two people in conflict on a raised platform against a dark drape, the art of the speaking voice and the emotional gesture, were looked upon as primitive absurdities.

Action became the use of new mechanical inventions for the stage: fifty buxom Thespians in the final, triumphant

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stance of their dance would be slowly, tantalizingly lowered out of sight by depressing the stage; or by the reverse process they would be popped out on the stage in a sudden whirl of pulchritude. Theatrical climax was no longer an intensification of feeling, but of sensation: a labyrinthine scenic effect would be miraculously disclosed; dancers in violent costume would whip the scene into motion; the music would ascend frenetically; the so-like-real waterfall would foam in the abyss, a last most resplendent fairy would be elevated on a throne from the cellar; sliding panels would emit a last, overwhelming exodus of gleaming, corseted coryphées. The final generosity of downpouring stars would pull the supposed last gasp from the audience, and then, quickly, the audience is held breathless by the withdrawal of the mist in the background, disclosing a recession of craggy steps each dominated by a monumental, Greekified male -- and that is all, surely all; when presto, the eye is drawn to the front of the stage where four white horses, harnessed to a gilded chariot in the shape of an enormous conch, are being elevated from the pit. The queen descends from her throne and sits daintily in the mouth of the conch. Flowers are strewn. Elizabethan page boys trumpet the Irish myth offstage, with an agitated retinue of Greek gods and Italian toe dancers singing German beer-hall music.

The New York Times for September 3, 1866 has the following to say about the stage preparations for The Black Crook at Niblo's Garden:

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"Such a stage was never before seen in this country. Every board slides on grooves and can be taken up, pushed down or slid out at will. The entire stage may be taken away; traps can be introduced at any part at any time, and the great depth of the cellar below renders the sinking of the entire scenes a matter of simple machinery."

On September 17, five days after the opening of the show, the New York Tribune critic was finally sure of his reactions:

"The Black Crook was played by easy stages, from 7-3/4 o'clock until 1-1/4. Most of the auditors remained until the gorgeous end. Hopes were entertained, at one time, that the performance would last until the merry breakfast bell would 'wake the snorting citizens.' But these proved fallacious. By dint of great energy on the part of Mr. Wheatley and the mechanics, The Black Crook was at length played through; and a patient multitude, dazed and delighted, went to brief dreams of fairy-land. It takes time to digest so much radiance, and we have not, therefore, been in haste to describe this extraordinary drama. Having swallowed the rainbows, however, it is now our pleasant duty to say that they are very good to take. The scenery is magnificent; the ballet is beautiful; the drama is -- rubbish ... . To call The Black Crook 'original' is merely to trifle with intelligence. Herein, for example, we encounter our venerable and decrepit friend the Alchymist, who wants to live forever, and is perfectly willing to give, not only his own soul to the Devil, but every other soul that he can possibly send to Avernus. Here, too, is the humble youth, torn from his peasant maid and shut up in 'tho lowost cell,' Ha! Ha! by the Baron, cruel and bold. then the Fiend's Minister, the Alchymist, surnamed 'the Black Crook' is on hand to release him and send him on the road to avarice, vengeance, and perdition. Here are the old manorial or baronial servitors, the red-nosed steward and the high-capped dame; and along with them comes the arch and piquant little village-maid, who sings a song, and smiles, and shows her pretty ankles to the sheepish swains. There

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are fairies, too, and demons; and, in the upshot, of course, the former conquer the latter, and the parted lovers are joined in happiness, and the Baron bold is run through his bold body, and the Fiend is cheated of his prey, and the Black Crook is removed, through a dreadful hole in the earth, to a region of great heat and many dragons. And that Mr. Barras calls an original drama!...There was, in fact, no need of the pretense of a drama, in this instance; or, if there was, almost any old spectacle would have been preferable to The Black Crook.

The tilt and lance game of the melodeons against the respectable theatres was played with as much gusto in New York as in San Francisco. During the year-long run of The Black Crook in New York City, the San Francisco Minstrels, headed by Birch, Wambold, Bernard, and Backus, were enjoying the great popularity of their New York City venture in a hall named after them, at 585 Broadway. One of their most successful bills included a number entitled The Black Cook. Niblo's gigantic peep-show was not only satirized in plot; it was announced that The Black Cook would be supported by an African Ballet. It is amusing to imagine the sport these master minstrels must have made with the new art of leg exposure.

With an advertisement for \$80 Young Ladies," March 12, 1867, the management of the Metropolitan Theatre gave the first local flutter to the invasion of The Black Crook and the now leg-show conception of burlosque. Maguire and his Opera House quickly countered with an advertisement March 25 for "one hundred Young Ladies." The most famous, perhaps, of all theatrical litigations had commenced. Maguire claimed to have purchased rights for The Black Crook in New York. The

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Martinettis, whose ballet troupe had been incorporated into the Metropolitan production, claimed that their script, which they called <u>The Black Rook</u>, was the original script and that Maguire was making use of a pilfered copy. <u>The Daily Dramatic Chronicle</u>, March 23, got wind of a seemingly solid case against Maguire:

"The facts we are about to relate, if true, constitute a most serious charge against James Dowling, whilom stage manager of the Metropolitan Theatre, and the truth of them is vouched for by the present management of the same house. The information we have received is to the following effect. For some time, Mr. Dowling has been out of employment, and, knowing his circumstances, the management of the Metropolitan employed his wife occasionally in the ballet, and recently engaged him to make a copy of the MSS. of the Black Crook--dividing the parts ready for the use of the actors. It is charged that while so employed, Mr. Dowling surreptitiously obtained a copy of the play, and appropriated it to his own use; and that he afterward informed the management of Maguire's Opera House that he could put a copy of the Black Crook in their hands, and finally sold them the stolen copy for the sum of \$100 ...."

Judge Deady, in his decision, took advantage of his own delicate sensibilities, bluntly doclared the <u>Black Crook</u> the devil's concection, unfit to be seen, and consequently without the bounds of copyright protection. As a result, both productions steamed into full and competitive rehearsal. The gleeful yapping of the melodeons, about this time, added to the noise of the superlative adjective ballyhoo of the two big productions. The Olympic, completely in the swim, announced an ambitious satire entitled <u>The Black Hook with a Crook</u>.

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Maguire's production was the first to open. The Daily Dramatic Chronicle for April 16, 1867 gives a thorough report of the occasion:

"Almost every seat in the dress circle, orchestra and parquet was secured long before the doors of this theatre were opened last night. Every available inch of standing room was occupied before the rising of the curtain. and the immense audiences assembled manifested their impatience to witness the wonderful Black Crook by exhibiting more excitement than on any occation since the engagement of Forrest. At length the curtain rose on the first scene, representing a valley at the foot of the Hartz Mountains .... For a first performance the Black Crook went off admirably well last night. As everyone who has read the New York papers was aware beforehand, the play as a literary production is rubbish -- as great as the Sheep's Foot -- but it is nevertheless a magnificent spectacular piece. Miss Olivia Rand's singing was much applauded, and the song of the Naughty Men gained an encore. Harry Edwards made the most of the part of the Black Crook. Mrs. Sophie Edwin appeared to great advantage both as Stalacta and in the March of the Amazons. Mrs. Judah as Dame Barbara was very amusing, and H. Sinclair's acting in the part of Don Puffenquintz was very comical. Harry Jackson caused roars of laughter by his impersonation of the half-starved Greppo, and sang a song descriptive of Black Crook in fine comic style. Willie Edouin as Dragonfin. the monster, was the life of the piece; never was a more clever monster seen on the stage; he did everything but fly; his ground and lofty tumbling would put to shame many a gymnast; his broadsword combat, with two swords was perfect, and his contortions were the very essence of burlesque fun.... The Grotto of Stalacta is one of the most gorgeous scenes ever presented on the San Francisco stage. We must complain of H. D. who did not do justice to the character of Zamiel. Of course, everyone intends to go to see the Black Crook. It has faults; as we said before, the dialogue is often stupid and even ungrammatical; some scenes drag a little -- the Incantation Scene for instance -- and good as the first representation on the whole was, it left room for improvements, which will doubtless be made.

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There are many pretty faces in the corps de ballet, and the display of legs is such that all tastes must be pleased whether they incline towards the substantial support of the gigantic elephant or the slender and graceful upholders of the slim and elegant crane. One member of the ballet was confessedly 'great,' and the roars of laughter which greeted her again and again, proved that she was a most prominent and observed personage..."

The following day, April 17,1867 the Daily Dramatic

### Chronicle completed its detailed observation:

"The Black Crook drew another immense audience last night. Among the startling effects introduced in this play is one in the Incantation Scene where the torrent of real water at the back of the stage is suddenly turned into blood. ... The Young California danseuses. Miss Rosa Siegrist and Miss Emma Miles, gained great applause for their pas de deux and performance generally. We cannot say much for the corps de ballet either as regards beauty or dancing. Of the former, there is but a sprinkling here and there; while as regards the latter (with few exceptions), we think that severe and frequent practice may make a change for the better. Misses Corcoran seemed about the only ones at home ... . We would like to see all the corps de ballet with the same colored shoes on -- it looks more uniform; we can't have the legs all the same size but common black outdoor boots don't look well mixed up with the pretty scarlet ones that most of the corps wore.

"We may have one more grumble before closing our notice, and that is the interminable length of the piece. It was a quarter to 12 when the curtain went down. The fourth act, the Amazons' March, is too long; in fact, tiresome, as there is nothing to relieve the samoness when the first impression is over...Wo missed the happy 'levyers' too, at the closing scene. The 'lovyers' certainly were wanting to make the scene complete, in our humble opinion. Wo spent, however, a pleasant evening, and were highly pleased at the entertainment, which reflects great credit on the getters-up of it, and we certainly shall take another opportunity of enjoying it."

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The critic of the <u>Daily Dramatic Chronicle</u> was by this time evidently absorbed in the competitive productions of the Opera House and the Metropolitan. After writing at such great length about Maguire's efforts, he attended the final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan, no doubt with great curiosity. His report, April 20,1867 furnishes a very suggestive account of the <u>Black Rook</u> which was to edge the <u>Black Crook</u> completely out of the picture:

"The Black Rook had its final rehearsal last night preparatory to its production on the Metropolitan boards this evening. We are fully justified in saying that it is the finest spectacular piece ever produced in San Francisco. The plot of the play is the same as that of the Black Crook, as played at the Opera House, although there is a slight difference in the dialogue, and the characters are differently named. The ballet is immense -- it is a wonder how the management got together so many handsome and shapely young girls; while the principal danseuses -- the well known favorites of the Martinetti troupe, fairly surpassed themselves in this piece. Their dances are new and difficult, and executed with remarkable grace and dexterity.

"The scenery is entirely new, and of the most splendid description. Andrew Lehman, the artist, has never painted better, and he has long enjoyed the reputation of being one of the best scenic artists in the world. The stage decorations and paraphernalia are gorgeous and abundant. In the ballet scene in the first act, immense wreaths of roses are introduced with splendid effect in the groupings. In the incantation scene in the second act, a lofty waterfall, with real water is introduced; while at the close of the scene, after Hartstein, the Magician (Mr. Howson) has ratified his compact with Astaroff, the arch-fiend, there is a sudden rush of demons, hideous reptiles, black rooks, phantom steeds with their riders, and other things ghastly and horrible, that make up a scene of awful weirdness and horror.

"The Fairy Grotto is a scene of splendor with many surprising and beautiful transformations, among which is a broad lake, girt with rocky hills, which is changed to a misty cataract, through whose crystal waters, naiads are seen disporting themselves. The Grand March of the Amazons is another fine spectacle, presenting a display of finely shaped limbs never excelled on any stage.

"The closing scene eclipses in magnificence anything hitherto produced on the San Francisco stage. It consists of a succession of wonderful effects which must be seen to be appreciated. The charm of the piece is heightened by the vocal music profusely introduced; Henri Herberte, the Misses Howson, Mr. Howson and Mr. Leach, each singing several songs as only they can sing. The fencing of Miss Parker, in the scene where Baron Wolfgang and the magician are overcome, was superb. All in all, the piece is cast upon the stage in a very superior manner ... The ballet is under the direction of the Martinetti troupe who add to a long experience a refined and cultivated taste in matters of this kind."

The Daily Dramatic Chronicle critic did not attend the opening night of the Black Rook. Instead, he made an undignified foray into the Olympic Theatre April 25, 1867 and, by way of complete coverage, reported the Olympic's burlesque of Burlesque, The Black Rook with a Crook.

"No injunction was issued last night to prevent the public from crowding into every available inch of space of this cosy little theatre, and the great spectacle of the Black Rook With a Crook, which has been in preparation nine years and cost \$3,000,000 was produced in a style unequaled by anything ever done in China or the Feejee Islands. No other theatre in this city outstrips in swelling proportions the beautifully formed Venuses that nightly disport themselves in their vine and fig leaf paradise at the Olympic."

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April 29,1867 this same critic announced the demise of Maguire's production after a two-weeks' run:

"It (The Black Crook) was put upon the stage in a splendid style and was admirably rendered, but the comparative weakness of the ballet prevented it from successfully competing with its rival around the corner."

The life span of the Olympic production is nowhere described. But the <u>Black Rook</u> successfully kept its demonic paraphernalia in the public eye until the latter part of May. The lack of structure in the new leg show burlesque was indicated by the flexibility of the program; acts were deleted and others added. There is, for instance, the announcement May 15, that six ladies in a crystal grove would further enhance the production. From point of view of attack, the enchanted hypocrites in town came to point of view of defense. Leg visibility became pure and beautiful. The repressed dimensions of a tightly laced front line, kicking up many layered flounces, became cold, and classic. <u>The Bulletin</u> for May 2,1867 wipes itself clean of any reservation whatsoever:

"The beautiful spectacle of the <u>Black Rook</u> continues to draw large and fashionable audiences. There is nothing to which the most fastidious can object. The scenery is gorgeous, the ballet charming, and the music fine...."

The last conspicuous notice the black humpbacked sorcerer received in the local press had to do with some unplanned action on the last Saturday night of the run at the Metropolitan. The backdrop for the Chaos scene was already

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in place and the audience had evinced the usual gasping approval of the wreck-of-worlds mural. Behind this backdrop, a stagehand was hastily adjusting one of the gauze hangings for the final scene when the gauze flamed up from contact with a top border light. The "fly man" instantly cut the rope which suspended the gauze and let it drop on the stage, a heap of flaring texture. Quickly, the Chaos scene was lifted forward away from the fire and the audience beheld the real chaos which threatened. There was the inevitable panic. The Daily Dramatic Chronicle for May 13 clarified the picture to the quality of an early American engraving:

"A rush was made for the doors; men shouted 'fire'; and women screamed and fainted; 'keep your shirts' cried out several cool men, while the Prince of Jokers, Charley Schultz, the leader of the orchestra struck up his celebrated 'Firemen's March,' never letting his orchestra stop playing for an instant during continuance of the excitement. As the fire was soon trampled out, and the stage manager came forward to assure the audience that there was no danger, the stampede was stopped, and the audience remained standing until the conclusion of the piece. Mons. Gruet, who held the rope sustaining the car upon which Paul Martinetti, as Neptune, descends to the center of the stage, had his hands badly burned by the friction of the rope while rapidly lowering Paul to the stage, he being endangered by the burning gauze. The arch little Clelia Howson went into a corner and quietly swooned away. One lady in trying to get out had nearly the whole skirt of her dress torn off. Great credit is due those in charge of the stage for the cool and prompt manner in which they extinguished the fire."

For the time being the curtains of the three theatres were drawn down upon this bat-winged abracadabra in a paste jewelry setting. But the trend of burlesque had been

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set. Elise Holt, the Zavistowski sisters, the Worrell sisters, the Gougenheim sisters, Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes, now had clear sailing. The influx of these pulchritudinous kick-girls reached its height in 1870, and 1867 to 1870 was a marked period of decay for the old legitimate theatre, and of ascendancy for the melodeons.

#### XXV -- UNDER THE GASLIGHT -- AFTER DARK

The events of the 1867-68 season all pointed toward the triumphant march of the flesh-colored tights. The bookings of the impresarios brought a variety of entertainment to town, most of which quickly fell into the red and oblivion. The public had seen the Crook, Rook, and Cook variations the new theme and a criterion had been established. The few successes were revelatory. A troupe of Japanese jugglers was in great favor. And there were Harry Leslie and Harry Raynor, minstrels at the Olympic. A men-only show still prevailed there; but the excited reports the male audience communicated to the women in town stimulated a female clamor which netted a contract at the "respectable" Metropolitan for the talented minstrels. Apparently inexhaustible, the Martinettis played in all the theatres in town; the gay symbology of their acrobatic pantomime was the most consistently popular entertainment of the decade.

In August 1867 Maguire sold his Academy of Music to Goodwin and Company. Hereafter the building was to be used as a furniture store. It was like the first confessed

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twinge of old age in Maguire, still the top impresario in town. Indicative of the times was the sale of the seats in the Academy to Samuel Tetlow, proprietor of the Bella Union Melodeon. The gradual approach of the "big theatre" entertainment to melodeon burlesque was automatically lifting the stigma of immorality from the latter. The melodeons were coming into their own; the heads of the big theatres were bowed.

were the only high spots of the legitimate drama from 1867 to 1870. There was <u>Under the Gaslight</u> by the American, Daly; and <u>After Dark</u>, a Tale of London Life, by the Irishman, Boucicault. The English play was apparently little more than the American play in a London setting. The production of these plays in San Francisco (<u>Under the Gaslight</u> at the Metropolitan; and <u>After Dark</u> at the Opera House) were inevitably echoed by burlesque versions at the Alhambra and the Olympic. Details of the burlesque versions are scant as usual. The review of <u>Under the Gaslight</u>, in the <u>Bulletin</u> for November 25, 1867, will give an idea what vulnerable hold this drama offered to a troupe of clever burlesquers:

"Charles Daly's famous drama of <u>Under the Gaslight</u> was produced, and in a manner that surprised as well as delighted all who were present. We cannot speak in too high praise of the liberality of the lessess and the skill of the artists. No pains or expense have been spared in putting the piece on the stage in the most attractive and telling manner. The scenery is all new and much of it is exceedingly beautiful.

Many of the mechanical effects are equal to anything produced here or elsewhere. The view of New York at night--with the bay and the rivers, the ships and wharves, the Jersey City ferry-boats plying to and fro, the ships lying at anchor and the smaller craft under sail--is singularly vivid and lifelike. So is that of the Tombs, interiorly and exteriorly. But the crowning mechanical triumph of the piece is the signal station on the railroad, with the night express thundering past under full speed, the engine puffing and shricking, the sparks flying and the smoke rolling in a sooty trail behind.

"Of the drama itself there is not a great deal to be said. As a literary performance it is not of very high order. With two or three exceptions the characters have little individuality, and the dialogue is not remarkable for wit or sprightliness....It groups together in a very felicitous manner, the two extremes of society, presenting us at once with the splendors yet meanness (?) of wealth, and the degradation of crime and miseries of common poverty. In Trafford we have the amiability, irresolution and moral cowardice of 'our best society'; in Laura Courtland we have beauty and angelic virtue rising superior to the frowns of fortune, the neglect of fair-weather friends and the temptations of poverty; in Byke and the old hag Judas we have incarnated the frightful depravity that rots and festers in the heart of a great city. The coarsest elements of social life are happily (?) represented by the slattern 'Peach Blossom, ' so admirably played by Mrs. Saunders, the red-skirted ballad-vendor and the boxer, and the ragged news and peanut vendors. Indeed, all the odds and ends -- the rag-tag and bob-tail of the social masquerade -- are grouped together in Mr. Daly's clever tableaux and made to show off their most salient points.

"As played on Saturday evening the piece was too long. Three hours and a half is too much for human endurance....There is, moreover, a good deal of redundant dialogue which the audience can well dispense with...."

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An interesting financial account of the first week's run of <u>Under the Gaslight</u> was published in the <u>Bulletin</u> for December 9, 1867:

"Edwards, Bates, and Vinson, the new lessees of the Metropolitan Theatre, have returned to the Revenue Department the following sums as the receipts of seven nights' performance of Under the Gaslight: November 23, \$1035;November 25, \$936.75; November 26, \$81.25; November 27, \$270.50; November 28, \$1558.75; November 29, \$891.50; November 30, \$1448.50; total, \$7622.25. The return of this for this week is without precedent, and the sum taken on Thanksgiving Day was the largest ever known in the theatre in this city at present prices. We understand that Mr. Wheatleigh remits by this steamer \$1000 to Augustin Daly of New York, as the author's share of the profits for a little over a fortnight of the remarkably sensational piece."

All that is salvaged from that distant time as to the Olympic's burlesque version of <u>Under the Gaslight</u>, is the suggestive title: <u>Under the Cairo-seen Lamp Post</u>.

Boucicault's After Dark opened early in the 1868-69 season. The English play immediately came in for a rigorous comparison with its American progenitor.

"The drama After Dark is a picture of the night side of London life, as Under the Gaslight and the Lottery of Life were pictures of the night side of New York...From the Gaslight he (Boucicault) has taken the pier and railroad scenes, and from the Lottery of Life the music saloon scene. The under side of the dilapidated stone bridge of Blackfriars, supported on piles and timber framing (crutches) as it has been for many a year, is made the abode of thieves and vagabonds as the under side of the Boston pier was, and while in the original drama the pier was the scene of the abduction and an attempt to murder, in the other the bridge is the scene of an attempt at suicide by the heroine.

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... The Magnolia Saloon of Brougham's play was full of life, and familiar in every feature to an American audience. The more staid manners and appointments of the London music saloon in After Dark could not be expected in this country to create the same enthusiasm. The absence of pretty waiter girls, with their paint and curls, their airs and blandishments, is very noticeable. The song from the saloon stage is an ordinary London comic ditty, and gives the performer no such scope as Melville had in a similar part. It wants the novelty and rollick-someness, both in tune and words of 'Coal Oil Tommy.'

"The railroad scene lacks many of the elements which aided in working up the audience to that unprecedented pitch of excitement which attended every representation of the night express train passing Shrewsbury Bend station from the first to the last. In the first place. the man who has been doomed to perish lies like a log on the track, if not dead, insensible. Except that the audience see him to be in danger, he contributes nothing to the interest of the scene. There are not those alternate emotions, the struggle for life, followed by selfabnegation, there are no manifestations of hero-ism in the bound man, as in the case of the doomed 'Snorkey.' The scene is defective also in that it has no preliminary business, during which the audience, as in the Gaslight, witness the daily routine of a roadside station, and become familiarized with the idea that they are standing beside a railroad line ....

"George Edwards, a new face in the company, dressed and sang his character song, 'The Provident Mud Lark,' in good style, and it was unfortunate for him that some of the good effect of his efforts were marred by the porsistent shouting of the gods for the raising of the 'rag' as they call the border when it intercepts their view..."\*

The burlesque version of After Dark received three notices in the press. Johnny Mack, quite famous at this time for his burlesques of current plays, opened his show at the Now Alhambra.

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, November 17, 1868.

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"The announcement of the performance of Johnny Mack's burlesque, After Dark, drew a crowded house. The piece is amusing, and cleverly travesties some of the more striking scenes in the original drama. The arrest of the locomotive by 'Pointer,' the policeman, (Johnny Mack) and his exposition of how the thing was done elicited much applause. In fact the audience were amused from first to last and went home in the best of humor.\*

"Exquisite dances by Sands and Ashcroft,a jolly medley by Miss Olivia Rand, graceful gymnastics by Leon Samuels, a sentimental ballad by Master Fulton, comic acts by Lew Rattler, Johnny Mack, George Coes, De Angelis and the rest of the sable brotherhood with the new travesty, After Dark Brought to Light will constitute the program tonight."

"The burlesque on After Dark does not follow the original very closely, but the travesties of the rescue scene at the bridge, the gambling room in the Music Hall, and the railroad sensation. The last is done very well. Johnny Mack, as Pinter, (sic) the policeman, arrests the locomotive, and exposes the manner of running the train across the stage by pulling out the stage carpenter from behind the painted canvas.

"The policeman is made the principal character in the travesty, and, he succeeds in bringing down the house by a satire on the efficiency, and boldness of the gentlemen of the baton."\*\*\*

Johnny Mack directed a long and successful season of burlesque and variety programs at the Alhambra. Gradually it became as proper a thing to attend one of Mack's riotous satires as to sit through the smug prototype at the Metropolitan or the Opera House. The shift of public taste was obvious. Several new burlesque houses were opened. The

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, December 4, 1868.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Daily Alta California, December 3, 1868.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Ibid. December 4, 1868.

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Bella Union was extravagantly remodeled. Even the new California Theatre (opened January 18, 1869), last successful outpost of the legitimate stock companies in San Francisco, admitted a burlesque program by Lotta Crabtree and Willie Edouin to its boards. In March 1869, Maguire brought Johnny Mack and some able assistants to the Opera House in a program of travesty and song-and-dance. The cancan craze finally and loudly laid low any attempt at classical or contemporary drama. Burlesque, with ancillary bill of variety, was at last intrenched in the sacred halls built for stentorian tragedy. Before the year was out, Elise Holt would flame upward as the first glamor girl of burlesque. The only constant, always perceptible, never tarnished thread of entertainment throughout the whole decade of fluctuating taste had been the Martinettis. Despite the triumph of leg show burlesque, the Martinettis appeared throughout the city during 1869, always to packed houses and spontaneous critical ac-It is time to give a backward glance of analysis to the extraordinary charm of these satirical pantomimists.

### XXVI -- COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE AND THE MARTINETTIS

The nineteenth century made it painfully clear that the tradition of the literary theatre was decadent. The ambitious new compositions of "high" tragedy were quickly closeted as drama to be read in stuffy, Victorian solitude. The great, creative intensity of the Commedia dell'Arte had been given a permanent form by Molière, but the Commedia dell'Arte

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itself had soon thereafter been circumscribed by the advent of a bourgeoisie not inclined to art patronage. There was very little left for the nineteenth century -- neither aliterary nor a popular tradition. The great service of the melodeons of San Francisco and New York, and of the music halls of London was their somewhat unconscious use of the actor's art of improvisation; in a crude from, the vitality of the old Italian, realism and satire, survived. The value of the pantomime troupes such as the Ravel family, and their successors, the Martinettis, lay in their conscious use of Commedia dell'Arte technique. Not that the critical genius of the renaissance comedians was approached; but that the framework of a highly artistic, popular theatre had been refurbished for further use.

There is plenty of superficial evidence. After ten years of activity in San Francisco playhouses, Julien Martinetti, in all press notices, was automatically spoken of as the Clown; Philippe Martinetti as Pantaloon; Paul Martinetti as Harlequin; and Madam Desirée Martinetti as Columbine. It is remembered that the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte troupes finally became identified personally with the roles which they played consistently throughout their lifetime. The jugglery and acrobatics are also present. A saltimbanque of the I Gelosi troupe, for instance, performing some incredible contortion on the outdoor stage of the troupe in Bologna in the sixteenth century, and one of the Martinettis performing

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a comical trick on a trapeze at the Metropolitan theatre in San Francisco in 1869, are in continuous tradition.

The broad, angular gesture of stylized pantomime is more evidence of continuity. There is record of the famous sixteenth-century actor, Scaramouche, who could keep his audience constantly delighted for fifteen minutes while he sat in a chair giving comical evidence of terror at the approach of an enemy from the rear; while in 1867, Julien Martinetti could be regarded by the <u>Bulletin</u> of March 1, as "the best comic artist who ever visited this coast," and Julien had rarely or never appeared in any of the speaking parts of the Martinetti shows.

Within this traditional framework, the nineteenth-century pantomimists developed their own kind of show. Ballet was added. The simple, straight-hitting satire of the Italian realists was now filtered through the fantastic facade indicated by some of the titles of the Martinetti pantomimes:

The Green Monster, The Golden Egg, The Red Gnome, Jack and Jill. But these fantasies were not of the deadly, Greek-English variety used in so many burlesques of the time; they had the imaginative liveliness of genuine fairy tale. Acrobatic display had by this time developed into a large part of pantomimic entertainment. And there was more and more exploitation of trick staging; but where trick staging in regular burlesque was to be used for the overwhelming and grandiose

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effect, in pantomime it was used for small bits of exciting, "surrealistic" business. In this regard, the <u>Bulletin</u> for December 11, 1866 has the following to say about a performance of <u>The Golden Egg</u> at the Metropolitan:

"The glamour of enchantment seemed to pervade everything and everybody. The stage and those who walked it appeared possessed; chairs and tables moved off on the slightest provocation; beds and bedding took themselves wings; shop signs became suddenly inverted or found themselves transferred to opposite sides of the street; men and women were whisked through the air, and appeared and disappeared in the most tantalizing manner; the most uncouth monsters, gigantic geese, deformed donkeys, toads, goblins, played fantastic tricks and assumed the most protean shapes..."

The Martinettis, like their famous teachers, the Ravels, hailed from Paris. Early in the nineteenth century, the Ravels had given definite, new lusture to the obscured pantomimic art. A clear signing away of vitality had occurred in the late 1700s: Riccoboni's company of actors, last of the famous Italian troupes to be licensed to the French court, addressed an illuminating request to a high official:

"The actors entreat your Highness to make urgent representations at the Court that they may be permitted, as in Italy, the free use of the Holy Sacrament, the more so as they will never recite anything scandalous; and Riccoboni undertakes to submit the scenarios of the plays for examination by the Minister and also by an Ecclesiastic, for their approval."

<sup>\*</sup> Quoted by Sheldon Cheney in The Theatre, Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting and Stagecraft p. 240

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Unfortunately there is no material available to indicate the likely family connections of the Ravels and Martinettis with these last Commedia dell' Arte actors in Paris. No doubt there were parental threads which transmitted the art of broad gesture and brief speech through the bourgeois revolutions, through the shift from court patronage to commercial theatre. At any rate, there was no large lapse of time between the disappearance of the Commedia dell' Arte in Europe and the appearance of nineteenth-century pantomime.

Once before. in the 1850s, the Martinettis had appeared in San Francisco under the leadership of their aging tutor, Gabriel Ravel. Now, in December of 1860, they returned in their own right as the Martinetti Troupe. A delighted public kept them in town for a forty-five night engagement, which was unusual for San Francisco not only at that time but even today. The press admitted the excellence of the performances, but throughout their first engagement the critics held on to a few dutiful reservations. As the decade proceeded and the perennial freshness of the Martinetti engagements was established, the critics followed the public into complete approval of the French family's extraordinary entertainment.

Little can be done to reconstruct a complete picture of a Martinetti program. A good part of their "business" was sheer gesture. The few spoken parts have not been set down in any permanent form. The eyes of the contemporary

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press must furnish whatever vision can be had of this troupe in action:

Bulletin for December 4, 1860: "The Martinetti troupe continue to attract crowds every night. Their performances are very pleasing, and in the case of the tightrope 'evolutions,' perhaps wonderful. The brothers Martinetti and Master Paul give an ingenious exhibition on what may be called a double story tight-rope, that is the two elders, while at a distance from each other, on the rope, support around their necks a rail, on which the boy mounts and goes through sundry antics, corresponding in time and sympathy with those of his bearers, all three being provided with balancing poles. The feats of Miss Chiarini, with a hoop and without a pole. the quick step of Mr. Chiarini and the tremendous leaps and somersaults of Mr. Lehman are likewise worth a passing notice. The dances of the principal members of the troupe, and the corps de ballet are prettily arranged and well executed, without being at all extraordinary. The drolleries of Julien Martinetti, as the 'White Knight' in the pantomime of the Green Monster, excite much mirth, in young and old .... "

Bulletin for December 21, 1860:
"Tomorrow, a grand afternoon performance will be given at 2 o'clock, for the special benefit of children and families, when new evolutions on the tight-rope, a ballet divertissement and the grand pantomime of Jocko, or the Brazilian Ape, will be presented. Master Paul, as 'Jocko' is particularly excellent and amusing."

Bulletin for January 10, 1861:
"In the pantomime (The Red Gnome), Mr. Lehman is very effective as the 'Gnome." Much seriocomic use is made in this piece of a hideous character representing a skeleton, which offends against good taste. The figure has a peculiar hitch, or palsied dropping of the side when it walks, which will be apt to haunt the memory of the nervous."

Bulletin for March 6, 1861:
"The latest pantomime, The Magic Pills, passed off successfully last night, and was received

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with much laughter and applause. Some of the scenes are very amusing, (though not quite new) such as that of the medium-sized and the little and the great landladies. The program, too is remarkably managed by 'Master Paul,' no doubt. The piece will be repeated this evening, together with ballet of Le Diable a Quatre."

The acrobatic flourish of a precarious ascent on a rope often closed the performances. The <u>Bulletin</u> for April 8, April 16, and April 20 announces three of the spectacular ascensions of the Martinetti troupe during their spring engagement in 1861:

"A 'grand ascension' on two ropes, by Philippe and Julien Martinetti with Mlle. Desirée, will close the entertainment."

"A grand ascension, by Julien Martinetti, who will walk on a single rope, with his head and body in a bag."

"The whole will conclude with a terrific ascension on a single rope, by Miss Chiarini and Mr. Chiarini, Mr. Chiarini carrying a man on his shoulders."

The <u>Bulletin</u> for April 24,1861 announced the elaborate plans of the troupe for their tour within the state and up the coast:

"The Martinetti Troupe have prepared a large and handsome tent, with a movable stage and suitable scenery and apparatus, with which they plan to travel all over this State and Oregon, and perhaps go as far north as the British Possession.

"Before leaving for the interior they will give four performances in this city, within the tent, which will be erected on the large vacant lot adjoining the International Hotel on Jackson Street. This tent will hold 1,000 persons, and the interior, including the stage, scenery and properties, will be of a comfortable and attractive character..."

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The critic of the <u>Bulletin</u> was not particularly happy about the Martinetti experiment with a tent. He wrote on April 27, 1861:

"A numerous attendance was present in the Martinetti Pavilion, last night, when the first public performance was given within it by the gymnast and ballet troupe who had so long held possession of the Opera House. The Pavilion is a very neat structure of the kind, and everything is managed as well as could be expected in such a place. Yet it is but a tent after all, where the feet rest on sawdust and damp earth, and the air is filled with tobacco smoke. In such a den, posturing and horse-drama are at home; but not the so-called High Art of French ballet-dancing, at least, after having been so long used to it in a comfortable and beautiful theatre. However, there is a magic in sawdust for many people. There will be a performance this evening."

On November 22, 1866 an announcement on the front page of the <u>Bulletin</u> establishes the return of the Martinettis from a long engagement in the East. The whole company is listed.

Martinetti Ravel Troupe!

From Niblo's Garden, New York.

In Order to Make the Performance Complete, the Management Have Engaged the Howson Opera Troupe.

Messrs. Julien and Philippe Martinetti, Directors of the company and principal Comic Artists.

Madame Marzetti, Première Danseuse. Madame Desirée Mathew, Première Danseuse, Demi-Caractère.

Mile. Julie Lehman, Mime et Danseuse. Madame Thérèse Schmidt, Danseuse. Madame Julie Martinetti, Madame Lehman and Madame Greuet Buislay, Coryphées. the bearing to the section of ... t. . i. . Lag co.

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Twelve Ladies of the Ballet.
M. Paul Martinetti, Harlequin and Premier Gymnast.

M. Greuet Buislay, Professor of Gymnastics.

M. Lehman, Scenic Artist and Pantomimist.

M. August Lehman, Pole Marque, Master Albert and Le Petit Ignacio.

The troupe called forth a great deal of enthusiasm

in the Bulletin the following day. April 23, 1867:

"This house (the Metropolitan Theatre) was crowded to overflowing last night to witness the first performance of the Martinetti Troupe. All the sitting and most of the standing room was occupied, and many went away unable to gain admittance. The gallery gods were out in their strength, and reveled between the piece in a deafening chorus of shrieks, yells, laughter, and whistling.... The ballet of The Contrabandista introduced the Martinettis. The audience recognized their old favorites in the troupe with enthusiastic shouts. The piece is entirely pantomime with only one ballet scene. The pantomime was admirable. Philippe Martinetti as the smuggler chief and Julien Martinetti as the comical 'Pipi' were particularly good. The latter kept the audience in a roar of laughter. Mesdames Mathieu, Marzetti, and Lehman were excellent in pantomime and ballet. The tableaux in the last scene were strikingly effective. The concluding performance was The Green Monster. rendered famous by the Ravels. With the exception of one or two hitches in the machinery, which can be avoided on another representation, the amusing transformations, magical tricks, and scenic display, which make up the chief merits of the piece, were done as well as we ever saw them. The tournament tableau as we ever saw them. and the scene of the combat afterwards were capital. Julien Martinetti, as the 'White Knight' was vastly funny, and Paul Martinetti. as the Harlequin was lithe and graceful. The sword play between these two was quite brilliant in its way. Philippe Martinetti as 'Chevalier G. Grand' was superb, and his solo on the ophicleide was full of expression. Julien's affectation of the Carnival of Venice on the Bassviol was a nice touch of the comic. The effect of the performances throughout was largely assisted by the excellent orchestration. under Mr. Schultz."

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A month later the Martinettis were undisputed "tops" in the town's entertainment:

Bulletin for December 1, 1866:
"Despite the unpropitious weather, the Martinetti Troupe were greeted by a large and fashionable house last evening. We cannot say much in favor of the vaudeville by the Howson family.

"The divertissement entitled Le Diable à Quatre was so good that we wished it were twice as long. The ballet was in admirable training, the dancing excellent, and the general effect pleasing. The pantomime entitled Mons. Dechalameau, with which the performance was concluded, was exquisitely amusing. The piece is one of the best of its class, abounding in the drollest situations and the most laughable incidents. Julien Martinetti as the blundering servant, a sort of French 'Handy Andy' proved himself to be a master of his art, and kept the audience in perpetual roars of laughter."

After a very successful run of the pantomime The Golden Egg (see page 101 for press quotation), the Martinettis continued their upward curve of success with The Contrabandist:

Bulletin for December 24, 1866:
"The beautiful ballet of the Contrabandist, by far the best yet presented by the Martinettis, pleased everyone.

"Jocko was a success. Paul Martinetti was a most amusing ape--if we can apply that term to a creature that would have puzzled Buffon and Cuvier to have classified. Jocko in truth bore more resemblance to what might have been the lost link between the simae and man than any known animal, but his principal object being to make fun, which he did most delightfully--he satisfied his audience. The pantomime is well acted throughout, and is one of the most attractive performances of the troupe..."

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Another new piece received as much attention as

## The Contrabandist:

Bulletin for January 7, 1867:
"Mazulm was repeated on Saturday afternoon and evening-some delays when the graveyard is changed into a ball-room. The latter piece is apt to retain a lingering flavor of mortality, and some of the tombstones den't know exactly when to disappear. The 'fair' is cleverly represented and throughout the pantomime, comic element is strong. Burlesque incidents and ludicrous situations succeed each other rapidly and render Mazulm fully as popular as its predecessors..."

On January 18, 1867, the <u>Bulletin</u> made a few generalizations:

"The Martinettis are not only clever artists but shrewd managers. They know with almost unerring instinct what the public wants and in what shape they prefer to have it served. Their pantomime and lighter pieces have been uniformly successful because they were artistically gotten up, pleasing to the eye and ear and not tediously long. Tonight they produce a fresh novelty, entitled Italian Brigands, consisting of a series of illuminated Tableaux, in which the principal members of the troupe will appear, with new music, costumes, etc. The pleasing dramatic ballet will be given."

By February 1, several other "fresh" novelties had been displayed and with the same infallible appeal. On this date, the <u>Bulletin</u> is reporting the second performance of La Vivandière:

"The ballet of La Vivandière delighted all; the flying trapeze act by Paul Martinetti was as daring as it was graceful. Soldiers for Love brought down the house.' Philippe Martinetti, who is equally happy in comic and serious parts was very funny as the 'thick-witted Jobard'; while Julien Martinetti acted the 'Jailer' exceedingly well. Paul Martinetti made a very

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enticing young lover, but we would have liked him better if he had not made quite so serious a business of it...."

Following 1867, the longest return engagement of the Martinettis occurred in 1869. On June 21, 1869 the <u>Bulletin</u> announced:

"Tonight Johnny Mack's new spectacular local extravaganza, Little Boy Blue will be produced, with Miss Sue Robinson and Paul Martinetti superadded."

The rest of the Martinettis were evidently not in the show, but the account of the opening night, in the <u>Bulletin</u> for June 22, has a good deal to say about the art of pantomime as practiced by the French Troupe:

"The great feature of the place (Maguire's Opera House) last night...was the new and spectacular fairy extravaganza of Little Boy Blue....In general character the piece is allied to the famous pantomimes of the Ravel and Martinetti troupes. Its plot is an apotheosis of Mother Goose, who has risen from the
nursery to be a theme for within (?) Punch and
for extravagant fun on the stage. Just now Hickory Dickory Dock furnishes a title for a dramatic absurdity in New York, and contemporaneously we have The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoo furnishing the subject of a diverting pantomime in San Francisco. The 'Little Boy Blue' is one of the numerous children of the old woman, and the ruffled current of his love for a golden-haired blonde is the ostensible motive of the play, -- fairies, demonds, pantaloons, clowns, harlequins, and monsters taking a promiscuous hand and furnishing rapid succession of magical transformations, laughable mishaps, and beautiful tableaux. The tricks and changes are equal in number and skillful execution to some of the best things of the Ravels...the fairy scene being actually gorgeous, while the closing tableau is one of the prettiest ever presented in the city.

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"The music is a clear adaptation of popular airs, and the chorus of themes from Mother Goose is very droll. Many of the incidents of the piece are burlesques on the sensation dramas of the day, or satirical hits at local institutions and bodies. The railroad rescue scene in Under the Gaslight\* is parodied by Pantaloon lifting the drunken clown above the track, which the two bestride, while a Lilliputian train of cars passed under their legs. The old woman of the shoe and her large brood, the burlesque brass band and horse marines in military procession, the file of old maids dolefully singing, were all funny features.

"A tiny creature danced the 'Highland Fling' so prettily as to call down a shower of silver coins. Sue Robinson made a charming Fairy. Paul Martinetti sustained his reputation as Harlequin..."

The <u>Bulletin</u> for December 8, 1869 indicated that the Martinettis were approaching the new decade in undiminished favor:

"Despite the unpleasant weather, the Metropolitan was nearly filled on the occasion of the appearance of the Martinetti troupe last evening. The performance commenced with the pantomime entitled Katie the Vivandière, which was prettily produced and admirably played, Madame Martinetti, Madame Marzetti, and Miss Lehman doing some astonishing feats of dancing and posing, winning tumultuous applause and liberal flower offerings. This was followed by feats of strength and agility by the Martinetti brothers and Mons. Buislay, comprising among others that of swinging chairs -- a feat at once dangerous and difficult. The entertainment concluded with the Christmas pantomime of Jack and Jill, which had been in preparation sometime and was produced with a degree of splendor seldom equalled on a San Francisco stage. It has all the grotesqueness and amusing extravagance and improbability of the traditional pantomime -with the inevitable occasion of Harlequin and

<sup>\*</sup> See Page 91 et seg.

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THE STORMY PETREL OF BURLESQUE PHOTO COURTESY M. H. de YOUNG MUSEUM

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Columbine, of Clown and Pantaloon. It is full of tricks and transformations of magic and mystification, of spectacular scenes and surprises. There is the usual melange of fairies and goblins, of spirits of the earth, the air and the nether world, with a sufficient sprinkling of the human element to make things lively. Some of the scenes are striking; some are laughable; some are surprising in the efforts produced. The piece has many elements of popularity, abounds in pertinent and impertinent local hits, has some clever strokes of satire and can hardly fail to draw. It will be repeated tonight."

## XXVII -- ELISE HOLT

The production of The Black Crook in 1867 had set the pattern. With increased exposure of limb and a freshening-up of the diablerie, this piece bridged the rest of the century with numerous performances and was still drawing well in the nineties. Elise Holt, Lydia Thompson, the several competitive companies of British Blondes -- all the famous female stars of burlesque became a part of the Black Crook tradition. There had been a time when burlesque had the meaning of the word. From 1870 on, burlesque in America headed definitely away from its original line. The leg show innovation cleared the way for the two very related faces of twentieth century burlesque: on the one hand, the glorified, musical revues, which abhorred the title of burlesque for the wrong reason; and on the other hand, the strip-tease theatres on the fringe of the theatrical districts, who adhered to the burlesque title, also for the wrong reason.

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Two theatrical ventures in New York City in March 1869 forecast the future. The Elise Holt Troupe was appearing in a burlesque called Lucrezia Borgia, or, The Grand Doc-John Brougham was appearing as Shylock in the burlesque written by himself and called Much Ado About a Merchant of Venice. Elise Holt, having absorbed theatrical news about the success of the blonde belles in England and their plans for an invasion of America, presented her troupe of native titians, brunettes, and nondescripts, in golden-haired uniformity. High silk tights plus peroxide was the touchstone of appeal, not the spoken lines of the burlesque. For Brougham, however, burlesque still signified satirical come-Much Ado About a Merchant of Venice, was the last of his dv. burlesques to gain any attention. His early success. Pocahontas and Columbus, might be revived on the basis of the sentimental memory of theatregoers. but these same theatregoers would take nothing new in the same direction. The new direction was already monopolized by the parade of the blonde Godivas:

The Spirit of the Times, New York, for May 15, 1869, implied that the new burlesque was something to which a germicide might be applied:

"The burlesque epidemic has spread to the Pacific Coast. Ixion rages at Barrett and McCullough's new California Theatre."

Ixion, or The Man at the Wheel, one of the most popular of the mythological extravaganzas by the Englishman,

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F. C. Burnand, was produced by a local company and disappeared rapidly from the press to make way for Elise Holt's advance publicity. In all the writing of this much-played piece, the following excerpt is one of the few moments when the words seem to catch on to a little bit of contemporary reality:

JUNO:

Venus, I've been admiring your dress.
The artiste's shop where that was made, dear. thrives?

VENUS:

The dressmakers lose by it.

JUNO:

Lose?

VENUS:

Their lives. For drawing-room days we put them in a

flurry, And then command our dresses in a hurry, For nights and days to get it done they ply Their busy needles, stitch, stitch, stitch,

and die.

JUNO:

I'm very sorry.

VENUS:

So am I dear, too.

A good deal of advance publicity for Miss Holt had been furnished gratis by Olive Logan, reformer. This woman had stalked across America and up and down the Pacific Coast predicting darkness for all the bright luminaries of burlesque, and inveighing against a public which was so weak as to expose itself. On July 17, 1869 the San Francisco News Letter announced the imminent advent:

"On Monday evening Miss Elise Holt, a burlesque actress of considerable note will make her first appearance, in one of Byron's burlesques, called Lucrezia Borgia, in which Miss Holt is described as being immense."

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The editorial rooms of the city took violent issue in the matter. The <u>News Letter</u> immediately anathematized Elise Holt and all of her kind. The <u>Bulletin</u> tried to maintain a dignified disgust. <u>Figaro</u> alone, as uncompromisingly but a little late, came to Elise Holt's defense. The <u>Bulletin</u> lay the ground for the offensive July 20, 1869:

"California Theatre Burlesque rules the hour. Offenbach warbles to crowded houses, when Bellini cannot get a hearing; Byron (what a profanation of a great name;) crows Shakespeare off the stage....We were not surprised, therefore to find the Theatre crowded on the occasion of the debut of Miss Elise Holt, one of the priestesses of the burlesque muse, last evening. Miss Holt belongs to the high blonde order of feminine beings. It was against her class that Olive Logan launched her recent diatribes. Some people would call her pretty; she is certainly striking in appearance, but whether pleasantly or otherwise will depend on the taste of the individual. She is petite, plump of figure, has expressive countenance, is supple of movement, and has an abundance of vivacity of manner.

"She is pert, saucy, audacious, and betrays an emancipation from restraints of modesty....

"Of her costume we will say little, for there is little of it; her purpose evidently being to typify in her own person the spirit of the 'nude drama.' If her appearance was an offense to every modest woman in the audience, it told in her favor with a large class of the male theatre-going public, who applauded her...At any rate if a theatre cannot be supported without the aid of such equivocational attractions as Miss Elise Holt, it had better be closed."

On July 24, the News Letter followed the Bulletin's suit with pellmell hysteria:

"This class of people (Elise Holt) is the creation of a foul public taste, who like the creatures (or victims) of any other such demand

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--are equally beneath criticism, contempt, or punishment. They are, in fact, without the pale of consideration altogether. They are simply individual members of a class, with which, as a class, we may deal, while it would be rank injustice to single out one member it for the visitation of special penalty. Besides which. the only practicable penalty is that of social ostracism: and these people are not within the social pale to be ostracized ... . Eliminating these people, brings the managers and the public face to face: i.e., you have on one hand, Mr. Barrett and Mr. McCullough, and on the other the audience -- a dense, piled-up house. The latter came to see the person called Holt, knowing that she would be indecent and nasty, (our selection of language, you remark, is accurately adapted to the performance: the people who squeezed to see the one, will not of course object to read the other.) The exhibition was the sort which has only heretofore been visible at the Bella Union. That audience knew that such would be the fact, and brought its wives, sisters, sweethearts and mothers to gaze upon it .... "

This "shoot-the-works" irritation of the News Let-

ter was still audible, August 7, 1869:

"The Holt drama, as an after-piece, has continued to hold the boards--but has, we are more happy to say, discontinued to draw; the respectable circle is pretty thoroughly emptied at the close of the respectable drama; the people who stay are a low lot; we have looked in on them and recognized few or none of that society whose Organ we are.

"We have only one reflection to offer, in addition to those heretofore made, upon the subject of the unclean drama: Formerly when legs were exposed upon the stage, the leg was subjected to rigid criticism....Miss Holt has no figure whatever; a pair of thin arms, huge hips, utterly out of shape--and there you are. Aside from its other faults, this series of exhibitions has been a wretched one in point of the material exhibited...."

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By this time there were enough ingredients in the pot for a sizable explosion. Both the <u>Bulletin</u> and the <u>News Letter</u> had continued their original attacks with long, jejune attempts at the vitriolic. The "strong animal development" and a "certain, jerky vivacity" of Miss Holt had suggested to the unschooled <u>Bulletin</u> scribe the "Hula-Hula of the Hawaiian Cyprians," whose dance was, so far, sheer hearsay in California. The plays in which Miss Holt had appeared, <u>Lucrezia Borgia</u> and <u>The Field of the Cloth of Gold</u>, had lingered on the palate of this same scribe with a "decidely melodeon flavor." The peroxided, denuded apparition of the star had been pronounced "an offense to every modest woman in the audience" and "an appeal to the lowest and most groveling of masculine instincts." With a slightly hesitant prophetic insight, the Bulletin had concluded:

"We are inclined to think that the manager, looking to the permanent as well as present interests of the establishment, has made a mistake in introducing melodeon business. The excuse of course is that the popular taste demands this class of entertainment. But this taste is a vitiated one to which it is wrong to pander. Besides people will soon become disgusted --have already become disgusted in the East--with the 'nude drama.' The blonde women will find their proper place in the concert saloons, and the legitimate drama, let us hope, will recover its prerogative...."\*

Miss Holt could not be prodded by these dull pins endlessly. With (from all reports) tears in her eyes, and

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, July 20, 1869.

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(again from all reports) a cowhide in her hand, she braved the office of Mr. Marriott, the editor of the News Letter. The exact procedure from that point on is nowhere indicated. The Spirit of the Times (New York) for August 21, 1869 made its own conjecture:

"As Miss Holt is about three feet two inches in height, and Marriott over the average in size, the damage done the calves of his legs, had they met, would have been frightful.'"

August 27, Figaro laid a last satirical wreath on the issue:

"Of course the Bulletin had as good a right to abuse Miss Elise Holt on her first appearance at the California Theatre as any other of the valiant quill-drivers who compose the noble army of her foes; it was a proper enough thing to do on that occasion, for had not the others, who do know some little of what they are talking about, taken the lead? Granted, we say, that the Bulletin in launching forth its anathema at that time did not make a much greater fool of itself than usual when it finds the chance: what in the name of common sense does the venerable stupid mean by trying to keep it up? Haven't the others given way at last? ... And has not the public, which was appointed referee in the Case, fully and finally decided it? The verdict has been rendered in favor of the little defendant; she is exonerated from all blame by the best of tribunals, and lo, our virtuous friend will not be satisfied ... Now as the Bulletin had seen Miss Holt on a previous occasion --did she see him when he called?--and had then expressed his opinion, of her, it is but fair to suppose that he must have had an object in going a second time. Did he go because he liked it? Or was it because he knew what it would be like, and was it urgent need of something to pitch into where there would be small danger of a return blow? Oh, worthy knight, Oh most redoubtable La Mahcha, had you not better have gone your way in peace, and left the pretty shining windmill alone?

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Pygmy-like against the skirling approach of the giant blondes, the <u>News Letter</u> and the <u>Bulletin</u> stood defiantly and ineffectually. Elise Holt was the lone, bleached harbinger of a whole flock. Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes nightly were embanking their Lorelei splendor against the footlights at Wood's Museum in New York City. The value of theatrical entertainment in America came to depend on a very real golden thread. Teutonic propaganda is not evident, nor a general desire to bolster up the "decline of the West"; but inexplicably, Nordic goddesses in unabashed deshabille came to dictate public response.

## XXVIII -- BLONDES INVADE CLASSICAL BALLET

Between Elise Holt and the ultimate deluge, the three Zavistowski sisters stand heroically as the intermediate stage in the peroxide experiment. Emeline, Alice, and Christine, vividly dyed, did not die quickly in the public mind. Early autumn, 1869, they were playing at Wood's Museum in New York City. While they danced, sang, and punned their way through the burlesque Masaniello in the doeply-secreted theatre of the museum, Chang, the Chinese giant, was displayed in the lobby. Dusty taxidermy, human freaks, and gambling devices were still crowded within the lobbies of these so-called museums, as a false front to the immoralities of the music halls in the rear. Jefferson, at this time, was closing a famous season at Booth's theatre, in the character

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of Rip Van Winkle. Before leaving New York for their San Francisco engagement, the Zavistowskis made Jefferson's portrayal of "Rip" the pivot of a new burlesque, Wip Wan Winkle, with Chang towering through the last days of long service as decoy. Rita Sangalli, noted Italian danseuse, who was to appear in San Francisco in January 1870, a few days ahead of the Zavistowskis, followed in their wake at Wood's. Flick Flock, the burlesque in which she made her first American appearance at Wood's, is buried beyond research; but it is known that while she enchanted people with her mastery of ballet technique, the museum proper was hung with posters announcing "Royal Bengal Tigers, Lions, Leopards, Hyenas, Lioness and Cubs, Mammoth and Infant Elephants, and Cages of Wild Animals."\*

Marie Bonfanti, only dancer of the time to give Sangalli headaches of competition, had preceded her to the Coast. Together with a corps de ballet, Bonfanti, at Maguire's Opera House, had presented "the original cancan as danced at Niblo's Garden in New York." Sangalli, who was introduced to San Francisco in a revival of The Black Crook, immediately came in for comparisons with Bonfanti:

"The spectacular absurdity of The Black Crook was presented to a densely packed house last evening. The cast contained an odd and somewhat surprising combination of talent, embracing in addition to the regular company, the

<sup>\*</sup> Odell, George C. D. Annals of the New York Stage. VIII, p. 587.

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Martinetti troupe, Madame Scheller, Harry Courtaine, (recruited from a Barbary Coast Melodeon) and one or two other notorieties. The great attraction was of course La Rita Sangalli, the eminent danseuse, who made her debut....Her style of dancing is unique. Indeed she may be said to have created a school of her own. Less arch and vivacious, and perhaps less airy in her movements than Bonfanti, she is more classical, more severely artistic, more surprisingly lithe of limb. Her poses are the perfection of grace. She executes the most difficult steps with an ease, freedom and abandon, at once pleasing and startling. She was warmly applauded and complimented by numerous floral favors..."\*

La Sangalli, however, not satisfied with this partition of the bouquet, appeared January 15 on a bill which included a burlesque of Bonfanti's particular abilities. The wife of one of the Martinettis performed the satire, but Sangalli no doubt closely and expertly superintended the take-off.

On January 18, the arrival of the Zavistowskis put an obscure finish to this small rivalry of the great dancers. The public quickly responded to the blonde lure, lost for a moment in the classical whirl of the ballet. The thrilling rapproachement took place at the New Alhambra.

"The sisters Zavistowski made their debut before a closely packed house last evening....They are blondes of a pronounced type. They are pretty and vivacious and thoroughly up to the art of pleasing the fancy of the crowd. They sing well, dance charmingly, and act with a naive abandon that is very pleasing. Miss Emma, who assumed the role of 'Ixion' in the burlesque of that name, played with audacity, sang and danced as if she were possessed, looked very bewitching, and closed the entertainment with a

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, January 11. 1870.

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bit of acting not in the bills -- fainted away."\*

The Zavistowskis were obviously ideal press agents for Lydia Thompson and her troupe. The critics were pleased that the three graces were blonde, but further pleased that their own predilection needed no apology -- the Zavistowskis were blonde charmers on the safe side.

"The sisters Zavistowski are drawing excellent houses. They are vivacious actresses, sing rather better than the average of their class, and dance audaciously and in a style that is, to say the least, unique. They are rather chary of costume, but have none of the bestiality of the blondes of the Elise Holt type."\*\*

With a quick succession of burlesques, <u>Ixion</u>, <u>Pyg-malion</u>, the <u>Female Forty Thieves</u>, <u>Cinderella</u>, the three sisters so fascinated San Francisco theatregoers, that Sangalli and Bonfanti, still in town, united their forces and attempted a two-star comeback in <u>The Black Crook</u> at Maguire's Opera House on February 7. What blood was shed in this explosive combination is nowhere indicated. Sangalli appears again in the press February 15, 1870 (the <u>Bulletin</u>), but there is a suspicious hush about Bonfanti's name. No writer of the time would have been so inept as to treat Bonfanti recklessly as one of La Sangalli's "sisters".

"The performances at the Opera House are rapidly approximating the melodeon standard. The Cancan in its lewdest form was boldly introduced in the extravaganza of The Slave of Love last evening. La Sangalli and her sisters threw off

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, January 18, 1870 \*\*Ibid. January 24, 1870

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everything like the appearance of decency, and stood confessed before the audience 'naked and not ashamed.' What the style of performances at the 'Bella Union' and the 'Pacific Melodeon' may be, we know not; but if they are much worse than what we saw last night, they must be low indeed. We doeply regret that Mr. Maguire, to whom the amusement-seeking public owe so much, should feel compelled to introduce such a style of entertainment at his house. We need not add that The Slave of Love was witnessed by a house almost exclusively made up of men, was abundantly applauded, and will be repeated this evening."

The state of theatrical affairs is clear from this quotation. The old type of extravaganza burlesque with some dignity in the ballet routine, was giving way to the high kick out of the big, blonde cloud. The delicate balance of ballet tradition exemplified by Sangalli and Bonfanti must either assume the contemporary antics of the cancan or disappear. But the cancan wasn't enough. There must be fleshcolored tights and a flaxen haze about the head. stars of European ballet dropped out of sight, while the Zavistowskis, fulfilling all requirements, extended their engagement well into May, On May 17, the Alhambra having been dark for only three days since the close of the Zavistowski run (they were probably still in town), one of them. Emeline. suffered the inevitable and just fate of all burlesque artists: she was mercilessly burlesqued by a fellow burlesquer, The take-off occurred in a burlesque Hamlet, Willie Edouin. presented at the California Theatre.

"Willie Edouin costumed in exact imitation of Emeline Zavistowski took the part of 'Laertes.' 'Hamlet' and his 'Mother' danced the Can-can, and 'Laertes' was particularly happy in his

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THE DIRECTRESS OF THE FAMOUS BRITISH BLONDES (1836-1908)



PHOTO FROM ODELL'S ANNALS OF THE NEW YORK STAGE



mimicry of the little, above named actress, and was rewarded by peals of laughter from all parts of the house. His Chinese dance was original, characteristic and also brought down the house...."\*

The internationally trained eye of Lydia Thompson was to agree with this eulogy of Edouin. Shortly after her arrival in San Francisco, she spotted Edouin's talent and induced him to join her company.

Spring of 1870, and the blondes are on the way. The limping winter season becomes suddenly hysterical with activity. The attention of the town is called to Maguire's last stand. Always astutely aware of the theatrical trend he now tries to exploit the fame of the Lydia Thompson company with the earlier engagement of a blonde troupe of his own. The "great, old drama" was definitely sitting on cold ground, and the public was lending no ear at all to the sad stories of the deaths of kings. In an attempt to save his fortune, Maguire was going to give the public what it apparently wanted, and this against the little inner voice which had prompted him throughout his career to produce the "better" things, even at a loss.

## XXIX -- LYDIA THOMPSON

A change in theatrical terminology about this time clearly discloses the shift of public taste. For many years burlesque had been the "afterpiece" to comedy, minstrelsy, or farce. As the spectacular aspects of burlesque involved

<sup>\* &</sup>lt;u>Bulletin</u>, May 17, 1870

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more and more machinery, as the leg-show ballet, with endless costume changes, became the piece de resistance, as the plot of burlesque dissolved entirely into a series of detached extravaganzas, so the length of a burlosque expanded. until The Black Crook, at its New York opening, demanded (and received) the presence of the audience for the incredible duration of five hours. Burlesque was now the feature of the show. farce, short comedy, or minstrol entertainment which opened the show was now spoken of as the "forepiece." Soon this forepiece would be dispensed with altogether, and the twentieth century musical revue would be elevated clear from The Black Crook had already taken burlesque all its origins. far in this direction. Lydia Thompson and the British Blondos, whom she released upon America as if from an inexhaustible bird-cote, were to fix the standard of theatrical entertainment so firmly that there was to be practically no development for fifty years. M. B. Leavitt in his Fifty Years in Theatrical Management has this to say about the 1870-1880 period:

"Those (burlesques) I staged then were equivalent to the Broadway Musical shows of today, though not upon so elaborate a scale, but the artists were fully as excellent...."

Maguire anticipated the opening of the Lydia Thompson troupe at the California, June 23, 1870, with the opening of a British Blonde troupe of his own contracting, June 16, at the Opera House. There is a good deal of confusion as to just who made up this company at Maguire's. Rose Massey was

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the central luminary, and there are press notices to the effect that she had bolted from Lydia Thompson's original New York company and formed a company of her own. This is not true. Lydia Thompson first appeared in New York, September 28, 1868; Rose Massey made her American debut with an entirely different company in February 1869. The outstanding members of the Thompson company who broke away in an ambitious attempt to emulate the master company's success, were Eliza Weathersby, Adah Harland, and Harry Beckett.

The Annals of the New York Stage, compiled by George C. D. Odell, establish the Britishness of the Thompson troupe:

"The great sensation, perhaps the supreme excitement of the season (1868-69) in New York, came on September 28th, when first appeared in our city the Lydia Thompson burlesque company, in a re-writing of Burnand's extravaganza, Ixion, or the Man at the Wheel. The body of this com-pany was made up in New York, but from England Samuel Colville imported five players who were destined to make a deep impression here. First and foremost was Lydia Thompson herself, a handsome, clever actress in pieces of this kind. Next in artistic importance was Ada Harland, from the Strand Theatre, London; Lisa Weber, from Covent Garden; the beautiful Pauline Markham, from the Queen's Theatre; and Harry Beckett, from the Prince of Wales Theatre, Liverpool, completed the victorious quintette. M. Connolly, musical director, was also new. These six really composed the British contingent in the troupe that soon became so famous."\*

The British Blondes opened at Maguire's in the burlesque <u>Luna</u>, or the <u>Little Boy Who Cried</u> for the Moon, with a short comedy, <u>To Oblige Benson</u>, as a forepiece. The newspapers

<sup>\*</sup> Eliza Weathersby joined the troupe in New York, June 14, 1869.

en de la companya de la co were very reserved at first and then admitted to a residue of enthusiasm. The Bulletin, for instance, for June 17,1870:

"The British Blondes must have been greatly encouraged and elated by the spectacle at the Goera House last night. It was packed full in every part, and they were received with oft repeated and tumultuous applause. But it is questionable whether they merited all the favors that were bestowed upon them. 'Pretty blonde' has become quite synonymous with 'pretty rough.' The Lingards however, demonstrated that a woman with yellow hair can be a modest and graceful lady on the stage, and that one may look at her without expecting to see her kick higher than her head, or give expression to coarse speeches to 'split the ears of the groundlings.' We should be pleased to say as much of some of the British Blondes. They are not distinguished kickers. Elise Holt or the Zavistowskis were their superiors in that respect; but when it comes to bandying with the gods such vile phrases as 'How's that for high?' with the toes of one foot pointing towards zenith, and 'How's that for low? with the body wriggling and squat towards nadir, the chaste Diana of the play last night is entitled to the palm of unenviable superiority. She is pretty, can sing passably, and dance airily; but she must learn that such familiarity smacks too much of the melodeon to be tolerated by the majority of those who patronize the Opera House. One coarse word or indecent gesture destroys at once all admiration for an artist, though she may be as beautiful as Hebe or as graceful as Thalia. We hope, for the sake of the management and the troupe, as well as for that of the public, that the faults alluded to will be reformed. The first piece last night showed the troupe to best advantage. The burlesque, although highly amusing for the most part, dragged considerably at times, and was marred by a degree of coarseness which offended many in the audience. If they will tone down in that respect, their success will be as-There was a lively distribution of ensured. cores, and such a profusion of bouquets that the recipients seemed several times at a loss to know what to do with them, and tossed the tributes about with a recklessness that was quite amusing. Rose Massey seemed to be the

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chief attraction among the blondes, but Eliza Weathersby in a more quiet and modest way challenged better admiration. She has a pretty voice and wonderful powers of imitation. G.F. Ketchum and H.Beckett displayed more than average ability as comedians and won hearty and well bestowed applause. Ada Harland danced with much grace and animation, but the rest were not required to exert themselves very much in any direction. The costumes of the principal artists were very brilliant and sufficiently scant, without being positively indecent. The scenery was quite good, and the representation of the moon's descent with Diana was very fine, as was also the closing Tableaux."

Resplendent as Maguire was able to make this opening of his blonde display, Lydia Thompson opened at the California theatre six days later with even more éclat. The critic of the <u>Bulletin</u> for June 23, 1870 fully elaborated his report:

"The Lydia Thompson Blonde Burlesque Troupe made their first appearance last night before the largest audience ever assembled in the California Theater. Not only were all the seats occupied, but every foot of standing room, and from each of the four or five wide doors leading to the dress circle long rows of chairs were placed, reaching back into the lobby, and on these men stood looking over each other's shoulders and heads and under each other's arms to catch a glimpse of the stage and its occu-Many were obliged to go away after striving a long time to find some position from which they could gain even a momentary glance. The appearance of Miss Thompson was the signal for a storm of applause, and from that moment to the end of the performance she and her companions held the field. At one time there were so many recalls, and such shouting, stamping, and yelling in the galleries, Mr. McCullough was obliged to come on the stage and request the gods to desist and allow the play to go on. They wanted about the twentieth repetition of the 'A B C' song. It contained some pointed local hits at notable persons and public bodies, among the latter

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and the group of the control of the The first production of the second se The second of th the state of the s  the Fire Commissioners on the election of an assistant Chief Engineer. Mr. McCullough's request was heeded, and after that the galleries were not so exacting. Although there were several speeches that might well have been left out, there were, so far as we could hear, no expressions of a coarse character. The costumes of the females in the troupe were exceedingly brilliant, and there was not a marked display of bust and limb as the reputation of the troupe and of burlesque actresses generally might lead one to expect...."

engagement before those at the California. During the conjunction of the two runs, open rivalry developed, never embittered as far as the companies were concerned, but ultimately unhappy for Maguire. The popularity of a special "sneezing song" by Rose Massey was paralleled quickly by a special "echo song" by Pauline Markham, the famous beauty of the Thompson troupe. Change of program at one theatre stimulated change of program at the other. There finally was simultaneous production of the burlesque La Sonnambula. This locking of horns was reported by the San Francisco News Letter July 2, 1870:

"The burlesque of La Sonnambula, played at both houses (with important variations) is perhaps better than the average, in that it is a parody of that which it professes to parodize, and follows with a reasonable distinctness the plot of the opera. Deducting Miss Thompson, the two troupes are very evenly balanced. Maguire has the best of it in the possession of Beckett, a comedian of genuine merit, who never misses a point, and is infinitely more versatile than Sheridan at the California, who is, we think, a good actor, but utterly out of place in burlesque. The Bush Street people have also an undoubtedly clever low comedian in Cahill. We are inclined to rate Eliza Weathersby, and Ada

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Harland above most of the ladies of the California in general versatility of talent, and Rose Massey is a more beautiful woman than any of them. On the other hand, Pauline Markham has a charming voice and knows how to use it...."

With the fate of these competitive engagements in the balance, Olive Logan, the reformer, megaphoned her voice into the scene. Figaro for June 29,1870 describes the waste-land after the inexorable Olive had passed over:

"...presently the atmosphere was filled with tangled yellow hair, fractured tights, sawdust calves, red paint and dye-stuff; and after the engagement the platform was metaphorically covered with green satin boots, from which the late unfortunate Blondes had been violently extracted...."

Surely not as a result of Olive's attack, nevertheless Maguire's blondes closed their engagement at the Opera House July 10, and left for Stockton. The Lydia Thompson troupe continued at the California until July 23. Praise for Lydia and her starring supporters developed into a din of adjectives. Pauling Markham became "she of the velvet voice." The "daintiness which flavors the high comedy of actresses of note" was ascribed to the burlesque acting of Lydia. Lydia, again is "perfectly at home as the reckless Sir Rupert in Lurline"; and Pauline sings a song with "real taste and expression." John Hall, who joined the company during the San Francisco engagement, "brings down the house without opening his mouth, frequently even disturbs the serenity of his

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brother and sister professionals on the stage, never misses a point, is a thorough actor and a good singer, and as a comic dancer is really unapproachable." The deluge followed. Lydia became plump, pretty, piquante, sympathetic, bright, innocent and winsome. Disarming extremity of praise was reserved for Pauline, who, Richart Grant White declared had found the long-lost arms of Venus de Milo.

The San Francisco News Letter for July 23, 1870 got away from the personalities of the troupe and realistically recorded something about the material these personalities were purveying. It has to do with burlesque played at the last matinee performance in the city:

"When Byron the play-wright in a fit of remorse entitled his burlesque Ill-Treated Il Trovatore he was undoubtedly right, for the troubador has certainly been maltreated by him. In our ignorance, it seems to us that a burlesque of this kind could be just as well got up by the actors themselves, and that authors are absolutely nowhere, and perfectly superfluous. Analyze said burlesque: given a certain amount of the original music of the opera and a few of the more or less un-melodious fiddle-faddles of the day, more or less charmingly sung by the Misses Markham and Thompson: given a few mad melodeon given a few dozen puns and gags which any well-regulated burlesque ought to be able to invent on the spur of the moment, and what need is there for Byron's name in the bills at all? We pause for a reply, and don't expect to get it. Hall's acting, and especially that bit of falsetto acting in singing in the opening scene did much to redeem it from utter damnation, but whatever is good about it was due to the company and certainly not to any merit in the burlesque itself .... "

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The two companies of peroxided pyrotechnics were gone on wide tours of the country which would eventually return them to fall seasons in New York. The British Blondes had set their first lap at Stockton; Lydia Thompson played her first stand at Marysville. As the routes of the two companies diverged into the hinterland, great confusion ensued. Dreaming over the advance publicity of the British Blondes, a provincial town would be jolted with the discovery on opening night that Lydia Thompson was not in the troupe. And, other way around, advertisements of the Thompson troupe innocently aroused the mistaken idea that the much-touted beauty of Rose Massey finally would be seen. Meanwhile, in New York, the further process of burlesquing burlesque had commenced. The San Francisco Minstrels, by this time an accepted and muchbeloved part of the New York theatre, were delighting packed houses with The Siege of the Blondes, or 'Tis Sweet for Cur Country to Dye.

One member of the press described the invasion as a plague and suggested realistic barriers against all incoming English ships. The picture conjured up is that of blonde Amazons in acrobatic tights, gracefully circumventing the rat-guards on the ropes, and bouncing triumphantly into a song and a kick-chorus on the wharf.

Olive Logan was right and wrong; right that the thoughtless sensationalism of the new theatre would prove debasing and sterile; wrong that an oxygen tank should be

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applied to the last shiver of life in the decadent legitimate drama. Well into the 1900s, there was to be the loud expansion of frontiers around a vacuous interior. With the collapse of the frontiers, the country was to be strewn with a good deal of disillusioned wreckage. Until that time, no questions were to be asked; and as a consequence, the theatre, along with the other arts, was not to attempt any answers, was to be sheer decoration.

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PART TWO (1870 - 1900)

## XXX -- HUMPTY DUMPTY AND THE LONE FISHERMAN

The close-packed incidents in the theatre of San Francisco from the Gold Rush through the Civil War reflect the swift and crowded development of the city's economic life. Time thus far had been taken up, almost unconsciously, with sure investments, unquestioned expansion, gay spending, and a life-is-for-today philosophy. The time from 1870 to 1900 is described by two steep drops in the graph. The general depression in the country in 1873 was postponed for California by the Big Bonanza silver strike in Nevada; but the failure of the Bank of California in 1875 and the defaulted dividend payments on the silver stock of the Consolidated Virginia Mine in 1877 plunged the state even below the national economic level. The reckless days of San Francisco were over; money was scarce, the trusts were in power, the future was unsure. A slight upcurve of rehabilitation was continuous throughout the eighties; but in 1893 there was again a devastating plunge for the whole nation.





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Events in the San Francisco theatre for this period. 1870 to 1900, came to be as widely spaced, as jittery, as tentative, as blind, as the ups and downs on the vast, economic backdrop. What was the public interested in? All the old forms were tried in this and that guise -- Italian opera, Shakespeare, sensation drama, pantomime, extravaganza, burlesque, farce, minstrelsy, romantic tragedy -- and most of them were dropped with that particularly cold clink of coin, not of the realm. The most consistent profits of the period were drawn from light opera, as comic as possible. An epidemic of Pinafore productions placed Gilbert and Sullivan at the top of the profession. Gilbert, in his own career, had given burlesque one of its developments: from the dead weight of puns and mythology-burdened satire to a freer, lighter use of the imagination. But the results of the Savoy collaboration were not burlesques.

Where was the old spirit of the melodeon burlesque? From 1870 to 1900 melodeon entertainment gradually collapsed from the full length burlesque of a definite subject to the conglomerate variety programs. To begin with, the definite subjects were dying off or disappearing. In 1893 Edwin Booth, the last of the great line of American tragedians, died in his apartment at the Players' Club in New York City. Almost no actors of any stature were left; and it takes stature to stimulate satire. Contemporary drama before this time a very vulnerable subject for burlesque, during the last

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three decades of the century became thin and unimpressive. Sensation drama had been the last, violent attempt to arouse interest in the playgoer. Ibsen and the drama of social criticism had not yet appeared.

The Black Crook formula was sterile. The costume designer might scratch his head for one more variation in the scant apparel of the dancers; the scene painters might depict a deeper, more meticulous illusion in the backdrops; the maître de ballet might send his puppets whirling out on the stage in the most intricate choregraphy so far witnessed; the grand and final transformation scene, by means of the most expensive machinery so far used in a theatre, might accomplish, without the drop of the curtain, a geographical shift so far unparalleled. But there was no subject matter; there was nothing to develop except the mechanical aspects of the formula. The spectacle piece had finally proven a blind alley for burlesque; had also from all indications proven dull. The even more glorious mechanism of the spectacles failed to draw. There was finally only a sentimental attachment to what had once been scandalous innovation. The Black Crook and other pantomimic spectacles, up to the turn of the century, were hauled down annually from the theatrical attics of the country and presented as Christmas entertainment for the whole family.

The mechanical display of the spectacles, the harmless soft-pawed charm of comic opera, the pointless melange The second secon

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of vaudeville: these were the new estates of burlesque. The old burlesque had contained a large element of political satire. Even the London-conceived extravaganzas when produced in San Francisco were hastily interlarded with supposedly sizzling cracks and in-the-know overtones. But the development of the city quickly got beyond this salutary intimacy of actor and politician. The hushed power of the trusts and the monopolies were for a long time not to be attacked in literature or upon the stage.

With the edge of satire gone so dull, it is not surprising that the only genuinely new notes in burlesque for this whole period (1870-1900) were two completely fantastic creations: the character of Humpty Dumpty, and the character of the Lone Fisherman. The career of Humpty Dumpty was started off in New York in 1868 by G. K. Fox. Thereafter, an acceleration of long runs by Fox and other great clowns throughout the country made of Humpty Dumpty a character as familiar as a comic strip character today. The Lone Fisherman was first created in the seventies as a character in the burlesque Evangeline. The plot architecture of burlesque having fallen so flat, the authors of Evangeline (Brougham is supposed to have had a hand in it) conceived this completely pantomimic character, who should walk silently, constantly, omnipresently among the scattered fragments, hearing everything, apparently omniscient, yet never committing his wisdom

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to any test, his costume always the same, that of a completely equipped, cranky trout fisher, intensely spending a precious Sunday afternoon away from the office.

Parallels up through a spiral of time are necessarily distorted, and rarely illuminating; but these last unreal creations of nineteenth century burlesque in the face of the impregnable mountain of the monopolies are surely among the progenitors of the surrealistic art which confronted the apparently boundless but obviously hollow prosperity of the 1920s. The signs of breakdown and the final crash were to give art a new grip; there was to be a renascence of political satire. A few productions in the 1930s were even to indicate that the central characteristic of burlesque -- straight-shooting, comic satire, so inherent in much of the early melodeon entertainment -- was being consciously salvaged as a serious dramatic tradition.\* All of which is a long leap from the dismal condition of burlesque in the 1870s.

## XXXI -- PROPHECY OF THE BELLA UNION

On January 4, 1871 the Bella Union, still the leader in the daring vanguard of the town's melodeons, made a newspaper impression of interest. The name of the burlesque was 1971. At this late date, the amount of fantastic prophecy a la H. G. Wells in the burlesque cannot be determined. The

<sup>\*</sup> cf. Last chapter of this monograph.

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newspaper accounts are sketchy, and very likely much of the vatic vision penetrated no further than early twentieth century strip-tease. But the melodeons were always more clever than spectacular, and the chances are good that 1971 accomplished some illumination for 1871. As is usual with the melodeon entertainment of early San Francisco, the details of this Bella Union burlesque are not covered by the press. It is notable that the burlesque received as much coverage as it did, indicating that melodeon entertainment was at last being taken seriously. And why not? With the decline of legitimate drama, the big theatres came round more and more to the same sort of fare that the melodeons had been purveying for years. Omitting the melodeons from theatrical reportage would now be omitting the whole field of entertainment.

A few obscure shots at the content of 1971 can be taken on the basis of the notice in Figaro for January 4, 1871:

"Among other amusing features in this play may be mentioned the introduction of Emperor Norton and the poor, persecuted Guttersnipe as Rip Van Winkle a hundred years hence. The battle of balloons is well managed, and is much applauded."

To read a false connotation into the battle of balloons is irresistible. The idea was probably a matter of sheer fluff and color; after all, even an overwhelming quantity of balloons might be regarded as a theatrical experience. But also, might there not have been a moment of wide-eyed, Buck Rogers intuition? Jules Verne was being widely popularized.

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The exact nature of the Guttersnipe is as obscure as the balloon encounter. Being poor is understandable, but how was he persecuted? Again it is clear that there is no possible restoration of the details of melodeon entertainment.

Figaro for January 7 has the last word for the Bella Union's conception of 1 9 7 1:

"The new extravaganza of 1971 has run successfully through the week. The performance throughout is very attractive. The scenes in the new play are some of them very fine, and the prismatic wheel, or chromatrope, which forms the background of the last scene, is very effective, and must have cost a great deal of money. Sam Tetlow, however does not care how much money he spends on a piece as long as it pleases the public, and the ringing peals of laughter which greet the many funty jokes in the dialogue prove how thoroughly the talented author hit the taste of the public."

## XXXII -- THE ZAVISTOWSKIS

The sign of the Gomini, and another unnamed zodiacal sign for triplets, seem to have cast their not entirely baneful influence over nineteenth century burlesque. The burlesque queens made fame and fortune as duets or trios of familiar splendor. Joey and Adelaide Gougenheim were the pioneers. Thereafter followed swiftly, Sophie, Jennie and Irene Worrell; Emeline, Alice and Christine Zavistowski; and finally Blanche and Ella Chapman. Periodically one of these closely tied constellations loomed brightly in San Francisco. The Zavistowskis traversed their orbit of "good towns to play in" with particular rapidity; after a short absence, they reappeared in San Francisco on March 27, 1871.

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"Long before the rise of the curtain at this theatre (the California) last night, standing room was at a premium. The performance commenced with the farce of Delicate Ground, but this was not what the audience came to see, and was therefore impatiently endured. Each of the charming Zavistowski Sisters on making her appearance on the stage received round after round of applause, and every song and every dance was encored. Paris is a labouriously constructed burlesque, too long and too much crowded with characters; but there was so much fun in it as presented last night, that the audience was kept amused. Though the burlesque moved a little slowly at times last night, the entertainment was altogether bright and amusing and the Zavistowski Sisters were as brilliant as ever. The pleasure afforded by gazing on these sparkling actresses as they dart hither and thither resplendent in gorgeous colors and gold and silver is akin to that which one takes in looking at humming birds, or butterflies, -it is one that all must enjoy."\*

The Zavistowskis evidently did not let down the speed and splendor of their bird and butterfly appellation, for two other burlesques followed the successful run of the burlesque Paris. With the opening of both Ixion and Kenilworth, (April 1 and April 6), the critic of Figaro made a tripartite division of adjectives in the interest of each resplendent sister:

"The Zavistowskis are certainly as popular as ever. <u>Ixion</u> was performed, and did not go nearly as smoothly as it should; it will, of course, be presented perfectly tonight. Miss Emeline Zavistowski bewitched the audience by her sunny smiles, vivacity, grace and pretty dances and delivered her lines with good effect; Miss Alice was the brightest of Mercurys, the prettiest post-boy ever known; and Miss Christine was graceful and artistic as Jupiter.

<sup>\*</sup> Figaro, March 28, 1871.

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"There is an immense amount of fun in the burlesque of Kenilworth as presented by the Zavistowski Sisters--Miss Emeline made a most noble Earl of Leicester; Miss Alice played the part of Walter Raleigh with much spirit, and Miss Christine was very amusing as the much wronged Amy Robsart."

A year later, May 1872, the Zavistowskis appeared for the last time on the San Francisco scene. In the interim they had played in Australia, which was the traditional leap from the Pacific Coast in all the early theatrical itineraries. Two old war horses of English burlesque writing, Ixion, or the Man at the Wheel, and Pygmalion, were refurbished as the vehicles of the "bird and butterfly" trio. To the very last the Zavistowskis were able to elicit favorable comment from the copy room; this time they are "warmly welcomed" and the Bulletin for May 7 admits that the "local hits in the play (Ixion) are cleverly wrought and contrast favorably with anything of the kind previously produced here." The Bulletin for May 11 constructed a final adjectival triptych for the still unfaded sisters:

"Miss Alice Zavistowski's benefit at this theatre (the Metropolitan) last evening was well attended and the performance passed off in fine style. The clever burlesque of Pygmalion, produced for the first time during the engagement, and arranged with special reference to the peculiar talents of the young and captivating actress, bristles with mirth-provoking witticisms. Miss Emeline is beautiful as "The Statue." Miss Alice is an interesting sculptor and Miss Grainger makes an excellent 'Venus.'"

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#### XXXIII -- TONY DENIER AS HUMPTY DUMPTY

Memory of the Zavistowskis quickly faded when bright, new announcements of a performance of Humpty Dumpty were posted all over the city. G. K. Fox, in the New York run of Humpty Dumpty, had already given the role of the clown lineaments as definite as those of a Commedia dell'Artecharacter. In fact, the stock types of Harlequin, Pantaloon, and Columbine were also worked into the show which in form was apparently a mixture of pantomime and burlesque. A comparison of the New York and the San Francisco productions indicate that a short burlesque which served as separate curtain-raiser to Humpty Dumpty in New York, in San Francisco was somehow incorporated into the main show. George Odell, in his Annals of the New York Stage, has the following to say about Humpty Dumpty:

"We might have thought that the decade of 1860-70 could not possibly produce a second run equal to that of The Black Crook. As a matter of fact, the career of Fox's famous pantomime, Humpty Dumpty, was even longer. It saw the lights on March 10, 1868, and for considerably over a year thereafter the Olympic Theatre knew neither worry nor fear of change. Humpty Dumpty at one time seemed immortal....The piece opened with the burlesque by A. Oakly Hall, in which Alice Harrison appeared as Burlesque, Mrs. C. Edmonds as Romance, and E. T. Sinclair as New Jersey."

Tony Denier, famous on the Eastern seaboard for his revivals of the Ravel and Martinetti pantomimes, came to San Francisco in the part of the clown which G.K. Fox had already "almost immortalized." The Bulletin for August 16, 1872, reviewed the opening:

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"The Metropolitan management are certainly deserving of success in their latest theatrical enterprise. The production of Humpty Dumpty required several weeks of preparation and no inconsiderable outlay of money, that the piece might appear in proper shape. Last evening the public of San Francisco had the first opportunity of witnessing its performance here. The attendance was all that could reasonably be desired; every section of the house was crowded and the audience was a discriminating one. The principal characters represented are: Humpty Dumpty, afterwards clown, Tony Denier; Buckle my Shoe, afterwards Pantaloon, J. M. Sloan; Tommy Tucker, afterwards Harlequin, A. L. Stacy; Goody Two Shoes, afterwards Columbine, Mlle. de Rhone; Burlesque, Maggie Moore; Romance, Ada Deaves; and New Jersey, John Woodward. The pantomime abounds in tricks and transformations that are calculated to and do provoke roars of laughter and keep the audience in the best of humor from beginning to end. Denier dances a hornpipe on stilts, imitates a drunken man, takes off the wonderful performing elephant, and introduces the famous 'wooden-headed acrobats. !!

The second night of the run, the house was sold out and stools blocked the aisles. The mode of operation of the wooden-headed acrobats is somewhat mysterious but was evidently very successful, according to the report in the <u>Bulletin</u> for the 17th:

"Such roars of laughter as greeted the queer antics of the acrobats last night, are seldom heard in theatres."

The two weeks' run of <u>Humpty Dumpty</u> was an extraordinary triumph in this time of theatrical slump in San Francisco. But this pantomime was no sudden discovery of a new means to tap the reserves of audience enthusiasm; the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, surviving feebly in the genius of the Martinettis, was reaching forth, in <u>Humpty Dumpty</u>, to one

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of its last expressions. This was made still clearer in the last few days of the San Francisco run; acrobatic pantomime, and scenic tricks from the Red Gnome, the old Martinetti favorite, were added to the production and the advertising announced Humpty Dumpty Reconstructed --again illustrating that the theatre at this time was much busier wearing out the old forms than creating new ones.

### XXXIV -- BLANCHE AND ELLA CHAPMAN

The midseason of 1872 and 1873 was particularly indicative of the unoriginality of the times. The Yellow Hat, a holiday burlesque at the Metropolitan, featured a March of the Amazons in which the Bulletin sensed "the Black Crook flavor"; and terminated with the customary transformation scene, this time called "Land of Ferna, or Halls of Dazzling Light." The completely decrepit war horse, Ixion, was urged on the heels of The Yellow Hat, but a single performance at the California Theatre on February 11, 1873 was enough to put the dusty, punning script back into the attic. It took the Chapman sisters to tide the interest through the balance of the season.

George Odell in his Annals of the New York Stage dates the discovery of Blanche Chapman's illumination very definitely:

"Miss Chapman's star was rising; on April 5th and 6th (1867), in The Wandering Boys, she was Paul to the Justin of Miss Marion, and the Count de Croissey of Thompson. On April 10th, 11th, and 12th, she was Cherry, to the Fair Star of Mrs. Stetson."

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Ella, the other sister, had already made her Eastern reputation as the "little Ella Chapman!" The role of the pathetic, diminutive orphan in the "sensational" plays of the time had been her forte in New York, although she had also played a season of burlesque with the Worrell sisters in that city.

Blanche and Ella started off their successful San Francisco appearance with the burlesque Little Don Giovanni. For some reason the Bulletin\* remarked that the audiences which the Chapmans drew were not only large but intelligent, without indicating whether or not Little Don Giovanni offered particularly intellectual fare, or if perhaps this close packed intelligence might not be due to the fact that the Chapmans were well educated, modest stars, entirely out of the run of yellow-haired Venuses (for which, however, there is not the slightest proof). The Gold Demon followed Little Don Giovanni.

"A new spectacular burlesque entitled the Gold Demon, was brought out at the Metropolitan last evening. The plot of the piece has no particular aim or end that need be described, but in substance it is an amusing medley of dialogue, songs, dances and ludicrous incidents, with a spicing of capital local hits. The Chapman Sisters glitter throughout in gorgeous attire, and are the particular stars.

"The play concludes with a dazzling transformation scene, attended with beautiful effects of the calcium light."

Aladdin or the Wonderful Scamp, Pluto, Beauty and the Brigands, and Cinderella, the other burlesques in the

<sup>\*</sup> March 11, 1873.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Bulletin, March 19, 1873.

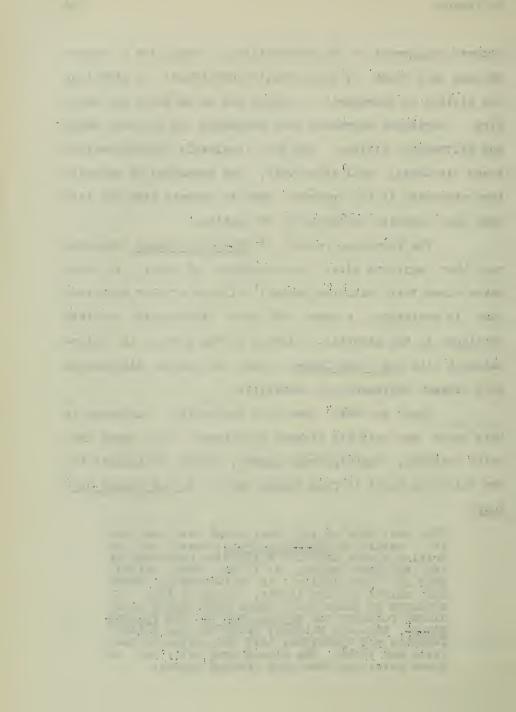
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Chapman engagement at the Metropolitan, sound like a chapter heading in a study of early English burlesque: no startling new titles, no experiment. Things had to be tried and surefire. Burlesque actresses were condemned to not only scant but glittering attire. And the inevitable transformation scene disclosed, veil after veil, the headaches of expenditure necessary if the producer were to compete with the last peep show surprise presented to the public.

The foregoing review of <u>The Gold Demon</u> indicates more than anything else, the decadence of plot. It also makes clear that with the gradual collapse of plot architecture in burlesque, a more and more disconnected variety developed in the material. Already in the 1870s, in entertainment like <u>The Gold Demon</u>, there is little distinction left between burlesque and vaudeville.

About to break down into vaudeville, burlesque at this point was paid its highest compliment; its great dramatic relative, Shakespearean comedy, began to imitate it. The following quote is from Jerome Hart's <u>In Our Second Century</u>:

"The vast wave of legs that swept over the land as a result of The Black Crook craze and the British Blonde invasion alarmed the actresses of the legitimate stage, as it was then called. Many of these ladies, in self-defense, had to doff skirts and don tights. Those of them who appeared in Shakespeare drama developed an inordinate fondness for As You Like It and Twelfth Night. Adelaide Neilson, famed for her Juliet, Isabelle, and Cymbeline, laid them aside for Rosalind and Viola. She always drew well, but in these roles she drew more crowded houses.



"Rose Coghlan favored Viola, and drew well in that role. She had a fine figure, as was the case with most of the actresses who yielded not unwillingly to the leg craze.

"Marie Wainwright manifested a liking for Twelfth Night, and revived that play--probably for curvilinear reasons, for it has a most unpleasant plot. When she played Viola she was a ripe beauty and looked well in silk fleshings, but never had so becorsetted a boy trodden the boards.

"Helene Modjeska was then making her way on the American stage. Finding no doublet-and-hose parts in Adrienne Lecouvreur and other plays of her repertoire, she too fell back on Shakespeare and his girls garbed as boys."

## XXXV -- DARK TIMES FOR BURLESQUE

Dark times for burlesque, certainly. In February 1873, Clay M. Greene, the local playwright, attempted the production of his burlesque, <u>La Blonde Dormante</u>. <u>The Call</u> for February 20 declared that

"The local hits are palpable in some respects, for Emperor Norton and Chief Crowley appeared on the stage with wonderful fidelity in outward guise, though the former (J. J. Murphy) had a marvellously powerful voice for an old man, and the latter (Mr. H. C. Droger) had scarcely the self-possession which a Chief of Police should display. The blonde was represented by the playwright, Mr. Greene, with good ability; but the most prominent part is that of 'Cupid' which was taken by Mr. Unger with an evident appreciation of the requirements and no small fitness to undertake them."

Any indication at this time, that burlesque can still be jerked up to its old form of political satire is refreshing; but Clay Greene's effort did not quite come off.

The San Francisco News Letter for February 22 had definitely made up its mind about the merits of the sleeping blonde:

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"The new burlesque by Clay M. Greene was a wretched piece of twaddle throughout; the jokes were far-fetched, and the whole thing hollow. We do not predict for La Blonde Dormante a place even among third-rate burlesque."

There was no getting away from the old English burlesques; most of the songs in Green's burlesque were lifted from <u>Ixion</u>. As for the joking and raillery, it was in imitation of Emerson's minstrels. It seems that the only times burlesque solidified at all, it took on the dignity of light opera; at the other extreme is an eclectic shapelessness headed for modern vaudeville. The ideal, in between, of seriously written humor on a well constructed satirical plot, with original music, somehow could not come out of the nineteenth century American theatre.

The deluge of light opera companies commenced in 1873 with the appearance of the Galton and Jennie Lee Opera Bouffe, Burlesque and Comedy Troupe, in productions mostly of opera of the Offenbach variety. Burlesques, if given, were usually nothing more than freely handled Offenbach.

one of the few signposts for this chronicle in 1874 is another of the faded revivals of The Black Crook. The Bulletin for August 10 announced a New York company for Maguire's New Theatre. The press agent was careful to add that an unprecedented amount of unsurpassed Black Crook scenery had reached San Francisco by way of the Isthmus and the Pacific Railway. The Bulletin for the 11th, however, applied great quantities of cold water to this invasion by a foreign company:

"A season of Langrishe and Glenn's Black Crook was opened at this theatre last evening. The material is principally an importation from the East, and hardly comes up to the standard of spectacular productions which local managers are accustomed to present. The Black Crook, in its present aspect, simply amounts to a general variety performance, through which the supposed dramatic narrative winds its slow length, replete with harrowing weariness, but not sufficiently connected to. engage the interest of the audience and excuse the occasional intrusion of the tedious dialogue by more readily excusable players...but as a whole, the so-called variety business seems to be an aggregation of that order of talent of which the city usually possesses much wealth in a state of dispersion, principally along Kearny street. The Black Crook, however, was greeted with generous patronage, and the season opens auspiciously in that view."

The show, still drawing crowds on August 13, came in for one last diatribe by the <u>Bulletin</u>, this time the proud, hollow remonstrance of a lover who has been let down:

"The Black Crook continues to occupy the boards of the theatre, and attracts the attention of many people, but to those familiar with the legitimate drama or who have any theatrical discrimination, the performance exhibits no signs of improvement. Some features of the variety acts are acceptable, and these might be very entertaining if seen under other circumstances."

These dark times for burlesque were lightened as much as anything by the engagement of the Vokes family. Jessic, Victoria, Rosina, Fred, and Fawdon Vokes opened at the California. August 25, in what the <u>Bulletin</u> declared to be a "sparkling extravaganza entitled <u>Fun in a Fog.</u>" The variety form dominated this burlesque, as all others at this time, the various acts and gags being built around the "trials and

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tribulations of an English militia officer and his valet, upon whom are perpetrated sundry jokes by a trio of American girls."\* The engagement of the Vokes was very successful. They were evidently able to give the public everything it wanted: they sang well, danced well, were accomplished acrobats, and were adept at the art of "low" comedy. They stimulated, certainly, unusual enthusiasm in a very dry time. The Bulletin for September 1 completes the history of their San Francisco appearance:

"The third sketch by the Vokes family, The Wrong Man in the Right Place, was produced last night, and excited quite as much laughter and applause as either of its predecessors. The efforts of Fred Vokes to sit down after exchanging his vagabond suit for black tights which are indeed tight, are immensely ludicrous, his burlesque polka is another feature which convulses the house; and the international quadrille, which closes the piece is truly a remarkable performance. We looked in vain for anything resembling the plot of the Wrong Man, as given in a morning contemporary last Sunday; the keenest eye could hardly recognize in Benjamin Buttontop a gentleman engaged to a lady who does not want to have him..."

Throughout the 1874-1875 season Maguire's California Minstrels were keeping the light of burlesque at some sort of glow. Otherwise there is no notice of a burlesque as a program in itself until January 2, 1875 when the <u>Bulletin</u> carried a notice for Maguire's New Theatre:

"Tonight, The Enchantress, Monday next the burlesque of Hamlet, Prince of Oakland, being an entirely reconstructed version from an Elizabethan Chronicle found in the archives of the Bohemian Club-room."

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, August 25, 1874.

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For a moment there is the possibility that the vitality of the early burlesques of Shakespearean tragedy has surged up again; but the stone must have been cast very awkwardly, for there is not the slightest ripple in the press after the original announcement.

When finally in the fall season of 1875 news releases announce a burlesque by Maguire's local company, the public is frankly informed that the burlesque will be a "kind of medley made especially attractive by the introduction of the most popular music of the day."\* Variety had become a talking point of advantage in advertising; the plot conception of burlesque was almost erased. The show was ready to go on, November 15. Again the Bulletin:

"The spectacular burlesque entitled The Fair One with the Blonde Wig will be produced this evening...all the leading parts are studded with the gems of new and popular old airs. It is understood to be substantially the extravaganza which served Mrs. Jas. Oates' troupe so well in the East, and is now produced under the direction of Mr. Crane, who was at that time stage manager of Mrs. Oates' troupe. Great attractions are offered in the way of choruses and ballet. The leading parts in the hands of Miss Katie Mayhew and Messrs. Crane and Kennedy are safe and great expectations are entertained of the debut of Miss Marian Singer as 'Prince Leander.'"

Mr. Crane turned out to be a talented burlesquer, the critics declaring that his peculiar mixture of comedy and grotesquerie never failed to get a response. Mr. Kennedy as "Princess Petipet" also came in for praise; while the debut of Marian Singer exhausted the bouquets of the reviewers.

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, November 8, 1875.

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Miss Mayhew was treated with respect but it was implied that she was perhaps a little refined for the sturdier virtues of burlesque. The surprise of the performance was the introduction of the four Allen sisters.

"They (the four Allen sisters) danced like fairies, and won the heartiest applause of the evening."\*

That the performance was good but cold is charitably indicated by the closing statement of the <u>Bulletin</u> review for November 16:

"A little more abandon on the part of the leading ladies will doubtless come as they become accustomed to the business."

Despite the limitations mentioned by the press,

The Fair One with the Blonde Wig played until December 4.

Acts were constantly added or withdrawn; the personnel of the company was very fluid. Whatever the plot of the blonde-wigged beauty on the opening night (the plot is never mentioned in the press), it could not have been recognized three nights later. These pages from the life of a Lydia Thompson chorine (which may have been the original idea) were given their last embellishment in the person of "little Mile. Schuman" who was announced as a "charming exhibition of infantile grace."\*\* From hor first appearance through the end of the run Mile. Schuman dominated the reviews. She is "exquisitely graceful,"\*\* she is "evidently working hard to

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, November 16, 1875.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Ibid. November 19, 1875. \*\*\*Ibid. November 24, 1875.

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perfect herself in her art" or she dances "a sailor's dance, in costume, with the grace of a veritable sylph." \*\*

Changes in the company itself were accompanied by daily excisions and additions in the script. The "local hits" necessarily changed as rapidly as the local scene and at one time achieved a penetration that was even rasping, according to an unusually delicate reaction on the part of the Bulletin. The music, that the original advertising might be fulfilled, was refurbished December 1 to an up-to-the-minute popularity. As for the nursery rhymes (an effect from the Mother Goose pantomimes) they were no doubt recoupleted nightly at the whim of any rhymester in the company. The Fair One with the Blond Wig, success as it was, turned up on closing night, December 4, in unrecognizable garb.

But the three weeks' run had firmly intrenched the local burlesquers. Another production, the extravaganza of Fortunio or The Seven Gifted Servants, was announced for December 24. By way of shining up the company, the Lenton family of acrobats, and Mr. and Mrs. George Ware, "serio-comic" vocalists, were engaged. The first notice of this production appears in the Bulletin for December 27, 1875:

"The whole company (at Maguire's New Theatre) has improved surprisingly since their first appearance in burlesque some weeks ago. The constraint and awkwardness have worn off, and in both action and speech the extravagant fancies of the author are realized."

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, November 24, 1875. \*\*Ibid. December 1, 1875.

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With a certain amount of provincial preoccupation with the greener fields of the Eastern theatres, the <u>Bulletin</u> for December 28 prints the last notice of this local burlesque troupe:

"This company has reached a degree of excellence in burlesque which warrants comparison with the great burlesque traveling troupes. The spirit of fun and jollity pervades the whole performance. The Lenton boys are without question the star performers of the day. All their feats are performed with a grace, care, and accuracy which is a relief when contrasted with other lads of their age. During the entertainment, Mr. and Mrs. Ware sang a character song."

Again, as with <u>The Fair One with the Blonde Wig</u>, there is a conspicuous absence in these reports of <u>Fortunio</u> of any awareness of plot. The structure of burlesque has by this time completely fallen; is obviously of no more importance than the crating lumber (now heaped backstage out of the way) which encased the dazzling scenery of <u>The Black Crook</u>, from New York to San Francisco by way of the Isthmus.

## XXXVI -- THE WORRELLS

The spring of 1876 belongs to the Worrell Sisters. Not newcomers, certainly; they had learned the fundamentals of burlesque comedy at Gilbert's old melodeon on the corner of Clay and Kearny streets. Irene, Sophie, and Jenny -- and their competition at Gilbert's in the old days included the already firm star of Lotta Crabtree. In fact, both Jennie and Lotta were bitterly proficient on the banjo, and they actually pushed each other about the Melodeon stage. New York City had then come very much into the stride of the Worrells.

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The first note about them in the Annals of the New York Stage by Odell is for the year 1865:

"The vivacious Worrell Sisters, grand-daughters of Mme. Judah, once famous in the minor New York theatres, and forever beloved in California, made their debut at Wood's on April 30th, in the piece long celebrated at Laura Keene's under the name of The Elves, or the Statue Bride..."

"The piece and the youthful freshness of the stars caught popular fancy, and no change of main piece was required for several weeks. During the first week, Jennie Worrell appeared in the afterpiece of The Good for Nothing; in this she introduced her breakdown, the Essence of Old Virginia. On May 10th, Crossing the Line, as curtain raiser, allowed Irene and Jennie to do a double clog. The Three Sisters, on June 18th, presented Jennie, Irene and Sophie Worrell, each in six different characters."

A succession of three benefit performances, one for each of the sisters, closed their first New York engagement in August. On January 14, 1867 the "orrells appear again in Odell's Annals of the New York Stage, this time in their production of Camaralzaman and Badoura. Odell's addenda to his review of Camaralzaman are illuminating:

"Jennie Worrell was also seen as Susy, in <u>Out to Nurse</u>, in which she introduced a cobbler's horn-pipe and a banjo solo; a fact which I introduce to show that Lotta was not alone in the art of the banjo when she flashed across our vision a few months later at Wallack's...On the 31st the advertisement in the <u>Herald</u> stresses Sophie and Irene in duets and operatic gems; Jennie in a clog-dance; Sophie, Jennie, Mrs. Gilbert and Donnelly in the Cure dance, 'received with shouts of applause and nightly encores'; and Mrs. Gilbert in her comic dance. Mrs. Gilbert in her Stage Reminiscences bears tribute to the Worrells. They were, she says, 'great favourites, in their day, and simple, kindly people

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to work with. I remember that they let me introduce a dance (in Aladdin) that attracted a good deal of attention; and yet dancing was their own specialty. One does not have to be in the profession to know what that means.'"

San Francisco was hardly excited about the reappearance of the old Melodeon favorites. The Worrells opened at Wade's Opera House, March 27, 1876, in the overworked burlesque, Ixion. Of Jennie. no mention whatsoever is made. Irene was found "too cold and quiet for burlesque, and her voice lacks power and her style expression. "\* Sophie came off a little better, the critics deciding that her lifeless acting derived from deficiencies in the supporting cast. Despite this cold approach, an advertisement in the Bulletin for April 3 extends the run of Ixion for another week. The original production was by this time transformed. For the closing week the Ferranti Brothers were engaged to exhibit their now inexplicable acrobatic art of "leg-mania"; and as if this were not sufficient stimulation for the public during the last performances, the advertisement quietly added that the ballet troupe had worked out a number of intriguing changes in its routine.

The last burlesque included in the San Francisco engagement of the Worrells was again an old stand-by, Black-Eyed Susan. As climax to the production, the ballet was to appear in a grand tableau entitled The Sailor's Dream. Somehow as a grand climax, no doubt, to the climax, the presswas

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, March 28, 1876.

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further informed that twenty-four young ladies in sailor costume would appear in a tremendous, centennial parade to the tune of the "March of the Sixty-ninth." The Bulletin for April 11 uses this production of Black-Eyed Susan for some heavy handed generalizations about the state of burlesque:

"The burlesque of Black-Eyed Susan is a very charming arrangement of new and popular songs and dances with just enough of the story to flavor the scenes. The company is improving in burlesque, a fact the less to be rejoiced at. as this theatre has given us a surfeit of that kind of amusement. The Black Crook leg drama which took so wonderfully in New York years ago, and has had glimpses of success in this city, is now thoroughly distasteful to people of all Now that decent drama has become a novelty, especially at this theatre, the people demand it. Nothing can be more monotonous than the same old dreary show of limbs, under one pretense or another, in ballet or burlesque with all the variations that a fixed purpose to present a half nude exhibition can suggest. Whatever attraction this kind of variety business may once have possessed is now worn off by satiety. There is no possible success in it, and the sooner the management wakes up to this fact the better. The most gorgeous scenery, the most illusory dressing, and the most languishing dances, fail to awaken even a passing enthusiasm."

With this thorough indictment in their ears, the Worrell sisters closed their San Francisco engagement.

### XXXVII -- JACK AND JILL

The fall season of 1876 played safe with the indictment the press had given the "leg-show" burlesque of the Worrell Sisters; the season was dominated by a Mother Goose pantomime spectacle called Jack and Jill. This of course being a roundabout and apparently unimpeachable way of introducing the inevitable ballet of chorines.

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This was the sort of burlesque that had become accepted as Christmas holiday entertainment and there was some surprise in town when the show opened in September at the Grand Opera House. But it was evidently a delightful production and the house was crowded through the whole run, September 4 to October 8.

Much was reported of the opening scene. It was the home of the Ice King: silver costumes and eerily lighted ice formations. Above the cotton-banked snowdrifts the aurora borealis played intermittently. And then came the startling shift, the thrill of spectacle: with the manipulation wall panels and cellar traps, with the rise and fall of great quantities of gauze curtains, the chilling home of the Ice King had become a friendly, heart warming village protected by green hills. It was all the idea of William Voegtlin who was considered the best of scenic designers in San Francisco. His also was the glorious unreserve of the final transformation scene in which, by a series of violent scene shifts, the four seasons pay homage to the sun god. The entire company then blazed forth in the customary final tableau. The Bulletin for September 5, 1876 casts little light on the actual story thread of the spectacle:

"The pantomime apart from its spectacular features, is full of rapid incident, and the part of the clown was taken with much success by Tony Denier, the successor of the Great Fox. His aids were J. M. Sloan as 'Pantaloon,' James Donald as 'Harlequin,' and Miss Annie Reed as 'Columbine.' There is also a ballet and musical interlude."

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Newspaper notices throughout the rest of the run of Jack and Jill gradually illuminate the content of the show. Again, as with "leg show" burlesque, pantomime seems to have reached such a disorganized, disconnected state that it is almost vaudeville. On September 6 the Bulletin mentions, as one of the features of the entertainment. "the serio-comic songs of little Mimi Midget, a veritable infant phenomenon." In this same review the Wood Family. "three admirably designed puppets." were declared to be excessively funny. On September 19 the Bulletin remarks that Jack and Jill "constantly presents a new face to those who had seen it a little while before." The changes on the 19th were the appearance of new comedians. Cassim and Fritz, as harlequin and sprite; and the introduction into the show of the Royal Prussian Band. On September 20. 1876 it is announced that "Herr. J. Weiffenbach will play on sixteen tuned harmony drums at once." A new masterpiece by the artist Voegtlin was the last, crowning attraction of the show:

"Mr. Voegtlin's grand tableau descriptive of the 'Battle of Bunker Hill' is one of the finest effects ever produced on the stage. In some respects it excels the 'Battle of Agincourt' tableau which was the principal attraction of the spectacle of Henry V. The group is designed to make conspicuous the fall of General Warren, and the living figures blend so naturally into the canvas that for a moment the observer is puzzled to decide where one commences and the other ends. The other novelty of the sixteen drums is simply a novelty and a curiosity. Miss Annie Reed is rapidly improving as 'Columbine.' As this young girl has risen from the ranks by her talent and attention

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to business, her progress is watched with more than ordinary interest. Miss Gertie Granville's song, 'Robin Tell Kitty,' is sung with admirable expression."\*

A run of four weeks established <u>Jack and Jill</u> as the only success of the fall season. The golden rain which descended upon the final transformation scene, and which the <u>Bulletin</u> admitted was "one of the finest effects ever produced on the stage," would no doubt for a long time fall vividly in the memories of most of the theatre-goers in town. It is fairly certain that, at a time when experience in the theatre no longer hinged upon the tension and resolution of a situation or the sudden illumination of the right word, but upon a progressive series of grand effects, the last effect of the golden rain would dominate the memories of the <u>Jack and Jill</u> audience until the still more golden rain of the next spectacle obliterated it.

## XXXVIII -- DESPERATE REVIVALS

The low estate of burlesque at this time is illustrated by the old chain of burlesque titles from which the entertainment of the year 1877 was suspended: January tried to make an alluring flash of such skin-and-bone vehicles as Kenilworth, Chilperic, and Lucrozia Borgia; December confessed sterility with another revival of The Black Crook. The few new titles, Patchwork, The Brook, and Our Politics, in no way propped up the decadent form of burlesque; merely in

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, September 21, 1876.

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fact, induced nostalgia for the old days, the old personalities.

The revivals of <u>Kenilworth</u> and <u>Chilperic</u> at the Grand Opera House served to introduce the Beauclerc Sisters to San Francisco. Little, evidently, was expected of them according to the <u>Bulletin</u> for January 16, 1877:

"Miss Katy Mayhew's chaste and charming style of burlesque we are all familiar with, but the brightness of the Beauclerc Sisters rather took the audience by surprise."

Patchwork and The Brook, presented at the Bush Street Theatre in April and early May, by the Salisbury Troubadours, were the most definite successes of the year.

"Everybody was waiting for the brilliant piece of Patchwork. The extravaganza was richer in business than the Vokes Family's Belles in the Kitchen, and is acted with wonderful spirit. The 'Take You In,' nursery rhymes are a series of happy hits and bring down the house, while the rehearsal of the closet scene in Hamlet fairly exhausts the audience with laughter."\*

"The Brook is even a greater success than Patchwork. It is one of those fresh, breezy and thoroughly bright entertainments that create an atmosphere with which the audience is enthused in spite of themselves. Perhaps the gem of the evening was Mr. Salisbury's Seven Ages of Man. It was absolutely a new revelation to those who are accustomed to hear that choice morsel of philosophy recited on the stage."\*\*

Our Politics, written by a certain Edward Willett of St. Louis, opened at the California Theatre, August 13. Hallelujahs should have resounded in the press for this attempt at serious use of the burlesque form. The Bulletin was more inclined to react in the following manner:

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, April 13, 1877.
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"We cannot wish success to such a travesty on American morals and manners, nor to play-writers who aim to rise to notice by such means."\*

The morals and manners travestied were those of the United States Senate. Senator Shuffle, the chief character, was overdrawn, according to the <u>Bulletin</u>, "in the spirit which prostitutes truth, propriety, national pride, and patriotic sentiment to the chance of making a few dollars." There is no assurance that Mr. Willett made any money from the one-week's run of <u>Our Politics</u> in San Francisco; at least, his ideas seem to have been intelligently presented:

"The play was remarkably well-performed for a first representation. Mr. Bishop accepted the character of 'Senator Shuffle' as drawn in all its vulgar broadness, its open duplicity, its shallow cunning, and its undisguised venality. He made a strong stage character, stronger perhaps than the author intended, and really contrived to retain enough of the sympathy of the audience to cause manifestations of approval when he was finally saved from ruin. It was probably the touch of burlesque in the character, the evident lack of earnestness and sincerity in the actor, which enabled the defeated 'Senator' to retain a place in the affections of the audience. A rather uncertain but otherwise satisfactory part, 'John Quincy Bunn' was given to William Seymour, and very neatly portrayed. He did not in the least carry out the popular idea of the men who make fortunes in the sagebrush region, being more of a clever drawing-room fop than a frontiersman. Mr. Mestayer, as 'General Napoleon Cubit,' evidently had a distinguished Eastern politician in the mind's eye when he designed his make-up. Mr. Curtis as 'Blossom,' took the burlesque view of his character and made his two scenes amusing. "\*

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, August 14, 1877.

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Unfortunate that details of the action are not given in the reviews, and that a copy of the script is not available. Our Politics is one of the few early instances of vigorous political satire. But neither audience nor playwrights were prepared to go further in this satirical direction. The San Francisco theatrical season dipped violently in the fall of 1877 to the safe, old, empty puns of Black-Eyed Susan.

Black-Eyed Susan's much disturbed corpse was shuffled off unceremoniously after a short run to make room for the still more exploited ghost of The Black Crook. Development of some kind, there had been; for the leg show aspects of The Black Crook were now considered quite dull. The sensation of the previous decade in Maguire's heyday was now, in 1877, served up as warmed-over good cheer for both children and adults during the holidays in December. With very little else to commend the production, the ballet troupe proved to be especially fine.

"The ballet under the lead of Mlles. Palladino, de Rosa and Corsi appear in the second and third acts, giving in the first 'The Demons' Revels,' and in the last 'The Ballet of All Nations.' This ballet troupe became in a measure familiar to the public at the Bush Street Theatre, but the larger stage at the California pormits a much finer display of art. The third act closes with an intricate and bewildering 'March of the Amazons,' in which the effect of shades of light upon shining costumes was almost dazzling. The tableau at the close was exceedingly beautiful. The scenery was by Voegtlin, Seabury and Graham, each act having a crowning feature. It is not very easy to say which is the most striking, but the transformation scene, entitled 'The Birth of Venus,' excelled all other

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scenes of its kind ever seen in this city. As one curtain of gauze after another was lifted, each revealing the brilliant interior more distinctly, the audience seemed to hold their breath and live only through their eyes."\*

To keep the show moving, the story of which, according to the <u>Bulletin</u>, was "not very tangible at best, and was sometimes completely lost sight of," the usual assortment of short variety acts was interpolated. Of the whole number the only acts that achieved the passing fame of newspaper notice were the singing of the Ulm Sisters and the gymnastic feats of the Valdis Sisters; and of these, the contortions of the Valdis Sisters apparently outweighed in effect the songs of their competitors:

"The Valdis Sisters are half-grown girls, and are as supple and as elastic as if their bones were made of gutta percha. They twist themselves into all sorts of shapes, and are as graceful in all their movements as a dancer."\*

With The Black Crook running inevitably, quietly, successfully into the second week of January 1878, Voegtlin, the scenic designer, was hurriedly painting the decorations for A Trip to the Moon, announced for January 21, at the California. After his long service in the interest of extravaganza backdrops, Voegtlin by this time must have been tearing his hair trying to achieve that new effect which must either be the "most splendid so far seen in this city" or else be regarded as a dull failure. The year 1877 closes, and since words and acting were no longer important in the

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, December 26, 1877.

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production of burlesque, the success or failure of this medium now depended on the imagination.

#### XXXIX -- A TRIP TO THE MOON

A Trip to the Moon was as well plotted a burlesque as had come to San Francisco in a long time.

"The story is that of King Pin who desirous of granting every caprice of his son Prince Caprice, arranges with 'Microscope' to be shot through a monstrous cannon to the moon. The first act closes with the party entering the cannon, which is fired off. The second act opens with a group of inhabitants among whom arrive the party from the earth. King Cosmos of the moon has a daughter of about the same age and general inclination as 'Prince Caprice' and the two proceed to make much trouble for their respective fathers. The business is in true burlesque style."\*

The source of the script of this burlesque is not clear but the influence of Jules Verne, so evident in the summary quoted above, is confirmed by some remarks in the Argonaut for January 26, 1878:

"As it (A Trip to the Moon) stands it is a servile translation from the French, and much of the sparkle and verve, which I can understand it may have possessed in the original, has obviously been lost in the translation. So heavy and dreary is the dialogue, that it is only by a constant fusillade of 'gags' from the dramatic personal (sic) that attention can be kept awake at all. Indeed I was told that the original parts were so bad that unlimited license was given to the ladies and gentlemen to whom they were entrusted, a license of which I am bound to say they availed themselves not always wisely, but a little too well."

There was a completely stellar approach to the production, in the casting as well as the writing. It was not

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, January 22, 1878.

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enough that Alice Harrison should exhibit her great ability at burlesque immediately before the proscenium; she was supported in the upper reaches of the stage by the famous Kiralfy ballet troupe. Bolossy Kiralfy, however, missed out on his usual praise, and received only tepid comparisons with The Black Crook for his ballet direction; while Alice Harrison served only as a reminder to the reviewers of the virtues of a newcomer. The newcomer was Grace Plaisted:

"A young debutante (I am told she is only seventeen) named Grace Plaisted, was to me an object of quite as much interest as all the other curiosities of lunar life and interstellar space put together. The young lady assumes the part of a Setanite princess, and her duties chiefly vocal in their character, though the role permits of a considerable amount of a certain kind of comedy acting. I have debutantes, -- they seem to grow spontaneously on California soil -- but I have never seen a first appearance at the footlights characterized by an utter absence of stage-fright and by as complete self-possession as was hers. Alice Harrison, who was evidently triumphant at finding herself in proximity to somebody smaller than herself, was nonplussed by her composure. The little lady ogled and flirted, gagged and dimpled with the best of them."\*

Voegtlin, evidently, had not been able to adjust himself rapidly enough from the background effects of The Battle of Bunker Hill to the background effects of A Trip to the Moon:

"The scenery, which is of course, the basis of every spectacle, is good, but I have seen better from Voegtlin's brush, and its mounting bears evidence of haste in preparation. The twenty-mile cannon was a fine effect, but the penny-popgun report with which it was discharged

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, January 26, 1878.

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was simply ludicrous. The transformation scene representing the journey of the airship through interstellar space, was a wonderful illusion, and the enlarged photograph of the moon waxing and waning as the observer was supposed to approach or recede from it, was an interesting and well managed optical effect.

With these vague effects of A Trip to the Moon even more vaguely remembered, the slow spring season of 1878 pushed forward to a combination entertainment at the Bush Street Theatre: Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels opened the performances; Mabel Santley's London Burlesque Troupe continued them, with first a number of variety acts, and lastly, a crowning burlesque. In the beginning of the run, which commenced January 27, The Forty Thieves was the featured burlesque; February 11, the long-suffering Ixion was again hauled out for tortured exhibition.

The actual performances, from all reports, might well be permitted to vanish as thoroughly as the hill snow in the spring of 1878, except that Mabel Santley will figure in the local courts in 1879 on a charge of excessive exhibitionism; and that M. B. Leavitt was the manager of both the Rentz and Santley companies. Mabel Santley in court will furnish amusement in a later chapter of this chronicle. M.B. Leavitt will come to dominate the whole later history of modern burlesque as the title of his autobiography, Fifty Years in Theatrical Management, published in 1912, indicates.

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, January 26, 1878.

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Leavitt starts off by admitting that he is "credited with being the originator of the first organization combining minstrelsy, vaudeville, and burlesque in one entertainment." He outlines his revolutionary idea as follows: the old idea of minstrelsy, consisting entirely of males, should be renovated by the addition of "beautiful, talented actresses." Slight as this change appears to be, in words, it does actually represent the first conscious synthesis of the nineteenth century of minstrelsy, vaudeville, and burlesque in the direction of the twentieth century musical show. Leavitt makes this clear: "Those (productions) I staged then, were equivalent to the Broadway musical shows of today, though not upon so elaborate a scale, but the artists were fully as excellent."

The excellence of his traveling companies was much in question in 1878, and his San Francisco season would have collapsed early and expensively if the <u>Bulletin</u> had not leveled a puritanical finger at the degree of undress in the show:

"The costuming of three or four in The Forty Thieves was an insult to the audience. Ladies who were present, under the supposition that it was a decent performance, sat, mortified and indignant, deterred from going out, only by a dread of advertising their presence. Nothing so thoroughly and suggestively indecent has ever been presented at a theatre in this city to which ladies were invited. It was a pleasure to note that a large portion of the men in the audience turned their backs on the performance and walked out."\*

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, January 30, 1878.

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The result of the press attack was of course a successful run; the Rentz-Santley\* combination packed the Bush Street Theatre well into the last week of February. Betsy B., the critic of the Argonaut, attempted sophisticated indifference in the issue of that paper for February 9, 1878:

"Tell it not in San Jose, but I have been to see the Madame Rentz Female Minstrels. The performance is not very naughty, nor is it very nice. There is just one shapely woman in a remarkable undress, who concentrates the attention of the masculines present. She wears tights and a street hat, and is as quiet, dignified, and self-possessed as Mary's little lamb. No dash, no specialty, but her perfect shape and a penchant for singing the 'Sweet Bye and Bye.' When we got home that night I questioned Jack as to the attraction of such a performance to the average man, especially to married ones. He wouldn't admit that there was any attraction. 'But what fills the house and blocks the aisles and keeps that row of callow youth, leaning against the semi-circular wall?' 'Some sort of a morbid impulse, he replied."

The Bulletin for February 20 took a parting shot at the M. B. Leavitt's Bush Street speculators in morbid reactions:

"This house (the Bush Street Theatre) is now relegated to the class of theatres which cater to masculine tastes exclusively. That there are people who like the can-can as danced by the burlesque troupe is demonstrated by the large attendance on Monday and Tuesday nights."

Information about the Rontz-Santley troupe for 1878 disappears with this last quoted notice of the <u>Bulletin</u>. This notice, however, makes it clear that the silence of the press was made up for by the applause of packed houses for the duration of the company's run.

<sup>\*</sup> See Minstrelsy, Vol. XIII this series.

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# XL -- GRIMALDI AND THE DECLINE OF PANTOMIME

On March 25 the <u>Bulletin</u> announced that a complete pantomime troupe, "the delight of young people," would take possession of the Bush Street Theatre. While the town is making its violent adjustment from the scandalous decollete of the Rentz-Santley troupe to the fully clothed innocence of <u>Mother Goose</u> pantomime, this chronicle chooses to review one of the many essays about the decline of pantomime which appeared about this time.

The article is entitled just so: "The Decline of Pantomime" which appeared in <u>Theatre</u> (February 1, 1882), a magazine published in London:

"It is true that Mr. Tennyson, speaking (in his sonnet to Macready) of 'brainless pantomime.' refers to 'those gilt gauds men-children swarm to see'; and it would also seem, both from the attendance at our theatres and from the character of the entertainment there provided, that it is the taste of such 'men-children' that is largely regarded by the managers. Ostensibly, however, pantomimes are chiefly for the youngsters, and for those of their parents and guardians who accompany them to the theatre. They ought to be such as young people can witness not only with pleasure but without harm, and they ought to be such as their elders can witness, not only with toleration, but without reprobation. The question is: Is this so? Do modern pantomimes tend either to real amusement or genuine edification?... There would not, however, be so much objection to adhering to the old familiar nursery tales, if those tales were only treated by librettists and managers in a becoming spirit. I write in the interests of the children. Adults may not, in every case, object greatly to the modifications introduced into the separate legends or the amalgamation of several legends into one. Both offices might be performed ingeniously, and with a certain

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proportion of grotesque effect. As a matter of fact, however there is as a rule, no ingenuity, and grotesqueness in the matter. Either a legend is taken and 'adorned' by the 'original' fancies of the author, or it is muddled up with one, two, or three others as the case may be, in a manner which is merely unintelligible and irritating. And if these processes are distasteful to the adult, who has no great interest in the affair one way or another, how singularly disagreeable they must be to the young imagination of our boys and girls, for whom Dick Whittington, Aladdin, Red Riding Hood, and Bo-Peep, are almost as real and vivid as their own relations. Such stories as those of Dick Whittington and Aladdin are usually followed with some respect for the original; but let a pantomime writer get hold of 'Robinson Crusoe,' for example, and what a hash he too frequently contrives of it."

The balance of this article lays the whole decline of pantomime to the intrusion of music hall elements. In its prudish, English way, the article is merely harping on the fact that even the apparently unassailable symbols of Mother Goose pantomime, the apparently eternal tradition of Harlequin and his cohort of supporting characters, were breaking down, like burlesque itself, into music hall variety.

A remark about the art of pantomime:

"Pantomime is now represented mainly, at any rate, for there are a few good pantomimists living, by troupes of contortionists of the Girard sort, people who only frighten the children out of their wits and make them anxious to get home."\*

and a brief discussion of ballet and transformation scene, closes this English survey:

<sup>\*</sup> Theatre (London) February 1, 1882 Article on "The Decline of Fantomime."

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"As a rule how meaningless, how utterly devoid of connection with the story, is this part (the ballet) of a pantomime performance. It is dragged in vi et armis, and has rarely even the merit of intrinsic grace. Something might be said, too, as to the monotonous character of the annual transformation scene, which has so little connection with the story as the ballet, and into which scenic artists appear afraid to import the slightest element of originality. When, I wonder, shall we see the last of the unfortunate strapped-up 'fairies'?"

The San Francisco Argonaut for March 30, 1878 bears out all the contentions of its English contemporary. The Nick Roberts Company started off at the Bush Street Theatre traditionally enough with a pantomime entitled Humpty Dumpty. Mother Goose, however, had barely established her identity before the footlights when, with the slippery rapidity of Proteus, all was changed:

"Columbine takes off her petticoats and puts on a gymnastic costume to give an act on the slack wire; the fairy queen sheds her spangles and gives a Negro minstrel song and dance, and a remarkable dance it is; the magic doors and windows and signs stop clanging, while the clown gives a drunken performance on stilts."

The clown of the company called himself after the famous progenitor of all English-speaking clowns, Grimaldi, \*\* and considering the eulogies of the local press, there is possibility that he was one of Grimaldi's worthier successors. But the great prototype loomed too large to be supplanted by an imitator. Only some new and divergent conception of the

\*\*Grimaldi, Joseph. (1779-1837). An English clown and comedian of Italian parentage.

<sup>\*</sup> Theatre (London) February 1, 1882 Article on "The Decline of Pantomime."

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clown role could supplant Grimaldi as he had supplanted Harlequin in England.

"His (Harlequin's) reign as a hero might have continued up to the present, but for the appearance of a clown so funny, so irresistibly, abnormally, deliriously funny, that Harlequin was overlooked and forever relegated to dumbness and the background. It is said that Joey Grimaldi really made pantomime in England. Before his time it was generally a stop-gap for dull seasons, and was mostly interpreted by foreigners. After he made his name immortal in Dibbin's Mother Goose, it became a national institution, and its great star stood as high in his way as Lord Byron and Sheridan did in theirs."

The dethroned and defrocked transformation of the clown symbol of Grimaldi by the year 1878 is described in a notice in the <u>Bulletin</u>, April 4. It is the last press notice given the Nick Roberts Company, and its brevity contains (perhaps only at this distance) a laconic penetration into the fate of the pantomimic art:

"The clown is remarkably clever both as a pantomimist and variety actor."

### XLI -- EDWARD "EVERLASTING" RICE

The rest of 1878, right through to the new year, belongs, as far as burlesque is concerned, to Edward E. Rice. That is, except for small competition by the Salsbury\*\* Troubadours in May. The troupe's reappearance at the Baldwin Theatre in the old piece called <a href="Patchwork">Patchwork</a> followed a brief

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, January 2, 1893. \*\*Sometimes spelt "Salisbury or Saulsbury."

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season in Australia where, according to the Argonaut for May 4, 1878 they had failed to shine:

"You would think they would have picked up something new in Australia. But, no. Miss McHenry still sings 'Pretty as a Picture,'which she has elaborated to an almost painful extent. Also, she has a new patchwork dress, which is extremely pretty. She is sall patchwork now, from her headdress down to her ceramic stockings and little shoes, for McHenry has a pretty foot. Blanche Correlli's voice seems richer and fuller than when she went away."

From this unstimulated inventory of Salsbury's assets, Betsy B. of the Argonaut proceeds to put down the first record of the brunette rediviva:

"It is worthy of mention that Mlle.Correlli also has a new dress, a very gorgeous affair of white and silver, which against the dead black of her hair and eyes, is extremely becoming. I do not wonder that brunettes are coming in style again. I for one, am sick to death of the piles of yellow jute, so popular on the stage."

Salsbury himself, in the same review, is almost etched into a personality, only to fade out again from theatrical annals, misused, no doubt, and unappreciated:

"Salsbury is a degree more tragic than when he went away. His resemblance to Barrett has increased if anything. Possibly he will develop into a tragedian when the Troubadour Combination falls to pieces, and he has enough to start on to give him hopes of success."

With the Salsbury troupe so hastily shuttled off to oblivion, Edward E. Rice's burlesque productions dominated the press notices for the rest of the year. The spring season of the Rice troupe was a failure, the autumn season a tremendous success. But the town was friendly from the

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### BURLESQUE FAVORITES AT THE STANDARD THEATRE IN 1876



ELLA CHAPMAN (LYDIA THOMPSON COMPANY)



ALICE ATHERTON

Ella Chapman, diminutive per-former of the burlesque "Hia-watha."

Alice Atherton, (1847-1899), (Mrs. Willie Edouin) star of burlesque, "Robinson Crusoe."

PHOTO COURTESY OF M. H. de YOUNG MUSEUM



beginning. Were not Sol. Smith Russell and George Knight in the cast? These were familiar and appreciated performers in San Francisco. The leading lady of the April opening, Florence Ellis, fell very cold on the eyes and ears of the reviewers and was quickly replaced by Catherine Lewis, who the press knowingly assured Mr. Rice was a "find." Even this shift, however, did not keep the spring engagement out of the red; while a mere listing of the artists engaged for the November opening assured Mr. Rice of a very profitable margin. Willie Edouin and his wife Alice Atherton were not enough. Rice also signed Alice Harrison, Ella Chapman, W.A.Mestayer, Lewis Harrison and, later, Belle Chapman. Most of these people were not only at the top of the burlesque profession; they were also famous Californians.

Evangeline was the title of the first production. It apparently might as well have been called Cleopatra or Rings Around Saturn, in the prevailing mode of Jules Verne extravaganza; Longfellow was little more than a vain shade without a voice in the commonwealth. Edward Rice and J. Cheever Goodwin, in collaboration, but mostly without collaboration in preference to Rice, achieved the historical curiosity.

The flat maze of the Evangelical plot (it is inevitable that this chronicle's proximity to the burlesque pun would finally inflict upon it, also, the disease) was a poor beginning toward success. The burlesque begins without the

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benefit of any particular geography. Evangeline is the daughter of Basil; she is betrothed to Gabriel; Le Blanc, the villainous notary, is delighted with this betrothal, knowing that Evangeline's inheritance will be denied her if she marries Gabriel; and, by way of cementing the opening situation, Le Blanc is in love with Evangeline's mother, Catherine.

From this entanglement, the story veers into an incredible number of pointless angles. Two sailors, deserters from a man-of-war lying in the harbor, are concealed by Evangeline in her father's house. It is the evening of her betrothal to Gabriel. With marriage at hand, the captain of the man-of-war, followed by his faithful sailors, enters the room violently. The deserters are found, Evangeline is arrested as a conspirator, and the entire burlesque company is sent to England for a court martial scene. But a storm of shipwreck proportions intervenes.

The burlesque company is next beheld on a bleak African strand. Things at this moment look intensely bad when suddenly diamonds are discovered in the sand and fortune seems to smile through a slight cloud rift. There will be no such luck, however, for a long time; the policemen of the African monarch, Boorioboola Gha, leap with barbaric yells upon the gawking victims, arresting the whole crew on a charge of stealing the crown jewels. Everyone is sentenced to death by the headman's axe.

At this point, at last, the miasmal bad luck begins to lighten into a honey-colored stream of complete goodwill. Le Blanc's eyes brighten and he steps forward. He has recognized in Boorioboola Gha a friend of his old days. In fact, they had worked together as masons on the same ladder in a construction job in some city somewhere. Pardons then fall like rain, not only from Boorioboola Gha, but also from the captain of the man-of-war. To complete his amnesty, Boorioboola Gha now furnishes his rescued friends with a balloon which carries the burlesque company in toto very conveniently near the Union Pacific lines in Arizona.

The script now designates home as San Francisco, where the last gay betrothal scene is finally enacted. No resolution is made of Le Blanc's early villainy. It is perhaps assumed that the audience will believe Le Blanc's evil motives have been thoroughly purified by the heavy crosses he has had to bear in the course of the evening. Evangeline's mother, Catherine, hauled without purpose through all the other scenes, is still present just before the fall of the curtain, falls into Le Blanc's arms, and the cogs and sprockets of the plot are considered complete.

The success of this pastiche in New York was due entirely to its performers. It was not so fortunate in San Francisco. The music of the burlesque, compiled and composed by Rice, was from all reports good; but, according to Betsy B. of the Argonaut, no one in the cast had even "one spark of

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musical ability." The weight of the performance fell upon Sol. Smith Russell and George Knight. Of the former Betsy B., in the Argonaut for April 13, 1878 has this to say:

"He enters quite into the spirit of burlesque, and is especially ridiculous in a toilet which consists of a Roman toga not more than twenty inches in length and a baker's cap. He gives just one little flavor of his former entertainment, his specialty concert, in a brief but touching recitation of that inspiring ode, 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star.'"

George Knight brought to San Francisco his famous character, the Lone Fisherman. Absolutely unrelated to the plot of Evangeline, the Lone Fisherman was nevertheless omnipresent:

"The Lone Fisherman is the feature. He actually smells of the brine, his make-up is so perfect. He is omnipresent. Every scene discloses him. He is in the play but not of them, until the last moment. He has a various fancy, and with his camp-stool, his pipe, his cards, fishing-rod and fan, his inseparable luggage he accomplishes many grotesque effects."

The Lone Fisherman creation of George Knight stands as one of those few original conceptions which freshened the withered burlesque form in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately it also stands, along with the burlesque of melodeons, as one of those irrecoverable portions of theatrical history. The Chaplinesque quality of this innocent fisherman, completely immersed in a scene which he does not influence nor which affects him to any great extent,

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, April 13, 1878.

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is obvious. George Knight had created a cinematic character a little too early for permanence in celluloid. By these events, the relation of Chaplin's silent films to the whole tradition of pantomime is clarified. The Commedia dell'Arte in its decadence shined out occasionally in such figures as Grimaldi and George Knight. The efflorescences of this old comedy of the people have been very rare in contemporary society. The movements of Charles Chaplin, one of the few outposts of the tradition, are fortunately preserved in the little, whirring squares of celluloid. If the tradition should again collapse, which is unlikely considering the extreme pitch in the twentieth century of social antagonisms and ferment, it could still be witnessed in the art of one of its greatest practitioners.

Betsy B. returned to the run of <u>Evangeline</u> with some hopefulness, seeing that Catherine Lewis had supplanted the unfortunate choice of Florence Ellis as star:

"I believe if I were a manager making a combinaation, I should come to California and pick up
the floating material. They have picked up
Catherine Lewis in this way for Evangeline at
the Grand Opera House. Artistically, Miss
Lewis is a vast improvement on Florence Ellis.
She has some talent, chic, magnetism. If Rice
will do a little reconstructing he has found a
treasure. That garment in the first act should
be committed to the flames. Those black boats
should be sent out to the Farallons and sunk
with heavy weights. That red robe should be
forwarded to Alameda and cut into sashes for the
bullfighters. Next week, Russell, they say is
to play 'Catherine' while Harry Golden will
play 'Le Blanc.'"

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, April 20, 1878.

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Miss Lewis, however, was not attractive enough to move the show from the red into the black and a last attempt to bolster up the falling off of the audience was made by George Knight in the last week of the show's run:

"George Knight has been making up as Emperor Norton. It is rather a frowsy costume, but very natural, as the actor seemed to think one night when, coming out he confronted the old Emperor himself a foot or two from the stage. Both seemed vastly pleased, and derived the same satisfaction apparently that is to be obtained from a long look in the glass."

There was nothing left but a violent move on the part of the impresario, so Rice announced a sudden change of the bill to the old burlesque of Conrad the Corsair. Nothing happened but further monetary loss for Rice and another series of attempted rescues on the part of the stars in the company. Catherine Lewis applied the oxygen with the drinking song from Girofle-Girofla, but this maneuver netted nothing but the dry quip from the reviewers that it was a shame Miss Lewis did not look as well as she sang. George Knight applied the Lone Fisherman episodes heavily, but the praise of the press for his work had evidently no realistic ratio to boxoffice receipts. The variations which he brought into his costume are no longer clear. The Argonaut for May 4 found that "He looked like Caliban, in a pair of tigerish looking tights, and he sang like a hoarse owl, "Rice's spring season was closed by Betsy B. of the Argonaut with a meditation on Sol. Smith Russell's hair:

<sup>#</sup> Ibid.

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"I find myself lost in amazement at the freaks of that wonderful lower lip. It assumes many strange forms. There is also a great deal of expression to his hair. When a solitary Napoleon look lies on his forehead, he is the school orator; when the front of it rears up like a set of spikes he is the pompous attorney; when it is smooth and sleek and properly set, he is Sol. Smith Russell."

With the persistence of the hero in a success story, Rice returned to the scene of his economic debacle in November. The return was practical; he was now backed up by a superb cast. Alice Harrison and W. A. Mestayer had become available after a noteworthy Boston engagement. Willie Edouin and his wife, Alice Atherton, were sure to arouse enthusiasm in their "home-town" after their successes in the Eastern cities. And there was Ella Chapman, consistent headliner in burlesque for many years.

The vehicle for this glittering constellation was stubbornly enough -- after the experience with early American history in Evangeline -- named Hiawatha. This proved to be ill-timed courage. The graph of Rice's fall season was to assume a pronounced curve; from the failure of Hiawatha, up to the pronounced successes of Robinson Crusoe and Babes in the Wood back down somewhere in between, to the production of Revels.

The machinations of the plot of <u>Hiawatha</u> are nowhere recorded. The sort of melange Rice had tried to stick together is pointedly analyzed by the <u>Argonaut</u> critic, November 2, 1878:

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, May 4, 1878.

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# MESTAYER AND LONG IN THE BURLESQUE OF THE TWO ORPHANS



PHOTO COURTESY OF MR. DONN HUBERTY

"I admire Mr. Rice as a plagiarist....Who else would have dared to plan the first strains of the old time melody of 'Jennie who lives on the Hill' under so transparent a disguise as 'Into the Water We Go'; while a dozen other Boucicaultian eccentricities cast one into a haze of perplexity while trying to recall the original air out of which the new was manufactured....Its (Hiawatha's) puns are feeble and stale, and its situations are not amusing, although the author has introduced the play within the play, which latterly has grown to be a specialty in dramatic writing. I think Mr. Rice must agree with Owen Meredith that 'old things are best,' for he utilizes yet once again the paste-board dumb-bells and weights. and the wooden horse, which have become standing properties in a minstrel troupe."

The audience was immediately hypersensitive to a certain remoteness in Alice Harrison and interpreted it as Boston hauteur. It proved to be merely a bad cold, and her temporary withdrawal from the company removed one of the essential props from Rice's shaky edifice. W. A. Mestayer, last seen in San Francisco as an actor in legitimate drama, showed a sudden rise in talent with his burlesque interpretations which, the Argonaut familiarly assured him, "sit better upon 'Lo,' the poor Indian, than upon the legitimate characters over which you used to groan." Miss Louise Searle, a newcomer, was found "a really delightful singer. She is pretty, in a characterless way, and in pink silk and spangles reminds me of a French doll sitting open-eyed in a toy window at Christmas time."\* The other stars of the production are then taken care of by this same authority:

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 2, 1878.

"He (Willie Edouin) was cast for 'William Penn' in that vague elastic way peculiar to burlesques, and perpetrated a series of lightning changes from Quaker to Athlete...I am taken with his wife, Alice Atherton...She manages to hit off the stolidity of the Indian Squaw in a very amusing and thoroughly life-like way, and accomplished a very amusing duet with 'Mr. Lo,' although she has the merest skeleton of a voice. I must tell you of a tiny midget billed as Ella Chapman. She sings a little song, and dances a little dance, and plays a little baby banjo, and has a wee little voice, and is altogether such a little creature that one feels rather as if they are looking on an infant prodigy than the burlesque actress of the period."\*

Hiawatha's canoe proved much too fragile a craft for the size of Rice's venture. The water had barely closed over the wreckage however, when the obstinate impresario thrust another prow into the rapids of the press and the murky waters of public reaction. There was a simple and unanimous statement in the newspapers, November 9, following the opening of Robinson Crusoe; Hiawatha had been a failure, Robinson Crusoe was a hit.

Alice Atherton was the Crusoe, and the Friday footprints which she discovered were those of Willie Edouin. Miss Atherton's Crusoe costume made green again the memory of Lydia Thompson's first California tour, for it was the pioneer Thompson's creation:

> "I wish you could see her (Alice Atherton) in her suit of goatskin, with only a dash of color let in, in the shape of a red wing in her cap, and a set of red ribs in her Japanese umbrella. I remember the cudgelling of brains Lydia

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 2, 1878.

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Thompson had to conjure up this costume, and what a hit it was."\*

Other aspects of the production stirred up as much nostalgia as the suggestively draped goat skin. There was a certain effect of stage lighting on Miss Searle:

"Apropos of resemblance, they cast the full blaze of the calcium light on Miss Searle the other night while she was singing--singing exquisitely, too--and for a moment she was a picture of what Minnie Walton used to be in the glory of her beauty, when Cherry and Fair Star was running at the old California."\*

Willie Edouin's conception of Crusoe's man, Friday, was the most discussed aspect of the production. Edouin had done the part in the East where, report had it, he had lifted burlesque up to something of its old pantomimic subtlety. His performance was treated as seriously by the newspapers of San Francisco. The Argonaut for November 9 declared soberly: "Burlesques always fizzle out toward the end, but in the first part there is more in Friday than can be taken in with a passing sense of pleased amusement." Brief reference to competent acting jobs by Harry Dixey and Lou Harrison completed the early press coverage of the production.

Ella Chapman failed to gain the spotlight until the production of <u>Babes in the Wood</u>, which opened November 18. Her first press notice, November 23, merely implied that she was still little and cunning and that she skipped rope.\*\*
Her second notice was shared with Willie Edouin:

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 9, 1878. \*\*Ibid. November 23, 1878.

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"Ella Chapman as one of the naughty babes has an awfully jolly time of it. She dresses like a little tot of four years, and Willie Edouin dresses and acts like an imp--a small male imp of six."\*

With the general opinion, and the definite proof in his pocket, that the <u>Babes in the Wood</u> had been as successful a burlesque as <u>Robinson Crusoe</u>, Rice confidently plunged into the final catastrophe of his long San Francisco engagement. The much advertised <u>Revels</u>, or <u>Bon Ton George Jr.</u>, woke up to the following review of its opening:

"The audience was sparse and cold, and of that character that demanded satisfaction for anticipation, and was disgusted when it did not even get it by waiting till after twelve o'clock; for Revels opened as a weakling and strung along the most ridiculous lot of rubbish that was ever dignified with the highsounding name of spectacle. Another English imposition without coherency of plot or movement, containing nothing new or novel, unless it be the diabolical attempts at punning that so invariably afflicts the text of anything that Rice and Co. have to do with."\*\*

The press despaired of summarizing the plot, finding the events had something to do with Saint George and the dragon, with the opening scenes vaguely Biblical, and the closing scenes somehow divided between contemporary England and India. The luminosity of all the stars but Willie Edouin had dimmed. "Situations intended to be ridiculous...are only saved from actual stupidity by the interpretation of the character 'Gallapat' by Willie Edouin, who has carried the performance and given what little satisfaction has been had

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 30, 1878. \*\*Ibid. December 28, 1878.

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from it" declared the Argonaut for December 28. Dwindling audiences confirmed this opinion. Rice slashed the admission prices; there was an upsurge in gate receipts, but the audience could not be held. The transformation scene and the corridor setting, which had cost so much money, were cliches of burlesque staging, no longer of interest to the public except in the almost sentimental revivals of <a href="The Black Crook">The Black Crook</a>. The music of <a href="Revels">Revels</a> was, according to Rice's honest practice, freely lifted from any available source; this time the stealing was conducted without any taste whatsoever. The fate of the production was clear from a last, irrevocable statement in the <a href="Argonaut's">Argonaut's</a> review for December 28, 1878:

"It (Revels) has not even the humorous features of lost Evangeline, the magnificent spectacular failure of a year ago."

The year was complete, and Rice's Surprise Party had become a sort of boomerang. The public, at the last, had been frigidly unsurprised. Rice's meditation on the closing night of his Revels, as he leaned over a bar or, with disgust and exhaustion, snapped his suspender from his shoulder in his hotel room, are among the invaluable, forever-lost records which novel writers pretend to recover. Even so, the year's production of burlesque in San Francisco had been his; and the years to come would often recur to his Surprise Party troupe, if not to his own writing of burlesque, as one of the high criterions of burlesque history.

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### XLII -- STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

The small deaths of individual careers are easily observed and furnish entertaining newspaper copy. The larger more important deaths of an art form -- a political institution, the buffalo, or the technique for making violins -- are more evasive of observation, and slippery of analysis. Minstrelsy, under the aegis of Billy Emerson and Charlie Reed at Standard Theatre on Bush Street in the early eighties, was exhibiting (and neither the public nor the minstrels knew this) the jerking muscles of its rigor mortis. When burlesque extravaganza had risen to its height of popularity in The Black Crook, the minstrels had competed by lending as many burlesque elements as possible to their own performances. in the eighties, when Gilbert and Sullivan had shifted the whole trend of theatrical entertainment toward light opera, the minstrels took on as much of that color as possible. The old end man, interlocutor, olio formula was discarded; minstrelsy as a particular kind of entertainment had lost its reason for being.

Burlesque itself was gasping dangerously for second wind of popularity in the spring of 1879. The Victorian Loftus British Blondes attempted the same fields that an overwhelming invasion of blondes had already cropped close. The variety acts, which were played against the outworn background of a blonde ballet, saved the engagement from failure. There was Harry Le Clair, a female impersonator, in an act entitled

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"The Stage-Struck Chambermaid." The Etzeltine Sisters manipulated Indian clubs in a "novel and picturesque act" which "brought down the house."\* Miss Lotta Elliott skipped into the hearts of her critics to such an extent by means of her skipping-rope act that subsequent notices praised her familiarly as Miss Lottie. James Marlow apparently filled out to a certain extent at least his advertised afflatus as "Banjo King." The Victorian Loftus British Blondes was obviously a misnomer for a variety troupe.

Matt Morgan's Living Art Pictures, at the Adelphi in 1879, with their nostalgic remembrance of the success of Dr. Collyer's Model Artists at the Athenaeum in 1850, were another instance of burlesque casting about for a direction; in this instance, the psychologists would say, a recurrence to the simple harmonies of childhood. Figaro for February 25, 1879 remarked, of Morgan's Living Pictures, that

"The one that took our fancy most was the realization of that well-known picture, The Old Couple in the Art Gallery. It is well done, and here we would say, that there is nothing in the production of these pictures that could possibly offend."

On the other hand, burlesque, in one of its desperate metamorphoses for its life breath, called down, very deliberately, the adjective "offensive." Still under the managership of M. B. Leavitt, the combination of the Rentz Female Minstrels and the Mabel Santley troupe returned to San Francisco in February and opened at the Standard theatre.

<sup>\*</sup> Figaro, February 11, 1879.

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Degree of undress and suggestive gesture were exploited as the last chance for theatrical survival. Unfortunately, the entertainment of the exhibit moved from the theatre to the courtroom where most of Leavitt's engagement was performed.\* The charge of indecent exposure brought against Mabel Santley netted her a fine of \$200, while the charges automatically filed against Leavitt as manager were finally dismissed. As for the theatrical performance itself, the court witnesses who were delegated to view it, could not, after sitting through the program in one case two times, in another four times, in another twelve times, "see anything in it." The News Letter for February 22,1879 had already declared itself:

"The women are all plain and mostly middle-aged. And there is not a fresh voice in the lot. The performance is insufferably stupid, but tights are worn and limbs are shown, and bald heads and downy tikes will pay for this sort of thing."

On only one occasion at this time did burlesque face the encroachment of light opera firmly and with the inherent method of the burlesque tradition. In the middle of the summer, 1879, Tony Pastor announced a satirical production, The Canal Boat Pinafore, take-off on the English original, so much in vogue at this time that nothing else seemed to stand a chance on the boards.

"There is really no sense in any manager trying to play anything but Pinafore. There's Tony Pastor, a man of the times, realized the necessity of playing Pinafore, and the utter absurdity of trying to play anything else; so he has converted a whole battalion of song and dance people into opera singers. They have burlesqued it

<sup>\*</sup> For details of Mabel Santley's trial, see monograph on The Court and the Stage, this series.

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ever so slightly and one can see that every individual member of the company has had a yearning to play Pinafore, and they do play Pinafore with an earnestness of effort which shows that they are challenging comparison. But the trail of song and dances is over it all; and the specialists will appear, for the 'Admiral' is a Dutchman; the 'Dick Deadeye' an Irishman; and the 'Buttercup' unmistakably from the London concert hall. They are all exceedingly clever; even the 'Josephine' is a fresh rather artless little girl for a variety singer. As for 'Ralph Rackstraw,' the much transposed music sounds oddly enough in the Irwin's deep, strange, uncomfortable voice; but she is a dashing looking mariner. And is Pinafore played out yet? Not a bit of it."\*

November 1879, the Colville Opera Burlesque Company, no doubt nervously remembering Rice's Surprise Party company, made another late attempt at burlesque extravaganza. It was quite successful. Ella Chapman was again one of the steadfast caryatids of the manager's fortune. The other stellar names were new: Eme Roseau, singing lead, whose name in the advertisements was larger than anyone else's; Kate Everleigh, an English actress; and a male comedy team, Graham and Reed. Miss Roseau was handled a little roughly in the review of the opening production, The Magic Slipper, in the Argonaut for November 8:

"Little Ella Chapman is really the bright, particular star. Miss Eme Roseau is per advertisement the star. She is a tall, handsome woman in a large way and reminds one of Lucrezia Borgia, or that cheerful person, the Duchess of Malfi, but would never strike anyone as a Cinderella. For some inscrutable reason, a woman five feet and ever and ever so many inches tall can not play the role of ingenue without looking excessively silly. To understand how silly,

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, August 16, 1879.

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go and listen to Miss Roseau singing 'Chick-a-dee-dee.' She would make a superb Mlle. Lange or Mephisto in opera bouffe, a beautiful Venus or Juno in burlesque, but there is too much darling for a fairy godmother in the Magic Slipper."

The quality of the script of the <u>Magic Slipper</u> is indicated in the final statement of this same review:

"It is a good old story, but just a little too old, except with better setting. Its jokes are all stale. Its puns, execrable."

Oxygen, the much-favored burlesque of Lydia Thompson's repertory, succeeded the Magic Slipper. Miss Roseau was again the maligned point of departure in the reviews:

"Miss Roseau is not at all at home in burlesque. She has not caught the faintest breath of its spirit. Her fun is clumsy, her mirth heavy. She really belongs in a higher field. She knows nothing of what the dailies call the technique of burlesque, a technique which Ella Chapman has at her fingers' points and toes! points, and even in the carriage of her head."\*

The particular error of Miss Roseau at this time was the singing of Adelina Patti's laughing-song, for which the entire town was anxiously awaiting the great Patti herself. The comedians, Graham and Reed, however, were looked upon hopefully. Reed was found to be "really clever" and it was granted that Graham had "an appreciation of the humorous." Kate Everleigh burst through obscurity with the production of Robinson Crusoe:

"...when little Kate Everleigh put on the white goatskin of Robinson Crusce, presto, she became the rage for a week. Is it the goat-skin

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 22, 1879.

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costume, which no woman with a respectable pair of legs can look badly in, or is it that the new prominence has brought out talent."\*

Productions of <u>Piff-Paff</u> and the <u>Babes in the Wood</u> carried the company into the holiday season, when the spectacle of <u>Blue Beard</u> was announced as a Christmas specialty. The "wealth of music and dazzling costumes" of <u>Bluebeard</u> prolonged its run into the first week of January 1880 when, by popular request, the <u>Magic Slipper</u> burlesque was revived. Henry J. Byron's burlesque of <u>The Bohemian Girl</u> followed the <u>Magic Slipper</u>:

"On Monday evening, Henry J. Byron's burlesque of the Bohemian Girl will be performed for the first time in this city. It will be produced with new scenes and costumes, and new music-not one air of the original opera being retained. It is spoken of as being a most amusing burlesque, full of Byron's best wit, and replete with funny situations and capital scenes."\*\*\*

A week of rapid repertory including the burlesques:

Oxygen, The Magic Slipper, Robinson Crusoe, Piff-Paff, and
Bohemian Gy-url, closed the long run of the Calville troupe at
the Bush Street Theatre. The Daily Alta California for
January 11, 1880 laid a niggardly wreath of lukewarm praise
on the close of the engagement:

"It (the run of eleven weeks) has on the whole been quite successful, and while doing well for the management, has afforded a great deal of pleasure to our lovers of amusement."

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, December 13, 1879. \*\* Daily Alta California, January 1, 1880. \*\*\*Ibid. January 4, 1880.

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Those lovers of amusement were evidently not satiated with the fare of the Colville Opera Burlesque Company. Immediately after closing at the Bush Street Theatre, the company reopened at the California for two more weeks of profitable production. With Robinson Crusoe, and Ill-Treated Il Trovatore, the Colville burlesquers achieved their one-hundredth and final performance in San Francisco, an occasion which called for floral tributes, much acclaim, and the distribution of satin programmes. The Monday following the close,

"...the company begins a season of one week in Sacramento, thence to Eureka for one week; thence to Salt Lake, appearing Feb. 16th and 17th; Denver, Feb. 20th, six nights; St. Louis, at the Olympic Theatre, for two weeks, and thence to New Orleans, opening March 15th, for two weeks."

The success of the Colville company was the exception and not the rule for burlesque in the eighties. With Eme Roseau, Ella Chapman, Kate Everleigh, and the comedians Graham and Reed definitely entrained on their long tour, the real nature of contemporary entertainment was again visible. Variety bills and light opera companies dominated the scene.

If you were not made curious by the bill at Woodward's Gardens featuring Hermann's cannon act, there was the opera company at the Tivoli in Girofle-Girofla. If the Emelie Melville English Opera Company in The Ideal Pinafore at the Bush Street Theatre had been too much heard, there was Millie Christini, the Two-headed Nightingale at Dashaway Hall on the

<sup>\*</sup> Daily Alta California, January 25, 1880.

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south side of Post Street, between Kearny and Dupont. And the Lilliputians were in town, and Mathilde Bonnay, the Xylophonist, and the Great Gibbons, King of the Air. At the Bush Street Theatre in March,

"...a pleasantly varied programme, divided into three parts was presented last evening. Part first introduced Professor E. O. Taylor, a clever illusionist, and a thorough master of the art of chemistry, in several very elusive tricks. M'lle LeGrande, blindfolded, performed some marvellous shots with the rifle and pistol. The program concluded with Taylor's Royal Italian Marionettes."\*

The Royal Middy, a comic opera by Richard Genee, took the stage over from the marionettes, and after five smash-hit weeks, moved out in favor of the first San Francisco production of The Pirates of Penzance. In the arid center of the summer's theatrical lag, for the first time in months a voice in the press was lifted for burlesque, and then only in the spirit of lamentation:

"What has become of them all since burlesque went out-the Zavistowskis, Lydia Thompson, the English Blondes, and all the rest? There is a burlesque revival now and then...but the peculiar spirit of that time has vanished. There are no more bevies of burlesquers, travelling about with their especial stock of quips, jokes, and antics, their songs and new steps. A burlesque nowadays is like the one at the Baldwin-a temporary filling in of time."\*\*

### XLIII -- MORE REVIVALS

The burlesque at the Baldwin was <u>Little Amy Robsart</u>, a revamping of the old standby, <u>Kenilworth</u>.

<sup>\*</sup> Daily Alta California, March 30, 1880. \*\*Argonaut, August 28, 1880.

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"With the single exception of Ixion, no burlesque is as worn as this, and yet it is almost the only one which will bear a revival. It is strange, too, for there is very little of the singing and dancing which once went to make up the better part of a burlesque."\*

The company involved in the production was the permanent stock company at the Baldwin which had supported Adelaide Neilson in her Shakespearean repertory in June. Mr. A. B. Bishop emerged as the star.

"We hail this combination of comedy and burlesque as the commencement of a new era, or rather the revival of old times, when wit was welcomed instead of wickedness, and humor took the place of indecency. Mr. Bishop was simply grand as Queen Elizabeth and the music was exquisitely arranged and conducted by Harry Widmer."\*

Late in September, after a vacuous lapse between productions, this same company announced the refurbishment of another old piece: Aladdin, or the Wonderful Scamp. Mr. Bishop again stimulated the press to some unguarded enthusiasm:

"Mr. Bishop was simply immense, both physically and artistically as the redoutable Widow Twankey. He fairly brimmed over with humor, and gave excellent promises as to his excellence in the new line he is about to undertake, as the Widow Bedott, which part, we understand he is engaged to enact on a starring tour through the United States. Bishop is beyond any doubt our best comedian. He relishes of the true Burtonian fun, so long lost to our stage, and is probably the only legitimate low comedian in the profession."\*\*

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, August 28, 1880. \*\*San Francisco News Letter, September 25, 1880.

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London.

 Miss Lillian Andrews was in the difficult position of inevitable comparison with a long line of previous Aladdins. Gougenheim, Zavistowski, Thompson, Worrell, Massey: all the famous pulchritude which in the brevity of tights had given entrancing shape to Aladdin's annual rejuvenation. The News Letter for September 25 was somewhat parsimonious and rasping in its praise of Lillian Andrews:

"She is never vulgar withal but manages to make the groundlings laugh without causing the judicious to grieve."

The excursion of the Baldwin stock company into burlesque was a brief and not too bright flash in the pan. With the winter of 1880 another hiatus in burlesque production settled upon San Francisco -- upon the whole country, in fact. To say that no new scripts of interest reached the desks of the impresarios is to start the story in the middle. Basically, there was no demand for such scripts; the taste of theatre-goers had been cultivated in other directions. Whenever a burlesque was hit upon as the means of bridging over a gap in entertainment, it was always an old horse, reharnessed, or as in the case of <u>Ixion</u>, re-wheeled. <u>Ixion Re-wheeled</u> was the title of the burlesque which opened as holiday entertainment for 1880 at the Standard Theatre.

"The burlesque (Ixion) has been almost entirely rewritten by Mr. Fred Lyster, who has introduced a multitude of local allusions with generally happy effect. The performance moves forward in a rapid and sparkling manner, it at no times becoming dull or tedious. The scenery is very handsome and the costumes of the characters are all new and very tasteful."\*

<sup>\*</sup> Daily Alta California, December 26, 1880.

Once the "bewildering display of charms that course through the masculine brain with kaleidoscope effect" had become less overwhelming, and the "coruscation of beautiful heads set on rounded busts" had dimmed a little, the Argonaut was jerked up by the fact that,

"The play itself is somewhat strong. It can not be said to rely upon its refinement. There are many good points made in the lines, but every joke is savage and seems to cut, where it does not smash. Mr. Lyster has no regard for any such immaterial things as feelings. What he can stand in the way of a joke he makes his audience endure. There is throughout the whole burlesque scarcely a legitimate piece of fun-a joke that can be laughed at without some feeling of discomfort."

Featured in the cast were Grace Plaisted as Ixion; Miss S. Arline as Mercury; Fanny Young as Jupiter; Sylvia Gerrish as Venus; Willie Simms as Minerva; and Harry Thompson as Bacchus. Of these, the press finally decided that Miss Gerrish was much too self-conscious of beauty to give much thought to acting; that Miss Young as Jupiter made her points in such a broad manner that they were lost; that Miss Plaisted might be able to snap her fingers and wear a gay costume, but that was all. An obscure person in the cast, Abbie Pierce, came forward with singing ability and with what the Argonaut for January 1 found to be "some idea of burlesque in her Ganymede." Willie Simms as Minerva was rated the ablest of the

"...few well-trained burlesquers in the Company (who) lead the fledglings into very credible attempts in the right direction."\*\*

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, January 1, 1881. \*\*Bulletin, December 27, 1880.

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Particularly heavy demands were made on Harry Thompson's interpretation of Bacchus. Harry was the brother of the famous Lydia, and it was openly declared that,

"...(he) must be expected to know all about burlesque, if only by force of consanguinity with the Queen of the Art."\*

The art was apparently in the blood, for Harry Thompson came through the leveled critical gaze unscathed and with high honors in the press.

Ixion Re-Wheeled was still drawing good houses when it entered the last week of its run, commencing January 8, 1881. Its demise was followed by another of those, by now, habitual sinking spells in the production of burlesque. No lights for burlesque were to be turned on until April 30 at the Standard Theatre, where Willie Edouin announced his appearance with a burlesque company of his own organization:

"On Monday will be produced Horrors....This is going to be something out of the common run. The scenery will be new and beautiful, and the dresses valued at \$1800."\*\*

### XLIV -- WILLIE EDOUIN AND THE EMERSON MINSTRELS

The years 1881, 1882, 1883: for all their being packed as any other years -- with the manufacture of woolen goods, the performance of murder, the precipitation of rain, and sartorial revolution -- were almost complete blanks for burlesque. The formerly vigorous, rotund body was in such

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, January 1, 1881. \*\*Ibid. April 30, 1881.

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an etiolated, flat condition that total eclipse was imminent. Willie Edouin with his own company in 1881 and the Emerson Minstrels in 1882, were the only spots bright enough for the record.

The element of horror in Edouin's opening burlesque, Horrors, remains unexplained.

"Willie Edouin's Hamsetzee Bumgetzee has lost none of the fun-provoking qualities that characterized it before." Miss Alice Atherton makes an acceptable Prince Achmed. Miss A. Dumaure's La Jolie, the French housekeeper is a capital piece of character acting. Jacques Kruger, always clever, does as well in burlesque as in comedy. Mr. Powers' Rajah Zog, with a strong Irish accent, deserves special praise for both make-up and peculiarities. Mr. W. Crosbie. Who is familiar to us all, surprised his friends as Tragedee, the Court Jester."\*\*

This uninspired partition of the critical bouquet was repeated for the company's second production, Willie Edouin's old vehicle: Robinson Crusoe. This time Miss Atherton "met all the requirements" of her role; Miss Marian Elmore "exhibited a fine fund of humor"; Miss Merville was "neat and careful"; Miss Starr was "very good as the Indian Princess"; Miss Russell "won applause for her singing but displayed little taste in her dress"; Mr. Kruger was "quietly funny"; and Mr. Powers was "acrobatically amusing."\*\*\* Willie Edouin received a little special praise. The newspapers cast

<sup>\*</sup> There is no record of this earlier performance. \*\* Daily Alta California, May 3, 1881. \*\*\* Tbid. May 15, 1881.

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a look backwards over his career and agreed that his interpretation of the Man Friday role was the best thing in his repertory.

It was a long, low swing between the Edouin company at the Standard Theatre in 1881 and the burlesque of Sarah Bernhardt by the Emerson Minstrels at the same theatre in 1882. The occasion was prefaced by an announcement to this effect:

"First appearance of the Celebrated Peruvian Actress: Mme. Sarah Heartburn."

The Argonaut for January 14, 1882, admitted having had a good time:

"Sarah Heartburn, by the way, is not a bad burlesque, and is a really welcome change from the wild breakage of dishes. and pitching about of furniture, with which a minstrel burlesque ceases to be funny. Time out of mind they have wound up with a grand shattering of crockery, or a shower of flour on the cork-blacked faces. The new Camille discreetly dies by measuring her length somewhat abruptly on the floor, and the curtain very properly falls to slow music. Emerson has taken a leaf from Haverly's book and deals in quantity. It is a leaf worth studying, for twelve clog-dancers in attractive uniforms are better worth seeing than two."

The reference to Haverly is important. Minstrelsy had taken much the same course of development as burlesque: the small company, the incisive, localized material, had given way to the Gigantic Spectacle. Haverly was manager of the Mastodon Minstrels. Minstrelsy was making its last standin the manner of <a href="https://doi.org/10.1001/jhtml.new.org/">The Black Crook</a>. It is interesting to remember that the last stand of cathedral architecture was the baroque

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architecture of the Jesuits: a façade of over-crowded design whose details cannot take much critical scrutiny. while within, the nave itself was a dull. hastily constructed amalgam of previous periods, with usually a sprinkling of over-sentimental statues by Bernini.

#### XLV -- BURLESQUE IN PANTOMIME

Revivals of all the famous, old burlesque titles had been attempted. The Madame Rentz-Mabel Santley combination had attempted some additional undress in the costumes. The spring of 1884 brought a burlesque to San Francisco, which attempted to telescope some apparently incompatible qualities. The burlesque was called Excelsior, already aged to the extent of successful runs in Paris and New York in 1882 and 1883, respectively. The attempted blend included: first, the complete abandonment of the spoken word for pantomime; second, solo dancing and spectacular ballet; third, the tremendous subject matter of The Triumph of Light over Darkness, or of Civilization over Barbarism. The whole history of pantomime had been its exposition of gay, satirical material: here, suddenly, it was being revived only to be placed upon a procrustean bed of Victorian morality. Harlequin was forced into the groove of Old Sobersides. The Kiralfy Ballet was the drawing card of the otherwise dull deck. No money had been stinted on the costumes, and Kiralfy's choreography, for once, satisfied and excited all beholders. Otherwise,

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descriptions of the production sound like one of those innumerable engravings in one of those large tomes which were supposed to uplift nineteenth century living rooms with such titles as "Hearth and Home," or "Chats Beside the Chimney":

"And therewith a bell jingled and the curtain arose. A young woman was outlined against the ruins of a city which seemed to have just come out of a bad earthquake. She was attired in a white silk robe, liberally embroidered with the portrait of an exceedingly ill-favored gentleman; and a tall, Mephistophelian fellow, who looked as Galassi might look in the part, was triumphantly waving something over her. In the course of the pantomime the young woman seemed to get the better of the young man, and he shrank away, looking as he went, apparently for a pin on the floor. And with this the curtain rose again, but upon a scene of dazzling beauty and light. There were ranks upon ranks of pretty coryphees all shapely, all graceful, and all radiant with fantastic, glittering costumes. There were dozens of little children variously arrayed, and the male ballet-dancers came to life again in a ballet of wonderful arrangement. Every possibility of varied and studied motion seemed to have been exercised. There were evolutions and convolutions, posturings. whirlings, twirlings, wavings, twinkling feet. and waving hands, and wreathing arms, any one of them almost impossible to identify, but all of them together transforming the stage into a wonderful study of light and color, and motion. It was indescribably beautiful ... "

This same review, printed in the Argonaut, April 5, 1884, reserved another type of adjective for the scenery. The master hand of Voegtlin had certainly not been employed:

"The scenery is rickety, shaky, dauby, smeary; the poor Brooklyn Bridge wobbles like a skipping rope in the wind; and the Suez Canal has a cold, flat, look."

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As for the plot content of the piece, no resume today could produce the illumination of the advance publicity in the <u>Argonaut</u> for March 29, 1884:

"The following is the plot of this curious play: Light, the Genius of Civilization, is found in captivity to Darkness, or Obscurantism, the Genius of opposition to Human Progress, who is aided by Ignorance, Superstition and Crime. Light wakes, breaks her chain, and defies Darkness, and the scene changes to a most elaborate and beautiful picture of the Temple of Light and Progress. This fills the entire stage with graduated elevations at the back, and the whole space is filled with dancers, including a large number of children in the highest part of the picture, who are dressed as winged cherubs. Light stands beside one of the premiers, all of whom are her friends and assistants at different stages of the pantomime. The rest of the act is filled by three divisions of the ballet La Renommée, by the full corps, La Civilization, by Miss Flindt, and La Renaissance by all."

During this period, the disturbing fact is that the melodeon entertainers and the minstrels were not alive to the opportunity. It had not been many years since a production of such spurious seriousness would have instantly kindled a merciless and side-splitting take-off in every music hall in town. Perhaps, in 1884, belief in the endless expansion of the market was so general that no one could think of the limitations, let alone laugh at a satire of Progress. So the transformation scene in Excelsion, wherein Progress was disclosed enthroned and gleaming above Light's successful encounter with the dragon of Darkness, was applauded nightly for several weeks by a full house.

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The <u>San Francisco News Letter</u> for April 5, 1884 gives still other and more profound reasons for the success of the piece:

"The ballet girls are, generally, pretty and shapely. The three or four primas are excellent danseuses. Signora Brianza is a little beauty. The male soloists are good dancers and remarkably clever in pantomime, an art supposed to be lost."

The gleaming foot of light upon the fallen head of darkness was too strong a memory for Excelsion's immediate successor. Pocahontas, one of John Brougham's burlesques, was "but a dismal affair as played at the Standard this week."\*

"Frank Wright is vigorous, to say the least, in his conception of Powhattan. Mrs. Saunders is comical as the school-teacher. Miss Helen Brooks is plump and pleasing in appearance as Pocahontas. The school girls are headed by sprightly Blanche Thayer and pretty Lillian Owen. That is about all that can be said about the performance. Charles T. Barbour is a most melancholy Captain Smith. His humor lies wholly in the peculiar angularity of his legs."\*

Not until June, with the piece A Bunch of Keys at the Bush Street Theatre, was burlesque able to divert any of the town's attention in its direction. Quite a let-down: from the cerulean heights of Excelsior where superhuman abstractions struggled for dominance on the papier-maché crags, to "life in a hotel":

"Life in a hotel has never been so amusingly caricatured as in this entertainment. The main satire is developed and embellished by songs,

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, April 26, 1884.

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dances and innumerable indescribable bits and freaks of an eccentric humor. What may be called gymnastic joking is an important factor in the general amusement....

"The company is a clever one...Bowser is the original Pittacus Green in this city. He is a versatile actor. In <u>Hazel Kirke</u> he was a genteel comedian; in <u>A Bunch of Keys</u>, he is a genuine burlesquer. His <u>Snaggs</u> is as finished a piece of work, the materials taken into consideration, as can be imagined. Canfield as Grimes, is the striking figure of the lot. He causes irrepressible merriment by his marvellous agility and grotesque grimacing. Lena Merville's character is that of a sort of Tom Boy. A striking degree of originality marks everything she does...Mariette Nash is one of the sprightlest women I have ever seen. She is the lightest of mortals. Her dancing is feathery in its ease....

"With its many bits of fun, which all have the potency of surprise, this is the most ludicrous entertainment that has been seen for years. If it has any faults, they are to be found in the superfluity of food for the risibilities, the show is too long by a half hour, and the circuslike form of one or two of the episodes."\*

From the contemporary satire of A Bunch of Keys to the mythological extravaganza of Orpheus and Eyrydice was the next quick change of burlesque in the strange 1884 season. The Bijou Company opened at the Baldwin Theatre July 18 with a burlesque production of Offenbach's opera bouffe, Orphée aux Enfers. Any further attentuation of Offenbach's material was dangerous. He had already given the old myth as much lightness and humor as it could stand, and still hold together as some sort of consecutive entertainment. The audiences of the Bijou Company's burlesque of Offenbach deemed

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, June 7, 1884.

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to agree that "perhaps of all the spinning, this new burlesque is the flattest and thinnest." An ambitious failure, the production nevertheless stimulated The Argonaut for July 19 to an interesting generalization upon all mythological extravaganzas:

"There was a grim humor in laying the first vandal touch of burlesque upon them (the Olympic gods). There must have been an exquisite absurdity in the sight, the first time that thunderous Jupiter stalked down upon the stage and executed a motto-song and a breakdown, and Venus, Juno & Co. went through a plantation walk-around. But to this generation, they are simply cheap material for burlesque."

The press comments give a very inadequate reconstruction of the production. A symbolic figure, Public Opinion, was somehow integrated into the plot. To Augusta Roche, who is described as an impressive woman of heroic height, was entrusted the interpretation of this ominous figure; and according to the <u>Argonaut</u>, her interpretation would have come off if Miss Roche had been "fitly costumed":

"As it is, she looks as if she had barely commenced her toilet and finished it in a fit of abstraction, with several yards of gold fringe."\*

Cupid, the dainty, little messenger to Offenbach's tulle and tinsel hell, was played by Ida Mülle. She was remembered not so much for her ability as a burlesquer as for her further pioneering over the horizons of undress. She and Fay Templeton were the first American actresses to dispense with trunks. Indeed, up to this point, the whole history of burlesque assumes the aspect of a fifty-year long strip-tease:

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, July 19, 1884.

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a dilated, slow-motion version of the rapid, twentieth-century phenomenon. The costumier, however, was balked as much by the concentrated undress of Cupid as by the ornate overdress of Public Opinion:

"This little Ida Mulle fits into the wings of Cupid, and is mischievous and prankish with an innocent, heavy, German face, like a very boy's. Her costume, what there is of it, is, excepting the wings, singularly inappropriate."\*

Mlle. Vanoni, the French star, received the most and at the same time very diverse attention. It was said she was too French for mythological burlesque which was essentially English. She might be chic, but it was the chic of the But what was the matter with Café Chantant? Café Chantant. Inevitably, she sang the famous French number "Pretty as a Picture"; but perhaps it was, after all, a good song. She was clever, gay, energetic -- people bought their tickets chiefly to see her; but wasn't she a little specialized? Admitted that she was an expert specialist, yet she wasn't an actress. Therefore she was attracting as a specialist and not as an actress. And when she sang, she did not take the orchestra into account, but ogled right over their heads the audience: the audience liked it but the orchestra was slighted. Flirtatious, yes, in a vivid, French way; but was she wicked enough to fascinate? She might have the superb polish of a French comedienne, but how much good was all this if she didn't fascinate?"

<sup>\*</sup> Ibid.

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Digby Bell and Daisy Murdock received the only unqualified praise of the reviewers. Digby Bell had come out of opera study in Italy with enough voice for four years of singing in Italy itself, followed by an American debut in Fra Diavolo, and subsequent seasons of Gilbert and Sullivan. Burlesque proved to be his element, and after a few appearances in the lowly art, a unique drollery was attributed to him. The management of Orpheus and Eurydice had cast him well. The few funny lines of the play were given to Digby Bell to say; and the traditional Mother Goose song, built out of completed local allusions, was given him to sing.

Daisy Murdock received the high praise of comparison with two of burlesque's topnotch stars. She was granted "a touch of that indefinable skill in burlesque which was second nature to little Ella Chapman, and in a less degree to Alice Atherton."\* Further, as Hebe, she "made the hit of the evening" in a vocal duet with Cupid, the duet being "a very pretty arrangement of Joseph D. Redding's Del Monte waltzes."\* The Argonaut reviewer hit upon a formula for her appearance: that of "a beautiful child of twelve years, with the self-possession and abandon of a Parisian actress of about ninety years' experience. The combination has an effect a little odd."

A few weeks later, light opera companies elsewhere in town had drained the Baldwin burlesque troupe of an audience, and the Bijou Company comes into the light again in

<sup>\*</sup> Toid.

August only because of the noisy secession of several members from the company when they could not collect their pay. The secessionists were Mlle. Vanoni, Digby Bell, Laura Joyce, Ida Mülle, and Emma Mülle.

Periodically, as during the spring of 1884, several kinds of burlesque were tried for their drawing power; and just as periodically, once these several kinds had failed to succeed in any startling manner, The Black Crook would be decked out again as a last resort.

There again as if forever, were the tiers of golden staircases in the background of the stage. And again, as if forever, the Amazonian hordes poured down the staircases with a spangled emphasis of their orbic peculiarities. The gauze curtains, again, as if endlessly, were gradually withdrawn to reveal finally, in the depth of the stage, the same old palpitating disclosure.

### The Argonaut for August 9, 1884 comments:

"An ardent young man from the country was sitting alone at the Grand Opera House on the first night of The Black Crook. He did not evince much interest in anything until the glittering Stalacta (Louise Dempsey) left her swan-drawn boat and walked down the steps. He immediately aroused himself, and it was evident that he had a touching belief in the reality of every charm. He even suspected that long golden mane of growing on the head, and regarded her glittering sea-foam as an integral part of her. 'O Goddlemighty, aint she a beautiful woman?' he cried aloud in honest rapture, and to this moment does not suspect what caused the outbreaks of titters around him."

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The summer went out with Ida Mülle very much in the public eye in a very private manner. Little photographs of her as Cupid in Orpheus and Eurydice were neatly framed for general consumption. Described in the press as a gem of the photographic art, the consumption was widespread. From how many dressers in how many boardinghouse rooms, did Cupid slant upward on his picture easel, at morning and at night, to feast the starved eyes? Perhaps this photograph is the origin of the Cupid Awake and Cupid Asleep pair of pictures which invaded the provincial American homes early in the twentieth century. Ida Mülle, despite her inadequacy in the burlesque of Offenbach, was profoundly successful.

#### XLVI -- BOTTICELLI AND BIG BERTHA

burlesque descends to an almost dead level for the period 1884-1887. In 1884, the minstrels at the Standard Theatre, under the leadership of Charley Reed, delved for a moment into real restate with the burlesque Who Owns the Theatre? the old California being the orphaned edifice. But obscurity quickly wrapped round the details of the piece and silence reigned in the press. On two other occasions, in 1884, the minstrels held up the feeble light of the burlesque lantern: once in a travesty of Fedora, again in a burlesque of Called Back, \* legitimate drama then running at the Baldwin. The fall

<sup>\*</sup> Burlesque was Crawled Back.

of 1885 witnessed a double debacle. Undine the Spirit of the Waters. a fairy spectacle in five acts and eighteen scenes. could not at all manage her head above water and drowned dîsmally, and the old Jules Verne spectacle, Around the World in Eighty Days, made an extraordinarily brief and disastrous circuit. What happened next was, by this time, as reflexive a thing for harassed theatrical managers as the secretion of saliva by one of Pavlov's dogs at the ringing of a bell--The Black Crook was revived. The denuded, long-suffering extravaganza appeared this time with Japanese overtones. Everything could be traced to the rage of The Mikado. Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas not only succeeded; they gained the oppressive currency of a modern, Tin Pan Alley tune. There was a Ko-Ko dance step, a Japanese ballet, parasols, and cherry blossoms. Stalacta, ethereal, rope-suspended fairy of the original text, was now a stolid, grimy Stalagma, relegated to an obscure niche in the orientalized transformation scene.

These few productions present almost the whole case for burlesque during the low years of the eighties; except perhaps for Fay Templeton's appearance in the fall of 1884. But her engagement in San Francisco, nine years from the time when she had been feted at the Bush Street Theatre as the inimitable child star, was strictly limited to comic opera. And the critic of the <u>Bulletin</u>, September 18, 1884 was well aware of a distinction between light opera and burlesque.

The quotation has to do with Harry Brown, leading man of Fay Templeton's company:

"Mr. Brown is a clever actor but he never did know where to draw the line. He interjects a fine burlesque performance into comic opera."

Not until the fall of 1888 was Miss Templeton to perform on this side of the line for this chronicle. At that time, she was to be starred in a production of Evangeline during a return engagement of Edward "Everlasting" Rice's burlesque troupe.

Other extant details of the above-named productions only confirm conclusions already drawn. All the detritus of outworn convention was still clinging to the raised hulk of Undine, the Spirit of the Waters:

"The ballet comes in the closing scene of the third act, with Mlles. Tittel and Bergland, seconded by Mlles. Lee and Heiback, as principal dancers. The fourth act is crowded with specialties too numerous even to be named here, but all more or less attractive and including a handsome maid of the Amazons. The fifth act ends with a transformation scene."\*

And Mabel Bert, the feminine lead, was still draining dry the long-dry convention of "Beauty must be blonde."

"The title role is entrusted to Miss Mabel Bert, whose beauty is indeed substantial rather than spirituelle, but who, in a becoming white dress and a wealth of golden hair makes an exquisite picture, and whose acting throughout is all that could be wished."\*

The remote and terrible possibility is that Botticelli is guilty. The pre-Raphaelite painters had confronted all English eyes with their peculiar conception of beauty. Botticelli

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, September 5, 1885.

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came before Raphael. The pre-Raphaelites "adored" Botticelli, whose famous Venus Anadyomene is indisputably blonde. Lydia Thompson, first burlesque queen to indulge in peroxide rehabilitation, could have seen pictures in an illustrated weekly; might even have attended a gallery. Ergo - but explaining an effect cannot brighten it. And long before 1885, the great weight of declorized hair which had fallen upon the American theatre had been described by bored witnesses as so many bales of jute.

The oriental reincarnation of The Black Crook in 1886 has already been hinted at. The plot structure of the burlesque itself had by this time become merely the weather-beaten pertico within which the theatrical bird of the season laid its egg safely. Black Crook revivals were always successful.

"The Black Crook has been such a success that it has been decided to keep it another week. The Japanese ballet grows in favor every night, and the little Pitti-Sing in the blue kimono, who dances to the last tip of her fingers and the last curl of her hair, gets a round of applause all to herself every night. Mme. Tissot's cherry farce is the bright particular feature of the specialties and no one is able to discover from her accent whether she is a French woman, or a wild western prairie girl."

For the rest, the middle eighties belonged to Big Bertha. She arrived in San Francisco unannounced, after travels which were never divulged. She made out an attractive,

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, January 23, 1886.

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but nongeographic. case for herself. Her wealth, she declared was proportional to her avoirdupois. The long quest which had brought her to San Francisco was primarily a search for a suitor. But there were strings attached. The suitor, to prove his faith, must advance a sum of money named by Bertha which she would double out of her own resources and invest according to her own light. The gag, though transparent, was successful. Suitors overwhelmed her: their pittance was collected, and the mysterious investment was sworn to. Thereafter, the dividends remained so invisible that there was a general uprising. The plaintiffs, however quickly cognizant of the unpleasant odor which court procedure would arouse, smoldered against the great injustice and kept quiet. Even so, Big Bertha was arrested: but the nebulous charges evaporated and she was released with a tremendous amount of free publicity toward her secret theatrical ambitions. First, a one-man stand in an empty store on Market Street, where she displayed herself as the undisputed, and apparently undetectable, Queen of the Confidence Women; thence, directly to the Bella Union. Oofty Goofty was the partner of her act. No less a celebrity than Big Bertha, he was the moronic clown who for years had walked up and down the Barbary Coast, making his living by persuading people to hit him with a bat he carried, at the cost (to them) of fifty cents.

Burlesque of burlesque was common. Big Bertha and

Oofty Goofty carried burlesque to its final, remote, unentertaining degree. Romeo and Juliet was the first subject. Big Bertha immediately raised the cry of foul play, and with no intention at dramatic criticism; for Oofty Goofty had not only gained the balcony, but in the amorous tussle which ensued, treated Big Bertha rough, she insisted, beyond any theatrical necessity. Oofty Goofty was quickly fired from the Thespian bandwagon; and the next week Big Bertha was billed alone in a condensed version of Mazeppa. The spectacular ride of Ada Isaacs Menken, strapped to the fiery horse, became for Big Bertha, a lumbering ride on a donkey. The audience, poised ready for amusement, was suddenly convulsed when the donkey, drawing back before the glaring footlights, pitched Big Bertha into the orchestra pit, then jumped in after her.

At this moment, Big Bertha achieved her most dramatic effect. Standing up tall in the midst of the anarchic
condition of the orchestra pit. the tremendous weight of her
fury gained a moment of quiet during which she hurled such
recondite vituperations at the crowd that no one could stand
up against her. She then, through the backstage door, made a
very realistic exit from her footlight career.

The middle eighties had brought the genius of pantomimic satire this low. The great shade of Grimaldi had certainly no place to hang his hat, and the development of

<sup>\*</sup> See Monograph on Adah Isaacs Menken, Vol. V, this series.

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burlesque was apparently not yet through with the blind alleys of transformation scene, bespangled ballets, and half-baked puns. Excessively dreary is the present knowledge, that well along in the twentieth century, Al Jolson would be making a name as Man Friday, the same role in the same burlesque that made a name for Willie Edouin.

### XLVII -- PROVINCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The first burlesque production of 1887, <u>Little Jack Sheppard</u> at the Alcazar Theatre, contributed no development to the history of burlesque, but did call forth some interesting expressions in the press; first, in relation to New York. There are few admissions of New York superiority in the brilliant stage history of San Francisco. In regard to <u>Little Jack Sheppard</u>, the San Francisco News Letter for January 15, 1887 has this to say:

"After seeing the burlesque of Jack Sheppard at the Alcazar one can well imagine how comical and entertaining the New York production, with Nat Goodwin and Jonathan Wild, must be...The burlesque is full of clever things. The costumes are very pretty, and new, a novelty to us here. The make-up of each character is admirable. All the accessories are as they should be. The effects are remarkable...We get from this an idea of how these burlesques are gotten up in New York. And yet there is a lack of spirit to the whole entertainment that makes it fall flat."

And the mention of Nat Goodwin gave the critic of the News Letter his second thesis, a discussion of the minstrel, Charley Reed, who played Goodwin's role in the local production. All dramatic critics in town had long been solicitous

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about Reed's career. He was too good for minstrelsy, they said; a little more polish and he should step up into serious comedy. Here he was finally in a "white-faced" burlesque, but the critic's memory of Nat Goodwin took all the wind out of Reed's sails:

"There is no funnier man than Nat Goodwin the stage, the world over, to-day. He is a remarkable mimic. Charley Reed is a funny fellow also, but in a more limited sense. He is a provincial comedian. His humor appeals to a restricted public, the public of his own milieu, and not to the general public. To us here, who know him of old, who like him and applaud him, he is far funnier than to those to whom he is merely one comedian out of a great many. His humor is essentially local. His sense of the ridiculous is awakened by matters of the moment in his immediate surroundings. He is no actor in the understood sense of the word. He is accustomed from his minstrel career to have the stage to himself and is lost when others are with him in a scene. In Jack Sheppard he is excessively amusing. In a hundred ways, by a hundred little bits of humorous business, he keeps us busy in laughter, and yet we feel that something is wanting. His fun comes in intermittent flashes, between which he disappears in solemn stolidity. There are no hyphens between his comical bits.... There is in Reed the making of a burlesquer, but he needs the training which comes of facing strange audiences."

That Charley Reed, with a little study, could make a New York appearance as successfully local as a San Francisco appearance, does not seem to have entered the critic's head.

Nor did the critic avoid the old trap of speaking about "the general public." If Reed, however, was capable of making expert fun of "his own milieu," what should prevent him from

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, January 15, 1887.

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discovering the peculiarities of another milieu and playing them up just as successfully? The general public is an abstract everybody without ears or eyes, of no particular place or time. A norm is valuable in the determination of high or low blood pressure, tall or short, fat or thin, but of no value whatsoever to dramatic criticism.

The Bulletin critic was more simply realistic in his coverage of Little Jack Sheppard:

"Little Jack Sheppard drew 200 people more than the house will fairly accommodate. It was probably not the burlesque so much as the return of Alice Harrison, and Charles Reed, who sustain the leading parts in the piece....It does not appear that the adapters of Little Jack Sheppard have done more than furnish a new Tramework in which the business of burlesque may be set. The scenes are suggested by the drama of the same name, and the filling in is what the company makes it."\*

Again it is indicated that the bones of any old structure would do as long as there was something to support the succession of variety acts. The decadence of the burlesque form was still not complete enough for the commencement of the reverse process.

These conclusions were confirmed by Edward Harrigan's burlesque, <u>Investigation</u>, which, with an August opening, was the first burlesque to succeed <u>Little Jack Sheppard</u> in the year 1887. Harrigan had become famous in New York for the writing of sharply satirical burlesque. But the ideas of <u>Investigation</u>, a satire upon the small town legislator, had not

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, January 11, 1887.

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#### TWO PROMINENT BURLESQUERS OF THE 1870's



Willie Edouin, burlesquing a ballet dancer of the period.

Harry Dixey, the "elastic" policeman in the burlesque, "Evangeline."

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE M. H. de YOUNG MUSEUM



quite jelled. Again, the plot structure of burlesque was merely the thread for a program of vaudeville. In fact, the newspapers spoke of a Romeo and Juliet burlesque as the feature of the bill.

"There is something in Investigation that no one should miss seeing, the burlesque Romeo and Juliet scene...Mrs. Yeamans is a genius.... She is perfectly unrestrained by fear of being ridiculous, the bugbear of most women on or off the stage. She is entirely free from affectations of any sort, perfectly natural and with a wonderful command of ludicrous effect. Her Juliet is genuine legitimate burlesque and as such remarkable."\*

The small town legislator of the original idea had evaporated completely by the time the piece was concluded. How else can the following statement which closed the <u>Bulletin</u> review for August 2, 1887, be understood?

"There were a number of Brahms' songs and choruses which went, as usual, very well and were even well encored."

### XLVIII -- HARRY DIXEY

Before one more of the rapidly successive periods of drought, there was another high moment for San Francisco burlesque. It was the appearance of Harry Dixey at the Baldwin Theatre in November 1887. Dixeys fame was firmly bolstered by 1200 performances of the leading role in E. E. Rice's burlesque, Adonis. New York had paid packed house homage; London likewise. In England, Dixey had gone so far

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, August 6, 1887.

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as to feature his imitation of Sir Henry Irving; but the English had taken it well. In fact, Dixey's mimicry seems to have been so exact that the quality of burlesque was erased. Long heralded, solidly advertised as a four-generation manufacturing concern, Dixey opened at the Baldwin, November 21,1887.

For once, Edward "Everlasting" Rice had a live, unifying idea for a burlesque. It seems, however, that it was
quickly dissipated.

"Dixey first appears as a statue chiseled by a woman who falls in love with her own work.... Adonis, while still a statue, finds a purchaser but the sculptress declines to sell it. It is arranged that he shall be endowed with life and allowed to choose between the woman who had created him and the woman who desired to buy him. Adonis takes to life naturally and demonstrates his fidelity to the race by turning his back on his creator and following the woman with the heavier purse. This, of course, is only the thread upon which the various special acts are strung."\*

Here was an opportunity to satirize all the cheap, enervating effects of art patronage upon the arts, but neither Rice nor the times were up to exploiting it.

"Adonis is a highly polished conglomeration of odds and ends with an exceedingly apt young man as the central figure of the performance."\*

No such man as Dixey had ever before starred in burlesque. He was not only thoroughly schooled in the art of burlesque gesture; he was also handsome enough to acquire a matinee idol reputation. His first performances in San Francisco created a widespread feminine flutter. In all justice,

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, November 22, 1887.

however, it should be stated here that the peculiar concentration on Dixey's legs had to do not only with their shapeliness, but also with the fact that Dixey had made his first mark in burlesque as the hind legs of a comic heifer.

"He does not belong to the drama, was never of it nor in it, that any one knows of. He is a bright and clever boy, who fell into an age when the most specious cleverness is fully appreciated....He seems to have something of the temperament of Hawthorne's faun, and laughs, and sings, and dances life away because he likes to.

"So much has been said of Dixey's legs that they have actually become historic, but nothing is ever said of his feet....They are large, long, and limber, and they take on a new expression with every change of character....Now and then it crosses the mind of the spectator that there may be something consecutive in it, but this, never, when Dixey appears. He is the most delightfully inconsequential of men. He is, indeed, only an etherialized variety man, and of course a variety man's every appearance is an act....He is deft, quick, and graceful in everything, and as a mimic he is inimitable."

The second act of the burlesque served the famous piece de resistance. Dixey came out upon the stage as Sir Henry Irving.

"It was said of this imitation in London that its absolute fidelity to the original was a source of much mortification to the English play-goers. They saw their favorite actor imitated so closely by an American burlesquer, that had the two been playing a dual role it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to tell which of the two was on the stage at the time."\*

The disconcerting thing about the ready praise of all the critics was the fact that Irving had not yet visited

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 26, 1887. \*\*Bulletin, November 22, 1887.

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America, so that there was really not a model for comparison with the renowned imitation. The <u>Bulletin</u> for November 22, 1887 pulled in the reins a little and admitted this:

"We infer that in the presence of an audience not familiar with Irving, the imitator touched up his performance with a little by-play the tragedian did not give the warrant for."

The <u>San Francisco News Letter</u> for December 10 rationalized its enthusiasm in a more recondite manner:

"As in the case of a strong portrait painted by the brush of a painter who succeeds in reproducing on canvas not only the lineaments of his subject's face, but his character as well, as indicated by the expression of his features, the likeness is self-evident, though the original may be unknown, so in the case of Dixey's imitation of Irving, those to whom the latter is a stranger, feel instinctively that it is a wonderful likeness."

But the Irving imitation was a small part of the entertainment. The rest of Dixey's powerful stage presence needed very little roundabout comment. To say that he was obviously the most subtle of the burlesquers of his time is the paradoxical manner of indicating his unique quality. The News Letter for December 10,1887 continues:

"Dixey continues to charm and amuse the public by the ease and grace of his movements, and the delicacy, deftness and finish of his versatile genius...He can be judged by no established standard, for he is the originator of a new branch of theatrical art. He has shown us that burlesque may be made extravagant without becoming buffoonery.He has shown us that satire may be drawn in lines that do not violate the rules of perspective and shading. His work is rounded off by a hundred delicate little details of characteristic tom-foolery, that come invariably in the right time, in the right place."

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From these reflections of his art in the press, it is easier and perhaps more correct to regard Dixey rather as further indication of decadence than of advance in burlesque. His finesse was in the direction of caviar, and a far cry from the broad, satiric clarity of the early clowns. At this point, a flashback to the early Commedia dell' Arte troupes is refreshing. The portable theatre has been set up in the square. Everybody in town has crowded about the gay stage. The term "general public" takes on some meaning. The muddled life of the populace, the crosscurrents of their daily connections with legal procedure and the soldiery, the constant, public explosions of amorous entanglements, the officious superveillance of the church; these things are suddenly made clear and dramatic on the torchlit acting space. And the penetrating, pantomimic gestures are not only legible at a great distance, but are understandable to the great variety of heads in the crowd. The whole life of the time is put on dramatic exhibition and everybody comes to behold it.

## XLIX -- TWO LONG, PROFITLESS TRIPS

As if not to take a chance with the enthusiastic public response to Harry Dixey, the managers of the Tivoli and California Theatres kept San Francisco audiences terrifically on the move with <u>A Trip to the Moon</u>, and immediately thereafter Around the World in Eighty Days.

The lunar trip was initiated at the Tivolias holiday entertainment during the last days of December 1887. But it

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proved as dull as the magic boat trip through the pictured tunnel on Coney Island. The inadequate cast served only to remind the reviewers of Alice Harrison and W. A. Mestayer, who stood out garishly in the waxworks of memory as the leads of the topnotch cast in the same burlesque years ago at the California Theatre. Berti Crawford was making her debut, upon which silence only descended, except for a quiet and frigid wreath from the San Francisco News Letter (December 31, 1887):

"Miss Berti Crawford is pretty and vivacious, but both in acting and singing she is devoid of the requisite qualities for success."

Offenbach, original perpetrator of the music for A Trip to the Moon, was this time literally snowed under. Almost all the songs were omitted in deference to a tone-deaf cast, and a snowstorm tranformation scene was constituted the feature of the piece. Today, the only note of interest in the production is the statement of the Argonaut for December 24, 1887 that, aside from Berti Crawford making her debut, the house would be lighted by electricity, "which is something new this side of the Rockies."

Around the World in Eighty Days, which opened at the California towards the middle of January 1888, offered a trip no more exciting than its predocessor. Kiralfy had been given the superintendence not only of the ballet routine, but also of the spectacular effects; and although a successful choreographer, stage mechanics were evidently outside his knowledge.

"The spectacular effects are, as usual with Kiralfy, ridiculous failures. The Union Pacific train in the play, is an inexhaustible fund of amusement. In its brief passage across the stage it indulges in a series of the wildest antics. The cars run off their hind trucks, telescope into each other, and to cap the climax, the tender, with a sudden inspiration of motive power, pulls the cars, leaving the locomotive standing."\*

With this last pathetic attempt at locomotion and the resultant standstill, burlesque production looked for life in a recrudescence of familiar splendors. The Black Crook may have been somewhat dim and worn but it was still a reliable ace in the hole. Its production this time overlapped the last dying fall of Around the World in Eighty Days.

As ballet master of The Black Crook, Kiralfy's stock rose noticeably.

"Henry Irving himself could not have produced a more artistic and brilliant effect than the outpouring of the King's troops from the pillared gates of Babylon. It is in large spaces, in general effects like this, that Mr. Kiralfy, giving rein to his picturesque and glowing fancy, can produce pictures as vivid, as gorgeous, as startling and intense as the paintings of Benjamin Constant or Henri Regnault."\*

Whether or not under Kiralfy's guidance, the cogs and sprockets were again a hit-or-miss matter, the conch-like boat in which Rudolph rode into the glistening caverns of Stalacta, jerked on its cable and arrived at its destined shore by a series of spasmodic lurches. Count Wolfenstein was to have thought out his black machinations against a backdrop

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, January 14, 1888. \*\*Argonaut, January 1, 1888.

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depicting a thick, gloomy, German forest, but the backdrop descended only half way, then remained suspended for the rest of "olfenstein's scene. When the backdrop was finally persuaded to descend to the floor, the scene had changed, and the sunlit, babbling brook referred to by the characters was no more than a vague, offstage rumor.

Such embarrassing moments for the creaking, skeletal armor were quickly hushed up and passed over by interstices of the shiniest, newest of vaudeville teams. Bibb and Bobb, the Onger Sisters, and the Dare Brothers were cosmetics for the old face. When the air in the overstuffed parlor became insupportable, there was a swift interjection of the latest team of "musical eccentricities"; or the beautiful rather than talented sisters would dance rather than sing; or the air deviltries of the acrobatic twins would catch the boredom of the audience up to breathlessness. Burlesque, supposedly the main dish of the bill, had been superseded in interest by the hors d'oeuvres.

The real appetite of the public was in the direction of light opera. And the impresarios complied. For the balance of the 1888 spring, light opera productions were everywhere dominant. Burlesque did not come forward again until Edward "Everlasting" Rice appeared in July with advance notices for another production of his Evangeline. He had meditated the market, and the zigzag "hay while the sun shines" process of

# FAY TEMPLETON, TOAST OF THE MAUVE DECADE (1865-1939)



PHOTO FROM ISHMAN'S, "WEBER AND FIELDS"

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his thought concluded that perhaps Evangeline was not a burlesque at all, but, right up the alley of the times, a comic opera.

"Mr. Rice, author of Evangeline, is in doubt whether to class his work as a Comic Opera or as a burlesque. It commenced life as a burlesque but some recent compositions have been of a higher character."

The "recent compositions of higher character" no doubt have reference to the last musical interpolations of Rice into the ever-fluid structure of his burlesque. Evangeline, born, Rice admitted, of low parentage, had been lifted on the wings of song to a high estate. The Argonaut for September 17, 1888, ran the following notice:

"The principal people in Rice's Evangeline Company, who commence a short season at the Baldwin on Monday evening, are Fay Templeton, Louise Montague, Lila Blow, Annie Perkins, Amelia Glover (the little Fawn), Cora Tinnie, George S. Knight, George K. Fortescue, James S. Moffett, Edwin S. Tarr, and Edward Morris."

## L -- FAY TEMPLETON

Rice's company commenced its September engagement with a bit of fortuitous publicity. Louise Montague, known (inexplicably, at this date) as the Ten Thousand Dollar Beauty, raised a great deal of dust when she discovered the San Francisco showbills gave more prominence to Fay Templeton than to herself. A great noise in the dressing rooms got to the stage-hands, and from the stage-hands to the world. Louise shouted

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, July 17, 1888.

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the fact that she averaged more floral tributes per performance than Fay. And bosides, had not Howell Osbourne, Fay's reckless, gambling friend, given her a definite "go-by?"

San Francisco tittered and talked, and waited impatiently for the opening night. There was not only a fine feud of the prima donnas to observe; there was also the gossip about Fay's trunkless legs to corroborate.

It was definitely Fay Templeton's show. Louise Montague might have been dubbed The Beauty Ten Times Grand by the International Committee for the Judgment of Pulchritude, but said committee had surely missed the mark in so doing, for Louise was no beauty. She had a voice, the press agreed, but it needed training, and the race itself was no place to train a dark horse. But Fay Tompleton was exactly what she was declared to be:

"Fay Templeton's figure is ideal, and bubbles up out of its tights as lavishly as Venus's did out of the sea. The most delicate imagination would not have a surfoit in dwelling on what is not displayed with charming frankness. Yet, somehow, one would as soon accuse Venus or Puck of immodesty as Fay. Undress many another woman to the extent that she displays, and the shock to the sensibilities would be terrific."

But there was some disagreement as to how much San Francisco sensibilities could take. Rice was no doubt delighted when the <u>Bulletin</u> for September 18, 1888 intimated there might be a tinge of immorality in Templeton, not enough for a court case, just the right quantity for good publicity:

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, September 22, 1888.

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"(Fay Templeton's) costume as 'Gabriel' was handsome, but is open to the objection that exposure is made a study. There is a point up to which display in a piece of this character is pleasing to the artistic eye, but the line or point should be kept carefully in view. A tendency to get on the wrong side should be corrected."

"The costumes were gorgeous, the play of lights artistic and the Amazons themselves exceedingly pretty girls."\*
But the humor of the piece had disappeared. George Knight's imitation of General Butler came off only in the matter of the General's bad eye. "Mr. Knight looked as a distant relative might who inherited only the defect."\* And the Lone Fisherman as interpreted by James 3. Moffett had better romained alone and invisible. "The Lone Fisherman as a novelty could once beguile us of a tolerant smile, where now he wakes a weary yawn."\*\*

As for the words themselves which were hurled at the audience, Betsy B. of the Argonaut (September 24, 1888) permitted herself an interesting divagation:

"If a man were to make a pun in general society today, people would suppose he was not well.... But the reader of Lacey's Acting Plays will find whole volumes of burlesques, partly in prose, partly in doggerel, the humor of which consists exclusively of puns. He who reads them today feels a tender commiseration for the generation which enjoyed that kind of thing."

"Evangeline appears to be one of these pieces, resurrected from a grave in which that class of literature was peacefully sleeping. The personages vie with each other in punning. Evangeline makes puns; her lover, Gabriol, makes puns;

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, September 18, 1888. \*\*Argonaut, September 24, 1888.

they all make puns in fierce rivalry, and they have to enunciate their verbal acrobatics with painful distinctness for fear the audience would lose them. This involves a strain on the audience which is very trying. When Evangeline's father reproves her for careless diction, he warns her against the use of 'slanguage'; and, after an effort, one realized that a pun has been committed."

But the people liked the artfulness of Fay Templeton's undress. And apparently there was no satisty in the American public for Amazon marches. Evangeline packed the Baldwin Theatre for four weeks, and, with the audience still flowing in the right direction, Rice's company opened immediately with its second production, The Corsair.

entertaining burlesque than Evangeline, and that was about the size of it. The cast remained the same; the allure was the same. It was a matter of investing in a new set of costumes, "as bright and handsome as money can make them." And Fay Templeton, as a matter of course, was given the title role. Things were getting dull. The hair pulling recriminations of the luminaries had died down. It was obvious by this time that Templeton's was the star which filled the houses.

Besides, other things were in the air. The Bulletin for October 6, 1888 had run the following announcement:

"M. B. Leavitt has returned from Europe with a number of new attractions. Among them are the Lydia Thompson English Burlesque Company and Leavitt's Folly and Burlesque Company."

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, October 23, 1888.

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Leavitt, by this time, had become manager of the largest vaudeville circuit in America; and a vaudeville circuit must be constantly refreshed. Leavitt's tactic was an annual transatlantic trek, at which time he put the best European performers under contract. His last visit to London had given him the idea that a farewell tour of The States by Lydia Thompson was sure to be a money-maker, so he sought out the great and original blonde. She had invested her fortune badly; she was easy to talk to. But she remonstrated her age -- twenty years had passed since her first American appearance -- and where was the dazzling cohort of Amazons who had made up her famous company?

Leavitt put the whole proposition on the basis of honorary revival. The public would not be made to expect a Lydia Thompson, concealing her age beneath heavy layers of make-up; the publicity, instead, would emphasize the graceful willingness of the first and greatest burlesque queen to reappear for a last time. Besides, Lydia was not entirely superannuated as an entertainer. Vigorously in hor forties, Lydia was still somewhat the ideal figure of the times. And the old vivacity of expression had not dimmed appreciably; at any rate, not if footlights were put between her and the observer. It was a big scoop for Leavitt, and all other theat-rical announcements for the 1888-1889 season paled in comparison.

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#### LI -- THE BLACK CROOK RESUSCITATED

Apparently, no winter season -- even with Lydia Thompson announced for January 29 at the Bush Street Theatre -- could elapse without a production of The Black Crook. The management of the Grand Opera House was intrepid enough to attempt the annual revival. Ill-advised, certainly, for there was no headlined star, no new spectacular effect, no extravagant costuming. There was just The Black Crook, and less of that, surely, since another year had fallen upon its slowly collapsing architecture.

The 1889 resuscitation of Stalacta was a wasted gesture, but the comments of the San Francisco News Letter critic (January 19,1889) have unusual importance for this chronicle:

"The Black Crock gets sheared of its original 'glories' more and more at each presentation. Originally a melodrama of the rankest kind, what is it now? It is about a quarter of a century since Charles M. Barras was haunting the theatrical managers of New York to induce them to produce a new melodrama. No one would touch it. Finally one of them, who had a ballet troupe on his hands, and did not know what to do with them, took the melodrama, cut it liberally, introduced his ballet, tacked on a transformation scene as a peroration, and made a sensation and a success. Barras made a fortune out of it, but died brokenhearted because his 'beautiful play' had been spoiled by the ballet ... Probably not one 20th of the original play is given this week at the Grand Opera House. The rest is ballet. could even dispense with the one-twentieth, it is so insufferably stupid. The operatta ballet, introducing dances to music and with costumes from The Mikado, Patience, The Little Tycoon and other operas, is original and taking. The Black Crook will be continued another week.

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"To speak the language of the prize ring, burlesque received a black eye when H. M. S. Pinafore was launched on the London theatrical docks, and from that 'knock-down' blow it has never recovered. Burlesque has never seemed so funny since. We took it previous to that day because we had nothing else to take. Really there is little excuse for it now."

#### LII -- LYDIA THOMPSON'S FAREWELL TOUR

"Lydia Thompson, who might be called the mother of burlesque in this country--if burlesque ever had a motherly age--will appear at the Bush Street Theatre on January 29th. She recently met with a slight mishap in New York. It seems that her silk costume had not been finished when she left England, and so it was sent to her in a letter by mail. The postal authorities, suspecting that all was not right, opened the package and notified her that her tights were dutiable, and that it would cost her Two Dollars to obtain her theatrical wardrobe. The Two Dollars were paid, and the engagement at the Bush Street Theatre will not be postponed."

With this bit of heavy-handed ballyhoo, the press prepared San Franciscans for the great advent. The burlesque Columbus started things off on January 26, three days ahead of the scheduled opening. The burlesques Penelope and Robinson Crusoe followed in quick succession, with an immediate revival of Penelope when Robinson Crusoe failed to draw.

As for the productions themselves, the press had little to say. The <u>Bulletin</u> announced on January 28 that there were "good specialists in the company, and a number of pretty girls in picturesque costumes, who sing in the chorus, form in groups, and keep things generally in motion." The

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, January 7, 1889.

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San Francisco News Letter for February 9, 1889 made the easy discovery that "the company may be said to be clothed in smiles, as it were, and not much else..." The Bulletin for February 12 laid the failure of Robinson Crusoe to "an evident tendency to rely upon special acts instead of making the play the first attraction." These were the inevitable statements which needed no reiteration, the easy echolalia of tired dramatic critics confronted with a boring rehash of yesterday's excitement.

It was another matter when the press came to write about Lydia Thompson. Her reappearance was a touchstone to memories of the entire post-war period.

"When Miss Thompson and her golden-haired Amazons first landed on American soil, they did not exactly follow the example of the Pilgrim fathers, 'who,' says Secretary Evarts, 'first fell upon their lnees and then fell upon the aborigines,' but there was a similarity in the mode of attack. They came over a long time ago, not quite on the Mayflower, not even 'Before de Wah,' the B. C. period of American history but somewhere in the late sixties. They were quite new, nothing of that kind had ever been seen before, and they were really handsome."\*

According to the <u>Bulletin</u> for January 28, Lydia Thompson "has retained her neat figure, her vivacity, grace and expression. She does not sing with the same effect as at one time in her career, but in other respects she does not seem much changed." Marie Williams and Rose Newham, Lydia's co-stars in the 1889 company, might be proficient assistants,

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, February 4, 1889.

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but what chance would they stand against Pauline Markham and Lisa Weber, Lydia's co-stars in 1868?

"Miss Pauline Markham was the beauty, and also was extravagant enough to have a rich pleasant voice. For two years she was the admiration of New York...Miss Markham was as luxurious and extravagant as an 'Ouida' heroine. Her apartments shamed in richness those of Prince Djalma, all black marble and white velvet, with ermine carpets. Her diamonds were the finest to be had, her pearls were like those presented to Lady Corisandi by the princely Lothair. She even had the honor of being put into a very stupid novel. She rose to the crest of the wave. Years after, ugly, old, and ill, she appeared in Buffalo, was forced through sickness to break her contract, and died in poverty and obscurity.

"While Miss Markham was the beauty, Miss Lisa Weber was the brains of the company. Miss Weber was of good parentage and had been educated and brought up in a cultivated manner. She was not a bit pretty, but she was clever. She was one of those people who can do anything.
...Miss Weber, too, could compose music, and sing, and write. When the company got into difficulties she could always get them out again. Upon one dreadful occasion a wicked costumer played them false, and Miss Weber designed and executed costumes more ravishing than anything ever seen before.

"In the course of time she too disappeared with the other old familiar faces, to reappear some six years ago in Leadville, then booming gloriously. She had several irons in the fire, and was a subdued and preoccupied woman of business. She was a rentière, owning several houses, and she had the sole right to some popular comic operas. Then she opened a little restaurant, where the fare was extra dainty, and epicures could get Eastern oysters less than three weeks old, and various delicious made-dishes. It was not a success, though Miss Weber devoted herself to it. She was a familiar figure in those days, arguing with the butcher and haggling at the fruit-stands over a box of half-ripe California plums. She was probably as good-looking as she

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had ever been--a tall, plain woman with rough reddish hair, a shrewd peaked face, and beautiful dark-brown eyes, probably a heritage from her mother, who was a Portuguese. She always wore a seal-skin coat and a black turban hat, always walked rapidly, brushing her way between the groups of miners on the kerb, with a brown paper roll under her arm, and an absorbed expression in her handsome eyes.

"The memories of the others are vague. Edith Challice, one of the most beautiful, is dead. It was she who went to a New York Charity Ball in a white-silk dress with the front studded with artificial tea-rose buds--a fashion which was afterward widely copied--and a white-lace shawl pinned round her neck. In those days the four hundred attended the charity ball, and even mingled with the dancers in a magnificent sort of way. They were staggered by her beauty....

"Out of the galaxy of stars, Miss Thompson alone remains, "\*

Quickly recalled to mind, these personalities were again as quickly forgotten. The past which had been cleaved open by Lydia Thompson's farewell tour, congealed again behind the printed page where amusement headlines shifted their attention to the opera season at the Tivoli. The violent dip in burlesque production was not to be picked up again until late in the ensuing fall.

## LIII -- THE KIRALFY BALLET

Bolossy Kiralfy's company opened at the California Theatre in the burlesque Antiope, November 15, 1889. The production was principally an exhibition of the Kiralfy ballet. The pretense at plot was perhaps worse than none at all. Two

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, February 4, 1889.

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story elements continually interrupted the gyrations and tableaux of the dancers. There was the triangular strain of the
Prince, the Queen, and Antiope. The Queen loved the Prince
and the Prince loved Antiope. This fact was reiterated in
"blank verse, colloquial American, strenuous English, and
finally in stately Alexandrines,"\* with the odds obviously
favoring the Prince-Antiope combination. And there was the
story thread of Discord and Concord. Whenever the valentine
lace of the dance background had to be changed, this ancient
pair came before a simple flat towards the front of the stage
and wrestled with their mighty theme. The theme of the conversational encounter was so large that it was completely dissipated by the time it arrived at a hasty newspaper review;
but the costuming of the titanic combatants was beautiful and
was there for everybody to see.

Somehow these moments of scene-shifting boredom were to be compensated for by the dancing of the soloists and the ballet. There was Mlle. Paris, "prima assoluta" of the entire troupe.

"The prima assoluta, Mlle. Paris, is of the Italian school at La Scala, the school of which Cavalazza is now the head. Their dancing always seems more surprising and remarkable than beautiful. It is a sort of tour de force that raises your wonder, but not your admiration. Looking at Mlle. Paris flying across the stage on the tips of her toes, one cannot but marvel at the agility and dexterity of her movements, but of grace there is none.... She is more like a

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 18, 1889.

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piece of steel mechanism than a woman, every movement exact, but there is no individuality in robbing it of most of its charm."\*

In a moment of good management, Kiralfy decided that Mlle. Carmencita should appear immediately after Mlle. Paris.

"Could anything be more unlike Mlle. Paris's performance than Mlle. Carmencita's performance? This is all personality, the individuality of the danseuse is almost too highly colored. There is no observable method in her wild posturing, or perpetual sinuous motions, but there is something barbaric in their unrestrained spontaneity. Carmencita looks as if she might invent her strange dance as she went along, inspired by the rhythmic throb of the music."

This excellence of the "primas" put the inadequacy of the "secundas" in a very bad light. And as for the rank and file coryphées, they were found "so out of training and nervous that they destroy some exceedingly pretty effects."\*

At one point in the burlesque, the Queen pleaded with her Amazonian followers that they

"Swear death to the whole Illyrian race Or die in the attempt !"

But the ballet was recalcitrant with bad training and stage fright, and the authoritative order was heard finally to come from the wings: "Get down, get down!" came the hoarse command of the director. Belatedly then, the Amazons knelt, with more awkwardness than grace, before their Queen, each one racing to pronounce the lost cue: "We swear! We swear!"

The denouement of the extravaganza depicted the grandiose annihilation of the Queen and her Valkyrian phalanx in their assault upon Illyria.

<sup>\*</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>20</sup> July 4.

"The Queen is brought in, chained. She bows her head and tames her heart of fire to the extent of forgiving the Prince and his bride and blessing them; whereupon there is another act devoted to revelry, and the curtain falls on a grand tableau, with Mlle. Paris pirouetting in the midst."\*

#### LIV -- DAVID HENDERSON

The time between 1890 and 1900 is a fixed period only for the career of David Henderson, impresario of the so-called "Chicago style" in burlesque extravaganza. Henderson's success was more the success of a city, than his own. Chicago was coming into maturity as the great, central city of the country, with a concomitant slang, a typical set of jokes, a manner of dress, and some indigenous ideas for dance steps. Henderson, as manager of the Chicago Opera House, was on the ground floor of this rise of a city. In an effort to summarize the significance of Henderson and the Chicago extravaganza, the San Francisco Bulletin for November 25,1893 came round to the following conclusions:

"The manager of the Chicago Opera House is fin de siècle; his methods are up-to-date--perhaps just a trifle ahead of date...Extravaganza, a style of entertainment whose introduction into this country is due to the forethought and bold policy of David Henderson, is nothing more nor less than English pantomime Americanized. And its American progenitor takes the same liberty with tradition, fable and legend as do the authors of those gorgeous but stupid spectacles which had been associated for fifty years with the historic English play-house in Drury Lane.

<sup>\*</sup> Ibid.

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"But the American extravaganza is a great advance upon its English prototype. American audiences would not accept English pantomime at any price. In American extravaganza the action is lively, the music is catchy, the effect is vivid. The appeal is made primarily to the mind and not to the appetite."

That Americans had been witnessing extravaganzas years before Henderson's ascent seems not to be taken into account. It became clear that Henderson's peculiar contribution was the unstinting splendour of the mounting (gained, according to the advertisements, for his patronage of the famous London costumiers), together with the raciness of the Chicago ideas.

His company first appeared in San Francisco in September 1890, with the extravaganza of The Crystal Slipper. From 1891 through 1894, the Henderson company appeared each consecutive fall. May 1896 and December 1899 marked the last two of its appearances. Throughout the decade Sinbad remained the most popular of the Hendersonian extravaganzas, filling four of the company's San Francisco engagements as was the case with The Crystal Slipper. Ali Baba and Aladdin Jr. which filled out only one engagement each.

The Bulletin for September 22, 1890 described The Crystal Slipper as "...a travesty on the fairy tale of Cinderella, embellished with modern music and local hits of the most amusing quality..." Illustrious burlesque stars headed the company. Eddie Foy, Louise Montague, and Ida Mülle, as leads in the acting contingent, were already stage favorites in

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San Francisco. The ballet group of the company was led by no less a premiere danseuse than Fraulein Clara Qualitz. These people were to form a permanent company which was to carry Henderson successfully through the 1894 season. At that time, Eddie Foy was to branch off with a company of his own -- lugubrious maneuver for both the neophyte impresario and the master.

In 1890, no rift in the company was visible. Eddie Foy as the comic character, Yosemite, in <u>The Crystal Slipper</u>, achieved gestures and sprung gags which tickled the most resisting of reactions, and the house roared applause. Ida Mülle was petite if not poignant as Cinderella, and Louise Montague strutted an attractive figure as the boy Prince.

"The costumes are of the richest character indescribably grand in texture and beautiful in composition of colors. The scenery is magnificent, well-drawn, highly colored and new in design and perfect in finish. The wood scene in the second act, preceding the corps de ballet, is a charming piece of painting, both with the backing that reflects the shadows of the trees, leaves and vines....The ball-room in the palace is also a well-planned picture, charmingly painted. The fan in the background is a pretty conceit, and when it opens, the prismatic fountains and surroundings are equally as hand-some."\*

Fräulein Qualitz performed as expected: precipitous flights on her toes, the giddy top-spin of the thickly-tiered ballet flounces, the incredible speed and nimbleness of her long legs in white tights. Azilla, billed as the flying dancer, was the surprise of the show.

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, September 23, 1890.

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"Azilla is truly a wonder, it being a query as how she is lifted diagonally across the stage, or rather up in the air, and again guided in an opposite direction from that in which she started."\*

With his next production in San Francisco, Sinbad at the Baldwin Theatre in September 1891, Henderson was careful of the essential thing for a producer of extravaganza; he topped his previous production in splendid effect.

"For a spectacle complete in every part, <u>Sinbad</u> is the most gorgeous yet presented to theatre-goers in this city."

Ida Mülle and Eddie Foy were still very much and successfully to the fore. Martha Irmler, new to San Francisco, contested with Clara Qualitz for leadership in the ballet. Henry Norman was the brightest newcomer among the men.

"Henry Norman, one of our favorites, is a most comical pirate chief. His make-up is ludicrous in the extreme and his acting and singing every way capital. His great song in the third act, 'The Bogie Man,' was charmingly rendered....When the management engaged Norman they found one of the best all around burlesquers on the stage."\*\*

The critic of the Argonaut recorded in detail the stage setting for this song by Norman, which "caught on" as one of the hit tunes of the nineties:

"...presto 1, the supers roll back the walls, the background rushes, wildly up into the air, the frightened coryphees flee in beautiful bewilderment to the right and left, and the scenic artist presents for your approbation a tropical isle, shimmering in a pale-green haze....In this pallid and somewhat ghostly light, Mr. Norman's

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, September 23, 1890. \*\*Tbid. September 29, 1891.

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song of 'The Bogie Man,' comes in so neatly that for the moment it achieves the feat of effacing all memory of the scenic artist....Not a word of the song was lost:

'You've got no show-You'd best lie low-Here comes the Bogie Man!'

sings Mr. Norman, tripping stealthily in the eerie light, in which all the cannibals, in their glory of beads and leopard skins, cower with fear and utter a sound between a groan and the grinding of a buzz-saw."\*

This same critic was much less impressed with the spoken word than with the singing and scenic effects of <u>Sin-bad</u>:

"The dialogue of Sinbad is nothing to boast about. It is composed mainly of Chicago jokes and slang. These, to the uninitiated, are at times a little fatiguing. They made merry about baccarat and the Prince of Wales, repeating, with good effect, the joke about 'carrying his own chips,' which was in Life over a month ago'!"\*

Ali Baba, the Henderson extravaganza for 1892, arrived in San Francisco in November. There was plenty of both old and new. Eddie Foy, Ida Mülle and Henry Norman headed the acting company. Martha Irmler had edged Clara Qualitz completely out of the picture and she was now referred to as "the premiere danseuse assoluta of the organization."\*\* Heaviest of the new assets was the new electrical equipment at the Grand Opera House.

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, October 5, 1891. \*\* Bulletin, November 28, 1892.

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"An entire new electric light plant has been put in the theatre; the stage is one mass of electric wires, and over 1,500 incandescent lights besides numerous arc and other illuminators, will lighten up the stage."\*

Henderson's reach for the ever grander effect in his annual production was approximating the fantastic. One of the special features of Ali Baba was the "Danse Diabolique." It occurred as the climax of the third act. The scene depicted "a lonesome spot in the mountains, with moss-covered rocks and spectral trees in the foreground and a fall of real water, tumbling and sparkling in the moonlight."\*\* Into this rockbound arena slowly appeared the enormous shape of a mechanical dragon. Laboriously, it reached center stage, emitting blasts of smoke and ferocious snorts from its cable-swung head, blinking its mechanical lids down over its balefully red eyes. Then from moor-beast it quickly changed to a mere surprise package. A large part of its side was seen to be a trap door from which stepped brightly-spangled coryphées. The contradiction of such a beautiful birth consecutive upon such a monstrous operation did not seem to confuse either Henderson or the audience. This particular act was one of the hits of the show.

To Frederick Daingerfield of Chicago went a great deal of credit for Henderson's success. He designed not only all of the scenery, but the costumes as well. The actual

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, December 3, 1892. \*\*Ibid. November 28, 1892.

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construction of the costumes had been entrusted to Madame Elise Freisinger and Charles Alias, famous costumiers of London.

Eddie Foy was still carrying most of the weight of the entertainment:

"Without a doubt the burden of Ali Baba, in an acting way, lies with Eddie Foy, who, if anything, is more comical than ever. From the time that he first makes his appearance to the finale he is a solid body of wit and humor, while grotesque in his actions yet with a meaning full of hearty fun, original, and new....His make-up and imitation of Lottie Collins, the original 'ta-ra-ra-Boom-dey-a' is perfect, and one of the funniest specialty acts that Foy has ever done."

This cast for 1892 remained essentially intact for the revival of <u>Sinbad</u> in 1893. Louise Royce, as Sinbad, assumed the feminine acting lead. Eddie Foy and Henry Norman were entrusted with most of the comedy. Martha Irmler was again premiere danseuse. Daingerfield was still manager of the staging.

As to the exact nature of the piece itself, the press was chary of details. If nothing else, a notice in the <u>Bulletin</u> for November 25, 1893 implied a spectacular internationalism:

"In Sinbad there will be 300 people on the stage, representatives of Italy, Spain, China, France, Germany, Russia, Egypt, India, Ireland, Scotland, England, and America."

This no doubt had reference to the grand transformation scene which was advertised as "A Tribute to America" in

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, December 5, 1892.

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"seven changes," the changes being seven arbitrary divisions of American history depicting the various influxes of European and Oriental immigrants.

The costumes were this time after designs by Russell of London, "leader of his craft."\* Much publicity was given the fact that the complete cast of three hundred went through three costume changes during the extravaganza. And nothing had been skimped in the materials:

"Notably a suit of black and gold for Sinbad, and a robe of white and silver for Ninetta are exquisite illustrations of the costumer's art. Mr. Henderson does not believe in cheap materials."\*

Nor did he believe in sparing expense when it came to the stage machinery devised by Daingerfield:

"In the new version of this extravaganza, the action of which opens in the port of Balsora at daybreak, a full-rigged private ship, the Roc, sails into the harbor and carries away all the leading personages.

"The next act shows the deck of the ship at sea and introduces a spectacular novelty in the shape of an immense panorama illustrating life on the ocean from the earliest times to the present day....

"The 'Frozen Valley of Diamonds' is Daingerfield's piece de resistance--a brilliant picture representing a frozen valley of precious stones in the fastness of the mountains."\*

During December 1894, the Hendersonian extravaganza at the Baldwin Theatre was the old but never familiar Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp; never familiar because the extravaganza idea was the use of the merest framework of the old

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, November 25, 1893.

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burlesques. The rest was extravagant trappings.

"Perhaps some day, in that distant millenium when the lion and the lamb are to be reconciled, a Chicago extravaganza may come to us where the dialoguo is entertaining and the jokes do not come from numbers of Life and Punch that go back farther than the memory of the oldest inhabitant.

"In the matter of costumes, Aladdin, Jr. distances all in its sumptuousness."

A dozen or so sturdy progenitors thus loomed right down through the development of extravaganza and into the rise of musical comedy in the 1900s: there are not only an Aladdin, Jr; there was a Robinson Crusoe, Jr; an Ali Baba Up-To-Date; a Black Crook, Up-To-Date etc.

There may have been more costume in Henderson's 1894 show, but there was less company. Eddie Foy had branched off on his own. Ida Mülle was contracted elsewhere. It was Henry Norman's show, with the excellent assistance, however, of Anna Boyd, the new leading lady.

"Henry Norman in his line of characters in burlesque has hardly an equal. Anna Boyd, the new leading woman, is dashing and full of life. Her two songs, 'I Didn't Think He'd Do It, but He Did' and 'The Girl With the Ringlets,' were cleverly sung." \*\*

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, December 24, 1894.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Bulletin, December 18, 1894.

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The art of the costumier was chiefly squandered on the Spirit of the Lamp, the Spirit of the Ring, and the Amber Ballet—the Spirit of the Lamp "in blues that shaded from the dullest and softest of tints to deep, velvety Prussian blue, with a pair of variegated wings trembling on her shoulders"; the Spirit of the Lamp with "long, web-like green wings in which he can wrap himself, or else, with extended arms, let hang its loose, silken mesh to the ground"; the Amber Ballet as "quite a symphony in yellows or in those warm golden chocolates, that pale into the faintest and most dawn—like tints of primrose."\* In Henderson's hands, American extravaganza was becoming a mere confection of dazzling color, held together by the comedian's firecracker gags, which the producer hoped would go off with a bang.

But the necessity for the annual increase in expenditure for costumes and stage settings, was inevitably piling up to Henderson's downfall. The last two of his productions which essayed as far from their Chicago base as San Francisco, both built around the situations of the early <u>Sinbad</u>, were comparative failures. The expansion of the Chicago extravaganza had reached a bursting point.

The production of Sinbad in 1896 was enough of a trial for Henderson. Oscar Girard, as the comedian, made no great splash in the water. And it seemed sufficient to the

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, December 24, 1894.

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press to mention that Louise Eissing was playing Sinbad. Three years of cclipse followed. In 1899, Henderson again reached San Francisco, and again with a production of Sinbad. The Christmas matinee at the Grand Opera House received the only press notice of the engagement. Edith Mason played Sinbad. The comedian of the company failed to receive even a passing notice. Frank King had replaced Frederick Daingerfield and was credited with the intricacies of a transformation scene entitled, "The Evolution of Nature, in eight changes."

Henderson had taken the Chicago extravaganza through as many progressive changes from splendid to more splendid. He had completed the development of that part of the American theatre which had commenced with The Black Crook in the late sixties. The exterior dazzle of burlesque had increased in galloping proportion to the satirical dialogue in the heart of the matter, and the audiences were becoming surfeited. Two young men from New York's east side were to discover this quite accidentally. In 1900 Joe Weber and Lew Fields, at their Music Hall in New York City, were pruning away all the dead weight of extravaganza and revealing the true function of burlesque as it had been known in the early San Francisco theatre. But the results of their genius was not to be felt in San Francisco until 1902.

### LV -- EXTRAVAGANZA AT THE TIVOLI

The career of local extravaganza at the Tîvoli Opera House paralleled the career of Henderson's Chicago 

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extravaganza and extended beyond it right up to the moment of the epoch-making fire of 1906. During the nineties there were three or four spectacular productions each season. The turn of the century, 1899 to 1902 -- a bad time for the theatre -- saw burlesque extravaganza at the Tivoli reduced to the one sure drawing card, the annual Mother Goose spectacle at Christmas time.

There were few repeats in this long span of production. The title meant little anyway, considering that no burlesque was ever played "straight,"but was always refurbished, redecorated. All the familiar names were played upon: Beauty and the Beast, Ali Baba, Don Juan Ad. Lib., Lalla Rookh, Little Robinson Crusce, Ixion, Bluebeard, A Trip to the Moon, The Babes in the Wood, Jack and the Beanstalk, Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp, The Strange Adventures of Jack and Jill, The Yellow Dwarf, Goldilocks, Little Bo-Peep, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, King Dodo, Orpheus in Hades.

The Tivoli company, essentially local and permanent, had to be good. From 1890 to 1906, the ability of these San Francisco burlesquers was to be challenged by such distinquished visitors as the Henderson Company, the Edward "Everlasting" Rice Company, the Matthews and Bulger company. Later there was to be the competition of vaudeville at the California Theatre under the management of Charles P. Hall and the vogue of the Weber and Fields type of burlesque as presented to San Francisco by the comedians Kolb and Dill.

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The Tivoli company weathered all of these vicissitudes. The Christmas pantomime at the Tivoli Opera House became one of San Francisco's institutions. Tillie Salinger, Gracie Plaisted, Phil Branson, Ferris Hartman: these actors laid the foundation for the permanent company. Later would come John P. Wilson, W. M. West, Louise Royce, John J. Raffael, Edwin Stevens, Edith Hall, Anna Lichter, Annie Myers. Oscar L. Fest was to acquire a stardom of his own as scenic designer. But the long experience of the Tivoli with burlesque extravaganza and spectacular pantomime was to be dominated by Ferris Hartman. He had begun his career as a singer in light opera; had discovered his ability as a comedian in The Island of Zenobar, holiday spectacle at the Tivoli in 1891; had been assumed not only most of the chief comedy roles in the Tivoli burlesques but also the capacity of director.

The thirty-odd burlesque extravaganzas produced at the Tivoli between 1890 and 1906 contributed nothing to the development of burlesque itself. As productions they were efficient reproductions of tried forms and formulas. There was not only the splendor of the Chicago extravaganza; there was also the fantasy of the English, fairy tale pantomimes. A well trained ballet carried on the leg-show tradition of The Black Crook. And there were transformation scenes, each one a more devastating bit of gorgeous illusion than the last. A deepening vista revealed "The Age of Progress," or the "dainty changes," described "Our Childhood's Fancies," or,

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, December 18, 1897.

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again, luscious involutions exposed "The Birth of the Rose." The <u>Bulletin</u> for December 27, 1894, names all the elements of one of the transformation scenes at the Tivoli, but fails to record the title. An all-inclusive title for these disparate elements was no doubt unthinkable:

"The transformation scene that developed from an alcove in the Peris' gardens through the birth of the flowers, the splendid spider-web, the true-to-life pictures of a New England New Year's day to the finale where Feramorz and 'Lalla Rookh,' in front of the revolving wheel, faced the audience with the pretty children suspended in mid-air in front of them, was the most artistic work ever seen in San Francisco."

Aside from the popular songs of the time, Offenbach continued to furnish most of the musical score. Max Hirschfeld, musical director of the Tivoli for several seasons, provided a good many original compositions; but the advertisement usually read "music composed and selected by Max Hirschfeld." In the Argonaut for June 20, 1898, the eclecticism of most burlesque music was very openly confessed: "the music is by Lecocq with additions by Max Hirschfeld, John Philip Sousa, Victor Herbert, Reginald de Koven and others." This advertisement had to do with a midsummer production of Ali Baba; or Cassim and the Forty Thieves.

The slow death of many traditions was to be accelerated by the great fire of 1906. After the event, during the period of reconstruction, things alive were to be more obviously alive; things dead more obviously dead. The fire was to prove a real, uncompromising transformation scene. If

one looked closely, however, the anlage of theatrical change was visible long before the fire. Already in the eighteennineties, while Oscar Fest's frilled scenery at the Tivoli
was penetrating, by means of seven changes, to the heart of
some such enormous subject as The Development of Nations,
rumors of a new kind of burlesque at Weber and Field's Music
Hall in New York City were reaching the West.

## LVI -- BEGINNINGS OF RAGTIME

Late in October 1899, the Columbia Theatre was packed for a return engagement of the Matthews and Bulger company in a revival of their "nonsensical hodgepodge," By the Sad Sea Waves.\* Twice in 1898, the company had played in San Francisco on a coast to coast tour and Matthews and Bulger had gained very profitable reputations locally as knockabout comedians. There was nothing extraordinary about most of their performance. At Gay Coney Island and By the Sad Sea Waves, the two pieces presented in 1898, were little more than vaudeville programs loosely held together by plots flexible enough to be adapted to whatever gag might draw a laugh. The thing of interest is a phrase in the advance publicity for By the Sad Sea Waves which was announced as " a ragtime opera." In the review published in the Argonaut for October 24, 1898, there is the further reference to Ned Wayburn, a member of the company, whose "ragtime playing is a hit."

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, October 30, 1899.

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This is surely on the trail of musical history A year later, in a review of the return engagement of the company in By the Sad Sea Waves, the Argonaut states:

"In addition to their (Matthews' and Bulger's) new business and up-to-date jokes, a number of clever specialties have been introduced, notably the plastic poses of Mile. de Seye. Aside from the stars, Bessie Challenger as Sis Hopkins, Tony Hart as a droll German and Ned Wayburn, the man who invented ragtime, are especially worthy of mention. Three songs which are encored nightly and are sure to be whistled on the streets are 'You Told Me You Had Money in the Bank,' 'Japanese Baby,' and 'Ise Found yo Honey.'"

Ragtime was to become one of the first important contributions of America to the development of contemporary music.\*\* American burlesque had doubtless felt and executed the particular rhythm of ragtime long before the appearance of Ned Wayburn who is credited with its "invention." In an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, October 29, 1899, Wayburn clarified the origin of ragtime to a certain extent, but also persisted in an illusion of parthenogenesis:

"This is the picture of Mrs. Wayburn, who with her husband's assistance, invented "ragtime." Both are members of the Matthews & Bulger's By the Sad Sea Waves Company, which opens at the Columbia Theatre to-night, and this is how Mr. Wayburn describes the discovery that he has since executed on the piano until he is famous:

"'We were traveling through the South some years ago' he continued, 'and we both noticed a peculiar something about the impromptu ditties of the younger element of the Negroes on the plantation. Their modern songs seemed somewhat different from the old-time melodies that used to

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 6, 1899. \*\*e.g. Igor Stravinsky's Ragtime for Eleven Instruments.

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charm our boyhood with visions of Little Eva and Uncle Tom. What that something was we could not exactly tell, still it was different. We caught ourselves unconsciously humming these peculiar strains and trying to reduce them or conform them to some musical law.

"'One morning my wife woke up and astonished me with a genuine burst of what is now called ragtime. "I have it," she said, "it came to me in a dream." The peculiar something is simple syncopate, a contraction of the measure by taking (sic) from the middle and abruptly ending each word with a sound of ah. I set to work to reduce her dream theory to practice, and the result astonished me. I soon found that I could turn every song and musical number into genuine rag-time.'"

Interesting details were added in an article in the San Francisco Examiner for October 30, 1899, entitled "Pale-White Tights and Pumpkin-Colored Rag Time":

"... as before, the real sensation is Ned Wayburn, the rag-time virtuoso. There are many ragtimers, but there is but one Wayburn, and he composed Syncopated Sandy, the most dare-devil, razoredged, pumpkin-colored stunt in the whole literature of fancy 'nigger' syncopation. The one original, national note that has been struck in American music is rag-time; it is the ancestor of our future folk songs; and Wayburn is its prophet. He is the May Irwin of the pianoforte. The other man doesn't live who can coax the same essence from the rigid ivories of a secondrate backparlor upright. Mr. Wayburn is not a reverent ragster. All composers prance alike under his fingers. Even the nuptial harmonies of Mendelssohn's March were given out in weird syncopation at the Columbia last night, and to Mr. de Koven's 'Promise Me' was annexed a sportive tilt that brought awful visions of Jessie Bartlett Davis in the pleasures of the cake walk. Then came a wild medley of real rags, winding up with the incomparable 'Sandy.'"

### LVII -- THE TEN GAY YEARS

David Henderson, Ferris Hartman and the Tivoli Company, Matthews and Bulger with Ned Wayburn: these furnish the defined by the second of the second and the second at the

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brightest configurations in the 1890-1900 decade of burlesque in San Francisco. There were other successes, other bright, and even brighter, lights; but none so persistent throughout the ten gay years.

Appropriately enough the last decade of burlesque in the nineteenth century was bracketed by the character of the Lone Fisherman, one of the few contributions of American burlesque to the old characters of pantomime. In April 1890, the Lone Fisherman was played by James M.Moffett, in a revival of Evangeline by a local company at the California Theatre. The century went out with another revival of Evangeline, this time at the Grand Opera House, with Fred Cooper, a famous comedian, playing the taciturn, misanthropic pescador. There was a glance backward in the reviews, for Joe Weston and Joe Clarke, a new dancing team with the first brush of fame, were cast as the front and hind legs of the talking heifer in Evangeline, roles which had started Nat Goodwin and Harry Dixey off to stardom years before.

Harry Dixey had appeared last in San Francisco in September 1890. The piece was called The Seven Ages and started off with a rhetorical dialogue between an actor got up to resemble the Bard of Avon, and another in the long, flowing robes of a female character with the vaguely meaningful name of Avonia. Once the span of human life had been neatly partitioned into seven compartments, the play began. It was an historical pastiche, with the British taking New

## FERRIS HARTMAN (1862 - 1931)



In the role of the Toymaker with his two children, Paul and Josephine Hartman.

PHOTO FROM THE COLLECTION OF MR. GEORGE POULTNEY

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York with the aid of some light-colored Indians -- why light-colored never being intimated in the reviews. The piece ended with a tableau, supposedly overwhelming, depicting the interior of a tavern. But the gleaming copper pots, the long clay pipes, and the deep lace cuffs of the convivial scene failed of a response, and the press picked out, as high spot of the occasion, the scene in which Dixey, wrapped in a cloak, swung himself upon a tight-reined horse, stretched out his right hand, and looked, for all the audience could tell, the exact replica of the George "ashington statue in New York City's Union Square. Harry Dixey had followed the indicated course from his famous impersonation of Henry Irving -- he was no longer engaged in the lively obliqueness of burlesque, but in the dead straightness of imitation.

Dixey settled back into the obscure warp and woof of the times, and Fay Templeton emerged. She had been in retirement and her return to the stage was especially well advertised by a fortunate coincidence. The Templeton diamonds, en route to America, were snagged by the limed twigs of the United States customs officials. Templeton whimpered to the press that no laws had been broken; that she had pawned the jewels three years before in Paris; that they were rightfully hers and no one could prevent their redemption. The whole country listened to every word. Howell Osborn, her long-established amour in the public eye, had been having a turn of luck at baccarat, and his horses at the Paris races

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were nosing in. Why should he not redeem her jewels if he chose to do so? Itemized lists of the diamonds followed. The more spectacular pieces were a gold chatelaine with five toilet attachments; one watch "no bigger than a nickel"; one gold necklace with diamond and ruby charms.

Shortly after the restitution of her diamonds, Fay Templeton appeared in San Francisco at the California Theatre in a burlesque called Miss McGinty. \*The burlesque itself was passed over as inconsequential, but "the Fay," after years of absence, still justified herself with local theatre-goers as the star of the show. Harping critics disparagingly made mention of a slight corpulence, and signs of wear in her voice. But Templeton was to give them all the lie with another decade of successful stardom at the Weber and Fields Music Hall in New York. In fact, she continued to worry the press of the nineties with numerous and youngish escapades. In October 1896 there was the news that she had eloped. The remarks of a New York manager, unnamed, immediately appeared in all the papers. Fay's out of the frying pan and into the fire technique in her love affairs was beneficial to her career as a burlesque queen, the New York manager was quoted as saying. And further, "if she was legitimate," he declared "a scandal would hurt her in a business way. An actress of serious roles is worth more to the play and the manager if

<sup>\*</sup> January 20, 1891.

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she is known to be a woman of unblemished character. The intended dramatic effect is defeated if the audience knows that the mimic personator of the heroine is herself the opposite of the character portrayed.

The following summer, the well-known face and figure of "the Fay" again illustrated the press. Howell Osborn was dead. and his relationship with Fav was rehashed in consecutive chapters in every paper of the country. The springboard of the difficulties was his mother's will which had stated that, if Howell should marry an actress, he was to be cut off as beneficiary of her legacy. With his own death, the Osborn clan descended upon the remains of the fortune, dug up the old clause in the mother's will, and attempted to direct it at Fay who had been mentioned in Howell's will as recipient of \$100,000. The marriage of Fay Templeton to Howell Osborn had however never been established, and the executor of Osborn's will easily won all of his points when the matter was brought to trial. The San Francisco Argonaut for June 21, 1897, concluded that "...the sloe-eyed soubrette will probably come into her money and retire from the stage. 17

Or again it was the face and figure of Corinne, star of the Jennie C. Kimball Opera Comique and Burlesque Company. Mrs. Kimball was noted as one of the shrewdest managers in the business, and had lifted Corinne to widespread

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut October 5, 1896.

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fame. Corinne first appeared in San Francisco in February 1891 at the Bush Street Theatre. Of the two burlesques given, Monte Cristo, Jr. and a burlesque Carmen, little was said by the critics except that Corinne's "imitation" of Carmencita, the Spanish dancer, won "rounds of applause." But the five years between 1891 and Corinne's second San Francisco appearance in 1896, had accumulated such fame about her name that all the reviews were very detailed and personalized.

"A story follows Corinne to this city that a mining company has been organized at Low Mountain, Cripple Creek, with her name, and that she and Mrs. Kimball have been presented with 25,000 shares of stock.... In her latest London hit, 'Louisiana Lou' -- which like all London musical hall songs, has but little meaning-the young lady wore a black satin evening dress suit, so bedecked with gems that she looked like a station at the Kimberly diamond fields after a wash-up. We presume the stones are real. as Mrs. Kimball gave Corinne last Christmas a diamond-encrusted watch worth \$5,000. Under such circumstances paste would be scorned. final act of the extravaganza (Hendrick Hudson Jr.) is a whirl of specialties, the best one being the burlesque of that part of Paul Potter's, Trilby in the foyer and concort, where Corinne sings 'Ben Bolt' and Svengali dies."

A few months before Corinne's final appearance in San Francisco the succeeding autumn, Mrs. Kimball died, leaving her fortune "expressed in six figures" to Corinne. The company immediately assumed the name of The Corinne Extravaganza Company, none of the dates were cancelled, and the

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, February 17, 1891. \*\*Ibid. February 1, 1896.

theatrical world occupied itself with the temerity of the burlesque queen's venture, now that the "business head" of the company was no more. The odds were against success, especially since Corinne had the admitted failing of most burlesque actresses of coveting a "legitimate" career. There is no record of her efforts in this direction, and a curious note in the Argonaut for December 7, 1896, signs Corinne's epitaph on the theatrical scene:

"Corinne made her will while in this city, and bequeathed her entire estate, which will be not less than three-quarters of a million to the founding of a 'home for aged and unemployed actresses."

Her last appearance had been splendid. "In the last act of Hendrick Hudson, Jr., Corinne will wear all her diamonds, among which is a single stone, weighing forty-two and one-third carats, valued at \$15,000.\*

In and out of all the big cities, throughout the nineties, making money wherever it stopped, M. B. Leavitt's colossal production of <u>The Spider and The Fly</u> put up its sign. It was the Hendersonian type of extravaganza and contributed nothing to the history of burlesque except quantity -- something was bigger, or there was more of it, or it cost more. The first San Francisco engagement, March 1892, was prefaced with the loudest sort of publicity. The costumes were not by anyone so provincial as an American, but by Charles Alias of London; and Europe had been combed for its most celebrated

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 9, 1896.

vaudeville specialties; and, to top it all, it was declared that The Spider and The Fly was no mere extravaganza, but also contained elements of opera bouffe, spectacle, pantomime, and comedy. The publicity closed with the hardheaded bit of information that "the show requires two 60-foot baggage cars to transport the scenery, costumes, electric effects, and paraphernalia of the piece. " This en massed splendor of the production almost concealed the single fact of interest; Charles Ravel, last survivor of the great Ravel family of pantomimists, was a member of the company. His act is nowhere described. He was not starred. The satirical pantomime of the Commedia dell' Arte--at the beginning of the nineteenth century still alive in the hands of Grimaldi, preserved somewhat in the acrobatic pantomimes of first the Ravels and then the Martinettis -- was here finally in the last, lonely Ravel ignominiously snared in the glitter and noise of The Spider and the Fly.

And the glitter would be folded away, and the noise would be stilled, and the two 60-foot baggage cars would haul the big show to its next engagement; up and down, and across the continent, the iron wheels of the new trunk lines, transporting the tinselled deadness of the American extravaganza.

Edward "Everlasting" Rice was on the road too.

Twice during the nineties, December 1895 and March 1898, an

Edward Rice Company presented to San Franciscans the extravaganza 1 4 9 2. In May 1897, Rice brought his company West in

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, January 7, 1893.

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<sup>.</sup> F. 210 11 , Triby 7 1939,

the sure-fire oldness of Excelsior, Jr. With a production of the apparently eternal Evangeline at the Grand Opera House in December 1899. Rice helped San Franciscans close the century.

The burlesque 1492 was Rice's attempt to outshine Henderson. The critics, a little blinded by the glare, could not be sure; but the New York audience had kept the show running for months, and the San Francisco engagement followed an almost year-long road tour. Chief attraction was Bessie Bonehill, London music hall singer, "the first of this class of performers who is neither loud nor coarse. She has much charm, a fresh and childlike voice, and extremely good teeth."\*

The featured specialty, Herr Kilyani's Living Pictures, was not accepted so graciously in San Francisco. The Rhine Daughters, piece de resistance of Kilyani's nine tableaux, was set down as follows in the local press: "In the picture of The Rhine Daughters, one of the nymphs, attired in a flesh-colored silk union suit, lies prone upon her back on a rock, with her legs and arms curled up as though suffering from strychnine poisoning."\* But there were other things; among them, a blood-brother of the cold-blooded Izaak Walton of Evangeline: "The lone fisherman of Evangeline almost finds his counterpart in the Celt who wanders through the second act with a bull's-cye lantern as big as a milk can,

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, December 16, 1895.

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and when asked whether he was a German simply replies, 'No, I'm a policeman.'"\*

And when King Charles knocks at the door, Queen Isabella says to Ferdinand, "If the worst comes to the worst, sing him one of your songs." Ferdinand greets Charles, leads him to a chair, and says, "Sit down, King, and we'll open something. Kitty, open the window."

That was the sort of dialogue Rice purveyed to San Franciscans in 1895. The actual writing of burlesque had advanced little or not at all since the days of Burnand. The air was still congested with the dreary fun of such puns as:
"I hear that Columbus is going to live in Missouri -- I heard Pike's Peak about it."

The gags had perhaps been refreshed a little by the growing effervescence of American vaudeville. "No," says the tramp, "I can't get a recommendation -- the last man I worked for has been dead twenty years," and "I don't wear patent leath - er shoes, for the patent on them has expired." "Yes, a long time ago I saved the girl's life -- shot at her twice and missed her." But the biggest laugh of the show was drawn out by "Hello, Columbus, how did you get out of Ohio?"

The curtain of the last act came up on Richard Harlow, female impersonator, as Queen Isabella, standing before a washtub, methodically washing Ferdinand's socks, and

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, December 10, 1895.

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voicing a tearful hope for the quick return of Columbus. His return was immediate, the queen's mood changed, and she broke gaily into the song "I'm up-to-date, I dominate, for I ride a wheel," which the <u>Bulletin</u> for December 10, 1895 prophesied would "be whistled all over town in a day."

Not so with the tunes of Excelsior, Jr. in 1897. The critics were unanimous indecrying the use of such cutworn material in such a dull way. For one thing, the ballet chorines were not only inexpert, but old -- and "the older they were, the shorter grew their dresses, the more golden their hair, the more artless their manner." Except for Sadie Martinot, there was nothing worth seeing -- or hearing -- for Sadie not only put on long white gloves and waved her arms about in a recognizable burlesque of Yvette Gilbert, she also did the best of the many singing imitations of the famous Cafe Chantant Parisien. Sadie Martinot was accepted by San Francisco almost without question, one critic holding cut for the fact that Yvette had not at all Sadie's girth, and also that Sadie should give the white gloves a good washing.

From the uncompromising expenditure on details of 1492 to the slipshod production of Excelsior, Jr. was a long and significant drop. Not that Edward "Everlasting" Rice was wearing out; the American extravaganza as developed from The Black Crook was wearing out.

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, May 17, 1897.

But the father survived with the last of his children. There were two productions of <u>The Black Crook</u> in San Francisco in 1895. Springer and Welby's New York Company presented one of the revivals at Stockwell's Theatre late in March, but did no better than call forth this melancholy comment from the <u>Argonaut</u> for April 2, 1895: "One is filled with melancholy for the dear, dead days of the Kiralfy spectacles, in which the dancers could dance, singers could sing, and the actors could act."

The other revival came forth under the local aegis of the Alcazar Theatre Company, which included Thomas C. Leary, of Tivoli Opera House fame, Florence Thropp, and the Spanish dancer Matildita. The production was launched as a burlesque of the old piece and was called The Black Crook Up-to-Date; but, as one would suspect, by the time opening night came around the element of burlesque was absent and the flimsy, old story was used merely as a sketchy system of pointless construction to carry the weight of the specialty acts. The headline act was a dance by Matildita, with the support of the Big Four French Folly Dancers. Matildita, the public was assured, was actually the promiere danseuse to the Court of Spain. The publicity added, honestly enough, that the four supporting dancers, actually Americans, had only assumed their title because of their superiority to the genuine Big Four French Folly Dancers engaged for the New York revival of The Black Crook two years before.

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And then came the Liliputians, with the patronage of Czar Alexander III redounding loudly to their credit in all their publicity. The Emperor of Russia had summoned the company to the Winter Palace and had been so impressed with the performance of the diminutive people that he had given them their company name. In May 1895, they reached San Francisco with a production called <u>Humpty Dumpty Up-to-Date</u>. The tallest member of the company measured only thirty-eight inches in height, the shortest member measured a mere twenty-eight.

The technique of their productions was obviously derived from the magical pantomime so exquisitely perfected by the Ravels and Martinettis. When Humpty Dumpty is about to sit on a chair, the chair whisks to the other side of the stage; he approaches a door, and suddenly there is a solid wall before him; in order to reach a window, he steps upon a table, the table quickly elongates into a flight of stairs by which he ascends to the window; seated within the window, he glances down and the flight of stairs has disappeared into thin air.

The charming grotesquerie of the spectacle was punctuated by four ballets: The Ballet of Humpty Dumpties, The Ballet of Precious Stones and Metals, The Ballet of Flies, and The Ballet of Drinks, in which "the dresses and accessories represent coffee, tea, milk, chocolate, wine, beer, seltzers, whisky cocktails, champagne, and even Croton water. The tableau finishing this ballet consists of an immense punch

bowl, with all the Liliputians as spirits of punch. The impression conveyed here is that the little people had selected a particularly gay method of drowning. The staging of the extraordinary natatorium is nowhere described. Stage historians are free to reconstruct it, each according to his particular bibulous fancy.

In the meantime, San Francisco had been growing up. From the homogeneity of the community in its early days had developed the clear demarcation of Market Street. There was a North of Market and a South of Market; two kinds of upholstery, two vocabularies of slang; two sizes of whiskey ponies; and, very definitely, two criterions of entertainment. A New York company in the Manhattan hit, The Passing Show, at the Baldwin Theatre in October 1896, crystallized this dichotomy in the snobbish mind of the Argonaut reviewer (October 28):

"What would rejoice Tar Flat would receive the cold shoulder from Pacific Avenue. Melodrama in its temple on the other side of Market Street, would lose its glamour if it were transported to this side. And genteel comedy would have a desolate, home-sick air if they tried to domesticate it at the Tivoli....From New York, Passing Show comes stamped with the approval of that metropolis. It has been running at the Casino there, but in San Francisco it is put on at the Baldwin. Three years ago the Casino passed from the home of light opera to the home of vaudeville and variety. Its patrons changed accordingly. The Passing Show makes its appeal for popularity here to the same type of audience that enjoyed it there, and would undoubtedly rejoice in the same degree of public favor. In transit across the continent it rose in social

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, May 11, 1895.

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scale, and when it reached the uttermost limits of things out here, it was supposed to be sufficiently elevated to be presented to a representative audience of San Francisco's best. It was a mistake."

Who would have written about social scale in San Francisco entertainment from 1850 to 1860? The application of the statement in 1895 indicated, beyond the division of classes, the docadence of the theatre itself. The life of the whole people was no longer being reflected on the stage by so-called "serious" writers and actors. "Genteel comedy was for San Francisco's best." They could evidently have it without a struggle, for most of the people in town could not be baited with such foreign moeurs and language. It was the old story of Hercules and Antaeus. As long as Antaeus had contact with Terra, his mother, he was alive and kicking. All that Hercules had to do to defeat him was to lift him from the earth, whereupon he became a limp, etiolated sponge.

After 1895, the nineties sloped precipitately into the new century. Theatrical forms were on the decline. It was a period for the three backward steps after the four taken forward. Eddie Foy was back in San Francisco with a production of In Gay New York at the Baldwin Theatre (November 1897); but there was little this accomplished comedian could do for an extravaganza which was all stucco façade and no interior. The critics, after discovering that the piece was an ill-timed imitation of Rice's 1492, commented dryly that what laughter there was in the production was on

the stage. All the time-tried hypodermics were applied to the corpse of the play with little effect. Gags were hurled at the stage by actors who had been planted in the boxes. An actor, got up as a naïve provincial, sauntered down the center aisle and engaged the cast in the most irrelevant and disconcerting sort of repartee. Eddie Foy was given "that venerable role, the crushed tragedian."

"Probably it is desperation at the antiquity of his role which makes him originate a piece of business which is cortainly new, to wit, seizing the female members of the chorus one after another, and suddenly turning them upside down."\*

The only encomium In Gay New York could elicit from the press, had to do with the costuming:

"One set of costumes, where the chorus wears very short transparent black skirts, flesh-colored tights, and black stockings and garters over the tights, are about as startling a costume as was ever seen on the stage..."\*

Jeanetto Bageard contributed the inevitable "imitation" of Yvette Gilbert.

Fat and thin, old and young -- there was an Yvette Gilbert for every stage in America. If not Yvette Gilbert, then Anna Held; if not Anna Held, then Carmencita. And the play of the moment was <u>Trilby</u>. No burlesque company's baggage was complete without a Trilby-Svengali act, written hopefully for laughs.

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, November 22, 1897.

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In the meantime, great waves of immigration from southern Europe were filling in the background for the America of the twentieth century. The trusts were solidifying themselves in the narrow, forbidding financial streets of the big cities. The financial panic of the nineties, ominous fissure in the expanding structure, had been hastily patched up; Coxey's army had been driven from the White House lawn; and expert demagogy had piled up a wave of patriotism directed toward the conquest of Cuba. This real background of America had so far not been given a theatrical design. Perhaps America was too busy growing up. The country was populated, but it had been an overnight immigration. Nobody had been here long enough to mature a unified culture. The New England fringe of culture was nothing that could be purveyed to the country at large. And now that the groundwork had been laid, a division in society was becoming apparent. America had probably been settled too late for an outstanding bourgeois culture of its own.

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## THE FAVORITE NEW YORK BURLESQUE QUARTETTE



WEBER AND FIELDS! MUSIC HALL NEW YORK, 1901 PHOTO FROM ISHMAN'S, "WEBER AND FIELDS"



### LVIII -- WEBER AND FIELDS

(1900 - 1906)

In January 1898, The Conquerors opened at the Empire Theatre in New York City. Paul M. Potter, professional gobetween for French novels and the English-speaking stage, stimulated by the demand for his dramatization of Trilby, had proceeded to a dramatization of a story about the Franco-Prussian war, written by Guy de Maupassant. The Conquerors was soon regarded as on the side of dun gray in theatrical interest, but on the side of turpitudinous flame in its morality. The particularly questionable scene took place in a French inn which the Prussians had taken over. The Prussian officer leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the table -- sinister gleam of black boots -- and then bellowed drunkenly at his quarry, the little French girl, her sweet innocence backed up fearfully against the door. The officer was commanding that she drink the glass of wine which he had forced into her hand. Revolt flared up; the girl dashed the wine into the officer's face and bashed the glass upon the floor.



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The dashing and bashing of such melodramatic gestures in a serious play "uptown" were duck soup to the proprietors of the Music Hall on Twenty-ninth Street. Weber and Fields made of their burlesque The Con Curers not only the high-water mark of their second Music Hall season, but a goal to shoot at in the whole history of American burlesque. Burlesque had started off in America as a full-bill affair. Satirical dialogue and action, satirical singing and dancing, the element of the critical parody on a great but vulnerable original, had gradually diminished to the point of brief, interlarded episodes in the extravaganzas.

Weber and Fields re-expanded the satirical element to a full bill. This expansion was to be quickly compressed again by the rise of vaudeville and the Ziegfeld type of musical revue, but in 1898 in New York burlesque was on the pedestal. The first productions of Weber and Fields at the Music Hall had obtained from the daily papers the scant notices granted to all the other music halls and vaudeville houses in the city.

The significance of the Twenty-ninth Street theatre gradually emerged with each successive burlesque of a current, "serious" play; the reviews of Weber and Fields comedy lengthened, until finally the famous team was receiving more space in the papers than Richard Mansfield. The New York critics were by that time in such frame of mind that attendance on a heavy drama was always qualified by the

speculation as to how good material it might be for a burlesque by the Music Hall team. The state of mind of the producers of legitimate drama extended itself in invitations that Weber and Fields attend dress rehearsals of their plays in order that the Music Hall might get an early start on the burlesque. It came to be a superstition that a Music Hall burlesque was a play's benediction towards success.

An essay on burlesque in the San Francisco Chronicle for March 22, 1903, looks back upon this renascence and makes the essential point:

"A few years ago, they commenced a new kind of show in New York, in which, surrounded by alleged comic opera they brought in burlesques of current plays. It was crude in the time of The Passing Show, this old-fashioned new travesty, for it was based upon the same peculiarly whimsical humor of which Burnand and Byron and others were past masters: which was distinctly The American humor asserted itself later and drew away from the old forms, giving us an original kind of burlesque, distinctly Still in some of the travesties out of which Weber and Fields have made a great fortune, the same old single topsy-turvy principle prevails. But there has come a purely American treatment, not of historical subjects or around us, which has not yet been sufficiently crystallized to have a name....

"What is coming is the old, true spirit of burlesque; and it promises to be altogether cleverer than the mere turning upside down of a story, the reductio ad absurdum. It is going to be keenly satirical, while broadly funny. It is to be a development of the old art in a more difficult form....The burlesquer of the coming time...will have to be able to present more complicated values..."

The beginnings were simple. The French girl's glass of wine referred to above became a custard pie. The way for Mack Sennett and Charles Chaplin was being paved;

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but the dialogue was the thing of importance. American idioms were being used; the life of Manhattan was being reflected. And in place of the thoughtless splendor of the extravaganzas, the staging now furnished a scenic comment. Everything was in the direction of meaning, with a certain margin allowed for the sheerly ridiculous.

"In the opening scene (of The Con Curers) a bust on a pedestal had a cigar in its mouth and a military cap cocked at a rakish angle on its head. A suit of armor made of stovepipe, pots and dish pans held a mop in its hands at present arms. There was a saddle on the piano, muddy boots on the mantel, and an umbrella jar was filled with swords and muskets. Major Wolffacen, an officer of the Uhlans, spoke with an Irish brogue, drank beer from a trick stein that filled as fast as he drank. The major, in writing a dispatch to General Schloppenhauservonauserblatzen, would dip his pen in the beer, wipe it on his whiskers and dry his whiskers with a blotter. A large bird cage held a small pig. The pig was a prisoner of war because he had rooted for the enemy. Three drunken peasants were brought in as spies. They were proved spies because they had first been seen through a spyglass. All three had been fishing. old boot dangled from one hook and line. dead cat hung from another. Its owner described it as a catfish. Major Wolffacen pronounced it smelt."%

In May 1889, Weber and Fields had reached San Francisco from New York, under contract with Gustav Walter, proprietor of the Orpheum Theatre, a variety house. Constantly making ever deepening inroads into insolvency, Walter had booked the comedy team for exactly what their own advertising gags implied. And the gags of the young men, who were in their early twenties at the time, were amplified on every

<sup>\*</sup> Isman, Felix. Weber and Fields.

billboard in town. Walter intended to get out of the red, or go under completely. Fortunately for him, the dusty, impecunious comedians belied their looks. On the stage, their professional costumes sparkled, and their wit was fast.

In 1889 their act was short, but it was already flexible and alive. They were knockabout comedians and the dialect of the German-Americans was exploited. The flexibility was more than physical recoil; it had to do with the penetration of the two Jewish boys into the life of American cities. When they put a pool-room scene on the stage and paralleled the comedy of their actions with realistic dialogue lifted out of Bowery pool-rooms, they were putting up one of the milestones of the American theatre.

Weber and Fields were not to return to San Francisco until 1904. The tremendous development of burlesque at their hands in their Twenty-ninth Street music hall from 1897 to 1904, was to be re-enacted locally in faithful detail by William Kolb and Max Dill. Fischer's Theatre at 122 O'Farrell Street was to be the arena, and the season was to last for two years, from 1902 until 1904.

Weber and Fields had augmented their German immigrant dialogue with the Jewish immigrant characterizations of David Warfield; a valuable addition, for Warfield was no common comedian. Again with him, as with Weber and Fields, burlesque was not merely comic make-up and a series of gags timed as successively louder explosions. Warfield knew the streets

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# KOLB AND DILL IN "PLAYING THE PONIES"



PLAYED AT THE PRINCESS THEATRE 1908
PHOTO COURTESY OF MR. MAX DILL

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of America where a heterogeneous people were trying to establish a new life. These three immigrant characters of the New York music hall established one of the most persistent traditions of American burlesque. In San Francisco, Kolb and Dill as the two Germans were not enough; Barney Bernard was engaged to play the Jewish roles created by Warfield.

#### LIX -- KOLB AND DILL

The eighteen months from April 1902 through September 1904 at Fischer's Theatre were contiguous mirrors reflecting the productions of the famous New York music hall. The first of the series was Fiddle Dee Dee. With at least one month's run apiece, these other burlesques followed in quick succession: Pousse Cafe, Hurly Burly, Whirl-I-Gig, The Geezer, Barbara Fidgety, Hoity Toity, Helter Skelter, Twirly Whirly, Under the Red Globe, Quo Vass Iss? and The Con Curers. Sometimes the entire burlesque was a take-off on one current play: The Geezer was of course the burlesque spoliation of the fragile Geisha; Barbara Fidgety was a ticklish handling of Clyde Fitch's sober drama, Barbara Frietchie; Quo Vass Iss? was obvious barbarism for Quo Vadis; and The Con Curers gave unexpected purpose to The Conquerors.

Sometimes the attack was not so concentrated; several current dramas would receive a blow during the same evening. In this case, the first part of the program, e.g.:

Pousse Cafe, would assume originality of plot, in which some

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well-advertised characterizations by "legitimate" stars would be translated into burlesque characters:

"The Little Minister, in which Maude Adams was starring at the Garrick; La Poupée and Anna Held at the Lyric; and Belasco's The First Born at the Manhattan came in for burlesques; but the main thread of the farcical story was tied to one Herr Wielshaben and a remarkable mechanical doll of his invention..."\*

And when the plot had meandered to such widespread thinness that the bottom showed through, a specialty act would be interjected. The olio of minstrelsy had gone through some evolutions but was still not transfigured; in fact, a place like <u>Hoity Toity</u>, even with consecutiveness of plot, was often referred to as a "musical hodgepodge." The second half of the program would be the direct travesty of the current "hit" play, or of something as old and tried as <u>Antony and Cleopatra</u>. Or the old and new might be laughed at together:

"On Monday night the first of the Weber and Fields burlesques will be produced at Fischer's Theatre. It is called Fiddle-Dee-Dee, and will be followed by two travesties, one on Antony and Cleopatra, and another on the Floradora Sextet which has had such a vogue..."\*\*

The roles of Weber, Fields, and Warfield had been taken over in San Francisco by Kolb, Dill, and Bernard. Lillian Russell, as New York prototype, had passed her mantle to Maude Amber, who played the leading lady throughout the Weber and Fields era at Fischer's Theatre. Winfield Blake

<sup>\*</sup> Isman, Felix. Weber and Fields \*\*Argonaut, April 7, 1902.

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played opposite Maude Amber as straight male lead, paralleling the De Wolfe Hopper-Lillian Russell team. Flossie Hope, Gortie Emerson and Olive Vail were the leading dancers of the chorus. Frank Hermson, a diminutive person, was the little seen but much heard interior of various animal pelts: a speaking Saint Bernard dog, or a singing monkey.

Everybody was expected to sing, especially the sentimental leads, Amber and Blake. Most of the books for the Weber and Fields burlesques were being written by Edgar Smith; most of the music by John Stromberg. Their collaboration had established another high criterion for the American theatre, and their songs, once presented in New York, reached a nation-wide diffusion months ahead of the tour of the production. Here was the beginning of today's Tin-Pan Alley. Among the many Stromberg tunes with the magic ability to "catch on and hold," were "Kiss Me, Honey, Do"; "I'm A Respectable Workin' Girl"; "How I Love My Lu"; "De Pullman Porters' Ball"; "When Chloe Sings a Song"; "Come Back My Honey Boy to Me"; "Rosie, You Are My Posie"; and "Ma Blushin' Rose."

Today, straight on, the dialogue of the Weber and Fields burlesques does not sparkle; but seen in retrospect against the rhymed, mythological burlesques of the Englishmen Burnand and Planche, the milestone is sharply visible. From Whirl-I-Gig there is the repartee:

FIFI: You might bring me a demi-tasse. COHENSKI: Bring me the same, and a cup of coffee.

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# WINFIELD BLAKE AND MAUDE AMBER (1868-1932) (1871-1938)



IN THE BURLESQUE HOITY TOITY, FISCHER'S THEATRE 1902
PHOTO COURTESY OF MR. MAX. DILL



Moss has grown? But there is the freshness of the following gag from Hurly Burly:

KOLB: So this is Paris!

DILL: There is no other place around the place,

so this must be the place.

The nineteenth-century predilection for puns stubbornly endured. There is this sequence from Quo Vass Iss:

RANCHER: Hold on! The cow stamped upon this letter. The cow belongs to the government, hence it is a government stamp.

I reckon you wouldn't obstruct the mails, colonel.

COLONEL: There's nothing male about a cow.

RANCHER: I guess I made a bull of it.

COLONEL: Put down both gags. They may get a laught in the War Department.

Today this inspissated dullness would fall flat in any governmental department. Again, however, there is a more permanent brilliancy in another place. In Barbara Fidgety a politician is canvassing votes in a small town mayoralty campaign, on the disillusioned, bottom-dog platform of

"To the victims belongs what is spoiled."

Or, in <a href="Fiddle-Dee-Dee">Fiddle-Dee-Dee</a>, there was this penetrating misunder-standing:

FIELDS: What is a magnate?

WEBER: Something that eats holes in cheeses.

For the ear, this sort of dialogue; for the eye, incisive pantomime and imaginative satire in the staging. In 1900, Olga Nethersole was playing the lead in Sappho at Wallack's Theatre in New York, directly opposite the Music

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Hall. Clever publicity thickened the atmosphore of impropriety about the play; Miss Nethersole, all to the good of the box office, was arrested several times for her performance. The Music Hall inevitably capitalized. In the original play, one of the most questionable moments found Sappho pleading with the hero: "If you will only let me stay, I'll black your boots." In the travesty across the street, a merciless deflation had taken place. The scene was used for the final curtain; the hero dragged on a shoe-shine stand and sat comfortably with arrogant expectancy; the burlesque Sappho then fell upon her knees, took a smudged towel from a shoe-shine kit, and dolefully swished a gleam into her tyrannical lover's brogues.

The Fischer Theatre company had to fly high in still another direction to approach the excellence of its New York progenitor. The Music Hall had lifted the chorus from its extravaganza doldrums. Since the revolutionary days of Lydia Thompson, the chorus had become more and more fixed in function until it was no more than a routine exhibit of legs at stereotyped intervals in the show. Then Weber and Fields had engaged Julian Mitchell as director-producer.

"He (Mitchell) found the chorus as standardized a theatrical institution as the proscenium arch. To see one was to have seen them all; they varied only as one potate from another. Its supposed function was to kindle the male eye with youth, figure, and face. It did so badly and unimaginatively. Mitchell's Music Hall choruses were the largest, shapeliest and prettiest in America, but he also raised his young

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women to an artistic dignity to which the chorus never had dreamed of aspiring. He cast the whole dogma of chorus technic in the ash bin and made his part of the show as distinctive as the principals. In dancing, chorus effects, costumes and settings, he put the Music Hall years in advance of the run of its contemporaries...."

And when the times had changed, when the momentary flare of Music Hall satire had been put out by the "gorgeous spectacles" of Ziegfeld, Mitchell would be found to possess the only ability in the Weber and Fields company which could carry over easily into the new era.

"When Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., inaugurated the Follies, it was Mitchell he chose as director...

"The Follies was the legitimate successor to Weber and Fields' Music Hall. Each, in its own time, dominated the theatrical sky line as the Woolworth Building does lower Manhattan's seried range. Both were new and revolutionary advances in the lighter American theatre, both left their mark indelibly upon our stage. The same creative talent that helped so largely to make the Follies what it is, was seen in Mitchell's direction at the Music Hall..."

Time has greatly diminished the value of the Woolworth building as a simile for tallness. Today the Ziegfeld type of musical review has been brought very low. But the above quotation was written in 1924 with no pretence at prophecy.

The fall of 1903 was the crest of a much earlier wave. The company at Fischer's Theatre which had specialized in scripts from the New York Music Hall began to break

<sup>\*</sup> Isman, Felix. Weber and Fields.

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up. A locally-inspired burlesque, <u>I. O. U.</u> by Judson Brusie,\* was announced for production, with the substitution of the Althea Twins as starred dancers in place of Flossie Hope and Gertie Emerson. But the success of the Kolb, Dill, and Bernard combination in the Music Hall burlesques had been so great that an independent venture inevitably suggested itself. During the winter of 1903 and 1904, the American Travesty Stars was organized. It was a time-proven galaxy, including not only Kolb, Dill, and Bernard, but Winfield Blake, Mude Amber, Flossie Hope, and Gertie Emerson. The <u>San Francisco Chronicle</u> for April 18, 1904, contained the following notice:

"The American Travesty Stars, who shortly leave for Australia on a tour of the world, started on their farewell American engagement at the Grand Opera House last night. This aggregation, which is to produce the Weber and Fields successes,...(is the one)...that gave Fischer's Theatre such a vogue for two years. The Grand Opera House was packed from top to bottom and hundreds were unable to gain admission....The skit Hoity Toity is well-known to all local theatre-goers, and nearly every one present last night had seen it once or twice before. It went with a snap last night, although the chorus was a little crude. The costuming is very elaborate, the management having secured many gowns from Weber and Fields. Maude Amber was in excellent voice...."

### LX -- LOCAL WRITERS OF BURLESQUE

The great days at Fischer's Theatre, demarked by the long series of New York Music Hall burlesques, were over. The declining days in this theatre's senescence, December

<sup>#</sup> cf. next chapter.

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1903 to November 1904, were spent chiefly with productions of burlesques by San Francisco writers. Judson Brusie contributed three scripts: I. O. U., U. S., and The Mormons; J. C. Crawford, two scripts, The Beauty Shop and Miss Mazuma; Howard Jacotte, one, Down the Line. Will Carleton and Lee Johnson, in addition to writing music and lyrics for some of the other burlesques, contributed two shows of their own: Roly-Poly, and The Anheuser Push.\* The production of three scripts from New York filled out this final year at Fischer's: Chow-Chow, A Lucky Stone, and The Whirl of the Town.

The trinitarian descendancy from Weber, Fields, and Warfield, continued in an unbroken line, perpetuating one of the most persistent of traditions in the American theatre. Two German immigrants and a "Hebrew impersonator" had become the nucleus of American comedy. With the American Travesty Stars company still nebulous, \*\* Kolb, Dill, and Bernard were together at Fischer's in December 1903 when Brusie's <u>I. O. U.</u> opened. Thereafter the trio underwent quick transformation. For a short time it was Kolb, Dill, and Bon Dillon. In May 1904 there was a complete change with Gus Yorke, Nick Adams, and Al Fields.

Starting with the production of A Lucky Stone in July, and carrying right on through the production of Down the Line in October, the trio was made up of the team of Rice

<sup>\*</sup> Anhaeuser-Busch (brewing company)
\*\*cf. last chapter.

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and Cady, together with Bobby North. The succession of leading ladies, following the departure of Maude Amber after the production of <u>I.O.U.</u>, included Helen Russell, Caroline Hull, and Dorothy Morton. John Peachey and Edwin Clarke divided the male leads. The Althoa Sisters, star dancing toam of the troupe, were replaced in June 1904 by the Garrity Sisters. In August, Flossie Hope had returned from her Australian tour with the American Travesty Stars, and was quickly re-engaged at Fischer's with Pearl Hickman as her assistant.

The role of soubrette in the company wont through as many name-changes as any of the other roles. To be engaged as soubrette in 1904 meant first of all ability as a comedience; and you would be expected to sing -- not the romantic songs of the leading lady, but something with "vivacity and spice." And if the show contained a slack moment, the soubrette would as likely as not be called onfor a specialty act of some kind. Georgia O'Ramey, Nellie Lynch, and Edna Aug filled consecutive engagements up to July 1904 when it was announced that "an Eastern actress by the name of Nora Bayes" would be the new soubrette in the production of A Lucky Stone. Late in August, Nellie Gerin replaced Nora Bayes for a brief engagement. Georgia O'Ramey then returned to complete the long run of burlesques at Fischer's in October.

The only advantage the local burlesques might claim over their Eastern competitors was that they were written with an ear and eye for the particular abilities of the Fischer

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## MAX DILL IN TWO BURLESQUE ROLES AT FISCHER'S THEATRE



UPPER: "WAY UP EAST," 1902, LOWER: "WIRLIGIG," 1903
PHOTO COURTESY OF MR. MAX DILL

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troupe. The plot situations were entirely subordinated to some imitative usage of the Weber, Fields, and Warfield type of dialogue. The following resume of the plot of <u>I.O.U.ap</u>-peared in the Argonaut for November 30, 1903:

"The plot is based upon the trials of three hotel proprietors (two Germans and a Jew"), who become financially embarrassed by reason of having housed and fed a circus outfit, which also becomes bankrupt and therefore is unable to pay for its board and lodging. As a compromise a trade is made whereby the circus manager exchanges his circus for the hotel property, and the landlords become owners of the circus, with such direful consequences and complications as to bring about a final re-transfer, the circus man going back to the sawdust ring, and the landlords returning to their hotels."

The Beauty Shop by J. C. Crawford was built as definitely about the basic triad of the New York Music Hall, as  $\underline{\text{I.0.U}}$ .

"The Beauty Shop is said to have a coherent plot, and tells of the adventures of a Chicago woman, who having married, robbed, and deserted an honest German, comes to San Francisco. Here she marries again, and is picked up by a speculative Hebrew, who starts her in the business of making unsightly people beautiful. The beauty shop does not prosper, so the Hebrew tries to obtain financial assistance from a Chicago visitor. the manager of a pretzel trust. He is the woman's first husband, and her efforts to conceal her identity, also to keep the knowledge of her past from her second husband, lead to some amusing complications. The scenes of the first and second acts are laid in the beauty shop, and the third is located on the ocean beach near the Cliff House."\*\*

In <u>U. S.</u> by Judson Brusie, the innocent immigrant trio is plunged into a confused, international fracas.

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, December 1, 1903. \*\*Argonaut, January 11, 1904.

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"Some of the stage business of I.O.U. has been revamped to fit the new piece (U.S.), which is based on the starting of a revolution in one of the South American republics by two Hebrews, a German and an Irish fugitive, with the intention of declaring a new republic and securing the protection of the United States by turning over a strip of land for a coal station. After some legal explanations, which permitted some humorous play, the rebellion is started, but the arrival of an American man-of-war quickly puts a stop to it and things are straightened out."\*

The pivotal comedy trio was also kept intact for the Anheuser Push, where again a slight odor of international intrigue prevails.

"Rice, Cady, and Bobby North will impersonate three millionaire brewers, calling themselves The Anheuser Push. Ben Dillon is to be a detective and Edward Clarke the president of the ice trust. The latter also appears as an organgrinder with a real organ, monkey, and a chorus of organ-grinders."\*\*

But the trend of the later burlesques at Fischer's was more and more away from the unified plots which the New York Music Hall had done so much to re-establish. The following notice for <u>Down the Line</u>, last of the Fischer burlesques, appeared in the <u>San Francisco Chronicle</u>, October 4, 1904:

"The book is by Howard Jacotte, but as he denies any attempt at coherency of plot, we cannot scorn him for the lack of it and we must be grateful that he has given a vehicle into which some lively spectacles could be thrown without scrious mishap."

Evidently, burlesque, despite the pioneering of Weber and Fields, had not yet come to firm enough grip with

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, May 30, 1904. \*\*Argonaut, August 22, 1904.

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Francischer auch der State der Seiner State der State American life to keep hold. The momentary clarity of the satiric face was quickly blurred, and the architectureless entertainment of vaudeville took procedence.

## LXI -- THE BURLESQUE WHEEL AT THE CALIFORNIA

From August 1905 through most of the year 1906, the car of Thespis was taking a gay ride down the declivity from the heights of Weber and Fields burlesque to the shapeless plain of variety and vaudeville.

"The new California Theatre under the management of Charles P. Hall will reopen tomorrow (Sunday) night inaugurating the new policy, the burlesque wheel which is to revive for fifty-two consecutive weeks, from New York to this city, presenting a new traveling company each week. The first spoke of the burlesque wheel to revolve on Sunday night will be the Dainty Paree Burlesquers, presenting the latest musical comedy The Married Bachelor."\*

As the burlesque wheel turned from such a company as the Dainty Parce to the Brigadior Burlesquers, to the Kentucky Belles, to the Jolly Grass Widows, to the Washington Society Girls, to the Tiger Lillies, to the Utopians, to the Gaiety Girls -- as the burlesque wheel turned it gradually lost all the clinging dirt of the home country, until finally the whole emphasis of the California Theatre was in the direction of specialty programs.

The phenomenon was of course national. The specialty companies at the tip of each spoke in the wheel were being rotated to all the major cities of the country; and the way

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, August 28, 1905.

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was clear. The keystone to the dominancy of burlesque had already been removed in January 1904, with the closing of the Weber and Fields Music Hall in New York City. After a brief tour, the famous partnership had been dissolved. There had been a personal difference, obscure and recorded almost entirely from hearsay; but other general factors had entered. The Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago, December 30, 1903, in which 575 persons lost their lives, had stimulated a stringent recording of fire laws throughout the country.

"New York enforced drastic changes calling for new fire walls, asbestos curtains, increased exits and unobstructed alleyways on each side of a theater. The music hall would have to be rebuilt or abandoned. Fields was for abandoning it; Weber opposed." \*

And then the hub of the city had shifted. The Pennsylvania Railroad had commenced the construction of its Thirty-fourth Street terminal; and the New York Central railroad had laid the foundation for its new terminal, not on Twenty-third Street as previously announced, but on Forty-second. The Twenty-ninth Street music hall would shortly be too far out on the fringe of activity for the faithless theatre-goer. At this time, any theatre in the city would have been available to Weber and Fields, but their friends insisted that the intimacy of the performances in the little Music Hall Theatre had contributed a great deal to their success.

<sup>\*</sup> Isman, Felix. Weber and Fields.

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So the two comodians said nothing about the personal quarrel, permitted their friends to think that the Weber and Fields Company was merely stalling for time, and headed West on what no one would have believed was the company's last tour.

saw; and the decline of the brief excellence of burlesque was to be in inverse ratio to the ascent of American industry. The geographical expansion of the country had been exhausted and the population had turned back upon itself for a brief moment of criticism. Now the industrial expansion had gained full headway, and for the time being there was neither time not inclination for criticism. Satirical comedy had little foothold in the positive movement forward in heavy industry.

The programs of the California Theatre tended more and more towards "pure" entertainment. It was no longer a matter of thought, but of mechanical ability on the trapeze or with sleight of hand. There was Yvette, the sensational electrical dancer; and the Kellar Zouave Girls from London in their startling lightning drill, wall-climbing, and march; and Gray and Graham, the musical bellboy and the military maid. With the applause wearing thin on the last specialty, the Marvelous Bard would perform a daring slack-wire act; and then came the Brothers Melvin, sensational gymnasts.

The outworn form of the minstrel show had been revived. The first part of the program was an elie which might contain anything, from Frank O'Brien the "funnicleer" to the To provide the second control of the second second

Rozinos, "the jugglers of a billiard table." The rest of the program was given over to farce, usually two of them, loosely constructed and more concerned with the exploitation of specialty talent and the exhibition of the chorus than with any plot sequence. This emphasis is clear from the following notice in the San Francisco Chronicle for December 24, 1905:

"The Broadway Gaiety Girls is the attraction announced for the California Theatre for Christmas week, opening with the matinee on Christmas Day. The company numbers some very well-known vaude-ville performers, and among those with the company are Mildred Stoller, John Weber, Gardner, West and Sunshine, Marie Green, the Melrose troupe of acrobats, Jack Marshall, the Green Sisters, and Kenny and Hollis. The chorus is said to be of exceptional merit. Fine costumes and scenic effects will help to make the programme a pleasing one. The final performance by the Thoroughbreds Company takes place this afterneon or tonight. For New Year's Week, the California announces The Jolly Girls Extravaganza Company."

## LXII -- SHIFTING BACKGROUND

The burlesque wheel at the California Theatre turned towards vaudeville entertainment against a shifting and uncertain background in the rest of the theatres in San Francisco; except, that is, for the duration of Music Hall burlesques at Fischer's Theatre, and the prolonged career of pantomime at the Tivoli. These latter showhouses furnished the sharp lines in the theatrical picture of the years 1900 to 1906. In the background was a great deal of untheatrical pastiche.

Entertainment often claimed as little for itself as the grand finale of the Rentz-Santley Combination show at the

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Alhambra Theatre in January 1900.

"The chief charm of the entire performance is the grand finale, 'An Affair of Honor,' adapted from the famous French painting of that name at the Bonjere Salon, Paris. There are three scenes to the pantomime, ending with a very realistic duel between two pretty women, who are decidedly adroit with the foils."\*

Or the city would be set agog by a troupe of juvenile stars in Palmer Cox's operetta Tho Brownios, featuring Carroll, a girl whistler, and Marie Louise Conley, youngest cornetist on the stage, playing "The Holy City."

Occasionally, a hopeful revival of some tried success would be inserted in a dry season. Aladdin, Jr. opened at the Grand Opera House in February 1900, featuring a "throng of thirty-six beauties in a kaleidoscopic ballet entitled The Festival of the Mandarins."\*\* In July of the same year, the Dunne and Ryley comedians applied themselves to the well-known success of Matthews and Bulger, By the Sad Soa Waves. In December 1902,

"...after a lapse of many years, Humpty Dumpty has been revived as a Christmas spectacle, and the new generation of theater-goers who witnessed last night's performance at the Central Theater greeted it with the same enjoyment that characterized the earlier productions. The extravaganza has been brought up-to-date by the introduction of current gags and specialties...The scenic effects were elaborate, and the grand transformation, 'A Good Child's Dream' was a feature of the production..."\*\*\*

<sup>\*</sup> Bulletin, January 7, 1900. \*\* Tbid. February 6, 1900.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>San Francisco Chronicle, December 23, 1902.

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Again at the Central Theatre, April 5, 1904, another nineteenth century production was given a fresh, cosmetic mask.

"The Central Theatre last night put on its biggest bill in a spectacular production of Around the World in Eighty Days....One of the features of the performance was the Oriental ballet by fifty girls under the direction of Bothwell Browne. A champagne dance and a Persian scarf dance were enthusiastically applauded...."\*

A revival of "colossal" proportions, was the Klaw and Erlanger production of the Drury Lane spectacle, Mother Goose, at the Grand Opera House in January 1905.

"The ballet at the finale of the first act is called 'L'Art Nouveau,' and represents in choruses and processions products of art in manufacture, displaying carved ivory, wrought bronzes and iron, mosaics, irridescent glasses, earthonware, limoges, enamels, gold work, transparent onamols, jewelry and the diamond. Over 400 people appear in this feature. Tho great ballot 'Heartsease' at the end of the second act is preceded by a minor ballet called 'The Land of Frost and Ice -- a remarkably scene, composed of frosted beadwork. This melts inte the 'Land of Heartsease' showing nearly 400 people in most gorgeous costumes in every hue of the pansy." \*\*

The original Mother Goose had been thoroughly plucked and the painted feathers rearranged in a showy, superficial pattern. The imaginative intensity of the Martinetti-Ravel version of Mother Goose was dispersed. The feeling for simple but genuinely theatrical fantasy had been dissipated in the cloying complexity of a meaningless design.

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, April 5, 1904. \*\*Tbid. February 6, 1905.

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With the gradual collapse of idea in entertainment, it was in the spirit of the times to enjoy the antics of juvenile troupes. Bothwell Browne furnished most of the material with his two musical extravaganzas, Princess Fan Tan and Cleopatra Up to Date. Princess Fan Tan was first presented at the Grand Opera House in September 1904 and was revived at The Chutes Theatre in December 1905. The pseudo-Egyptian furnished the Christmas entertainment at The Chutes Theatre immediately upon the closing of the pseudo-Japanese.

Upon her second presentation, the Princess found herself amidst some rather mature company, human and otherwise.

"Princess Fan Tan, the delightful Japanese musical extravaganza, participated in by nearly 300 clever children, will receive its final presentation at the Chutes this afternoon and evening, and at the Monday matinee. Princess Trixie, the wonderful educated horse, will reappear in her extraordinary exhibitions. Henderson and Ross, refined singers and dancers will make their first bow, and 'Bob Fitzsimmons,' the boxing kangaroo from Australia, will indulge in three-round goes. The Bothwell Browne Gaiety Girls will present Twirly Whirly and Marie Straub, the singer of illustrated ballads, and the animatoscope will make up the bill."

The tangential reference of importance here is to the animatoscope, an early form of the kinetoscope or movie projector. It was at this time that crude bits of cinema were becoming a part of variety entertainment.

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, December 3, 1905.

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Bothwell Browne's second panorama of oriental royalty received little notice in the press. <u>Cleopatra-Up-to-Date</u> was patted on the back -- "the piece will be beautifully mounted"; but more was made of the sentimental occasion than of the content of the show -- "...tomorrow afternoon every child in attendance will be given a present off the Christmas tree."\*\*

The disappointment of the 1904 winter season was the long-heralded Julian Mitchell production of The Wizard of Oz. This had been Mitchell's first New York production after the dissolution of the Weber and Fields Music Hall company, and the metropolis had crowded to the show with great acclaim. A second company, however, had been sent out on the road and evidently little remained of the original show except Mitchell's masterly direction of chorus routine.

"The company was not, of course, the New York company, but without being too captious, it may be said that there would be little difficulty in getting up a better cast from our own cheap theaters. It was mainly a leg show; not that the legs were any prettier than we can find on our own stage, but both principals and chorus did better with their limbs than with their heads. They only silenced criticism when they danced..."\*\*\*

Earlier this same year, February 1904, the final tour of the Music Hall company had brought Weber and Fields to San Francisco, in a double burlesque bill at the Grand

<sup>\*</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, December 17, 1905.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Ibid. December 24, 1905. \*\*\*Ibid. December 20, 1904.

Opera House. A few sentences from the San Francisco Chronicle for February 9, 1904 indicate how clearly the heads and shoulders -- the heads chiefly -- of this great comedy team were above the other burlesquers of their time:

"There is something about the Weber and Fields performance which grows upon the audiences. It is a new and complete comedy act. Care and infinite pains do not stop with providing brilliant accessories, but go on to make a full and harmonious comedy.

"When the curtain went down after the first part it had to come up half a dozen times, and the audience would not be satisfied until Charley Ross, voicing the feelings of Weber and Fields, who stood by in the make-up of marble statues, had said some very nice things to the audience, and Miss Russell had curtsied and expressed her great pleasure at being among those present.

"Whoop-Dee-Doo in two whoops led the bill, the second part being a clever burlesque of Catherine. For real wit and humor, exploded opportuncly, the piece boats any of the Weber and Fields shows which had been seen here.

"Wober and Fields are carnestly funny. If their humor is slower to captivate than that of Kolb and Dill, it is a great deal more satisfying when it has you going."

A more encouraging emphasis upon the intelligence of the period would be given if this chapter could end at this point without the falsification of events; but the entertainment on the eve of the great conflagration in 1906 was a theatrical form, as old and outworn as the architecture about to be consumed. In February 1906, the Belasco and Mayer stock company at the Alhambra Theatre announced the production of The Black Crook. After the event, it becomes symbolic that this old member of the burlesque family should

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have been present at the holocaust; but the fire was illtimed. Ziegfeld was to give the extravaganza form an extended lease on life. and the specific production of the specific part of



# PART FOUR (1907 - 1940)

### LXIII -- THE BIG SHOWS

"There is something about these Follies which affects one like a drug. Perhaps that is why the average over-taxed business man likes them. I cannot say I do, for they seem to stun and perplex and narcotize the judgment...It is rather disconcerting to realize that while the legitimate drama is being pushed, shoved, and hustled by the 'Movies' to humbly taking a back seat, or going out of sight altogether, Ziegfeld's Follios grow more popular from year to year."

This quotation from the Argonaut, March 27, 1915, might well inscribe the pediment of the theatre for this whole latter period, 1907 to the present day. T. B. M. became an accepted abbreviation in the press for the tired business man. Oceanic margins had very naturally defined the geographical expansion of the country. The economic contradictions of production and consumption in private finance, both nationally and internationally, were to define, very artificially, the possibilities of industrial expansion. Inevitably tired from an excess of stock exchange gymnastics, the business man was to endure a ride on war boom inflation, steep as a funicular

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railway, with an equally precipitate descent to depression on the other side of the peak.

modity, was by means of the labor saving device, with the resultant speed up in manufacture. The tempo of life in general was geared up to commodity production: the architecture was the skyscraper; the music was a pseudo-Negroid percussion; the great bulk of the literature was the easily read, easily forgotten pulp magazine; the entertainment of most people was the quickly commercialized cinema. The musical revues of Florenz Ziegfeld, George White, and Earl Carroll, were no doubt typical entertainment of the period; but, although a development out of the popularly priced burlesqueextravaganzas, they were priced inaccessibly beyond popular attendance.

In form, the Manhattan musical review contributed nothing to the history of burlesque. The chief elements were those initiated by The Black Crook production in 1868. Tiaraed and plumed nudity was the major characteristic. Julian Mitchell, in Ziegfeld's employ, elevated the quality of chorus routine; but the expansion of the satirical element by Weber and Fields was again compressed to brief interstices of irrelevant comedy.

The first of the large New York reviews reached San Francisco in July 1913:

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"From the Winter Garden comes The Passing Show of 1912, the production which broke all records for attendance at this famous place of entertainment and repeated the triumphs in Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. The local two weeks' engagement which will be played at the Cort Theatre, begins Monday night, July 6. The Passing Show is one of those spectacular affairs which challenge description. There are seven scenes and the musical numbers follow one another with remarkable dispatch. Ned Wayburn was the producer, and it is agreed that he has never done more excellent work in the way of arranging novel numbers.

"Bits from nearly every important drama and musical play of the past season are joined together in the plot. There are many characters and each is recognized. The harem scene from Kismet is employed to advantage. In this there is the immense swimming pool occupying the centre of the harem, and into it plunge--not three girls as in the cast of Kismet, but sixteen--and even the gorgeous Trixio Friganza goes headlong into the tank. Then there are brief scenes from Bunty Pulls the Strings, Officer 666, A Butterfly on the Wheel, Oliver Twist, Bought and Paid For, The Return of Peter Grimm, and others...

"Charles J. Ross, famous for twenty years as a king of travesty; Trixie Friganza, who needs no introduction; Adelaide, the Bernhardt of the ballet; J. J. Hughes, whose dances have become international; Clarence Harvey, Texas Guinan, Howard and Howard, Moon and Morris, and a chorus of eighty, are included in this extraordinary organization." \*

The aquatic episode is elaborated in the Argonaut for July 12, 1913:

"(Enormously clever was Trixie Friganza's) pink gauze travesty on Gertrude Hoffman's 'Spring Song,' with its abrupt aquatic finale."

Miss Friganza dominated the production. She had a "rich, hearty voice"; she "supplied a steady stream of comic

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, July 5, 1913.

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interlude"; her legs were "plumply agile"; and her face was to be observed closely, because like all "higher-up artists, her whole being, mental and physical, pours itself whole-souledly into the representation."\*

But it was neither the individual career of Trixie Friganza nor Texas Guinan which had to do with the future of burlesque in America. The prophetic note in The Passing Show of 1912 was the runway down which the "fair choral company" paraded into tantalizing proximity with the audience. The word "burlesque" was beginning to take on the meaning which it has today in the strip-tease showhouses of the country.

This decadent direction of the future had still not worn out all the evidence of a more intelligent past. The contribution of Weber and Fields to burlesque was still visible in this same issue of <u>The Passing Show</u>. David Warfield had gone directly from the New York Music Hall to stardom at Belasco's Theatre. Now that he had gained international fame in "heavy, legitimate" drama, it was his turn to be deflated, as he had deflated so many of his contemporaries.

"Among the ranks of the men (in The Passing Show of 1912) there are many to commend. Willie Howard, however, is the one whose ability stands out most prominently in the mind. He gave a remarkable imitation of Warfield's Peter Grimm, the vocal intonations, with their occasional curious tendency toward childishness and the falsette shriekiness that comes out in Warfield's moments of histrionic agitation, being particularly faithful. Willie Howard is the kind of performer upon whose lightest accents the audience hangs devoutly..."

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, July 12, 1913.

Willie Howard and his brother Eugene were to become the constant luminaries of more than a decade of musical reviews. In fact, to furnish "glorifying" backgrounds for a few brilliant comedians, singers and dancers was to be the chief function of the Manhattan spectacles. The backgrounds, so important in their own time, are now forgotten in the enormous vaults of the "old scenery" warehouses in New York City; or, more depressing and significant, in the cheap rooming-houses where the aging vaudevillians and chorines are trying to fill out their truncated professional lives.

The scenic background for The Passing Show of 1913 which played at the Cort Theatre in May 1914, is preserved in a description in the Argonaut (May 9, 1914):

"From a scenic standpoint nothing of greater magnitude than the reproduction of the Capitol Steps at Washington has ever been shown on any stage. A portion of that part of Broadway known as Tango Square is also shown pictorially. Here are introduced every known variety of the present terpsichorean mania and a revival of the old-fashioned cake-walk, which has proved to be one of the most popular numbers in the revue. The spirit of the dance enters into the sky-scrapers and at the finale of the scene the entire company with its picturesque backing of tall buildings are all moving to the strains of the syncopation."

The headlined performers before this architectural replica included "Conroy and Le Maire, the inimitable black-face comedians; Charles and Mollie King, travesty favorites, who appear to advantage as Broadway Jones and Peg O'My Heart;

Elizabeth Goodall, one of New York's favorite comediennes; Whiting and Burt, singers and popularizers of songs...; Mazie King, the international toe-dancing favorite; Artie Mehlinger, another San Francisco favorite; Teddy Wing and George Ford, dancing experts; Henry Norman, last seen locally in the David Henderson extravaganza productions; Louise Bates, Laura Hamilton, Ernest Hare, Charles Van, Leslie Powers, and others."\*

In 1916, Marilyn Miller and Alexis Kosloff emerged to stardom. This same edition of The Passing Show again featured the Howards in a burlesque Trilby. Howard Marsh, Clarence Harvey, "and some others whose identity it was difficult to seize in the general whirl, did valuable fill-in work."\*\*"Fill-in-work" is the relevant term here. The Weber and Fields burlesque has been reduced to brief, interlarded skits. These "fill-ins," short travesties and specialty numbers, if taken out of the centext of thirty-six beautiful girls, were nothing more than the disconnected elements of a vaudeville program.

During this interval between 1914 and 1916 the "runway" had become an integral part of burlesque. The big show out of New York to reach San Francisco in 1915, was called The Whirl of the World. There was the usual whirl of the specialty acts; Eugene Howard was still the accomplished foil to his brother Willie's famous rejoinders. But chiefly, there was the "runway."

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, May 9, 1914. \*\*Ibid. May 20, 1916.

"The runway, greatly favored by a majority of the male audience, bridged the lower auditorium from the stage to the rear, and at this vantage point we were permitted to see, at close range the substantial charms of the vivacious Texas Guinan, and to cast appraising glances at the rose-lighted shapes of the chorus girls as they passed singing along....When the show-girls went through the usual process of parting with their wraps and revealing themselves, their skirts were narrow. Long, sheathing, trailing skirts they were, and the pretty girls who were them had coquettishly adjusted, double-plumed head-dresses, which swayed rhythmically and piquantly as they went through their showgirl paces.

"Seats near the runway included privileges, for the fascinating Miss Guinan bestowed upon closely contiguous bald heads the rare distinction of a Guinan kiss.... But although I admit to finding the runway parade entertaining in spite of its rather questionable taste, it seems to me that made-up stage beauties at close range are rather daunting to a fastidious taste. We can see the thick red paste on their lips, the thick black around their eyes, the smears of enamel on their marble arms and shoulders.... But, at close range, how hard they seem to be working. One realizes then that these gilded toys, as they seem on the stage, are human and are sweating for a bare living."

This quotation from the Argonaut for February 20, 1915, has a great deal of importance for this history. Almost all of the meaning that the word "burlesque" has for people in 1940 is inherent in this report by the Argonaut critic. Strip-tease and runway -- there is no longer a theatrical form; there is simply the frank display of a highlighted form.

The glare and noise in the staging of musical revues, the tinseled innuendos of the disrobing of the "glorified" girls, increased throughout the nineteen-twenties proportionately to the post-war expansion of American business.

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The Ziegfeld Follies for 1918, which reached San Francisco in 1920 after a fortune-making tour, started the upward curve of elaborate display, which successive shows must top or fail. The Greenwich Village Follies in 1921, De Courville's London Follies in 1922, The Spice of 1922 in 1923, The Pepper Box Revue also in 1923, The Passing Show in 1924, Artists and Models in 1925, The Passing Show again in 1925, George White's Scandals in 1926, Exposures in 1927, Gay Paree in 1928, The Music Box Revue in 1929: these are the shows which marked the highest development of the Ziegfeld type of burlesque. They also were the shows which marked the last stage of development in the extravaganza form initiated by The Black Crook, half a century earlier.

New names had flashed into reputations that were to become a permanent part of American stage history; in addition to the Howards and Texas Guinan, there were Georgie Price, Sophie Tucker, Mamie Smith, Chic Sale, and Ethel Waters. The American musical review had been aggrandized to monumental proportions; the big shows with the great names were sent out from New York along the arterial trunk lines, and a cultural pulse was established throughout the country. Very few people detected a flutter in this pulse. Just as few people paralleled the rise of the Ziegfeld review to the rise of the New York stock market after the war. As lines on a graph, however, they were united in the procipitous decline of 1929.

The papier-mache interior of the big show was exposed, and the uprooted talent, the great names, were cast out into the last days of vaudeville, into night-club entertainment, into radio, into cinema.

# LXIV -- THEATRICAL BACKGROUND FOR THE BIG SHOWS

Florenz Ziegfeld, George White, and Earl Carroll manipulated the most representative stage entertainment in America for two decades. Against the brightness of their "big-moneyed" casts very few other lights were visible; and when visible, they assumed the same pattern described by the Follies, the Scandals, or the Vanities.

Low Field's first independent venture following the rift in the Weber and Fields partnership was a "musical extravaganza" entitled It Happened in Nordland. This production was one of the last clear reflections of the high spot in American burlesque attained by the New York Music Hall satires. A review of the San Francisco engagement at the Princess Theatre appeared in the San Francisco News Letter for July 4, 1908. Lew Fields had not accompanied the show on its Western tour.

"It is absolutely undiluted praise that must be tendered to It Happened in Nordland, and the people who make possible its gaiety. Glen McDonough has built a libretto that abounds in witty lines and humorous situations crammed with the real spirit of burlesque. The music of Victor Herbert is really entitled to being termed 'tuneful,' for it all has a swing that is captivating."

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Joseph Weber, also, was to make his contribution to this last stand of "the real spirit of burlesque." His production of The Girl from Rector's reached San Francisco in August 1909. Weber and Fields had learned enough working together to purvey the sharpest comedy in the country even when going their separate ways. The Girl From Rector's opened at the Garrick Theatre, August 22:

"Paul Potter wrote the piece...He has taken as a text for this work a French farce of Pierre Veber, entitled Loute, changing the locale to Americanize it...The Girl from Rector's amused crowded houses every night in New York for a long stason at Mr. Weber's own theatre on Broadway...Carrie Weber, a noted Broadway soubrette is the 'girl' and William Sellery has the leading comedy role...The Pendleton Sisters, three pretty dancing-girls, have a sensational whirlyind dance that is introduced into the action."

The billing of the Klaw and Erlanger production of The Ham Tree as a "new musical vaudeville" indicated the real trend of the times. This first San Francisco production of The Ham Tree opened at the Novelty Theatre in January 1907 and featured the comedy of McIntyre and Heath. But a new-comer, W. C. Fields, received most of the encomium in the press:

"One of the most delightful hits in Klaw and Erlanger's production of The Ham Tree...is the clever work of W. C. Fields, the tramo juggler, who plays the role of Sherlock Baffles.

"He does the funniest tramp juggling act on the stage, and introduces his part as an amateur detective. He puzzles everything in sight. Mr.

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, August 21, 1909.

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Fields excels in comic make-up, and his easy manner and laughable pantomime greatly strengthens a most intoresting character..."\*

The spring of 1908 was dominated by a double bill at the Princess Theatre, a "musical eccentricity" called Little Christopher, and "a travesty of New York operatic and theatrical life, written by George Hobart and Victor Herbert, called The Song Birds."\*\*

> "No little credit for its success (The Song Birds) belongs to William Burress, a comedian of intelligence and finish who impersonates Manager Hammerstein....Oscar Apfel is the Conreid of the travesty ....

> "The competing impresarios proudly call out their leading singers, 'the most expensive bunch of notes in existence' and if Hammershine's 'queen of cadenzas,' Madame Tattletalezine sometimes outshines Conried's Emma Screams, the Peter Pantson of the Metropolitan forces easily drowns the baser bass of the Manhattan Eddie de Rest-Cure ... "\*\*\*

Later this same year, the town was taken over by the reappearance of Ferris Hartman, "long-time fun-maker in chief at the old Tivoli Opera House"\*\*\* in a series of tried burlesques including The Idol's Eye and Ship Ahoy. "The plaudits that filled the crackling atmosphere from the orchestra rail to the congested lobby were a meaty, satisfying tribute to his continued popularity." \*\*\*\*

In 1909, the theatrical background for the big musical reviews had worn very thin. There were only two instances of burlesque in San Francisco. Johnnie McVeigh and

<sup>\*</sup> \*\* San Francisco News Letter, January 12, 1907.

Ibid. April 11, 1908.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> San Francisco News Letter, May 23, 1908.

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>Argonaut, August 22, 1908.

his College Girls appeared at the Orpheum in January with a featured skit entitled An Incident in a Dormitory. In May, Piff, Paff, Pouff, a "rollicking musical whimsicality" appeared at the Princess Theatre. The chorus of Piff, Paff, Pouff was the thing. The principals, Fred Mace, James F. Stevens, Edwin Emery, May Boley, and Zoe Barnett, could be dispatched with by such hasty coverage as the Argonaut for May 15,1909 applied: melodiously winning, or statuesquely comic, or pleasing to the eye, the ear, and the intelligence." But the chorus leaned much more pivotally upon the attention; it was not only "larger than ever," the handsome costumes were not only "the great feature of the show," but, to top everything, "the chorus was Frenchily attractive." This emphasis on the supposed penchant of the Gallic people for spicy undress was to set the tone of advertising in American burlesque right down to the present day. The Folies Bergere, which played at the World's Fair on Treasure Island in 1939, was purveyed to the San Francisco public as an entirely French affair. Evidently, the United States is still willing to regard itself as a provincial outpost of Europe in matters of moral sophistication.

Wine, Woman and Song, the musical review at the Savoy Theatre in March 1910, was a composite of all the elements which were struggling for dominance in American burlesque. There was the featured soubrette, Bonita, who appeared in "a bewildering array of French gowns, fourteen in

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number, and each one a revelation of the modiste's art." \*
There was the team of comedians, still reflecting somewhat the high tradition established by Weber and Fields; and there were inevitably, and principally, the "pretty show girls."
Significantly, the first act of the production was called "Going into Vaudeville." In this act, some of the brightest lights of the legitimate stage were given employ on the two-a-day circuit, and it should be noted that these famous people were presented in "lifelike characterizations," not satirically. The creative criticism of New York Music Hall had disappeared in favor of the more mimetic replica -- a comparatively easy art so thoroughly initiated by Harry Dixey in his imitation of Sir Henry Irving.

In 1910, the stars deemed brilliant enough for mirrored reflection included David Warfield as the Music Master, Robert Mantell as Richard III, Mile. Genée the famous danseuse, Enrico Caruso, Blanche Bates, George M. Cohan, Fay Templeton, Maude Adams, Chauncey Olcott, and Jan Kubelik.

The descent to present day, so-called burlesque, although already indicated, was not to be precipitous. The gradual, zigzag decline was to include a variety of stations. In 1913, Oliver Morosco's "fairyland fantasy," The Tik-Tok Man of Oz, presented in April at the Cort Theatre, was to revive all the old values of the best nineteenth century extravaganzas. In October 1914, a really thoughtful

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, March 12, 1910.

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travesty by William de Mille, called <u>Food</u>, was to open at the Orpheum. The <u>Argonaut</u> for November 7, 1914 found that <u>Food</u> was a "sort of high-class burlesque," and then proceeded to an interesting résumé:

"It may be remembered that the action of this piece is supposed to transpire fifty years hence, when a mighty food trust is developed, and nour-ishment is taken, even by the rich in homeopathic morsels. In spite of the curious resemblance between the comedy aspects of Food and the present tragedy developed by the European conflict, the audience, only too glad probably to escape from gloomy thoughts of war into the cheer of vaudeville, surrendered itself to the most appreciative enjoyment of the humor of the piece. Handsome stage appointments, the sumptuous costume of the Food Trust, all are adhered to as prescribed by the author, who wishes to indicate that fifty years hence the world is deluged with wealth and luxury while running short of food."

Without inquiring too closely into the precision of such prophesy, it is clear that de Mille's travesty was one of the last throwbacks to an earlier form of trenchant comedy which had almost vanished.

July 1915 found Al Jolson at the Cort Theatre in a twelve-scened spectacle called <u>Dancing Around</u>, full of such magnificence as "we have come to expect in Winter Garden extravaganzas."\* The nature of the splendor is indicated by the titles of some of the scenes: The Startling Ballet of Shadows. The Cubist Carnival, A Night on a Venetian Canal, and The Marvelous Danse Eccentrique. The songs of the

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, July 26, 1915.

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production which Jolson made parlor-piano favorites included "Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers," "When Grown-up Ladies Act Like Babies," "I'm Seeking for Siegfried," "I'm Glad My Wife's in Europe," and "The Shuffling Shivaree." In 1916, it was Eva Tanguay's turn to achieve an undistinguished reputation in the outworn, leg-exposal tradition of the early burlesque queens. She was not gifted as a comedienne, nor as a singer.

"You will want to know if her costumes were very daring. Well, they seemed to be largely devoted to the deification of the leg. legs are very pretty. not in the long-limbed, classic style, but they are of childishlyrounded contour ... As to the costumes: one was a mass of pearl embroideries; another a combination of African and Oriental bizarrerie: another a gorgeous corruscation of electric blue glitter....The 'Salome' travesty hasn't much to it, but I found myself enjoying the good burlesque of Charles J. Ross, the imposing setting, and the thunder and lightning music. When Eva Tanguay appeared, however, her sharp, scratchy voice and difficult enunciation banished the atmosphere of burlesque.... Preceding Eva Tanguay's two acts was a complete vaudeville performance."\*

In 1917, the burlesque tradition was split unrecognizably in several directions. At the Orpheum Theatre in May, Jay Gould and Flo Lewis appeared in a "delightful travesty" called Holding the Fort, which the newspapers did not condescend to review. In October, Gus Edwards' version of the Manhattan musical, The Bandbox Rovue, opened at the Orpheum.

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, October 28, 1916.

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Again at the Orpheum, in December, the first definite burlesque of the year was presented:

"Charles Withers and company in the four-act travesty melodrama, For Pity's Sake, divide the headline honors. A traveling theatrical company play good old melodrama in a remodeled barn known as Cy Spliven's Opera House. The crafty villain, the tearful heroine, and the handsome hero are all in evidence and they all deliver the 'ancient goods' in such a perfectly serious manner that the result is admirable."\*

Following the war, there was a general prevalence of vaudeville in San Francisco until the appearance of Raymond Hitchcock's production Hitchy-Koo 1919 at the Columbia Theatre in May 1920. A lesser edition of the Follies, it was immediately followed by several attempts at "the big show" as created by Ziegfeld. In July 1920, G. M. Anderson's "revue of revues, The Frivolities of 1920" opened at the Columbia. In September of the same year Bits and Pieces, a "musical revue in which song, dance, and satire travesty six of New York's principal theatrical successes,"\*\* opened at the Orpheum. The six successos proved to be Breakfast in Bed, My Lady Friends, East is Wost, The Greenwich Village Follies, Scandal, and Tea for Three.

Nothing new was happening to burlesque. The trend of this theatrical form was by now clearly indicated. The decade 1920 to 1930 was to witness the final discard of all

<sup>\*</sup> Argonaut, December 22, 1917. \*\*Ibid. September 25, 1920.

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genuinely satirical elements. The leg-show nucleus was finally all that was left of the brilliant development which had stopped so short with the personal quarrel of the New York Music Hall partners.

## LXV -- VISIBLE SIGNPOSTS

those former sanctums of legitimate drama, now off the beaten path with the shift of commerce to other streets—dark, musty heaps of rococo polychrome; firetraps lined with threadbare red plush: here is the last stand of what is still called the "American burlesque." Life in the city is enervating. The long hours of work, against the noise of countless systems, of innumerable sensations; and, more than anything else, the dehumanized distance which has developed between people who are not acquainted; the fundamental sense of competitive enmity between those people who are alone in those abnormal congestions of modern life called cities; these are the facts which have patterned the nervous system of so many contemporary Americans to receptivity for the completely decadent present-day conception of burlesque.

As often as not, the contemporary American who goes to the burlesque show on Saturday night is the uprooted immigrant. He has severed his contact with Europe. As yet, he has found no easy adaptation to the crude, emergent American culture. The strip-tease act provides escape into a

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simple internationalism; and the dialogue of the comedy acts is so monosyllabic, the gestures so obviously vulgar, that communication over language barriers is established. The entertainment value of this sort of burlesque is entirely untheatrical; to the audience, which is chiefly male, the runway display of the chorus and the consequent strip-tease of the younger and prettier danseuses, is little more than the inspection of a commodity in a commercial boudoir.

But the art of social satire, the art of clowning the errors or hypocrisies of "the great ones" has the strength of survival of the masses of people themselves. The Commedia dell' Arte tradition is inherent in the very desire of most people to better their lives by critically observing and combating the immediate obstacle. Most of the time this desire has been an individualistic thing, and the theatre cannot reflect intelligibly the obscure, personal impulse; but the gradual breakdown of the contemporary method of social being has unified the impulses of many people. Criticism of the pressure, which the social milieu has brought upon most of the people, has broken out in sharp, intelligible proposals for change; and the theatre has recommenced its old function of vigorous reflection and positive suggestion.

In 1925 the Theatre Guild of New York City produced John Howard Lawson's "Jazz Symphony of American Life" entitled <u>Processional</u>. This play was the first attempt by a present day American playwright to rediscover the abandoned

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thoughtfulness of satirical comedy. In his preface to the printed version of the play the author makes this statement:

"I have endeavored in the present play, to lay the foundations of some sort of native technique, to reflect to some extent the color and movement of the American processional as it streams about us. The rhythm is staccate, burlesque carried out by a formalized arrangement of jazz music."

Unfortunately, a production of Lawson's play has never been given in San Francisco. But the present decade has not confined the best of its theatre to Manhattan. In August 1938, the original New York cast of Pins and Needles played at the Geary Theatre in San Francisco. The production, a brilliantly satirical musical revue, had already set sophisticated Manhattanites agog. It was called Pins and Needles because the cast was made up of members of the Garment Worker's Unions -- nonprofessionals who had been startled with the sell-out success of their show, planned and rehearsed after hours as a means of stimulating relaxation from the day's work.

Although styled a musical revue, there were no attempts at "beautiful tableaux," no costume build-ups to a "knock-out effect." The only concerted statement of the production was the song by the whole company, lined up very simply across the stage immediately after the first curtain:

"We're not George M. Cohans or Noel Cowards Or Beatrice Lillies or Willie Howards-We're plain simple common ordinary Everyday men and women Who work for a living-We're from the shops."\*

<sup>\*</sup> Chronicle, August 10, 1938.

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Songs by Harold J. Rome were a feature of the show. Their music was patterned after the popular, thirty-two measure, Tin-pan Alley formula -- but Rome's lyrics lifted the melodies to incisive statements, way above the crooning morass of lovelorn sentimentality. These songs together with a number of sharply conceived blackouts, made up the show.

The dramatic critic of the San Francisco Chronicle published the following statement August 10, 1938:

"Everyone will enjoy the show's exuberant jibes at fascism, such as the 'Mussolini Handicap,' in which Al Eben presents a ferocious Duce who violently prescribes 'multiplication for the Nation' to Italian Womankind. The 'Four Little Angels of Peace' skit is a hilarious comment on the Berlin-Rome axis, and 'We'd Rather Be Right,' satirizes gayly, but without acidity, the one hundred per cent brand of red-baiting Americanism."

More immediately was the announcement, August 1939, by the San Francisco Theatre Union of its forthcoming production, Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock. Perhaps the first definitely successful attempt at an American opera, this work has already aroused a storm of pro and con with its New York production. Blitzstein not only composed the music, but also wrote the libretto, which accounts a good deal no doubt for the fact that here for the first time in the American theatre, American idioms of speech have been genuinely welded with American idioms of music in recitatives. A great many elements of burlesque enter into this picture of Steeltown, a typical industrial town in the United States. Mr. Mister,

Ladies, 1907 T. Francisco, and the second se

owner of the steelmill, dominates the picture. The other characters include, Mrs. Mister, a patroness of the artist Dauber and the musician Yasha; Sister and Junior Mister, Mr. Mister's bored, apathetic children; Reverend Salvation; Gus and Sadie, Polish immigrants; the Moll, a streetwalker; Ella Hammer, the wife of a steelworker; Editor Daily, local newspaperman; Larry Foreman, union organizer; a number of college professors, a gun-thug, a private detective, a cop, and, very centrally, Harry Druggist, a dispossessed businessman who has become the town's derelict. Out of such representative elements, the work ascends to real pathos, to hilarious satire, to profoundly moving climaxes.

The plumage inflicted on burlesque by the nine-teenth-century extravaganza, and only more deeply dyed by Ziegfeld and his followers, is at last outworn. The theatre is again using a thought-process for its excitement. The signposts in the development of satirical comedy from the Italian troupes of the sixteenth century to the present day are again visible above the debris. And as always, it is not the art-form which has begun to think, but the people themselves, whose life is the face in the flesh for the theat-rical reflection.

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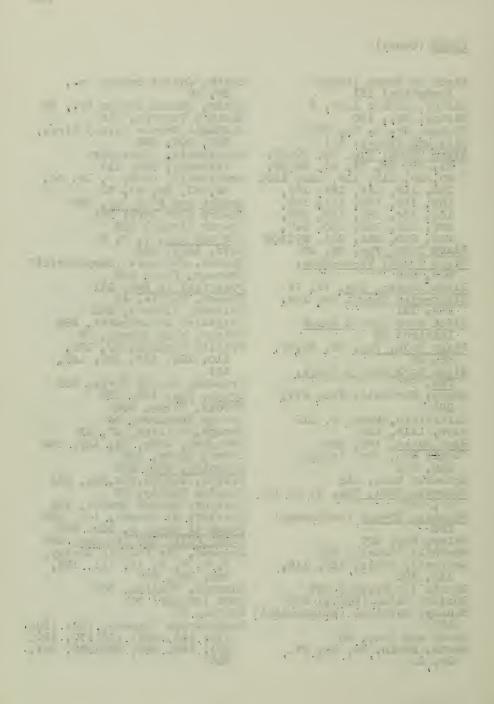
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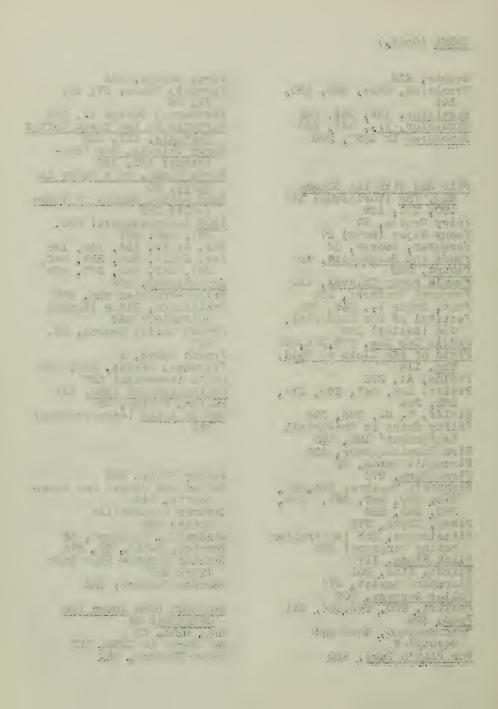
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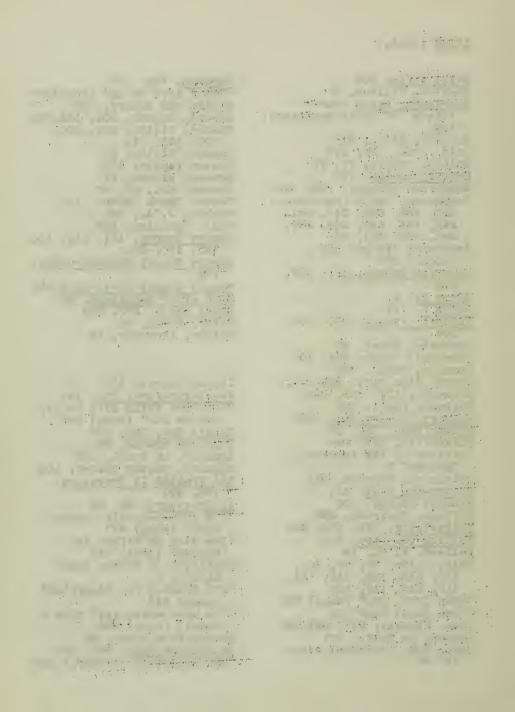
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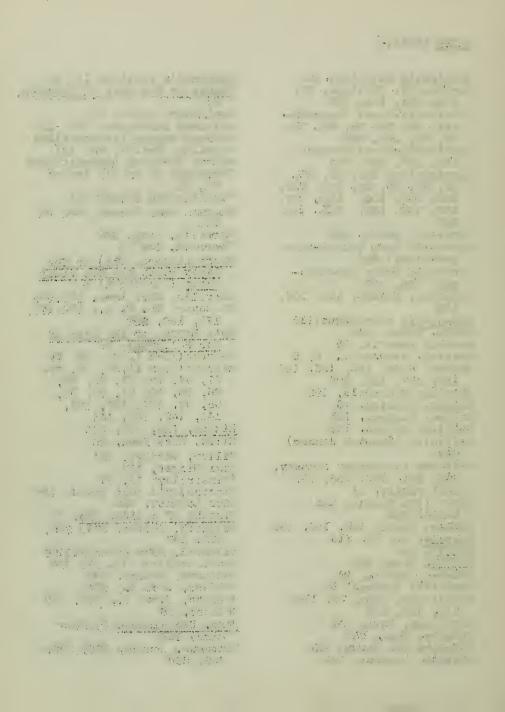
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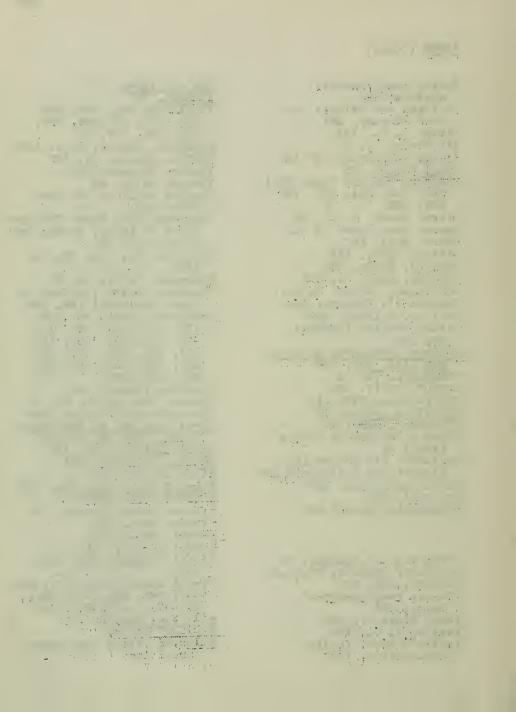
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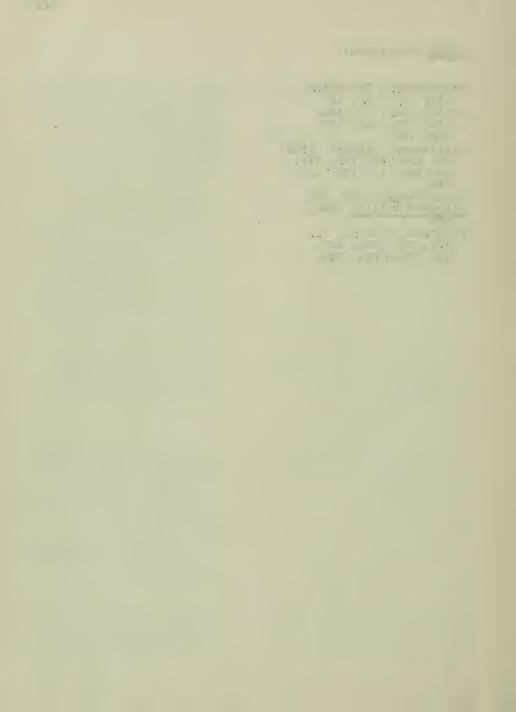
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