

FOOTLIGHT MOTHS AND FLAMES

What is the Fascination of the Stage?

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LOVE IT! I love it! I love the dusty dressing rooms; I love the smell of the grease-paint!" Thus enthusiastically spoke a young actress, after about ten years on the stage, during which time she had gained only the most meager recognition, and

had endured disappointments and humiliations such as she had never dreamt of before she left a comfortable home.

What is the fascination that drew her and is still drawing thousands of men and women into a profession in which so few rise above mediocrity, and from whom so many sacrifices are demanded to attain even mediocrity? A prominent actor, defying the fascination of the stage, ventured: "The desire to give expression to that which we feel is within us."

While that may be the case in some instances, I am inclined to the belief that it is only the minority who adopt the stage for this psychological reason, and that the great majority take the step from entirely different motives. There are many magnets, of course; for human beings are not all born with the same tastes and temperaments. There are certain desires and ambitions, however, to which we may point as being almost, if not quite, universal in mankind.

The most poignant of all human longings is to be admired, and in no other walk of life is the opportunity to gratify this ambition so great as behind the footlights; for there was never an actor so incompetent that some one would not tell him that he was good, and there was never a face so plain that grease-paint and powder would not soften, or quite efface, the blemishes that unkind nature bestowed upon it.

Where is the man or woman who wishes to appear old? Who is there in the wide, wide world who is not pleased when some one says: "How young you look!" Would you like to start out on a search for such a person? I should not; but if I were forced to do so, I should take the first car that would land me at the "funny house."

Are not the wearing of handsome and becoming clothes; the applause and laughter of the audience; the consciousness that hundreds of eyes are concentrated on *you*; that hundreds of ears are listening intently to hear what *you* are going to say — are not these most joyous sensations? Are they not essentially and universally human sensations?

Again, let any person on the street, or at any gathering of people, say: "There goes an actor!" Does n't every one turn and look at the one indicated? Except on Broadway, where actors are as common as preachers at Ocean Grove, an actor off the stage is always an interesting personality. Does any one turn around and look when some one points out a lawyer, a doctor, or an editor? Is it not pleasing to feel that one is singled out as belonging to an unusual and much admired class?

What, then, is the deduction? In giving my theory of the fascination of the stage, I expect to hear protests of, "No!" "Absurd!" and "Ridiculous!" For my contention is that the principal fascination of the stage lies in the opportunity to gratify vanity, and I am an actor.

WHAT percentage of actresses who marry men not connected with the theater give up the stage for good? Probably not one per cent. And it is safe to say that seventy-five per cent return to the footlights because they find that, as Mrs. Gold-

brick or Mrs. Bellemere, they no longer attract the old train of admirers, and that their names do not appear in the society column with anything like the frequency that they did in theatrical jottings when they were Nellie Nimbletoes or Mlle. Soprano-rino. An instance, in proof of this: A short time ago a young actress announced that she was tired of the stage, that she longed to darn socks. She married a man outside the theatrical circle, but in less than six months she returned to the limelight. She did not state whether she had tired of her new and exciting pastime, or whether her husband had cruelly adopted "wear-proof, guaranteed for six months hose."

The ambition of every young actor is to play in New York. Why? There are some twenty or thirty millions of theater-goers outside the metropolis who are ready to bestow their admiration on the people of the stage, and who, generally speaking, are more prodigal with their praise than New York's paltry million or so of blasé theater patrons. Vanity again; the desire to be seen and, possibly, admired by the populace of the largest city in the country; to be able to write home (not one actor in ten was born in New York): "I am playing in New York."

What a world of happiness that assertion contains! For years he has dreamed of the day when his name

would appear in the metropolitan newspapers. For this, season after season, he has endured almost-hotels

on the road. New York is the reward he hoped for when waiting in freezing depots in jerk-water towns for trains that were seven hours late. This dream has buoyed him up when the ghost failed to walk in Dowagiac, or when the manager jumped the company and left the actors stranded in Joplin. It may be years before he obtains another New York engagement; for New York engagements, except for the elect, are few and hard to get. But he is living in the present; and the joy of meeting a friend on the rialto, and on being asked: "What are you doing in town?" to be able to answer: "I am playing at the Frolanger Theater, compensates for seasons of one-night stands. He may be playing a part that you could not recall, after having seen the play; but no matter — he is playing in New York!

Of course, it may be assumed that some people go on the stage purely as a matter of business. Actor's salaries

seem large, when one fails to consider the shortness of their working season, the expense of living in hotels, paying sleeping-car fares, and so forth. But to offset the theory that the stage is a business proposition to a considerable number of persons, we have only to look at the recruits that the theater claims annually from the ranks of society. Does the wealthy society man or woman go into the profession for business reasons? Assuredly not. There are many of this class on the stage whose salaries would not pay for their board and clothes. Why, then, do they go? The same old thing. Their circle of admirers is too small to satisfy their vanity; they are not sufficiently in the public eye to gratify their craving for admiration, and the stage offers them the best field in which they may be seen and talked about by the greatest number of persons. Many women from the social world go into the chorus, where the surroundings are anything but pleasant, the work very arduous, where there is the least possible opportunity for advancement, and the pay not worth considering. They go for the simple reason that chorus girls are much sought after and admired by a large number of men.

HAVE I demonstrated that vanity is the first and greatest attraction of the stage? Then, we will take up another feature that makes an appeal to a good many aspirants.

A young man, who had but recently adopted the stage, was asked why he decided to become an actor. "Because it is n't as hard work as selling shoes," was the reply.

The late Denman Thompson is reported to have said: "All actors are either crazy or lazy." Whether Mr. Thompson excepted himself from the sweeping assertion is not chronicled. He was lazy enough to play one part for twenty odd years, and crazy enough to amass a fortune therefrom. There are doubtless many theatrical managers who will agree with Mr. Thompson, and an equal number of actors can be found who will aver that most theatrical managers are mentally unbalanced. It is merely the point of view.

There is no doubt, however, that the apparently easy life of the actor is another factor that constitutes the so-called fascination of the stage. And while we hear a great deal about the hard work that the actor is called upon to do, there is no denying that, with the exception of the stock company actor,



"There goes an actor!"



"I love the dusty dressing rooms; I love the smell of the grease-paint!"