The Real "Coon" on the American Stage

By GEORGE W. WALKER

The stage has always fascinated me. To stand before the footlights and entertain large audiences has ever been the dream of my life. When but a lad, I joined a company of amateur colored minstrels in my native town, Lawrence, Kansas. There were thirteen of us, but I cannot say that we had bad luck. We gave annual performances, and were always well patronized, and our net receipts from the box were usually gratifying. Negro minstrels, organized and put on the road by white men, soon after the emancipation of the Southern slaves, were very successful throughout the Northern and Western States, but hardly anyone was optimistic enough in those early days of the black man on the American stage to believe that he would ever rise above being a mere minstrel man. I started out with the idea that it was possible for the black performer to do better. My associates shared my views to some extent, but to most of them the future offered little encouragement, and the longer I remained at home the more impossible it seemed for me ever to realize my ambition. So I left Lawrence and went West to California. I did not make the trip in a single leap, but made my way from Lawrence to San Francisco by easy stages.

In those days—about 18 years ago—the West was not so up-to-date as it is now. The Westerners were good-hearted, but a bit rough and ready. I had to rough it, and rough it I did. But I got there, and that was the main thing.

There were many quack doctors doing business in the West. They traveled from one town to another in wagons, and gave shows in order to get large crowds of people together, so as to sell medicine. When a boy, I was quite an entertainer. I could sing and dance, and was good at face-making, beating the tambourine, and rattling the bones. I was not lacking in courage, and I did not hesitate to ask the quacks for a job. First one and then the other hired me. When we arrived in a town and our show started I was generally the first to attract attention. I would mount the wagon and commence to sing and dance, make faces, and tell stories, and rattle the bones.

My experience with the quack doctors taught me two good lessons: that white people are always interested in what they call "darker" singing and dancing; and the fact that I could entertain in that way as no white boy could, made me valuable to the quack doctors as an advertising card.

When I reached San Francisco, I left the quacks and went around the theatres and music halls looking for employment. While hanging around one day I saw a gaunt fellow over six feet, of orange hue and about 18 years of age, leaning on a banjo, haggling with a manager—that was Bert A. Williams. He was stage struck, too! We got a job together at seven dollars a week each. That was about fifteen years ago. We have had many ups and downs since those days, but still we hang together.

When we were not working we frequented the playhouses just the same. In those days black-faced white comedians were numerous and very popular. They billed themselves "coons," and were often much amused at seeing white men with black cork on their faces trying to imitate black folks. Nothing about these white men's actions was natural, and therefore nothing was as interesting as if black performers had been dancing and singing their own songs in their own way.

There were many more barriers in the way of the black performer in those days than there are now, because, with the exception of the negro minstrels, the black entertainer was little known throughout the Northern and Western States. The opposition on account of racial and color prejudices and the white comedians who "blacked up" stood in the way of the natural black performer, and petty jealousies common among professional people also greatly retarded the artistic progress of the Afro-American.

How to get before the public and prove what ability we might possess was a hard problem for Williams and Walker to solve. We thought that as there seemed to be a great demand for black faces on the stage, we would do all we could to get what we felt belonged to us by the laws of nature. We finally decided that as white men with black faces were billing themselves "coons," Williams and Walker would do well to bill themselves the "Two Real Coons," and so we did. Our bills attracted the attention of managers, and gradually we made our way in.

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Sardou's Latest Play

The story of Victorien Sardou's new play, "La Piste," is thus described in The Stage (of London).

The plot hinges upon the concealment from her second husband, M. Reville, of an intrigue his wife had carried on during the period she was living with him. One day, however, she discovered the secret and turned over some papers in a writing tablet placed on the table, which, assuming it to be addressed to her husband, cast a suspicion upon him. He shows her the tablet, to which she appears to attach no importance, declaring that she had bought that particular piece of furniture at the Hotel Dardet at the sale of a well-known demi-mondaine. Reville, however, exchanges ideas about it. Then a cousin, his wife, whose beauty and charm are known in society, seeing that a husband is mentioned. Reville's doubts are further increased by the fact that his wife has been absent on certain occasions. Reville, however, is not convinced that the tablet is written to his wife. He straightway takes her to the hotel, and while she is there, he asks her sister, who, under the name of the remark made by her sister, to her face, frankly owns the truth, declaring as much was the reason that it had been deferred to the days of her first marriage. The only way that now seems to her possible for the complete reassurance of her husband is to induce her to say she knew of his infidelity, but Revillon naturally wonders why it should have been charged in the pleading for divorce. In company with her sister, Florence calls upon M. Jelinek, who promises to do as he is asked, and when the two friends Reville commissaries to make inquiries of her husband to the requisite assurance is given to MM. Potard and Loytelle. Instead, however, of waiting in the street, Reville himself comes upon the scene, and upon hearing her husband's expression of incredulity, Florence and her sister enter the room, as if they had only just come into the house. It looks, after a few assurances from Florence, as if Reville believes what he has heard, when the sister blunders again by telling Florence, who looks for her little satchel, that she has left it in the other room, which by showing this to be their second visit. Reville persisting in his intention to have indisputable proof that the intrigue was anterior to his own marriage, Florence, who loves her husband devotedly, sees no other way but to go to the hotel at Garches, where she passed two days with her lover, and obtain verification from the proprietor. Finally, the unhappy woman's grief at her inability to prove the truth of what she advances convinces Reville that the reputation for truth she has always had amongst her friends is fully deserved.
ROBERT B. MANTELL AS KING LEAR

This well-known actor will continue to appear in this and other Shakespearean roles next season.