



# The Confessions of an Advance Agent.

*BY FRANK S. ARNETT.*

THE TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS OF THE MAN WHO "GOES AHEAD"  
OF A TRAVELING THEATRICAL COMPANY, FRANKLY TOLD BY  
A FORMER MEMBER OF THE GUILD.

LITTLE remains of the theater's old-time mystery. Never, perhaps, were the temples of Thespis so crowded, yet their false high priests have themselves torn away the once sacred veil. Achievements that in bygone times were deemed almost supernatural have become familiar and almost childish tricks to-day.

In this matter of fact generation, I wonder if even the children gaze at the footlights with any such awe as Charles Lamb tells us he felt when a boy of six. The gentle philosopher recalls that when the curtain was about to be raised, "incapable of the anticipation," he reposed his closed eyes "in a sort of resignation upon the maternal lap"; and when he finally dared to look, he believed that what he saw was "all enchantment and a dream." I hope there are still such children, but I fear they passed away with the coming of the press agent and the Sunday newspaper.

The hammer of the stage carpenter, the fads and foibles of the actor, the training of the ballet dancer, the home life of the chorus girl—all these, now-

adays, are matters of common knowledge. One dramatist, lest there should remain a vestige of charm or illusion, has raised the curtain at the close of his play to show you the bare and dreary stage, deserted by the actors, stripped of its painted settings, with nothing visible save brick walls and a barn-like door.

Let it be my task to tear away the last tattered shreds of the veil by telling the story of the advance agent. An actor may wait till he is gray-haired and famous before writing his reminiscences. At eighty you can act, but you cannot hustle. Therefore the agent must write his at an earlier age; and as he never becomes famous there's no use in waiting for that.

## THE MAN WHO "GOES AHEAD."

I have some right to talk of the labor of those who point the way to the doors of the theater, for during the better part of ten years it was my sole duty to persuade men and women and children to enjoy themselves. Admitting the pleasures to which I urged them to have

been harmless, nay, at times even helpful, may not the advance agent look back upon his work and hope that, after all, his is not the most unworthy of careers? Leigh Hunt, it seems to me, has defined what should be one of the chief objects of both the stage and the advance agent—to “make adversity hopeful, prosperity sympathetic, all kinder, richer, and happier.” And, lest anything that I may say should be misunderstood by my fellows, let me state here that an intimate knowledge of all their joys and sorrows has not lessened my belief in the innate goodness of the majority of the people of the stage, nor my appreciation of all that is true or beautiful in their work.

How many, outside hotels, theaters, and newspaper offices, have an advance agent among their acquaintances, or more than a vague idea of what he does when he “goes ahead” of a traveling theatrical company? I never knowingly saw one, until for some time I had been an advance agent myself. Now any summer day I can walk up Broadway in New York, and between Thirty-Fourth Street and Longacre Square point out three hundred and seventy-two advance agents of various kinds.

For they are not all alike. There are agents that wouldn't for worlds put that title on their cards. They are either “business managers” or “personal representatives.” I was once a business manager myself, but in time I got over it. Later I even became a real manager, if you please, with the head-enlarging legend “Under The Sole Direction Of” preceding my name. When I recovered from that—well, if there had been any money left I would have paid a premium to any man that would permit me to put just the common or garden title of advance agent on my cards.

Of course we all wanted to be actors when we were boys, but advance agents—why, we didn't know there were such people. Even to-day I possess little information regarding their individual origin. Some, sad to relate, marry into the business, and, when once firmly established, get a divorce; others remain married, but grow jealous, become a nuisance around the theaters, and cause

complications that ruin the stage careers of their wives.

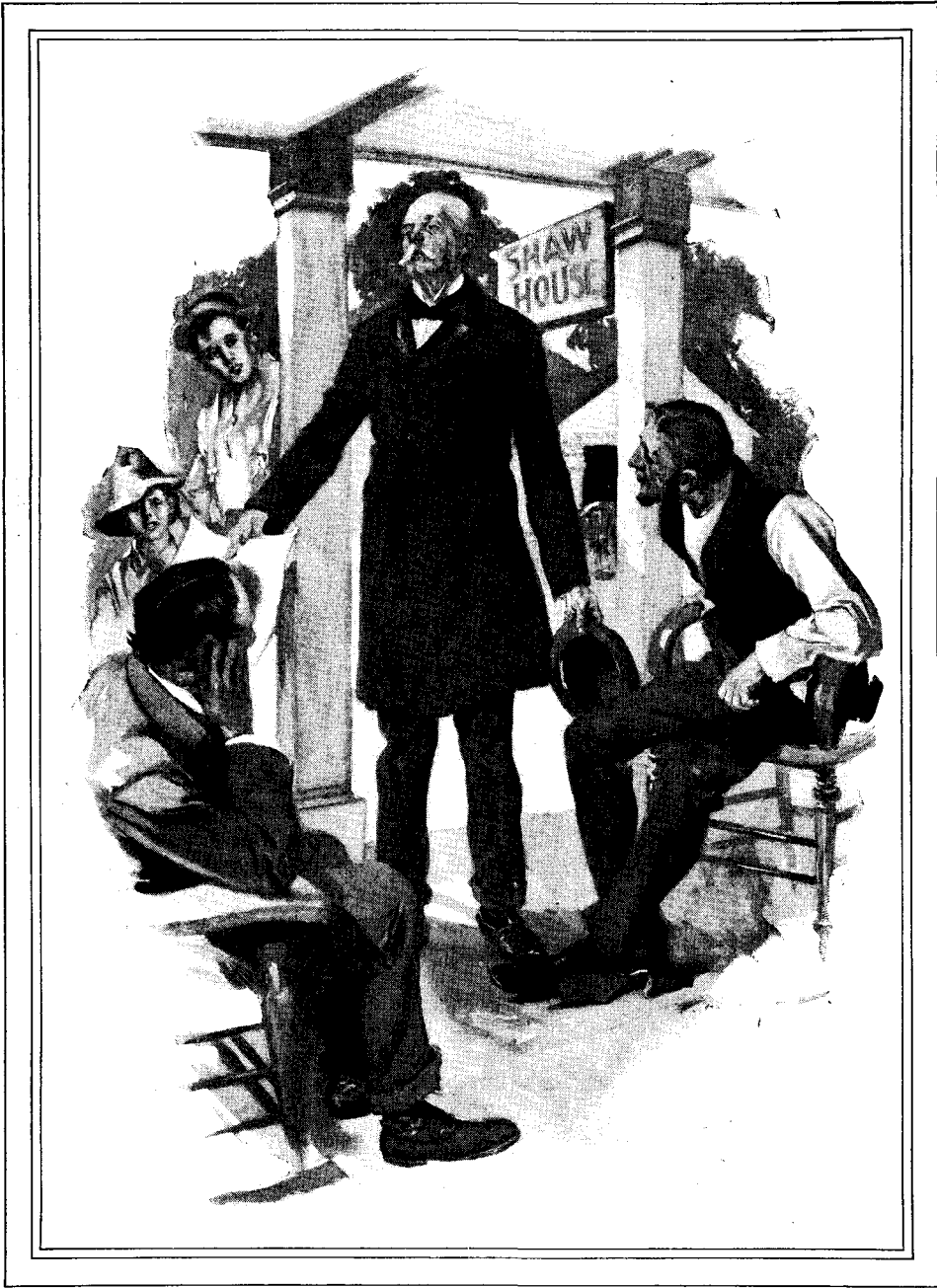
#### THE OLD-TIME ADVANCE AGENT.

Old-time managers will tell you of the wonderful agent of the “palmy days,” but the probability is that his circus methods and eccentric make-up would not now be tolerated. He belonged to a race of conscienceless and brazen liars, and his Munchausenish marvels were told at their best only when his legs were stretched under the table of some backwoods temple of Bacchus. He made it a point of honor never to leave a town until he had prevaricated about the “show” to each individual inhabitant; but he couldn't write his yarns if his life depended upon it, and work was a word not found in his otherwise colossal vocabulary.

Occasionally he is still to be met in the “one night stands,” bald, seedy, and somewhat wistful, but mendacious as of old. He has no ambition higher than continuing in advance of the “ten, twenty, and thirty” class, and he would refuse to succeed Maurice Grau at New York's Metropolitan Opera House, for then never again would his eloquence hold spell-bound the citizens of Pawpaw, Illinois.

In increasing numbers advance agents are being drawn from among men of education. Not a few are college bred, and many have been dramatic critics and newspaper writers. To-day the agent of this class is cordially welcomed at exclusive clubs—not, of course, because he is an agent, but because he is himself; and while his life is not one permitting the continuance of social connections formed, possibly, in youth, he may find time to write successful plays, creditable fiction, and even more serious works. The time is past when he made his headquarters in saloons and spent his evenings in the theater “bill room,” playing poker on a barrel and “rushing the growler” alternately with the lithographers.

The ideal agent—and he exists, although not in undue numbers—knows something of costuming, and of the art of the scene painter, and can write intelligently of them; he knows the life stories of his dramatists, composers, sing-



THE OLD-TIME ADVANCE AGENT—"HE MADE IT A POINT OF HONOR NEVER TO LEAVE A TOWN TILL HE HAD PREVARICATED ABOUT THE 'SHOW' TO EACH INDIVIDUAL INHABITANT."

ers, and actors: he realizes, as several eminent authorities have failed to realize, that the most vital part of the history of English literature is the history of the English stage; and he can talk interestingly of all these matters, although he has sense enough to talk shop

at only the right times. He is no more of a Sir Galahad or a George Washington than was the old-time agent, but he is a far more artistic and up-to-date liar, and in really important matters his honesty is unquestioned. Local managers know that when he promises a good play and a

capable company his promises will be kept, and newspaper men have learned that they can safely print his announcements without changing a word, in the interest either of truth or of grammar.

That these announcements are written by the agents is not generally known. Even in New York the accounts of coming theatrical events are often similarly worded in all the newspapers, showing a lack of pride and energy in the dramatic editors, and a lack of versatility in the press agents. A great deal of the matter relating to the theaters, the gossip, interviews, and "scare head" news filling a column or more, is written by the agents. As regards New York, however, I have no personal knowledge of a case where this has been true of the actual criticisms of important productions.

#### THE ADVANCE AGENT AND THE NEWSPAPERS.

Nevertheless, dramatic editors who permit all their criticisms to be written for them are not extinct. In small towns, and in case of a play and cast of well established merit, this may do no harm. But in a city of three hundred thousand inhabitants I once wrote a column and a half of laudatory review of my company's first performance, and on the following morning it appeared in the leading local daily over the critic's own signature, without the omission of a word. I wrote it honestly, for the attraction happened to be one of the most worthy of the year. But suppose I had not been honest, and both play and players had deserved severe censure; the column and a half would have appeared just the same. It was a business transaction, not a matter of friendship. Suppose, on the other hand, I had refused a preliminary business basis. That's different; the critic would have managed to do his own work, and his paper would have condemned the performance as a disgrace to the stage.

Personally I have known but three critics who in cold blood would accept a cash bribe. I have known several whose newspaper space was exchangeable for an introduction to an actress, and a score interested solely in the advertising upon which their criticisms were based.

Others are men whom even friendship cannot prevent from telling the truth.

The idea that editors flee from the approach of the advance agent as from that of the subscription book man, or the charity promoter, is but partly correct. Most of them realize that they and the agents should be of mutual benefit. Some are never cordial, remaining distant even on long acquaintance. The reason is either that they refuse to regard advance agents as gentlemen, and consider every visit an attempt at corruption, or that they have charge of departments which they deem more important than the dramatic. Agents that do not have the entrée to the rooms of able and whole-souled editors must be either fakirs or bores, and yet for some mysterious reason a few reputable organizations continue men in advance who are absolutely barred from entering certain newspaper offices.

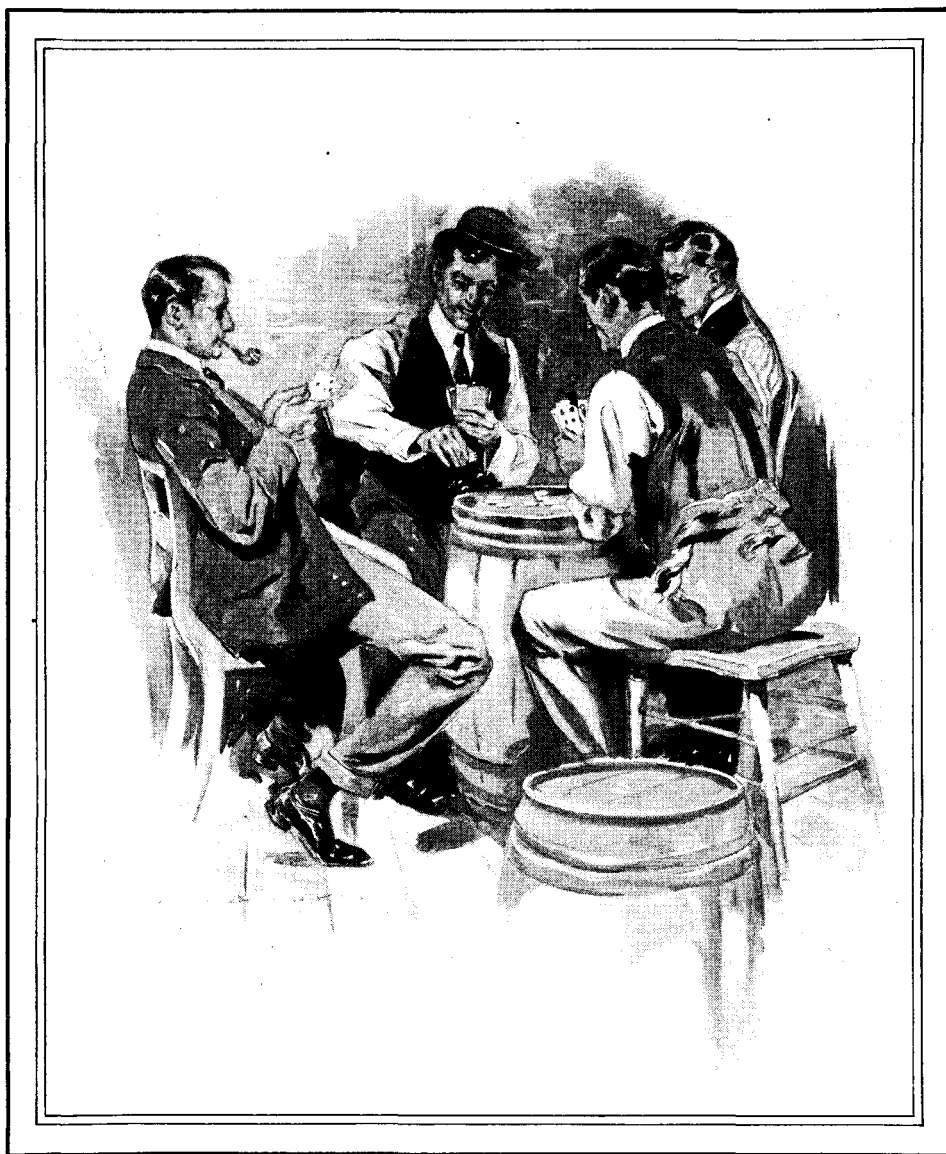
#### THE ADVANCE AGENT'S TRIALS.

On the opening night in each city, the agent is the most anxious of all the group posing at the theater entrance. He is not present, as are many of the others, because of any financial interest in the receipts, nor because he will be praised, if the house is crowded, for his successful efforts to arouse the public's preliminary interest. One of the peculiarities of the theatrical business is that the advance agent, in the manager's opinion, is never in the remotest degree, nor through any conceivable combination of circumstances, the cause of large first night audiences, but is invariably and inexcusably responsible for small ones. He is there at the opening, not hoping to share in a possible triumph, but merely praying that the house may not be empty, that the play will not be a "frost," that the theater will not burn to the ground, and that the leading lady will not be struck by lightning on the way from her hotel. Of any or all of these catastrophes he knows, from sad experience, that he will be proved conclusively to have been the sole cause. And yet at the sudden close of a disastrous tour the manager, leaning against a Broadway bar, will smite his hand on the mahogany and disgustingly exclaim:



"What could you expect? With an agent like that we hadn't the ghost of a chance from the time we left New York. If we'd had a decent man ahead we'd have made a mint, sir, positively a mint!"

other shows losing money hand over fist. But I just gritted my teeth and said I'd make it a go. I don't want to throw any bouquets at myself, but I did it, I actually did it, sir, in the face of superhuman difficulties. Give you



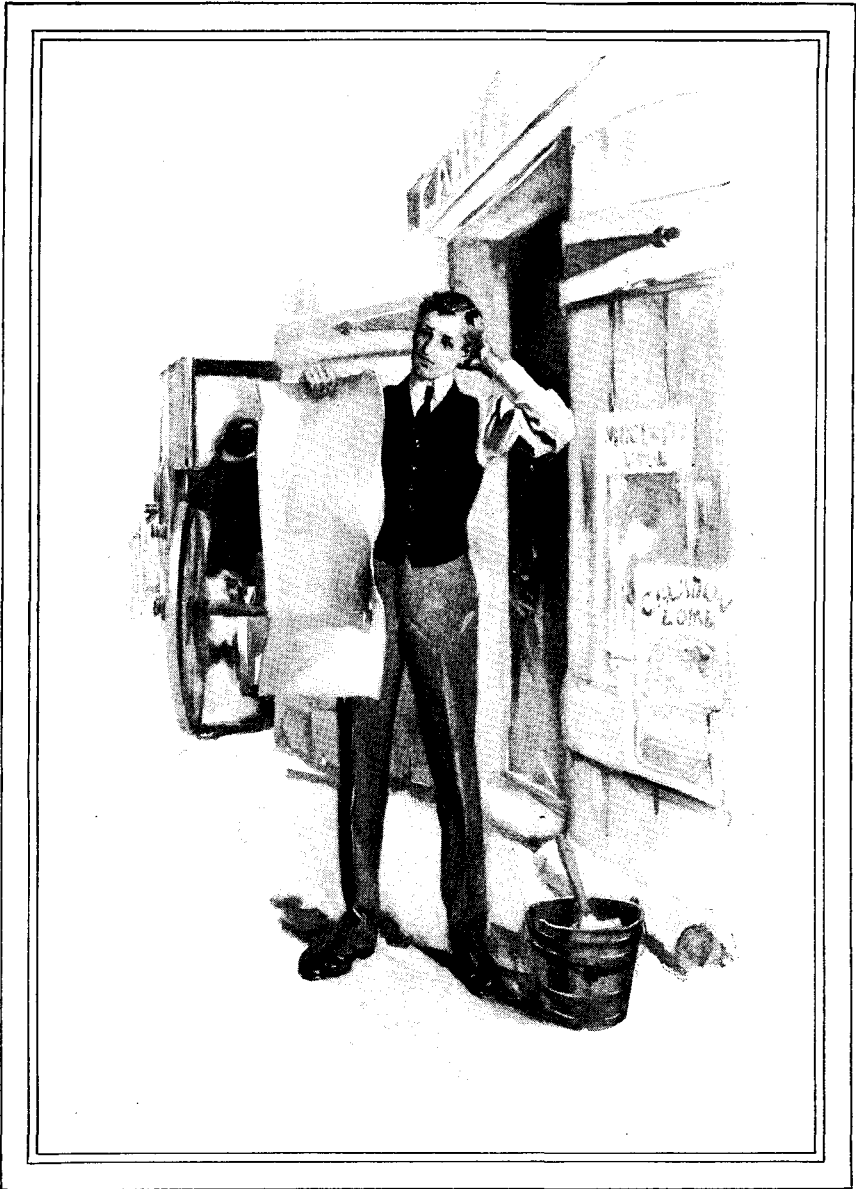
"HE SPENT HIS EVENINGS IN THE THEATER 'BILL ROOM,' PLAYING POKER ON A BARREL."

If the tour has been a success the same manager, leaning against the same bar, may be heard complacently to say:

"I give you my word I never worked so hard in my life. The company was rotten, the play was worse, and half the

my word, we turned 'em away in every single town."

The public is aware that the actor frequently fails to receive his salary; but the agent is sometimes a loser not only in credit for conscientious work, but



THE VERACIOUS LITHOGRAPH—"OUR AGGREGATION OF TALENT INCLUDED LILLIAN RUSSELL, MRS. LANGTRY, AND EDWIN BOOTH."

also financially to an amount greater than his salary. Some years ago, while with a company appearing in Philadelphia, I was sent to secure scenery that had been stored at a certain Chicago theater. As my manager was heavily in debt to the Chicago people, the task was both delicate and difficult. More than that, the theater was preparing for a gigantic spectacle intended to run throughout the World's Fair. Numer-

ous delays had brought every one in the place to a condition bordering on insanity. All were working night and day; to move our scenery would require that everything else should stop, and every hour meant hundreds of dollars. Naturally, my request was refused.

I wired the fact. An immediate reply stated that my failure would close our season. Made eloquent by this, I renewed my appeal, urging it solely upon

the personal grounds of former Chicago newspaper associations. Work on the spectacle was at once halted, and an entire day devoted to unearthing the required scenery and loading it on a special car. I felt imperatively bound to reward the stage hands for extra labor performed while almost out of their minds from overwork and loss of sleep. My hotel cashed a draft on my manager, and the money was divided between the workmen and the railroad. The scenery had been obtained in spite of difficulties that were almost prohibitive, and our season had been saved from an untimely and disastrous close; yet the manager refused to honor the Chicago draft, which I paid out of my own pocket in response to a wire from the hotel.

Another manager was addicted to a practise that was practically picking the pockets of his agents. He knew nothing of art in connection with the drama, and his one purpose was to secure any publicity that would bring in money. He gave me *carte blanche* to traduce him in the newspapers. He would father any disreputable thing I could get into print provided it drew attention to himself. He frankly admitted that there was nothing he would not stage if the police would permit it and the public patronize it. One of his agents, while at a New York theater, agreed to share with the local management in certain extra advertising. The manager later paid the bill, having of course received the benefits of the advertising; but he deducted the amount from the agent's salary. The result was an immediate resignation, although, impoverished by similar reductions, the agent was forced to leave his hotel without settling, reaching home without a dollar in the world.

These instances show how unlike the common sense and fairly honest principles characteristic of almost every other business under the sun are those upon which many theatrical organizations are conducted. If a company closes with salaries unpaid, it is taken for granted that they will never be paid unless recourse is had to the law—and that, in the etiquette of stageland, is bad form, to say nothing of being fatal to further engagements.

Lack of preparation is a besetting sin of such companies. Men without capital engage a company of from seven to seventy people, send an utterly unequipped agent out "wild-cattin'," and follow him with the hapless actors, no one knowing where a performance is to be given a week thereafter. Such men look upon contracts as playthings, and seriously believe that all actors should take chances with the manager, sharing in losses when failure comes, thankful for their bare salaries when there is a success.

#### A GRAND THEATRICAL ENTERPRISE.

I recall that once, when the season had ended abruptly, I was asked on Broadway if I could leave the same afternoon "ahead of a show." The company was to be backed, I was told, by a wealthy grocer. Having accepted the offer, I was met at the train by the comedian, who was also the manager. It later developed that during the summer months he was a tin-type photographer at Coney Island, the drama being rather in the nature of a relaxation from the arduous duties of his regular profession.

The comedian was most apologetic. At the last moment, it appeared, the grocer's wife had learned of her husband's desire to become an "angel," and had concealed the family pocket-book. Could I get along with seven dollars until the show opened? There floated through my mind visions of certain high and mighty organizations heralded in other and happier days; of crowded boxes during an opera season at the Chicago Auditorium; of the brilliancy of a first night at the New York Casino; of a proposed theatrical lease in Paris discussed over a cozy table at the Café de la Paix. But I realized that it was midwinter, and that the sum named would create a riot on the Rialto; the train was pulling out—and I took the seven dollars.

Spring Valley, Branchville, Nanuet, and Nineveh were four of the places I visited. Sometimes I could find the towns after reaching the railway station, and sometimes I couldn't. The manager of the town hall usually worked a farm some miles out, and ne-

gotiations involved pedestrianism. I learned to make my own paste and put up the bills, the walls of barns and the door of the blacksmith's shop being my most prominent bill-boards. On unrolling my first bundle of second-hand lithographs, I found that the tin-type man must have lovingly labored over them late into the nights, for all had been carefully dated with pen and ink. I hope he has since developed into a Young Napoleon of the Drama. He deserved it.

According to the pictured promises of these lithographs, our aggregation of talent included Lillian Russell, Mrs. Langtry, and Edwin Booth. Having some doubt as to the credulity even of Spring Valley and Nanuet, I regretfully tore off the names of these living and dead celebrities, but I could make no change in a "magnificent group of one hundred choristers." I think our exact number was eight, including the grocer and an infant phenomenon.

I never saw that show, but I once met a man who had gone in on a pass, and he said it was all right. I was thinking of going back to see it, when one day, quite by accident, I learned that it had returned to New York a week before. The company, it appeared, was a family affair, the agent being the only member not related to all the others. Hence, perhaps, their calm indifference as to how long I continued to wander over the country with my pictures of Russell, Langtry, Booth, and the superb chorus of one hundred.

#### THE ADVANCE AGENT'S DUTIES.

Although much more pretentious organizations sometimes take the road with little more formality than in the case cited, the agent of a high grade company opening its season in New York, and playing thereafter only the larger cities, usually enters upon his duties long before the opening. Indeed, the entire summer should be filled with preparatory work. Once started "on the road," seven days in advance of his company, much of the comfort of the actors depends on him, besides the peace of mind of the manager, and the financial success of the tour. In addition to arousing the interest of the public, he is

expected to perfect every business and personal arrangement, so that the company, on reaching a town, will have nothing to do but give the play, and the manager, if prospering, little but to "count up the house," take his share of the receipts, settle with the railroads, and pay salaries on Tuesday nights. Of course, if times are bad and there is no "angel," the manager may have a few other things to do; but these are not *his* confessions.

While even a detailed account of the agent's work might not indicate the fact, his life is an unnatural one, just as, in a way, is the actor's. The shivering beggar, peeping from the pavement at the softly lighted tables of the Waldorf, feels no more an outcast than does the agent a thousand miles from those he loves, walking the streets of a strange city at night to see how it is "billed," and occasionally catching a glimpse through a window of some happy family gathering. To feel the life to be anything but unnatural you must have been born in it, have had theatrical parents, or have commenced as an usher or a lithographer. In truth, those that begin in these latter capacities often make the best agents.

But for the man born in another sphere of activity, for the man who has had wealth and hasn't it, who has had cultured men and women as his friends and hasn't them, outside the theater's narrow circle, who has led the normal life with broad and lofty interests and has almost forgotten what that life is—for such a man there is a constant sense of unreality. While he may possibly enjoy his work, he cannot grow accustomed to it or feel that it is permanently his. When this feeling exists, much of his usefulness is lost.

Yet the discreditable features of the agent's career are not essential. The business of the theater can and should be conducted like that of any other legitimate enterprise. One great trouble is that the men who enter it, particularly those who commence as advance agents, if not unscrupulous, are at least morally weak. They succumb to its temptations—to late hours, to questionable associations, to their own popularity, whether personal and honest or professional and



false. Drink is the agent's chief curse. Perhaps he is not unique in this respect, and yet I think the character of his work makes his fate more certain, once he is started on the downward path.

#### THE AGENT'S LIFE AT ITS BEST.

There is, however, another side to the agent's life. To be the herald of a company and a play of which you are proud; to visit them once a week and stand in the brilliant theater watching the assembling of a great audience; to know that you have been instrumental in bringing the spectators there and giving them pleasure, as well as in promoting the prosperity of your manager and the triumph of your company; to see the curtain raised, and to watch the work of your friends on the stage fulfilling the promises you have made; to rush out at the last possible moment, bidding goodbye to the local management, which for a week has joined in your labor; then to catch a midnight train and be whirled away, tired but contented, to another city, which in a day will also blaze with the results of your work—these are indeed pleasures, trivial, perhaps, in this period of great deeds, and yet real enough to the man capable of enjoying them.

I can, indeed, imagine an ideal life in advance of a theatrical company—for a sane man, a man of hopes and ambi-

tions. How easily his humblest duties might be performed! How useful he could make his newspaper work, useful alike to the papers, to the public, and to his company! What friends really worth having he could claim all over the continent! How he could study a hundred cities as they never have been studied! Think of his opportunities of witnessing the best in current dramatic art; of his welcome at the theaters in the evening, the pleasant, harmless gatherings after, and still later the midnight oil and the joyous toil with pen and books; of the—but no one does it just that way. I'm afraid I never did!

And, after all, when the agent has freed himself from the shackles of his calling; when he has again painfully forged his life into normal shape, again knows the meaning of evenings at home, and can work as he did before the virus of the stage entered into his veins—should he feel guilty if there sometimes comes a wild longing for the old bohemian life? For never, perhaps, will he be wholly proof against a sudden hunger for the lights and crowds in front, for the flickering, wire-screened gas of the dressing-rooms, for the nervous merriment and thoughtlessness behind the curtain, for the rushing trains night after night, aye, even for the once hated roll of lithographs and the companionship of the bill-poster.

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#### THE CHOICE.

MORN of the orient eyes,  
The broad-browed noon—  
These do I prize,  
But for the dearest boon  
Give me the eve,  
When the long shadows weave!

The eve, and one fair star—  
Love's own!—within the west;  
And from afar  
A wood-bird's hymn of rest,  
Low note on note  
Slipped from a mellow throat!

Breeze-whispers drifting bland;  
Leaf-vows of tender tone;  
And Love's warm hand  
Close-nestling in my own—  
Herein for me  
Lieth eve's raptury!

*Clinton Scollard.*

# The Robbery at Oldport.

THE STRANGE MEETING OF TWO SENTIMENTAL PILGRIMS AND TWO  
MOST UNSENTIMENTAL ONES.

BY ANNE O'HAGAN.

## I.

THE letter fluttered from Marion's fingers, and she broke into weak laughter that was but one degree removed from tears. Indeed, it changed into the long-drawn, shivering sigh of spent emotion before its peal was rounded. Her eyes drooped, her lips grew heavy with sadness, and her limp body relaxed against the back of the chair. The pale blue sheet fell unnoticed to the floor. It ran thus, in fine, old-school handwriting:

MY DEAR, DEAR MARION:

I hope that you will like the wedding present I am sending you. It is the deed and the key to the house at Oldport where—I am so glad and proud when I think of it—you and Leslie met and became engaged. I have always meant the place for Leslie, whom you know I love more like a son than a nephew; but it pleases me that he should have it through you, as, in a way, he won you through it. I am a sentimental old maid, my dear.

I have been down to Oldport, and the place is ready for you if you should wish to spend any part of your honeymoon there. It is not quite so gay and pretty as when you saw it last. All the awnings and flower boxes are gone, and the doors and windows all up the river front are boarded. But if you two happy children should think it, for recollection's sake, a storehouse of joy, and should wish to go there, it is all ready. You know I always kept it in such shape that I could take a party down at any time without anxiety concerning provisions. I have removed my personal things, but the cellar and pantry, the coal bin and the wood boxes, are prepared to receive.

Leslie and you are of all your generation the dearest to me, as his father, the best of brothers, and your mother, the truest of friends, were the dearest in my own. Think, then, how happy I am to know that your happiness came to you in a home of mine!

Your loving aunt-to-be,

AMANDA WINTER.

After a while the dullness that had succeeded Marion's mirth on reading the letter departed. She looked over the rest of her mail. The long envelope with the name of Gresham, Lovel & Jones—Miss Winter's attorneys—in the corner, and presumably containing the

deed to the cottage, she did not open. But with the little box that held the key she fumbled a moment. When she had opened it, she kissed the piece of brass before she put it among the trinkets on her dressing-table. Then she rang the bell.

"Will you ask Mrs. Brotherton if she can come in to see me for a moment?" she said to the maid.

That young person, coquettish and trim according to the most approved stage models, confided to one of her fellows in the hall that "Miss Marion would be a pretty plain-looking bride if she kept on as she was that morning." To Marion's stepmother her comments were less harsh. She regretted that Miss Brotherton had eaten no breakfast and looked as if she had not slept at all.

"Ruth," began Marion lifelessly when Mrs. Brotherton hurried in—the two girls had been friendly acquaintances before they were more intimately connected by Mr. Brotherton's unexpected sally out of widowerhood—"Ruth, my engagement is broken. You'll have to recall the invitations."

"Marion!"

"Please don't make a scene with me, Ruth. I'll do anything you like—have brain fever, typhoid, anything that may be sufficient ground for deferring the wedding. Then afterwards, when people have forgotten, the whole thing may be declared off. But I will never marry Leslie Winter!"

"May one ask an explanation?"

"Certainly. We are totally unsuited to each other, and we have found it out——"

"In time, I suppose you are going to say. But it isn't in time! Your engagement was announced three months ago. Your wedding invitations have been out three days. Your bridesmaids, your trousseau——"

"My trousseau! I had quite forgot-