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## MARK TWAIN

Theatre went West for the same reason most pioneers did, to make its fortune. Eager to profit from the Gold Rush of 1848, performers played mining camps and frontier settlements; some, like the child Lotta Crabtree, got rich in the process. By 1849 Sacramento had a permanent playhouse and San Francisco followed suit soon after. Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835–1910), a former Mississippi riverboat pilot, also drifted westward, becoming a reporter in Virginia City in 1862. Under the name Mark Twain, he proceeded to chronicle such attractions as “the naked lady” Adah Isaacs Menken in a facetiously ironic vein. (The extravagant career of Menken—sometimes billed as “The World’s Delight”—encompassed marriage to a champion prizefighter, alleged affairs with Swinburne and Alexandre Dumas, and authorship of a book of cloying prose poems.) For Twain, fame came in 1865 with his short story “The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” and he moved to New York, where he made a triumphant debut as a lecturer at Cooper Union in 1867. He also reported for the *Alta California* on Manhattan amusements, among them the scandalous new genre, the burlesque. He knew his readers in the West would be excited to hear of moral peril on the stages of the civilized East.

The eroticism of the “leg show” stood in sharp contrast to the respectability of the minstrel show, which Twain recalled not long before his death. The first public display of minstrelsy had taken place at the Bowery Amphitheatre in New York in 1843, when a quartet of fiddle, tambourine, banjo, and bones was played by white men in blackface. Minstrelsy became the most popular form of indigenous American entertainment, its traditions surviving well into the 20th century.

Twain hoped that the theatre might serve as his own private gold strike, but his collaborations and adaptations—*Colonel Sellers* (1874), *Ah Sin* (1877) and *The American Claimant* (1887)—failed to pan out. Aware of his weakness as a playwright, he assumed an insouciant pose: addressing the opening night audience at *Ah Sin*, Twain said, “I never saw a play that was so much improved by being cut down, and I believe it would have been one of the very best plays in the world if [the manager’s] strength had held out so that he could cut out the whole of it.”

*The Model Artists*

WHEN I was here in '53, a model artist show had an ephemeral existence in Chatham street, and then everybody growled about it, and the police broke it up; at the same period "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was in full blast in the same street, and had already run one hundred and fifty nights. Everybody went there in elegant toilettes and cried over Tom's griefs. But now, things are changed. The model artists play nightly to admiring multitudes at famous Niblo's Garden, in great Broadway—have played one hundred and fifty nights and will play one hundred and fifty nights more, no doubt—and Uncle Tom draws critical, self-possessed groups of negroes and children at Barnum's Museum. I fear me I shall have to start a moral missionary society here. Don't you suppose those friends of mine in San Francisco were jesting, when they warned me to be very choice in my language, if I ever lectured here, lest I might offend?

In '53 they called that horrid, immoral show I was speaking of, the "Model Artists," and people wouldn't go to see it. But now they call that sort of thing a "Grand Spectacular Drama," and everybody goes. It is all in a name. And it is about as spectacular as anything I ever saw without sinking right into the earth with outraged modesty. It is the wickedest show you can think of. You see there is small harm in exhibiting a pack of painted old harlots, swathed in gauze, like the original model artistes, for no man careth a cent for them but to laugh and jeer at them. Nakedness itself, in such a case, would be nothing worse than disgusting. But I warn you that when they put beautiful clipper-built girls on the stage in this new fashion, with only just barely clothes enough on to be tantalizing, it is

a shrewd invention of the devil. It lays a heavier siege to public morals than all the legitimate model artist shows you can bring into action.

The name of this new exhibition that so touches my missionary sensibilities, is the "Black Crook." The scenic effects—the waterfalls, cascades, fountains, oceans, fairies, devils, hells, heavens, angels—are gorgeous beyond anything ever witnessed in America, perhaps, and these things attract the women and the girls. Then the endless ballets and splendid tableaux, with seventy beauties arrayed in dazzling half costumes; and displaying all possible compromises between nakedness and decency, capture the men and boys—and so Niblo's has taken in twenty-four hundred dollars a night, (seven nights and a matinee a week,) for five months, and sometimes twenty-seven hundred dollars. It is claimed that a multitude equal to the entire population of the State of California, Chinamen included, have visited this play. The great *Herald* newspaper pitched into it, and a sensation parson preached a sermon against it; this was sufficient to advertise it all over the continent, and so the proprietor's fortune was made.

The scenery and the legs are everything; the actors who do the talking are the wretchedest sticks on the boards. But the fairy scenes—they fascinate the boys! Beautiful bare legged girls hanging in flower baskets; others stretched in groups on great sea shells; others clustered around fluted columns; others in all possible attitudes; girls—nothing but a wilderness of girls—stacked up, pile on pile, away aloft to the dome of the theatre, diminishing in size and clothing, till the last row, mere children, dangle high up from invisible ropes, arrayed only in a camisa. The whole tableau resplendent with columns, scrolls, and a vast ornamental work, wrought in gold, silver and brilliant colors—all lit up with gorgeous theatrical fires, and witnessed through a great gauzy curtain that counterfeits a soft silver mist! It is the wonders of the Arabian Nights realized.

Those girls dance in ballet, dressed with a meagreness that would make a parasol blush. And they prance around and expose themselves in a way that is scandalous to me. Moreover, they come trooping on the stage in platoons and battalions, in most princely attire I grant you, but always with more tights in view than anything else. They change their clothes every fifteen

minutes for four hours, and their dresses become more beautiful and more rascally all the time.

*1867*