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NOV. 10, 1892. SOME EXTRACTS FROM
THE PRESS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF
MR. HENRY IRVING AND MISS ELLEN
TERRY; PP. 14-118**

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the troubled old father's certainty about when people are dead, the trial of the looking-glass, the stirring of the feather, the sudden comment on the excellence of a soft, gentle, low voice in woman, the still more sudden boast of having killed the slave that was a-hanging Cordelia; then the final burst of forlorn persuasion that she will "come no more," the lapse again into physical discomfort, the kindly thanks for relief, the gaze—the exclamations—the fainting into death.

So ends, in the full poignancy of a subtle tragedy, purged to simplicity by the fining process of fate, this great representation. The setting is very noble and beautiful. There has seldom been such really praiseworthy scenery. The atmosphere achieved and preserved by every stage resource is delightfully stimulating to the fancy. The great actor who plays the venerable and distraught King has newly understood and newly rendered the part, ridding the play thereby of a detrimental element of melodrama, and revealing more than ever the truth and nature which are as real in it as its tragic power.

E. R. RUSSELL.

WHEN close upon midnight the distinguished audience, released from its tension of spellbound excitement, gave way to an uproarious burst of cheering, it demanded, as usual, from Mr. Henry Irving the customary speech.

The great actor-manager explained, in the briefest manner possible, the mission of "King Lear" on the Lyceum stage. "If," said Mr. Irving, "our humble efforts have been able to suggest to any one here assembled one of the countless beauties of this Titanic work, we have, indeed, been amply repaid." Here, in fact, is the keynote of the situation. Here is the manager's triumph in a nutshell. In the fifteenth season of the management of the Lyceum

the daring manager elects to play the most difficult work that Shakespeare ever wrote, a work that might have been so easily ridiculed, a theme that to the uninformed might have been so readily misunderstood. Yet what was the result? Not a ripple of irreverent laughter was heard, not a suggestion of indecorum was audible, and all in the house, from stalls to topmost gallery, followed the fortunes of the infinitely pathetic and storm-tossed Lear. It was that very pathos which hall-marked the play with interest. There have been wild Lears, Bedlamite Lears, Lears frenzied from the outset; here was a Lear who from first to last emphasized the chord of human affection. His brain only gave way when all the love he had to bestow was turned to gall. The actor's task was one of heroic magnitude, particularly when we consider Henry Irving's temperament and method. He is not an actor to do a thing by halves. He gets an idea into his head and steadily works it out to its legitimate conclusion. Never was there an actor who played less to the gallery, or was more indifferent to the applause of the moment. Often he seems to stultify himself, and raises doubts in the minds of those who watch him. But he is working for an end, and in the end he triumphs. Without such an ideal Cordelia as was found last night in Miss Ellen Terry such a Lear might have been considered a rash and hazardous experiment. But the artist knew where he had posted his reserves. He was perfectly well aware from whom would come the relief, and it came certainly and surely when the distraught King found his pathetic solace in the arms of the daughter he had wounded and impetuously misunderstood. The play woke up and gained new life when Cordelia was discovered, and her great love tempered the anguish of the uncrowned king.

Cordelia is not, after all, a very telling character; but the actress did wonders with it. She illuminated the play,

and in every scene and situation she seconded the desire of Henry Irving to bring out the intensely affectionate nature of this tremendous father.

It would be difficult—nay, rather it might be considered rash and presumptuous—to attempt to describe in adequate language the barbaric splendour of the background against which stand this grand and patriarchal Lear, this auburn-tressed, most feminine, and enchanting Cordelia. The King, as we know, is a monarch created by the brain of the greatest of imaginative poets, and rightly does he dwell in a lovely land of imagination. Where, then, is this kingdom of old Lear? Who shall say? and who is there that, rightly understanding the fields of poetry, would care to ask such an unnecessary question? It is a fanciful England, no doubt, but certain it is that the Romans must have quitted the loveliest of lands, and that the Britons who supplanted them were mighty men and warriors of heroic stature. The eye is enchanted with pictures of fascinating and harmonious colour, and the mind is absorbed in countless scenes of rare and imposing magnificence. The “dear white cliffs of Dover” are, of course, here contrasted with the everlasting blue of the ocean that washes and engirdles our island home. Traces there are on many a hill and wind-swept down of the lost age of stone and of Druidic worship. Temples there are, rude but stately, chipped and battered and moss-grown with time; columns and porticoes that have displaced the wattled huts and cliff caves of our more savage ancestry. We do not believe that the English stage has ever seen the play of “King Lear” mounted and set in such a splendid frame, or coloured with such artistic taste. Henry Irving has put modern science and stage appliances to a noble use. It is not alone in the thunders or the lightnings, or the pitchy darkness flash-illuminated, or the blue and purple shadows of the hills and vales, or the

superb effects in armour and costume that this last Irving revival distances all rivals and improves upon precedent and the past; the matter for congratulation is that the Shakespearian masterpiece is guided, directed, and arranged for modern audiences by a master hand.

There he stands before the mind's eye, and there he is indelibly stamped on the memory. Of all Henry Irving's tragic personations this is at once by far the most picturesque and imposing. A tall, gaunt, supple, and kingly figure, the thin and attenuated frame weighed down with a swathing load of regal garments. A splendid head, indeed, with the finely-cut features, the restless eyes, and the yellow parchment skin set in a frame of snowy white hair and silvered straggling beard; and, of course, those eloquent hands which have been so often discussed and so frequently described. When the play is over and the glamour of the scene has faded away, the new Lear will come back to the mind with vivid force. We see him at his entrance with the Court, tottering down a steep decline in an ancestral castle, half-supported, and leaning on the gold scabbard of the broad-sword which serves as a staff; he comes before us kneeling and prostrate before he delivers the mighty curse, "Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!" We recall him magnificent in repose, resting on the couch when "oppressed nature sleeps." We leave him like some historic oak shorn of its leaves by wind and storm, but with limbs and trunk still unshaken even by "the rack of this tough world," calm in the majesty of death. But the picture that will most delight is the Lear of reconciliation, the "foolish, fond old man," with the beloved Cordelia ever now in his arms, the gold of her sunny hair contrasted with the snow of his, father and daughter sublimely united in an embrace of love. The exit of Lear and Cordelia will linger long in the memory of all who instantly appreciated it. But as yet

the question has not been answered, What kind of man known to the student does this splendid personality resemble? Some will say Merlin. Yes, there is something of Tennyson's Merlin in this rugged, impetuous, nervously sensitive old man, tall, erect, hoar-frosted with the hard and cruel winter of life. Shut your ears to the text, and in scene after scene it might be Merlin and Vivien, and not Lear and Cordelia. But these impressions are fitful and momentary. In its external aspect the comparison that at once suggests itself to the mind is one from sacred and not profane history. When this grand figure stands erect against a dark background, illumined with flashes of lightning, how is it that biblical and not Shakespearian lore is uppermost in the thoughts? Henry Irving—not to speak it profanely, but in all reverence—in his character of Lear, might have stood for Moses on Mount Sinai or Noah at the hour of the flood. His appearance is patriarchal, not theatrical. The stage vanishes, and we seem to be in the presence of the sublimest instances of hoary senility.

The play was charged with electricity. A beautiful touch it was when the dotting father brushed away his daughter's tears with his worn finger and tasted the salt-drops. And surely never before has Henry Irving given us so elaborate or so fancifully conceived a death scene. The object of the dying King was to kiss and kiss again the lips of his dead child. For an instant the power and vigour of youth upstarted in this octogenarian at the words, "I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee!" but it was momentary and spasmodic. The flame burnt out, the fire was extinguished, and all that Lear could do was to struggle once more for the life of his child, and to toy with the rope that had encircled her lily neck.

Not a detail was lost on the profoundly interested audience. There are scenes in the play inspired by Henry

Irving and Ellen Terry that will count amongst their greatest achievements.—*The Daily Telegraph*.

THE six weeks that have flown since the most recent *première* in Wellington Street drew all artistic London to the familiar stalls, have served but to ripen the many fine features of the representation. Mr. Irving's picturesque embodiment of the mad monarch has gained in effect at every point. So it is with the whole performance of the tragedy. Familiarity with the dramatist's plan and with the Lyceum actor-manager's interpretative design has brought good results in all directions. The Cordelia of Miss Ellen Terry, pure and beautiful at the outset, is now doubly so.—*The Daily Telegraph*.

LAST night was the fiftieth representation of "King Lear"—a notable event in dramatic annals, because it beats all earlier records of the fortunes of the play, and establishes Mr. Irving as a more successful impersonator of the character of the British monarch than any of his predecessors.

It has been left to Mr. Irving to show that, if beautifully staged and pruned of its grimmest horrors, the play of "King Lear" can not only command a vast amount of sympathy, but so far enthrall a modern audience as to become a great theatrical success.

Only a Lear, nervous, splenetic, and irritable, because wounded in the tenderest feelings of his heart, and infinitely sorrowful at the supposed falseness of a dearly-cherished daughter, could, as played by Mr. Irving, touch us with pathetic pity for not only a mind but a heart o'erthrown. With the practice and experience which he has gained during fifty nights of performance, the actor