A Great Actor's Biography.*

"Perhaps the saddest spot in the sad life of the actor," wrote Richard Mansfield, "is to be forgotten. Great paintings live to commemorate great painters; the statues of sculptors are their monuments; and books are the inscriptions of authors. But who shall say, when this generation has passed away, how Yorick played? When the curtain has fallen for the last time, and only the unseen spirit hovers in the wings, what book will speak of all the mummer did and suffered in his time?"

Mr. Paul Wilstach's biography of Mansfield goes far toward preserving our recollection of his consummate art, and gives us, besides, a faithful portrait of Mansfield the man — a portrait that does its distinguished original ample justice, without concealing those temperamental faults that marred his character. Taken as a whole, it is the most satisfying biography of a player of which the present reviewer has knowledge. The book itself, with its wealth of illustrations and its dignified binding, its clear type and fine paper, compels a word of favorable comment.

Richard Mansfield's father was Maurice Mansfield, a London wine merchant; his mother, a famous singer, Erminia Rudersdorff. Richard, their third child, was born on the 24th of May, 1857. The boy's public life began in his fourth year. His mother was dressing for a concert at the Crystal Palace. Refusals and threats only stimulated Richard's determination to accompany her. Finally, the imperious mother yielded to the imperious boy. He was hastily dressed in his best black velvet skirt and coat, a wide embroidered collar falling over his shoulders, and together they rattled away in her carriage. His mother's dressing room, the vastness of the stage, the lights, the strange noises and confusion, frightened the child and he clung close to his mother.

"When the stage manager came to the door to say that Madame's turn had arrived, and that the orchestra was waiting, she strode majestically forth, as was her custom, from her own room straight to the centre of the stage. Her appearance was greeted by a roar of applause, which she acknowledged with queenly bows. She did not observe a subdued ripple of laughter, however, and signalled the conductor to begin. The music quieted the applause, but it did not hush the increasing titter, of which she soon became painfully conscious. Glancing about to see what could be the occasion, she discovered Richie, beside but somewhat behind her, frightened to stone, but firmly clutching the hem of her long train which his little hands had seized as she swept away from him into the presence of the audience."

Richard's father died in 1861. His mother's engagements in the first opera houses of Great Britain and Europe continued. As most of her time was spent upon the continent, it was decided that the children should be sent to Jena. There Richard and his brother Felix attended a private school, kept by a Professor Zenker, a famous master. Early in his school career Richard painted one of the class-room doors a vivid green, and in the high pride of his achievement signed his initials to his handiwork. The boy spent two years at the school *Am Graben;* then two years at Paul Vodos's school in the little town of Yvredon, in Switzerland; and later at Bourbourg, France. Early in 1869 he entered on the experience which in after years remained clearest as a retrospect of boyhood. He was sent to Derby School. Here he was distinguished in the athletic sports of the period, but not as a student; among the boys he was known as "Cork" Mansfield,—perhaps because of his remarkable feats as a swimmer. He did, however, become the star performer among the schoolboys on "Speech Day," acting his first role — Scapin, in Molière's "Les Fourberies de Scapin" — during his first year at the school. In the following year he appeared, on the same occasion, as Shylock; and the next year's Speech Day witnessed young Mansfield's acting in a German, a French, and three English scenes, — and taking a leading part in each.

In the spring of the following year (1872) he left Derby. It was his mother's wish that he should enter Oxford or Cambridge; but the World's Peace Jubilee in Boston offered her opportunities she could not neglect. These ripened into attractive offers to make Boston her future home; and, this course being decided upon, the children were brought to America, and Madame Rudersdorff's rooms in the Hotel Boyleston, and her studio, became one of the artistic centres of the city, to which artists from the four quarters of the globe were attracted as certainly as they visited Boston in the course of their American tours. For two years young Mansfield knew the drudgery of a desk in the great Washington Street store founded by Eben D. Jordan. It was the young man's duty to translate letters destined for or received from France, Germany, and Italy; he exercised his originality also upon advertisements for the firm. From such prosaic details Richard must

*Richard Mansfield: The Man and the Actor. By Paul Wilstach. Illustrated. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

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have escaped eagerly at night to the brilliance of the company always gathered in his mother's rooms.

Mr. Wilstach gives us an amusing reminiscence of this period, from the recollections of Mrs. Julia Ward Howe.

"I remember [Mrs. Howe is quoted as saying] a surprise party Madame Rudersdoff gave on Richie's birthday. They were nearly all young people present excepting myself. It was not a surprise party in the ordinary sense, but you will understand when I tell you. In those days we were continually invited to meet distinguished musical artists at Madame Rudersdorff's home. She provided unsparingly as a hostess; she was really queenly in her hospitality. Hence her invitations were snapped up in every quarter. On this occasion we were invited to meet a newly arrived prima-donna, — I forget her name. The hostess and her distinguished guest received together. I remember her as if it were yesterday. She was youthful in appearance; uncommonly modest in demeanor. She wore a red and white silk dress with a prodigiously long train, and had many jewels and an abundance of thick wavy dark hair which was the admiration of everyone. Some of us were put to it to talk to her, for she spoke only the European languages. The announcement finally that the great prima donna would sing produced an expectant silence. We were all struck by the phenomenal range of her voice. She seemed to be able to sing with equal facility a soft, dark contralto, or a silvery soprano, capping off with an octave in falsetto. After responding to several encores, she at length astounded us all by lifting off her towering coiffure and announcing unaffectedly: 'I'm tired of this, mother. Let's cut the birthday cake.' It was Richie. He and his mother had conspired in the surprise party."

Toward the end of his fourth year in Boston, Richard became the dramatic and musical critic of a feeble daily newspaper, "The News." When he resigned, he told the editor it was "impossible to criticise for a man who was the friend of so many bad actors."

The pyrotechnical temper of Madame Rudersdorff, and the gradual development of an explosive capacity on his own part, led eventually (1875) to the selection of separate quarters for the young bachelor — a modest room at 23 Beacon Street. Here he disposed his few pieces of furniture, bought a piano, and, since his allowance did not permit the purchase of many pictures, he drew and painted them on the walls himself. Painting was supposed to be his *metier* at this time; his mother gave him an allowance; the position in Mr. Jordan's office was given up, and Richard's friends came forward at intervals to buy his pictures. "But," he afterward explained, "when I had sold pictures to all my friends, I discovered I had no friends." Exhausted credit soon closed various streets to him. A knock at his door became the sure precursor of an insistent dun. Someone suggested that he give lessons in the languages he knew so familiarly. For a month he had a fashionable class of young ladies who were taught French, Italian, or German, and were, moreover, stayed with tea and comforted with music. At the end of the month the parents of the young ladies remitted promptly, and Richard had a spread in his studio remembered to this day. Two days later he was hungry and penniless.

The Sock and Buskin Club, which had been organized in 1875 by Mansfield and some of his friends, was now thought of, and the young men gave a performance of Robertson's "School." It was so successful that Mansfield, who had taken the part of Beau Farintosh, announced to his friends that for the advantage of himself and his creditors he proposed to give a benefit to himself. Boston's artistic set had its curiosity piqued by learning of "An Entertainment to be given at Union Hall, on Thursday evening, June 1st, by Mr. Vincent Crummels, on the Singers and Actors of the Day." It was whispered about that Crummels was no other than the famous Madame Rudersdorff's son Richard Mansfield. Of course the hall was crowded. With wonderful effrontery, Mansfield occupied the entire evening with imitations of all the famous actors and singers known to his audience — including his own mother, who witnessed the burlesque from her box, and laughed as heartily as anyone.

Early in 1877, with the promise of a continuance of his mother's allowance, Richard Mansfield returned to England, to study drawing and painting. But brush and palette were not for him. His pocket-book was soon flat — the sooner, perhaps, because of the extension of his acquaintance with the London bohemians. His chambers became one of the popular rallying points. For such evenings his scanty allowance forced him to pay the penalty of abstinence and exhausted credit. By April he was overjoyed to accept an offer of eight pounds a week in the German Reed Entertainments. His friends crowded St. George's Hall for his first appearance. He had a small rôle in the comedietta which opened the evening; later, he was expected to occupy the stage for an hour by himself. When his time came, he sat down at the piano and fainted dead away. He had not eaten for three days. Meanwhile, Madame Rudersdorff, in Boston, had learned that her son had given a few entertainments in English country homes for pay. She was superb in her wrath; she would at once cut off his allowance. And

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she did, punctually, in a letter which, "beginning in very plain English, emphasized her resentment in French, German, and Italian, and ended in Russian, with a reserve of bitter denunciation, but no more languages to express it in."

The struggle of Mansfield's life began now in earnest. Long afterward, when at the meridian of his fame, he told the story.

"For years I went home to my little room, if fortunately I had one, and perhaps a tallow dip was stuck in the neck of a bottle, and I was fortunate if I had something to cook for myself over a fire, if I had a fire. That was my life. When night came I wandered about the streets of London, and if I had a penny I invested it in a baked potato, from the baked potato man on the corner. I would put these hot potatoes in my pockets, and after I had warmed my hands I would swallow the potato. That is the truth."

The sale of an occasional picture, or the acceptance of a story or a poem by a magazine, were the sources of his scanty income. He strove to keep his appearance respectable in order to accept fortuitous social invitations for the sake of the cold collations without which he would have gone hungry. Often he stayed in bed and slept in order to forget the hunger of the hours of wakefulness. Food seen through the windows of bakeries and restaurants seemed to him the most beautiful sight in the world.

The year 1878 found him, with a second or third rate company, playing the role of Sir Joseph Porter, K.C.B., in "Pinafore," in the smaller towns of England, Scotland, and Wales. His salary was three pounds weekly; and when he demanded an additional six shillings, he was cut adrift, and returned to London in desperate straits. The turning point of his career was accompanied, as he told it, by a remarkable experience.

"This was the condition of affairs when a strange happening befell me. Retiring for the night in a perfectly hopeless frame of mind, I fell into a troubled sleep, and dreamed dreams. Finally, toward morning, this fantasy came to me. I seemed in my disturbed sleep to hear a cab drive up to the door as if in a great hurry. There was a knock, and in my dream I opened the door and found D'Oyly Carte's yellow-haired secretary standing outside. He exclaimed: 'Can you pack up and catch the train in ten minutes to rejoin the company?' 'I can,' was the dreamland reply. There seemed to be a rushing about, while I swept a few things into my bag; then the cab door was slammed, and we were off to the station. This was all a dream. But here is the inexplicable *denouement*. The dream was so vivid and startling that I immediately awoke with a strange, uncanny sensation, and sprang to my feet. It was six o'clock, and only bare and gloomy surroundings met my eye. On a chair rested my travelling bag; and through some impulse that I could not explain at the time, and cannot account for now, I picked it up and hurriedly swept into it a few articles that had escaped the pawn-shop. It did not take long to complete my toilet, and then I sat down to think. Presently, when I had reached the extreme point of dejection, a cab rattled up, there was a knock, and there stood D'Oyly Carte's secretary, just as I saw him in my dreams. He seemed to be in a great flurry, and cried out, 'Can you pack up and reach the station in ten minutes to rejoin the company?' 'I can,' said I, calmly, pointing to my bag, 'for I was expecting you.' The man was a little startled by this seemingly strange remark, but bundled me into the cab without further ado, and we hurried away to the station exactly in accord with my dream. That was the beginning of a long engagement; and although I have known hard times since, it was the turning-point in my career."

For more than three years Mansfield played in minor opera and minor comedy; engagements being now the rule rather than the exception. He received the news of his mother's death, and of her will, which made him her sole heir but contained the capricious proviso that no portion of the inheritance should pass into his hands so long as he remained unmarried. Then, one night in the spring of 1882, in his dressing-room, Mansfield heard a familiar voice; his old friend Eben Jordan of Boston grasped his hand, and that night persuaded him to return to America. It was on the night of January 11, 1883, that Mansfield played Baron Chevrial for the first time, and woke on the following morning famous. There were many ups and downs in the years that followed, but "Cork" Mansfield sustained the qualities of his cognomen.

For most of us, the remaining pages of Mr. Wilstach's book, which are devoted to Mansfield the actor, will stimulate personal reminiscences of the gifted artist. "Prince Karl," "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "Richard III.," "Beau Brummel," "Don Juan," "Monsieur Beaucaire," "Cyrano de Bergerac," "Arthur Dimmesdale," "Shylock," "Captain Bluntschli," "Dick Dudgeon," "Alceste," "King Henry V.," "Peer Gynt,"—these names represent the story of the wonderful years, wonderful in the development of his own genius as an actor, and wonderful in the development of his equally marvellous breadth of view and mastery of detail as stage manager and producer. Mr. Wilstach, with intimate personal knowledge of his subject, with every facility in the way of materials at his command, and with a discriminating judgment and taste that qualify him perfectly for the task, gives us so true a picture of the actor in each several part that he essayed as makes him fairly live again before our eyes.

Of Mansfield the man, Mr. Wilstach speaks apparently with equal fidelity to truth. He does not seek to ignore, or even to condone, those

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outbursts of temper which robbed Mansfield of the affection of American playgoers, however they might yield him their admiration. Mr. Wilstach says:

"Most of his outbursts were the outbursts of nervous despair. At times before acting a new rôle there were moments when his confidence appeared to desert him, and he would break down entirely. Then he would toss away his part and pace the stage in voluble agony, declaring it would be impossible to give the production; everything and everybody, including the play and himself, were beyond hope; the opening must be postponed, etc., etc. At such moments no one had influence with him but his gentle wife. With soft words of agreement, the tender terms with which a mother would propitiate a child, she would calm the spirit of this mighty child, and in five minutes have him quieted, comforted, and back at work again."

To say to a workman "You're discharged!" meant nothing from Mansfield more than a reproof. "It was the habit of exaggerated words," according to the biographer. His unfailing patience and gentleness during the rehearsals of "Ivan the Terrible" were a matter of ominous comment among the company. He seemed, says our author, to be holding himself under a strain which would break him. This endured until the dress rehearsal, which passed swimmingly up to the fourth act. "There, in the passionate confession scene, the tricky lines slipped, and with them slipped his self-possession. There were five minutes of realistically improvised Tzar Ivan before he settled down, but the burst was welcomed by everyone. An old-timer of fourteen years in the company said: 'I was afraid for him. And I was afraid for this piece. It seemed as if he hadn't blown in the trade-mark. But it's all right now.'"

"The evolution of a character in Mansfield's mind remained unexplained. He retired into what Pater called 'mystic isolation.' Like Rossetti, he became 'a racked and tortured medium.' But when he came to rehearsal, even to the first, it was with full possession of the new character, just as later, when he went on the stage to give the character to the audience, it had full possession of him. His performance of a rôle — even of those which he retained in his repertoire from his early successes — whether in comedy or tragedy, was to him a sacred work, almost sacramental. He was first in the theater, never less than two and sometimes three hours before his first entrance. This time he spent in the seclusion of his dressing-room. But the preparation did not begin there. In the afternoon he took a long walk. When he returned he would see no visitors, none of his household, and his servants attended him in silence. He ate a light repast at five o'clock, with a book for company at table. Then he retired to his own apartment for a short nap and a bath, and rode away in his unbroken silence to the theater. And so into the dressing-room. When the call came for his entrance, and he emerged from his room, a metamorphosis had taken place. It was not the actor who went upon the scene, it was the character. By some process — and it has been called self-hypnotism — he became the person he was playing. He carried the manner to and from and into his dressing-room. He acted the rôle all the evening on and off the scene, and it fell from him only as he put aside the trappings and emerged from the dressing-room his own self, bound for home."

Mr. Wilstach gives some delightful pictures of Mr. Mansfield's home-life, with his charming and talented wife (Miss Beatrice Cameron), and his little son, George Gibbs Mansfield. A number of letters to this little chap from his father are given, and they alone are worth the price of the book. Mr. Wilstach and his publishers, and the family of Mr. Mansfield, and all who loved or admired him, may be congratulated in all sincerity upon the appearance of this really notable biography.

MUNSON ALDRICH HAVENS.

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