

AMATEUR THEATRICALS.



TEN years ago the terms "amateur theatricals" and "private theatricals" were synonymous. Since then, while private theatricals have remained amateur, amateur theatricals have by no means always been private. Indeed, this form of amusement, one of the great charms of which should lie in the atmosphere of refinement pervading its environments, a charm which vanishes at the merest suggestion of publicity, has become almost as public as professional dramatic representations. The stage now forms more frequently than the drawing-room the frame for amateur theatricals. A change so at variance with all social precedent could not have been effected without protests from some quarters, and it is not surprising that a large conservative element looks upon it with undisguised disapproval. The amateurs who have become prominent since the first notable public amateur dramatic performance—the production of "A Wonderful Woman," at the Madison Square Theater, New York, in April, 1881—have been criticised severely as seeking notoriety rather than the advancement of dramatic art, laughed at for their pretensions to rival professionals, and adjudged guilty of transgressing the proprieties of society in at all exposing themselves to criticism or ridicule. Fortunately we have nothing to do with this phase of the subject.

The present status and influence of the amateur stage are worthy of serious consideration. The evolution of this class of theatricals from a mere drawing-room entertainment, gotten up in a happy-go-lucky way for an evening's diversion, to a production carefully prepared in every detail, under professional supervision, engrossing all the spare time of those engaged in it and intended to be a permanent addition to the repertoire of a thoroughly organized club or company, forms an important chapter in the history of American society. The consequent *rapprochement* between society and a profession whose members were once socially ostracized is alone a phenomenon worth considering, and we shall find as we investigate the subject that it has other phases of great interest, which heretofore have been neglected for frivoliety gossip concerning the social standing of the amateurs or descriptions of their costumes, and for indiscriminate praise, which last has been responsible for much misdirected effort. The facts that for some years past the stage has

been effecting through the medium of amateur theatricals a revolution in society, and that, *vice versa*, society has through the same medium had a great influence upon the professional stage, have, with several other important aspects of the question, been overlooked. The subject can, however, be more readily discussed and understood after a brief reference to the status of amateur theatricals in New York, which in these matters has given the cue to the country at large.

I believe the first recorded performance of amateur theatricals was that of "Pyramus and Thisbe" by Bottom, Quince, and their associates, who played not only the title rôles but also the lion, the wall, and the moon. This scene in the "Midsummer Night's Dream" always "takes" with an audience. Shakespeare's satire is as pointed to-day as when the comedy was first given. The public feels instinctively that behind even the well-organized amateur companies of the present there are others whose proceedings are of the Bottom-Quince order. But ten years ago one met Bottoms and Quinces among amateurs far more frequently than nowadays. Costume was then the prime factor in private theatricals, and all the dramatic proprieties had to yield to it. A performance some ten years ago of that delightful skit "A Morning Call" is a case in point. The hero is supposed to have ridden across country, and hence appears in his riding-boots, corduroys, and sack coat, letting in with him the freshness of the morning air and the buoyancy of the turf. In this instance, however, the young lady who was to play the heroine had just received an elaborate evening toilet from Paris. *Voilà!* the title of the comedietta is changed to "An Evening Call." The heroine wears her Paris gown, the hero his dress suit, the references to the morning canter are eliminated. "What harm? The situations remained the same!" True; but the dialogue lost the swing and dash of the original. Yet the change encountered neither opposition nor criticism. Indeed, I think the complacency of the audience was as much evidence of the crudeness of amateur theatricals in those days as was the actress's supreme indifference to everything but her Paris gown. Her toilet was the great dramatic effect of the performance. If some one with managerial authority had been in charge of the rehearsals this calm disregard of the spirit of the play would probably not have been permitted. The slipshod

manner in which plays were gotten up for drawing-room representation was due to such lack of directing force. There was no discrimination in the casting, costuming, and staging of plays. The division of the personnel of a theater into leading man, leading lady, walking gentleman, soubrette, first old woman, etc., was apparently unknown, and a man who made a success in a low comedy part would as likely as not be next pressed into service for a tragic rôle. In the matter of costume there was an artless indifference to the laws of harmony and contrast which would have been charming had its results been less melancholy. As for stage management there was none worthy the term. A change for the better began with the organization of the Amateur Dramatic Club in 1877, which went to work not only with an accomplished personnel, but with a method. Its chief successes were in "A Scrap of Paper," "The Cricket on the Hearth," and "New Men and Old Acres." This club was never formally disbanded, but it did not survive the marriage and almost total withdrawal from amateur theatricals in 1883 of its leading lady, whose dramatic gifts are so apparent and whose technique is so finely developed that, did she not shrink from the publicity which connection with what I may call the professional amateur stage entails, she would easily be the leading lady of that. The Amateur Dramatic Club was organized on the plan of the well-known Mendelssohn Glee Club, with active and subscribing members, the former taking part in the performances, the latter defraying the expenses and in return receiving each a certain number of tickets. Thus the public could never gain admission to the performances of the club, the audiences being composed of members and their friends; and while the scope of amateur theatricals was being extended the idea of privacy was retained.

About 1880, while the Amateur Dramatic Club was still flourishing, a lady from the South, who has since gone on the professional stage, began to guide the destinies of amateur theatricals in New York. She was ambitious and enthusiastic. Her ambition prompted her to enlarge the boundaries within which amateurs could gain reputation for histrionic talent; and her enthusiasm being communicative, it caused a sudden burst of dramatic energy in society. The result was, about a year later,—April 26, 1881,—the performance at the Madison Square Theater to which I have already referred. Rehearsals for "A Wonderful Woman" began weeks beforehand, and were conducted under the stage management of a professional actress, at first in private houses and afterwards on the stage of the theater in which the per-

formance took place. Some of the rôles were notably successful, and the whole play, owing to the thoroughness with which it had been rehearsed, went smoothly. It was a public performance, and its social and dramatic features were reported at length in the newspapers the next day. It started amateur theatricals on their career of publicity until in a short time the doings of the amateurs were as fully reported as those of professionals. And, indeed, after this performance any one attempting to make a success on the amateur stage was obliged so fully to devote his attention to studying and rehearsing that he might well be called a professional amateur. Take, for example, the leading actor on the non-professional stage. He has a repertoire of over ninety plays, and has acted one part, *Sang Froid*, in "Delicate Ground," nineteen times.

Until the winter of 1887, when she went on the professional stage, the lady of whom I have written was the central figure in amateur theatricals. She was virtually the manager of the most complete company of amateurs which has acted here. With a few changes of personnel it remained intact for five years, achieving its main successes in "The Romance of a Poor Young Man" and "The Russian Honeymoon," plays it would act many times each season. This lady's methods were those of a professional manager. She had a list of all who acted with her, with their addresses and notes regarding the line of parts in which they were especially successful. In this book she also entered the names and addresses of the people, many in number, who applied for a chance to act with her. She made each applicant recite or act, and noted her opinion of the effort opposite the name. When, therefore, some member dropped out of her company or in any way disappointed her, she had a large number of people to choose from in filling the vacancy. Her company was organized according to the regular theatrical divisions of leading lady, etc., and with under-studies. For every performance given under her management a professional "coach" was engaged, and his word was law. The result was a discipline to which amateurs had never before been willing to submit. They had become quasi-public characters, they knew they were to play before large audiences, and they felt that failure would not be overlooked as in the case of strictly private theatricals. Therefore they worked with an energy which could not fail to place amateur theatricals upon a higher plane; and however much the publicity attained by this form of amusement is to be regretted for certain reasons, there is no doubt that this very publicity put the actors on their mettle and caused them to

approach their tasks in a spirit of artistic seriousness. Moreover, so far as the question of publicity is concerned, I think amateur theatricals have reached their turning-point, and that a reaction towards the more refined environments of the social circle will soon set in, while the discipline which in these years has been obtained at the expense of privacy will remain as a distinct gain. One of the most conspicuous signs of this reaction is the popularity of the Amateur Comedy Club, which is modeled somewhat after the old Amateur Dramatic Club and never takes part in performances for which tickets are sold. This club was founded in 1881, but fell into desuetude when public amateur theatricals became popular. From the time, however, when it began to seem as if notoriety were inseparable from the amateur stage, this club began to "pick up," and now it has regained its former prestige. The Junior Comedy, a club recently organized on the same plan, is also exerting a good influence over the non-professional stage.

As indicated in the above résumé of the history of amateur theatricals in New York during the last ten years, the publicity given to this form of amusement has caused a decided departure from methods formerly in vogue; so that there are now two classes of amateurs—amateurs and professional amateurs. The effect of this publicity has, however, been felt equally in other directions. It has certainly brought "society" more into public view. Society news was an almost unknown factor in the make-up of the daily newspapers before the amateurs gave public performances. Only social happenings of extraordinary interest were, as a rule, considered of sufficient importance to be admitted to the news columns. But now we find balls, dances, weddings, dinners, receptions, teas, duly announced beforehand, and the day after their happening served up along with politics, murders, scandals, and the other delicacies of the journalistic menu.

It is significant, in connection with this phase of the subject, that society reporters and not dramatic critics are usually assigned to "do" amateur theatrical performances. It goes to show that the publicity these representations have obtained is not of that legitimate kind which is valued by an artist. The length of the reports does not depend upon the merit of the performance but upon the social prominence of the performers. Productions of far greater merit than those reported at length will be passed over entirely because those who participate in them do not move in the highest circles of society. It is the fictitious value thus assigned to a certain line of amateur representations which has proved harmful to the true

interests of the amateur and the professional stage alike. For, as there is no attempt at criticism in these reports, the actors are apt to conceive an exaggerated idea of their abilities, and are led to attempt plays which are not within the legitimate scope of the amateur stage.

Amateur theatricals have had another and different influence upon society than that just referred to. They have made it less exclusive. The jealousy with which it formerly guarded its privacy caused publicity to seem incompatible with good breeding, and naturally created a prejudice against the profession whose members, through the very character of their work, necessarily come conspicuously before the public. When the old slipshod methods were abandoned for a thoroughness of preparation almost if not quite equal to that which prevails on the professional stage, the amateurs became cognizant of the many sterling qualities which an actor of the first rank must possess in addition to natural dramatic gifts. They recognized the great artistic value of a successful portrayal of character, and naturally the actor and his work grew in honor among them. There was, of course, a touch of vanity withal. Were they not emulating professional actors? How could they then afford to look down upon those like whom they were striving to be? Then, too, as soon as the amateurs began to rehearse and play in public theaters, they gained a nearer view of professional dramatic matters. They saw theatrical life no longer under the glamor of the footlights. They were brought face to face with the stern reality behind the scenes and learned that the actor's life is one of loyal devotion to his art, often under conditions of hardship which no other profession imposes. There they found also a wealth of generous, self-sacrificing natures which they could not but honor. Nor could they fail to discover that in theatrical circles, as in others, there are various degrees of culture, and that among the members of the profession are men and women who would be ornaments in the most refined society. And so it is that the stage has been brought into closer relations with society; and from this more intimate relationship a new kind of amateur theatricals has in turn sprung up, called mixed theatricals, consisting of performances in which both professionals and amateurs take part. The first representation of this kind which attracted general attention was the production, early in 1888, of "Contrast" at the Lyceum Theater, New York, in which the leading man was a professional and the leading lady an amateur, while the minor rôles were similarly distributed.

There is an audaciousness in this new departure which at first blush seems somewhat

taking. But on consideration it is found open to criticism. Does it not, in the first place, transcend the legitimate bounds of amateur theatricals? The element of social exclusiveness, as well as that of privacy, has been eliminated. In the second place, the amateurs must usually be at a disadvantage in these performances. For the professionals are always chosen from among the leading actors, and a professional of the first rank is almost certain to outshine an amateur of the first rank, if only because the former has acquired a more finished technique through his wider experience and greater practice, even if the amateur's natural gifts are equal. Hence the performance is apt to be of uneven merit. These mixed representations seem to me such an utter perversion of the legitimate character of amateur theatricals that I can hardly believe them other than the result of a merely temporary aberration of taste, due to the American tendency to go to extremes. This new class of theatricals is so palpably an exaggeration that it seems impossible it should not turn upon itself. Indeed, I do not know but when the amateurs awaken to a sense of the preposterous character of these mixed performances a reaction may ensue all along the line, and amateur theatricals gradually be withdrawn from those public surroundings so incompatible with the charm of that subtle, indefinable quality we call refinement back into their proper environments. The primal indications of such a reaction are, as I have hinted, not lacking. Some of the most talented amateurs now refuse to appear in performances for which tickets are sold; and, as already pointed out, the clubs whose rules forbid their participation in any but private representations, charitable entertainments not excepted, were never so prosperous as now.

When amateur theatricals first attracted public notice they were viewed with some disfavor by the dramatic profession. Managers apprehended that as society was so much interested in amateur theatricals it would be proportionately less interested in regular theatrical amusements. They further dreaded a general irruption upon the professional stage of ambitious amateurs who would lower the standard of dramatic art by achieving success by playing upon the curiosity of the public. But I do not believe there is a theatrical manager in this country to-day who will not acknowledge that, all things considered, the stage has been benefited by the widespread interest taken in amateur theatricals. To quote one of our prominent managers, it brings social interest to the theater. As one result the average social standing of those who now enter theatrical life is higher. At the same time there

has not been the irruption of society amateurs upon the stage which the profession at first dreaded. The result of the only instance of this kind directly attributable to the amateur theatrical excitement has hardly been so encouraging as to cause a general stampede of women from society to the stage—and from the men no danger was ever apprehended. A man has to win his way on his merits. But to return to the point under consideration. In former years many people the bent of whose disposition was towards a dramatic career hesitated to go on the stage because of the baneful influences which were supposed to surround theatrical life. This notion once had wide prevalence. But opinions have changed, and a wholesale denunciation of the stage defeats itself because its exaggeration is patent to the vast number of people who, through interest in the amateurs and their doings, have learned that the actor's career is not a round of glory and dissipation, but that the woman or man who goes on the stage a lady or a gentleman can remain such if she or he *chooses* to. No doubt the prejudice which formerly existed worked greatly to the actual injury of the dramatic profession. But from the time amateur theatricals became a controlling factor in the society world—I speak on the authority of the manager of one of our leading theaters—applications to go on the stage from women and men of refinement, as well as of talent, have been steadily increasing in number. It is not impossible that the amateurs and their friends influenced the stage towards that better life which so surprised them when they discovered it—a suggestion I throw out with much hesitation, because I believe that even in the days when the stage was most completely under a social ban its tendency was to elevate rather than to lower those who trod its boards.

The effect of the more intimate relations now existing between society and the stage is also observable in the American dramatic literature of the day. Under the fostering care of the amateur stage the American society drama has obtained a foothold on the professional boards. Not so very long ago society plays were almost exclusively of French origin. But as the interest of society in matters dramatic increased, managers naturally began to consider the interests of society. The result has been a number of well-constructed, well-written plays dealing with American society—a class of dramas far superior in tone and influence to the French pieces formerly in vogue, and happily quite as successful.

Considering that the publicity given to amateur theatricals in New York has given an impetus to this form of amusement all over the



A SCENE FROM "KATHARINE," A TRAVESTY BY J. K. BANGS.
(DRAMATIC CLUB, CO. I, 7TH REGIMENT.)

country, so that nearly every community, however small, boasts its amateur company, it seems well to point out certain mistakes that amateurs are apt to make in choosing and preparing a play for performance. The choice of the play is of first importance, a phase of the subject which leads to a consideration of the legitimate scope of amateur theatricals. I have never seen a thoroughly successful amateur performance of anything but burlesque and light comedy. Even in the performances of the "Romance of a Poor Young Man" and in those of the "Russian Honeymoon" there were crude elements due largely to want of technique on the part of some members of the cast. It is impossible for an amateur, until he has been acting for many years, to acquire the technique of a professional. For experience is to the actor what the five-finger exercises are to the pianist. It gives him a certain flexibility of touch which enables him to create at least the lineaments of the part even if the subtler characteristics are lacking. His technique saves him from total failure. In a company of amateurs there is always more or less want of such flexibility. They should especially beware of tragedy. The more inspired the tragic play the more it will bore the audience when played by non-professionals. For of all classes of dramas tragedy demands the most finished technique. It is a significant fact that many eminent tragedians began their careers in parts quite different from those in which they afterwards succeeded—even as actors of comedy and eccentric character. The spirit of tragedy was rampant within them, but they were unable to give physical expression to it. They lacked the necessary finish of technique which in time they acquired in humbler rôles.

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The most thoroughly successful amateur performances I have seen—thoroughly successful because every part was well done—have been the college burlesques given from time to time in New York by the Harvard Hasty Pudding Club and the Columbia College Dramatic Club. Most notable among the performances of the Harvard men was a burlesque entitled "Dido and Æneas,"—the *Æneas* has since become a prominent amateur,—and among those given by the Columbians the skit "Captain Kidd." Both were cleverly written, the work of undergraduates, and were played with the wild freedom and hilarious abandon of exuberant youth. The female parts in these college burlesques, even those of the *corps de ballet*, are taken by men who make themselves up so that they are fair to look upon. I have also seen some capital productions by amateurs of farces and light society comedies. The latter were especially successful because of an element of good breeding which pervaded them. It may therefore be laid down as a rule that the pieces to which amateurs should confine their efforts are burlesques, farces, or society comedies of the present day. In the last they are among their familiar surroundings and are required to portray only such characters as their every-day life has given them insight into. The moment amateurs get into any other than the costumes to which they are accustomed their lack of flexibility or want of adaptability becomes apparent. Therefore a costume play is



SCENE FROM "THE LADY OF THE LAKE" (HARVARD HASTY PUDDING CLUB).



THE CHORUS FROM "DIDO AND ÆNEAS" (HARVARD HASTY PUDDING CLUB).

always to be avoided by amateurs. For in such plays they cannot merge their personality into the past age. The nineteenth century rushes about in the ruffles and gold lace of the slower and more pompous eighteenth, and the twang of Uncle Sam rasps through the gentle inflections of the speech of Louis XIV. In short, amateurs are as a rule ill at ease in any play not of their own day and dress. Of course there are some non-professionals who, being exceptionally gifted and having acted almost continuously for a considerable period of time, have acquired a *savoir-faire* almost professional, and easily cast off their identity. Among these is the lady who, in the company which gave the "Romance of a Poor Young Man," played the part of the *Governess*, and was also seen as the *Baroness* in the "Russian Honeymoon." She is, to go to the gist of the matter, at home on the stage. So are two other ladies, one of them a Hungarian, who in the work she has done has shown herself a true daughter of her emotional and picturesque race; the other an actress of eccentric parts, who also appeared in the "Romance." Another young lady is devoting herself with much success to old comedy parts, such as *Lady Teazle*, and *Helen* in "The Hunchback." In these old comedies she has the coöperation of a veteran amateur who was the *Doctor* in Feuillet's drama, and of a gentleman preëminent among the younger men. The latter is the "leading man" of the non-professional stage. His greatest successes lie in parts which call for a good deal of nervous action and a few delicate touches of the eccentric. He is the one of whose extensive repertoire I spoke. The most prominent actor of purely eccentric parts is the gentleman who has

really distinguished himself by his *Kester* in the "Sheep in Wolf's Clothing," and his *Diggery* in the "Specter Bridegroom." It must not be supposed that those whom I have just referred to have the monopoly of the dramatic talent on the non-professional stage. I have stated that the most accomplished of the amateur actresses clings faithfully to the idea of private as distinguished from amateur theatricals, and I may add that one of the most gifted among the amateur actors, a lawyer who has held a minor judicial office in the city of New York and has been honored with the nomination for a judgeship in one of the higher courts, has never emerged from strictly social environments.

But amateurs in general should bear in mind that those whom I have just cited are exceptionally gifted, and that even they do better work within the line of lighter plays than in those in which they challenge comparison with professionals. And, by the way, one of the great advantages to amateurs of acting in short burlesques, farces, and comedies is that in this country they have these branches all to themselves, and do not therefore trespass on professional domain. I have often noticed that when amateurs attempt plays of greater scope, while one of the leading parts and the minor rôles may be well taken, the others in the cast are overweighted. The successful leading part happens to be played by an exceptionally gifted amateur, like the lady who acted *Suzanne* in "A Scrap of Paper" with so much vivacity and artistic discrimination with the Amateur Comedy Club in April, 1888; the minor parts are within the limits of amateur accomplishment. Between these extremes all is ridiculous or melancholy. A star performance is bad enough on the professional stage; on the amateur stage it breeds a combination of pity and wrath.

After the selection of the play come the important tasks of casting, studying, and rehearsing; and now it is of first importance to introduce system into the proceedings. To this end a "coach" or a stage-manager should be at once appointed, with full powers. There should be absolutely no appeal from his decisions. If possible, he should be a professional. After he has cast the play those who are to take part in it should meet and read it

through, each taking his own rôle, in the presence of the coach, who should correct any mistakes of emphasis, etc. When the play has been learned by heart the rehearsals begin, and at these implicit obedience to the stage-manager is absolutely necessary to success. Actors often think they are making a gesture in a certain way when they are not at all carrying out their intentions, and so convinced are they that they are giving physical expression to their dramatic conceptions that they are apt to lose their tempers when corrected by the stage-manager. Of course the coach must in his turn exercise a certain amount of persuasive tact. It is most advisable to produce amateur theatricals under the auspices of a club modeled upon the Amateur Comedy Club, with subscribing and active members, and

a stage committee which casts the plays and superintends their production.

Amateur theatricals have gained system and method from the very publicity which has robbed them of the charm of privacy. But there is little doubt, as I have stated, that there is a reaction towards their legitimate scope and surroundings. At the same time there is every reason to believe that this reaction does not mean a return to the old slipshod methods. The advantages attained through publicity will survive that undesirable attribute, and amateur theatricals will be on a sounder basis than ever before. Amateur theatricals, within their legitimate scope and surroundings, are an intellectual lever that our society could ill afford to lose.

Gustav Kobbé.



CAVE SCENE IN DIDO AND ÆNEAS.

DUTCH PAINTERS AT HOME.



DEVOTEE of the modern school of Dutch art never paints to paint a "picture," but endeavors to portray some simple phase of nature or some quiet sentiment of every-day life. The work of the school is chiefly remarkable for its purity of color, its decided individuality, and its originality of conception. Their subjects, taken from the life around them,—the picturesque people, old cities, flat fields, winding canals, windmills, and clumsy boats,—must of necessity be simple and quaint. They combine the delicate perception of nature peculiar to the best French landscape painters with a sense of something higher and greater than purity of color and beauty of form—something that must come from the heart of man. In short, their work is first simple, then vigorous; as a consequence fresh, and always unacademic.

It was on a lovely morning at the Hague that we set out to call upon Mr. Josef Israëls, the founder of the present school of Dutch figure-painters. There is a delightful little