

The Library of America • Story of the Week

From *The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner* (The Library of America, 2010), pages 60–78.

Reprinted from *Mimic Life; or Before and Behind the Curtain* (1856)

ANNA CORA MOWATT

Anna Cora Ogden (1819–1870) enjoyed a pampered girlhood, writing poems and starring in amateur theatricals, activities she continued after she secretly married the New York lawyer James Mowatt in 1834. When he lost his money, she found herself constrained to give public readings, with some success. Illness cut off this avenue of financial recovery, and so she wrote a comedy, *Fashion*, to be acted at the Park Theatre in 1845. It became the first American play to enjoy a long run, and her prejudices against the professional stage began to evaporate. To the horror of her friends and relatives, who shared the common view of actresses as little better than prostitutes, she made a debut at the Park and performed throughout America and England until 1854. Poe, who became a friend, praised “her own grace of manner—her own sense of art—her own rich and natural elocution.” Her refinement and hard work helped to qualify the stage as a viable profession for respectable women. Mowatt’s autobiography (1854) and her reality-based fiction *Mimic Life; or Before and Behind the Curtain* (1856) promoted this purpose. In these theatrical equivalents of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a class of exploited laborers is portrayed as virtuous, moral, and worthy of society’s consideration.

The Morning of the D  b  t

FROM

Mimic Life; or, Before and Behind the Curtain

It was the morning of Stella’s d  b  t. As she drew back the curtains of her window, the sight of her own name, in huge characters, on a placard opposite, sent an electric shock through her frame. The novel sensation could hardly be designated as pain, yet it would be misnamed pleasure. There was too much incertitude, too much thrilling expectancy, too many turbulent thoughts contending in her mind, for the sense of enjoyment to predominate. She had broken the thrall of tyrannous custom, she had triumphed over all opposition; and yet the canker-worm of discontent entered her breast, and blasted the spring blossoms of her youth. The unrelaxed tension of her

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert so you won’t miss a single story!

nerves, her mental unrest, had quenched the sparkle of her effervescing spirits. Her state constantly alternated between high excitement and an oppressive weariness.

As soon as her determination to become an actress was bruited in the public ear, she was, of course, besieged by the remonstrances of friends. But their opinions she set at naught. Her independent tone and resolute manner silenced exhortation. To her mother's presence no one gained admission.

Mr. Oakland declined to accompany his pupil to her second rehearsal. His tenderness towards the unprotected girl had induced him to violate a principle, at her strong entreaty, but he saw no cause to subject himself to further slight without being of essential service to her.

The clock had struck its tenth warning on that eventful day, and the ten minutes' theatrical grace had expired, before Stella, with Mattie at her side, once more entered the theatre. They found the company already assembled, but rehearsal had not commenced. Everybody awaited the appearance of the great tragedian. Punctuality would have been derogatory to the dignity of Mr. Tennent. To cause his co-laborers as much annoyance as possible was to impress them with a due sense of his own importance.

Mr. Belton saluted Stella more cordially than on a previous occasion. He was gratified to find that Mr. Oakland's presence was not considered indispensable. Fisk bestowed on her a familiar nod. The stage-manager and actors curtailed their civilities to the utmost brevity. The profession never pay homage in anticipation. Miss Rosenvelt's assumed position in the theatre as yet lacked the stamp of public recognition. All novices are looked upon as pretenders until success proclaims their legitimacy.

Mr. Belton chanced to be called away. Stella was left standing in the centre of the stage, beside Mattie, looking wretchedly uncomfortable and out of place.

Mrs. Fairfax, who had just entered, joined her at once, and ordered Fisk to bring a chair.

"You will learn the ways of a theatre, little by little, my dear. Every one feels strange at first." She placed the chair beside the manager's table. "You can sit here or in the green-room, just as you please. It is the privilege of stars to take their seat on the

stage and watch the rehearsal. The rest of the company are not allowed this liberty. How flushed you look! Will you not be more comfortable if you lay aside your bonnet? You will rehearse better."

Stella willingly removed her hat, for even its light weight seemed to press painfully on her throbbing brain.

Mrs. Fairfax hinted that Mattie had better keep a little more in the background. She might subject herself to reproof from the austere stage-manager. Mattie, at a word, retreated behind the scenes. But her honest, anxious face was constantly visible, peeping round one of the wings, and watching Stella.

After half an hour's delay, Mr. Tennent made a pompous entrance. The stage echoed with his heavy tread. His deep, sonorous voice, as he issued some despotic orders, his imperious bearing, his athletic frame, cast in one of nature's rudest moulds, inspired Stella with a feeling akin to awe.

Mr. Belton presented him.

"Sorry you've got me a novice! Detest acting with *amateurs!*" was his audible observation, as he eyed the young girl with supercilious scrutiny. "Poor Lydia! we shan't soon see her match again." He turned on his heel without addressing a single syllable to the discomfited novice.

"And *he* is to enact Virginius!" thought Stella to herself. "How will I ever imagine myself his daughter? If he had only spoken one word to me, it would make such a difference!"

Rehearsal commenced. To Stella's great surprise, Mr. Tennent rattled over the language of his rôle in the same senseless manner as the other actors, pausing now and then to explain his particular "business," and ejaculating "Brute!" in an undertone, every time some unfortunate individual failed to comprehend him.

Stella summoned all her energy, and successfully assumed a bearing which might have been mistaken for composure. She went through her allotted duties without hesitation, and apparently undismayed. Mrs. Fairfax congratulated her on her newly-acquired self-possession. Mr. Tennent occasionally instructed her in "business," but without unbending from his stately demeanor.

As Virginia is seen no more after the fourth act, Stella was at liberty to absent herself before rehearsal concluded. She re-

turned to the chair upon which she had placed her bonnet. Mr. Finch was unconsciously sitting upon both. He laughed unconcernedly, and made a clumsy attempt to pull the hat into shape, but uttered no apology. Then, thrusting it into her extended hand, he said:

“No use of crying over spilled milk! If you don’t put your foot in it to-night, and make a failure, you can afford to buy yourself twice as fine a kickshaw as this.”

Stella’s mind was too much engrossed to dwell upon trifles, but she recoiled from contact with coarse natures. It was less mortification to be forced to wear the damaged hat through the streets than to be treated with such rude indifference.

She was passing out behind the scenes, when Mrs. Fairfax once more joined her.

“Call upon me for any assistance you may need this evening. You will, of course, have the ‘star dressing-room.’ The luxury of an apartment to one’s self is reserved for stars only. The room in which I dress, with four other ladies, adjoins yours. You had better come early,—at least an hour and a half before the curtain rises,—so that you can walk about, after you are dressed, and collect your thoughts. Don’t forget that I will assist you with pleasure.”

Mrs. Fairfax’s partiality for her profession, as well as her native kindness of heart, interested her in a novice who apparently possessed histrionic qualifications of a rare order. The compassionate actress stretched out a loving hand to this young girl, whose uncertain feet were forcing their way within the briery circle which bounded that miniature world, a theatre.

Stella was thanking her new friend with much warmth, when a ballet-girl timidly approached. Her face was grief-worn and sickly, but of touching loveliness. Oppression looked out from her meek eyes. Her coarse and insufficient garb betokened penury. Her attenuated fingers were rapidly knitting lace, and her needles never ceased their motion as she spoke.

“May Floy carry your basket, miss?”

“My basket?”

“The basket with your dresses. Floy carries all the baskets.”

Stella looked inquiringly at Mrs. Fairfax.

“You should have a basket for your costumes. A basket is lighter and more convenient than a trunk. This is Floy’s sister.

He takes charge of all our baskets. Poor fellow! we ought to help him as much as we can." She added, in an under-tone, "The unfortunate boy is half-witted, but very honest."

"Mattie shall purchase me a basket. Let your brother call for it, by all means," said Stella.

"And tell him to be sure to call early, Perdita," added Mrs. Fairfax.

"O, never fear! Thank you, kindly, Miss Rosenvelt." Still knitting as she walked away, Perdita returned to the green-room.

* * *

The afternoon was one of long expectancy to Stella. The thoughtful Mattie had persuaded her to lie down; but she tossed uneasily on her pillow, finding no repose. Every few minutes she turned to the clock; there was surely some clog upon its hands, they moved so slowly. O, that the night had come and had passed! Then, as the longed-for time drew near, suddenly she grew sick at heart, and was seized with faintness. The thought flashed through her mind that she would fail at the last moment; that she lacked strength to carry the burden which she had lifted upon her own shoulders with such head-strong will.

Half-past seven was the hour at which the curtain must rise. She had been apprised that Mr. Belton enforced the strictest punctuality at night. Even when stars of first magnitude solicited a few moments' delay, it was denied. Mrs. Fairfax had cautioned her to be at the theatre in ample time. It wanted but a quarter of six.

A knock at the door. The pale-faced Perdita stood without. She was accompanied by a tall, ungainly stripling. The extreme sharpness of his countenance reminded Stella of the "profile" shows she had that morning seen scattered about the stage. His large projecting eyes, of faintest blue, seemed starting from their sockets. His nether limbs bore a strong resemblance to a pair of compasses, and his long, lank arms reached below his knees. His mouth remained open with an expression of silly wonder. When he caught Stella's eye, he shook his head, agitating a profusion of straight, tow-colored locks, and chuckled and laughed, as child does with child when they are bent upon some forbidden frolic.

"I have brought my brother," said Perdita, advancing into the room. "He has come for the basket. I show him the way the first time he goes to a strange place. He always remembers it after that."

The serene, sweet face of that humble girl, who had passed calmly through such soul-harrowing trials, who faithfully performed so many difficult duties, had more effect in composing Stella's excited nerves than all the hartshorn and sal-volatile which Mattie solicitously administered.

The basket was already packed. Mattie strapped the cover with leathern girths, and Floy delightedly received his new burden.

Stella's adieu to her mother was very brief. She only trusted herself to say, "I hope I shall bring you good news, mother; and the promise of laurels hereafter, even if I win none to-night."

She was equally surprised and gratified when her mother asked for a copy of *Virginius* to peruse in her daughter's absence.

Mattie, who was now and then a little tyrannical, had persisted in ordering a carriage, though Stella declared herself quite able to walk. Soon after six, they were driving to the theatre. They presented themselves at the stage-door just as Perdita and Floy arrived with the basket. The door-keeper brusquely questioned Stella as to her identity before he admitted them.

The dreary gloominess of a theatre behind the scenes, when twilight is chasing the out-spent day, must be seen and felt to be fully comprehended. The desolate cheerlessness of the place has struck a chill to the heart of many a novice. The crowded scenery looks rougher and dingier; the painted tenements, groves, gardens, streets, more grotesque; the numberless stage anomalies more glaringly absurd.

The sea-weed floating on the waves in feathery sprays of brilliant red and vivid green, that, seized for closer scanning, turns to an unsightly, shapeless mass, fitly typifies the stage in its resplendent wizard-robe of night enchantment, and its unideal, lugubrious daytime garb.

"Where am I to go?" Stella inquired of Perdita.

"The dresser, Mrs. Bunce, has not come yet, and the gas will not be turned on until half-past six. Mr. Belton only allows it

to be lighted for one hour before the curtain rises; but, if you please, I can show you the star dressing-room."

Perdita led the way up a long flight of stairs, then through a narrow entry, or, rather, gallery. On one side appeared a row of small doors, very like those of a bathing-machine. They opened into the rooms of the ladies of the company. A wooden railing extended on the other side. To any one who leaned over this rude balcony the larger portion of the stage became visible. Five or six persons were often crowded into one dressing-room. The apartments were portioned off into set spaces, and every cramped division labelled with a name. The room at the end of the gallery was appropriated solely to the lady "star." The dressing-rooms devoted to the use of gentlemen were located beneath the stage.

Perdita opened the door of this modern "star-chamber." The apartment was very small, the atmosphere suffocatingly close. Mattie at once threw up the tiny, cobweb-draped window. A shelf ran along one side of the wall, after the manner of a kitchen dresser. In front lay a narrow strip of baize; the rest of the floor was bare. On the centre of the shelf stood a cracked mirror. A gas-branch jutted out on either side. Two very rickety chairs, a crazy washstand, a diminutive stove, constituted the furniture of the apartment. In this unseemly chrysalis-shell the butterflies of the stage received their wings. Little did the audience, who greeted some queen-like favorite, sumptuously attired in brodered velvet and glittering with jewels, imagine that such was the palace-bower from which she issued!

The year had just ushered in its most wayward child, smiling, frowning April. Frowns thus far predominated; the unsunned air had all the searching bleakness of March. Mattie threw her own shawl over her shivering charge, and examined the unlighted stove.

"Set down the basket, Floy, and run for a match," said Perdita.

The boy, as he removed the basket from his shoulder, looked at Stella with evident admiration, winked at her, chuckled again, and ran down the stair. He was strongly attracted by this new face. He comprehended that something was going on which principally concerned its possessor; but what it was he could not have defined.

Floy returned with the match, and Mattie was lighting the fire which she found prepared for kindling, when Perdita whispered, "Here comes Mrs. Bunce!" and hurried away with her brother, apparently awed by the approach of some august personage.

Mrs. Bunce, a portly, middle-aged woman, now bustled in. What a voice that Mrs. Bunce had! It was so shrill that, when she spoke, Stella almost fancied her ears were suddenly pierced by a sharp instrument. All Mrs. Bunce's words were darted out with amazing rapidity.

"Here in time, eh? That's a good sign for a novice. This is the young lady, I suppose," examining Stella. "Quite a stage face. How do you do, my dear? This is your maid, I presume?"

"Her maid, or her nurse, or her costumer, or anything she is pleased to want," replied Mattie, with dignity.

"Ah! that's well. No doubt a very serviceable person. So you've set the fire going? That's a pity! You may be smoked out soon; all the stoves here smoke when the wind's contrary. Out with the dresses! Hang them up on those nails. Her toilet things go here. Never been on the stage before, miss? It's a trying thing for beginners. I've seen hundreds of débûts in my day. Most of the young ones think a deal of themselves until they get before the lights; then they find out what they're made of. Not one in fifty succeeds. Hope you're not scared? Don't show it to the audience, or they'll think it good fun. They always laugh at the fright of novices; you know it makes the poor, simple things look so ridiculously awkward! Here, Jerry," calling over the gallery to the gas-lighter, "if you can't light up that gas yet, give us a candle, will you? The young person is a novice, and I may have trouble dressing her."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bunce," Stella ventured to say; "but Mattie has been accustomed to dress me."

"Yes, that I have, ever since she was that high!" added Mattie, affectionately, and designating with her hand a stature of some few inches.

"Ah! I dare say, but not for the stage. Mr. Belton depends upon me to look after the novices on their first night, and see that they don't disfigure themselves."

Mattie, when her legitimate office was thus preemptorily snatched from her hands, looked like a suppressed thunder-gust;

but, considerate even in her wrath, she feared to distress Stella by remonstrating. Not without difficulty, she controlled a strong temptation to forcibly eject Mrs. Bunce from the apartment.

As Mattie opened the basket, Mrs. Bunce seized upon the contents, and dragged them to light without ceremony.

“White merino: that’s right. Has it got a sweep? Not too long, I hope; if she’s awkward, she’ll trip. Those folds are too small for a Roman dress. She has such a wisp of a figure, she could wear loose folds, which are more correct. Where’s your key border?”

“*Key border?*” asked Stella.

“Yes, round the bottom of the dress; it’s Roman. We always dress our Virginias with key-border trimming.”

“I like the dress better without. Virginia’s character is marked by so much girlish simplicity that her attire should be unadorned.”

“O, very well! It’s no great matter; you are not expected to know much about it as yet.”

Mrs. Bunce chattered on without pause, while Stella commenced her toilet. The busy fingers of the dresser made several desperate attempts to assist in the arrangement of the novice’s hair; but this Stella would not allow. She folded back the waving, golden-tinted tresses from her pure brow, gathered them in a classic knot, and encircled her head with a white fillet. A stray lock here and there escaped its bonds, and was permitted to curl down her finely-curved throat.

The gas was by this time lighted. Stella was just receiving her dress from the hands of Mattie. Mrs. Bunce snatched it away.

“Wait, wait a bit!” said she. “Where’s your paint and your powder?—but you’re white enough without powdering—where’s your *rouge*?”

“I have none. There is nothing in the poet’s description of Virginia to make one suppose that she was particularly ruddy; besides, excitement has given me too much color already.”

“Does very well now, but it can’t be depended upon like *rouge*. It won’t last when you’re frightened out of your wits, that’s the mischief. Better let me borrow some *rouge* from the ladies.”

“No, I would rather not. I don’t see the necessity.”

Mrs. Bunce persisted; Stella refused.

"O, of course you can do just as you please," said the officious dresser, in an irate tone.

"I always do," replied Stella, quietly.

Stella's Roman toilet was completed. Even the critical Mrs. Bunce was forced to confess herself satisfied with the young *débûtante's* appearance; it was so chastely classic, so befitting the patrician maiden, so indicative of vestal purity.

It wanted more than half an hour of the rising of the curtain. The small stove had been gradually sending out thin wreaths of smoke. The atmosphere was becoming unendurable, as Stella's smarting eyes and irritated lungs began to testify.

"I shall have neither sight nor voice, if I am shut up here any longer," thought she, "and this chattering woman will drive my part quite out of my head."

Then she remembered the kind offer of Mrs. Fairfax, and requested Mrs. Bunce to see if she were dressed. In the Roman matron who returned with the messenger Stella hardly recognized her friend; the *make up* of the practised actress was so elaborate, so striking, so full of character.

Mrs. Fairfax shook hands, and held the novice at arm's length with a look of unmistakable pleasure; then retouched Stella's dress, disposed a fold here and there with more statuesque grace, and said, affectionately,

"I have seen at last my *beau idéal* of Virginia! I hope you feel quite collected?"

"Tolerably; but this room is so close, the smoke chokes me. Might we not go down?"

"Certainly. Come, and I will show you the green-room, and teach you your way behind the scenes; that will help wear off the newness."

Mattie followed, carefully protecting from contact with the ground Virginia's spotless vesture. To Stella's great relief, Mrs. Bunce remained behind.

"This is the green-room," said Mrs. Fairfax.

Stella looked in curiously. It was a long, narrow apartment. At one end sofas, throne-chairs, and other stately seats for stage use, stood crowded together. On either side of the wall a cushioned bench was secured, the only article of stationary

furniture, except the full-length mirror. On this bench lay an actor in Roman apparel. Stella's uninitiated eye failed to detect that he was indebted to art for his white locks and venerable aspect. He appeared to be studying, but every now and then gave vent to an uneasy groan.

"That is Dentatus—Mr. Martin. Don't you recognize him?" inquired Mrs. Fairfax. "He is a martyr to inflammatory rheumatism, and can scarcely stand. He has suffered for years, and finds no relief."

Stella called to mind the gentleman on crutches whom she had seen at rehearsal.

"But how can he act?" she asked.

"That is one of the stage mysteries which it requires some wisdom to solve. You will see him, when he is called, hobble with his crutches to the wing, groaning at every step, and really suffering, there is no doubt about that; but, the instant his cue is spoken, his crutches will very likely be flung at Fisk's head, and, lo! Dentatus walks on the stage, erect and firm as though he had never known an ache. He is a great favorite with the audience, and generally manages to keep them convulsed with laughter, though he never ceases complaining and groaning himself, when he is out of their presence."

Two other Romans were walking up and down the green-room, repeating their parts in a low tone. At the further end, where the sofas and chairs were huddled together, sat a group of girls in Roman costume. Stella recognized Perdita among them. She was knitting lace with a rapidity positively wonderful.

Mrs. Fairfax next conducted Stella to the prompter's nook on the right of the stage. There Mr. Finch sat, arranging his prompt-book, and Fisk was going through a series of ludicrous antics at his side.

The latter nodded to Stella, and inquired, patronizingly, "How d' ye do? How do you feel *now*?"

Mrs. Fairfax checked him by a light box on the ear, and led Stella to the stage. It was covered with green baize; the scene was set for a street in Rome.

"Come and take your first look at the audience," said her cicerone, pointing out a small aperture that had been surreptitiously made in the green curtain. They looked through, and saw the boxes, pit, and gallery, rapidly filling.

At this moment, Floy glided up to Stella, rubbing his bony hands. "Such a house! such a house!" he exclaimed, and then darted away again.

Stella's heart began to leap as though it would bound into her throat, as she caught sight of the thronged audience.

"You won't mind them, when you are once engrossed in your part," said Mrs. Fairfax, noticing her sudden trepidation. "Never think of an audience, if you can help it."

They walked up and down behind the scenes. Stella remarked the broken windows, the open doors through which rushed strong currents of cold air, the dilapidated condition of the walls, and wondered at the comfortlessness of the place.

"It's the same in all theatres, my dear. I never knew a manager yet who thought it necessary to render the members of his company comfortable behind the scenes. Those windows have been broken all winter. Nobody ever dreams of having them mended. A good many of us have nearly perished in our light clothing. But I dare say we get accustomed to it; and, on the stage, in the excitement of acting, one is not conscious of heat or cold."

The door-keeper came up to them. "There is a gentleman asking to see you, miss. He says you desired him to call. It's against the rules to admit strangers, and I had to take his name to Mr. Belton to get consent. Mr. Belton said he didn't mind your seeing any one to-night, as you were a novice; but he wants you to learn the rules, and the sooner the better."

"It's Mr. Oakland! I begged him to come for one moment. How kind he is!"

Mr. Oakland was standing at the stage-door, somewhat discomposed by the door-keeper's rebuff. Fastidious and sensitive as he was, that he subjected himself to these annoyances, was an eloquent proof of his attachment to the fatherless girl.

"How good you are! The sight of you revives me, and gives me courage!"

"Fair Virginia! Yes—you *are* Virginia in looks—be nothing but Virginia to-night! I must say adieu, for I could not stay here" (and he looked around with an expression of slight disgust) "amongst these dramatic savages. Be natural; do not aim at too much; don't try to act, but to feel; don't *declaim*, but *talk*; remember the good rule: colloquial, but not prosaic;

forcible, but not declamatory. Good-by, and Heaven help you!”

Just then, Fisk darted by her, twisting his body into ludicrous contortions as he ran up the stairs, crying, at the top of his piping voice, “First musi—ic—ic—ic! First musi—ic—ic—ic!”

Along the gallery, past all the dressing-room doors, he sped, repeating, “First musi—ic—ic!” Down the staircase, beneath the stage, making the circuit of the gentlemen’s dressing-rooms, he pursued his rapid flight, still shouting, “First musi—ic—ic!”

“What *is* that strange boy about?” asked Stella of Mrs. Fairfax.

“He is making the *first music call*. It is given a quarter of an hour before the curtain rises.”

The musicians could now be heard tuning their instruments. Stella continued promenading up and down with Mrs. Fairfax. After the lapse of five minutes, Fisk was seen rolling himself from side to side, in sailor-like fashion, as he climbed the stairs again, screaming, “Second musi—ic—ic—*ic!* Second musi—ic—ic—*ic!*” He made the same tour, and then rolled back to the prompter’s seat.

“Now it wants ten minutes of the time,” said Mrs. Fairfax.

Stella was seized with an uncontrollable fit of gasping and trembling. Her head grew giddy; the same sickening faintness which she had experienced at home now nearly overpowered her. Mattie ran for a glass of water. The members of the company, who were on their way to the green-room, stopped to stare at the novice, to nudge each other, and jest at an alarm which most of them had suffered themselves.

“Last musi—ic—ic—*ic!* Last musi—ic—ic—*ic!*” screeched Fisk, with a new variation of his fantasticalities.

The orchestra was playing vociferously.

“Now, my dear, you had better forget everything else, and think over your part. It wants but five minutes of the rising of the curtain.”

“O, don’t leave me! don’t leave me! What would I do without you?” supplicated Stella, for she saw her friend about to mount the stair.

“I will return directly. You don’t appear until the second scene. I go on a moment before you, and from the same en-

trance. I shall be by your side. Now walk about quietly with Mattie, and try to think only of the play.”

“I shall fail! I shall fail!” murmured Stella, in an agony of fear. “I shall never be able to articulate a word! O! if Mr. Oakland were here, or my brother, or any one who loved me!”

She was wringing her hands in absolute despair, when Perdita passed her and went up to a man in the garb of a Roman citizen, who was extended on the ground, in one corner. He appeared to be asleep; his head rested on a pile of shields, breastplates, and other warlike accoutrements. Perdita laid her hand gently on his shoulder.

“Father! father, dear! the last music is called; you will be wanted in a moment.”

“Get out! get out! don’t disturb me; get out, I say!” was the rough reply, accompanied by a motion that somewhat resembled a kick.

“Father, you *must* wake up! The curtain is going to rise! You are on in the first scene!—*do* wake!”

“What is it? Who is it?” asked the man, with a vacant stare. “Perdy, it’s you, is it? Always bothering me! no quiet to be found anywhere; no rest!”

“I was forced to wake you, father; for you are called for the stage.”

She smoothed his disordered hair, and arranged the tumbled folds of his toga.

He rose unwillingly, shaking himself after the fashion of a huge mastiff. His form was tall and finely proportioned. His countenance must once have been handsome; but the defacing fingers of passion and sensuality had ploughed furrows that destroyed its comeliness. He was not precisely intoxicated, but in that semi-stupid state which habitual intemperance renders second nature.

Stella forgot herself and her approaching trial as she watched the noble girl patiently waiting upon and soothing her brutal father.

“Everybody called for First Act of *Virginius!*” bellowed Fisk, gambolling up to the green-room door. “*Servius, Cneius, Virginius, Titus, and all the Roman citizens!*”

“O, where is Mrs. Fairfax?” cried Stella, as she seized Mattie’s arm to support herself, “Why don’t she come? Do try and

find her room, and beg her to come, Mattie! No! no! don't leave me here alone! If she would only come! I go on at that entrance, over there. I must get there quickly."

She was walking across the stage, with Mattie's arm encircling her waist, when the orchestra ceased.

"Clear the stage, ladies and gentlemen," called out Mr. Finch.

The prompter's tinkling bell sounded. Stella's white dress and sandalled feet were visible for a second, as the curtain slowly rose.

The first scene commenced. Where Stella stood, she commanded a full view of the stage. But she saw nothing, heard nothing,—not even the stately Virginius, not the shouts of applause with which his entrance was greeted.

"Courage! courage!" said a kind voice at her side. It was Mrs. Fairfax.

"O, madam, I feel as if I were under water—stifling—drowning!"

"It's only *stage fright*, my dear; it will pass off by and by. All actors suffer more or less from its paralyzing influence. Even our veterans are not proof against occasional attacks of the monster. Try and collect yourself, and think of what you have to do."

"Virginius—Servia—Virginia," cried Fisk, in a more subdued tone; for, now that the curtain had risen, his former key would have been heard by the audience. Fisk looked saucily in Stella's face, his head on one side, and a sagacious expression upon his countenance, which seemed to ask, "How d' ye like it? Pleasant feeling, isn't it?" And then he repeated almost in her ear, "Vir-gin-ia-a-a call-*alled!*"

"Go away, you young pest!" said Mrs. Fairfax, giving him a shove.

A shrill whistle sounded; it penetrated Stella's very brain. The scene changed to an apartment in the house of Virginius.

"There's Virginia's broidery," said Fisk, giving Mrs. Fairfax a frame with worsted-work of by no means classic appearance. "There's your Virginia painting," he added, handing Stella a colored engraving. "That's the picture of Achilles, which looks so wonderful like your beloved Icilius. An't it fine?"

At the sound of the changing scene all the company poured

from the green-room and gathered around the wings, to witness Stella's *débût*. Actors invariably entertain a sovereign contempt for novices. The stage tremors of youthful aspirants are a fruitful source of mirth. They delight in confusing and tormenting a *débûtante*.

Virginius enters with Servia. She points out the tell-tale letters L and I twined with a V, in Virginia's embroidery. After a brief dialogue, Servia is despatched for the maiden.

Mrs. Fairfax returned to the place where she had left the panic-stricken Stella, and found her lying in Mattie's arms, breathless with the intensity of her emotion, her face and lips colorless, her eyes half closed.

The actress grasped her by the shoulder with pretended roughness, and shook her, saying, "Rouse yourself, child! rouse yourself! You've only a second now. You're not going to make a failure? Think of what a disgrace it would be! Think of the one whom you wish most to please—who is dearest to you—and rouse yourself. Virginius' soliloquy is just over. 'Soft she comes'—that is your cue; go on bravely."

She clasped Stella's icy hand, and with gentle force pressed her forward. Stella was scarcely conscious of what she was doing, as she tottered on the stage and approached Virginius, saying, in a tremulous tone, "Well, father, what's your will?"

Those foot-lights sent forth a dazzling glare, but Stella was in total darkness. The air grew so thick she could not breathe; her "soul of lead" "staked her to the ground;" she could not move. There was a sound of noisy hands, a prolonged acclamation, but Stella paid no heed to these, as she stood spell-bound before Virginius.

He attempted to speak, but the applause drowned his voice. As it was bestowed upon another, he would gladly have hushed it down, by proceeding with his part (a favorite trick of actors); but the audience was resolute in obtaining some recognition from the stupefied novice.

Mr. Tennent now churlishly whispered, "Curtsey, curtsey—can't you?" Muttering to himself, "Defend me from novices!"

Stella, thus prompted, turned mechanically to the audience and bended slightly, for her quivering limbs rendered the genuflexion somewhat difficult of accomplishment. The darkness was partially dispelled, but the still misty atmosphere seemed

full of floating atoms; her Roman father was enveloped by them. The air was less stifling, but were they not flakes of ice which she inhaled at every breath? Silence was restored, and the dialogue proceeded.

The graceful simplicity of Stella's attire, the changing beauty of her countenance, the refinement of her mien, her rich, well-cadenced voice, made an instantaneous impression on the audience.

Virginius despatches her for her "last task." Mrs. Fairfax had thoughtfully taken the painting from Stella's hand, and was now holding it in readiness. Stella drew one long breath of relief as she passed out of sight of the audience. Only three lines are spoken by Virginius before Virginia reënters. Stella would certainly have forgotten herself but for Mrs. Fairfax. Virginia returns with the painting. Dentatus enters a moment afterwards. There was no trace of the crippled rheumatic in his gait or mien. Dentatus and Virginius retire together.

It was passing strange, but Stella, now that she was left alone upon the stage, felt as though the freezing influences that begirt her had suddenly melted away. The spell was broken; her lost faculties were restored. Her form dilated, the truant blood rushed back to her cheeks, the lustre to her dimmed eyes, her thoughts concentrated themselves on her part; with an involuntary self-surrender, she became Virginia. Nothing could surpass the girlish naturalness, the earnest sweetness, with which she uttered:

"How is it with my heart? I feel as one
That has lost everything, and just before
Had nothing left to wish for. He will cast
Icilius off! I never told it yet;
But take of me, thou gentle air, the secret—
And ever after breathe more balmy sweet—
I love Icilius!
He'll cast Icilius off! Not if Icilius
Approve his honor. That he'll ever do;
He speaks, and looks, and moves, a thing of honor,
Or honor never yet spoke, looked, or moved,
Or was a thing of earth!"

The audience testified their approval. She had taken her first step on the steep, flinty mount. That over, at every tread she gained a securer foothold.

Icilius enters. Virginia has but a few lines to speak in this scene, but the maidenly modesty with which she confessed her love,—

“My secret’s yours;
Keep it, and *honor it*, Icilius,—”

her drooping head, the unconscious picturesqueness of her *pose*, drew down a second round of plaudits.

When the act closed, Mrs. Fairfax embraced her warmly. “You will be an actress. I thought so; now I know it!”

“But what I have suffered, and how much I owe to your sympathy and encouragement!” replied Stella.

By the time that the call-boy’s summons for the second act was given, she had entirely regained her self-possession. Every time she appeared, she grew in favor with the audience. There is no field for a striking display of dramatic abilities in the simple character of Virginia, as portrayed by Knowles; but Stella’s unaffected, artless delineation left a deep impression.

In the fourth act, as Virginius raises his knife to stab his daughter, Stella gave utterance to an irrepressible shriek, which imparted unusual reality to the scene. Virginius, the instant he had struck the blow, dropped the young girl from his arms upon the ground, and, with upraised knife, rushed towards Claudius, exclaiming:

“Lo! Appius, with this innocent blood
I do devote thee to the infernal Gods!”

Stella felt the trampling of the citizens’ and soldiers’ feet over her dress and on her loosened hair, as they gathered round to form the closing *tableau*; but she lay motionless, inwardly sending up thanks to Heaven that her trial was over. The curtain rapidly descended. Mr. Belton assisted her to rise.

“You have done well, you give promise,” were his chary words of commendation.

There was, of course, a “call” for the *débûtante*. The manager requested Mr. Tennent to be kind enough to lead on Miss

Rosenvelt. The pompous tragedian complied somewhat sulkily. As Stella made her obeisance before the foot-lights, every chord of her heart vibrated with a strange, wild delight. It was the first sensation of unalloyed pleasure she had experienced that night.

While she resumed her every-day attire, the tearful congratulations of Mattie drew from her eyes responding tokens of joy.

Floy came for the basket. That he noticed her streaming eyes was obvious. "O! O! O!" he murmured, pityingly; then, when she smiled, he shook his head, rubbed his hands gleefully, and repeated his favorite ejaculation, "Such a house! such a house!"

Half an hour later, the *débûtante* was sobbing in her mother's arms. "Mother, I have succeeded! Forgive my waywardness!"