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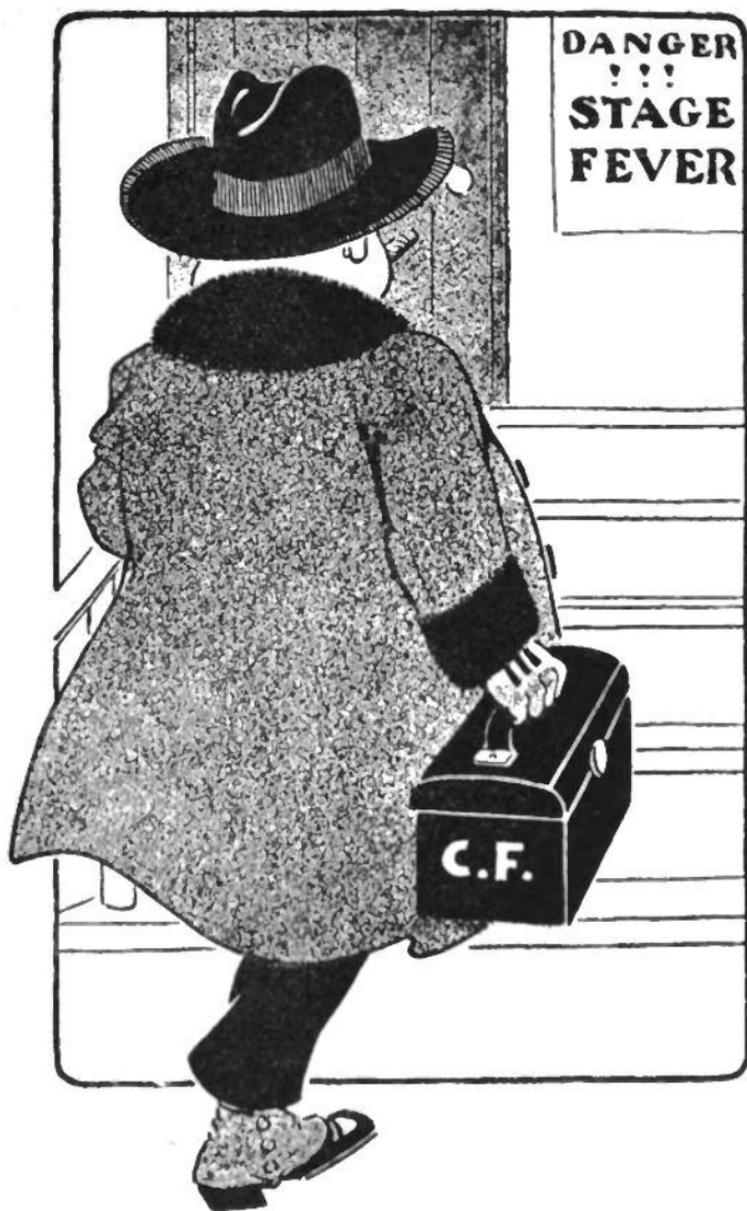
CHANNING POLLOCK

Channing Pollock (1880–1946) was the all-purpose Broadway factotum. He served his apprenticeship as dramatic critic of *The Washington Post* in 1898, before becoming a press agent for the managers William A. Brady and the Shuberts. Without any sense of conflict of interest, he regularly reviewed plays for several publications, including *The Smart Set* and *The Green Book*, often biting the hands that had fed him. He also promoted his own works for the stage, including a dramatization of Frank Norris's *The Pit*. Pollock contributed sketches to three versions of the *Ziegfeld Follies* (1911, 1915, and 1921), composing the English lyrics for “My Man,” Fanny Brice's rendition of the French torch song “Mon Homme.” His sanctimonious anti-war play *The Fool* was a popular if not a critical success in 1924, but his dramatic career was dealt a lethal blow in 1931 when Dorothy Parker wrote of his latest effort: “*The House Beautiful* is the play lousy.” Pollock's ample store of stage lore is illustrated in his essay “Stage Struck,” from his collection *The Footlights Fore and Aft* (1911), which indicates just how popular the theatre as a profession and how widespread the concept of “stardom” had become since the days of Anna Cora Mowatt.

Stage Struck

*Being a diagnosis of the disease, and a description of its
symptoms, which has the rare medical merit of
attempting a cure at the same time.*

“FROM the stern life of an officer in Uncle Sam's Navy to a merry job carrying a spear in the chorus of a musical comedy may be a far cry”, but that is the step which a metropolitan newspaper recently recorded as having been taken by a young man named in the story whose beginning is quoted above. On another page of this same newspaper was an article which announced that “because pink teas, bridge whist, and dances no longer amused her”, a certain “society woman” had joined the chorus of a company appearing at the Casino. These two cases composed a single day's list of casualties from the malignant disease known as stage-fever.



“The malignant disease”

When my eye had finished its journey over the accounts of the "society woman" and the naval officer, I paused to wonder whether either of these aspirants would be checked by seeing spread-headed over the first page of the journal in question the horrid details of a theatrical suicide. The night before, an actress of reputation—a woman who had won everything that these new-comers had but a faint chance of winning—had killed herself in an hotel in Baltimore. Of course, it had not been shown that this "star" was influenced by any circumstance connected with her work, and, of course, it is true that people of various professions are self-slain, and yet—I wondered.

If the naval officer was restrained in his resolve it was not for long. A week or so later I saw this impetuous youth, who couldn't stand "being bottled up on a battle-ship", on the stage of an up-town theater. He was standing near the middle of a row of young men, waving his hands at stated intervals, and singing "yes—yes" at the end of every second line rendered by the principal comedian. He had but to wave his hands a moment too soon or too late in order to incur a fine or a reprimand. Perhaps by this time he has discovered that there are worse misfortunes than being "bottled up on a battleship."

Whether he does or not, the stream of the stage-struck will continue to flow like the brook poeticized by Tennyson. There is no stopping it. Youth has a better chance of missing measles or scarlet-fever than of escaping that consuming passion to "go on the stage." Nearly everyone struggles with the mania for a time; the wise conquer it, the foolish make up the comic opera choruses, the unimportant road companies, and the stage-door-keeper's list of "extra ladies and gentlemen." From every class and walk of life, from every town and city troop the victims, abandoning their vocations and their homes, as though they had heard the witching notes of a siren song. They come with high hopes and bright dreams, most of them to the great, gay city of New York, where they besiege the agencies, and the managers, and the teachers of acting until their dreams fade, or their money gives out, or they are smitten with realization. There is hardly a community in the country so small as to be without its "amateur dramatic club", and no one even distantly connected with the theatrical pro-

fession has lacked his or her experience with the inoculated unfortunate who knows that "I could succeed if I only had a chance."

Some time ago I happened to be in Syracuse, and used the long-distance telephone to communicate with New York. My conversation over, I sat down in the hotel lobby, and had just lit a cigar when a page announced: "Long distance wants you." I returned to the booth. "Yes?" I inquired. A woman's voice replied: "I overheard enough of your talk with New York to judge that you're in the theatrical business."

"I'm indirectly connected with it", I replied.

"Well", said the voice, "I'm the long-distance operator, and I want to go on the stage. Please get me an engagement."

I explained my misfortune in being acquainted with no manager who was likely to consider extensive training in enunciation of "hello" and "busy" sufficient education for the stage. The lady probably didn't believe me, for it is the popular impression that anyone concerned in the business of the playhouse has only to ask in order to receive a contract for whomever he wishes to assist. That song-heroine, who declared herself "an intimate friend of an intimate friend of Frohman", has her prototype in real life. Moreover, no aspirant to footlight honors ever can be convinced that actors must be made as well as born, and that there may be a few people in the world, who, given the opportunity, would not become Modjeskas and Mansfields.

William A. Brady once was served at dinner by a waitress whose surliness astonished him. He made no remark, however, and at last the waitress addressed him. "You're William A. Brady", she said; "ain't you?"

Mr. Brady confessed.

"Well", exclaimed the duchess of dishes, "my name's Minnie Clark. I've been a waitress since I was fourteen years old, and I think I can stand it until about next Wednesday. Give me a job, will you?"

David Belasco had a less amusing experience with a chambermaid in Attleboro, Mass., where he spent a night with the organization supporting David Warfield in "The Auctioneer." This girl, whose tap at the door interrupted the wizard producer while he was blue-penciling a scene, had just heard of his



“You’re William A. Brady, ain’t you?”

presence in town, and lost no time approaching him. She had been stage-struck since childhood. Hearing of Mr. Belasco's success in teaching dramatic art, she had determined to visit him in New York. "I saved my money for three years", she said, "and then I went up to you. I called at your office every day, but they wouldn't let me in. When all my money was spent I came back home, and began saving again. I had about half enough when I found that you were coming to Attleboro." Mr. Belasco was unable to give the girl the least encouragement. She was wholly illiterate, and, moreover, her death warrant was writ on her face. She was suffering from an incurable disease of the lungs.

Collin Kemper, one of the managers of the Astor Theater, recently had a letter from an elderly priest, who, after twenty years in the pulpit, felt that he wanted "a larger field of expression", and yearned to play Shakespeare. A wrinkled old woman of sixty sought the late Edward Marble, when he was conducting a school of acting in Baltimore, and confided in him her desire to be seen as Juliet. This desire she had cherished nearly half a century when the death of a relative gave her the means of gratifying her ambition. Daniel Frohman once received a young man, who laid on his desk a letter of introduction from an acquaintance in the West. "Ah!" said Mr. Frohman. "So you wish to become an actor?"

"Yes", replied the young man. "I'm puh-puh-puh-perfectly wa-wa-willing to ba-ba-ba-be-gin at the ba-bottom—"

He stuttered hopelessly.

The most astonishing feature of stage fever, however, is that its ravages are not confined to the ranks of people who would be bettered by success in their chosen profession. My wealthiest friend, a silk importer, who owns a charming home in Central Park West, dines alone while his wife stands in the wings of a dirty little theater in Paris, where their only daughter earns a hundred francs a week by dancing. A successful literary man of my acquaintance, who would cheerfully devote his entire income, something more than fifteen thousand a year, to making his young wife happy in his cozy apartment yields per force to her wish to appear in vaudeville. The most valuable member of the staff of an out-of-town newspaper, recipient of a big salary, suddenly threw up his position two years ago, since when he



“A wrinkled old woman confided her desire to be seen as Juliet”

has been employed seven weeks, and that seven weeks in an organization presenting "The Chinatown Trunk Mystery."

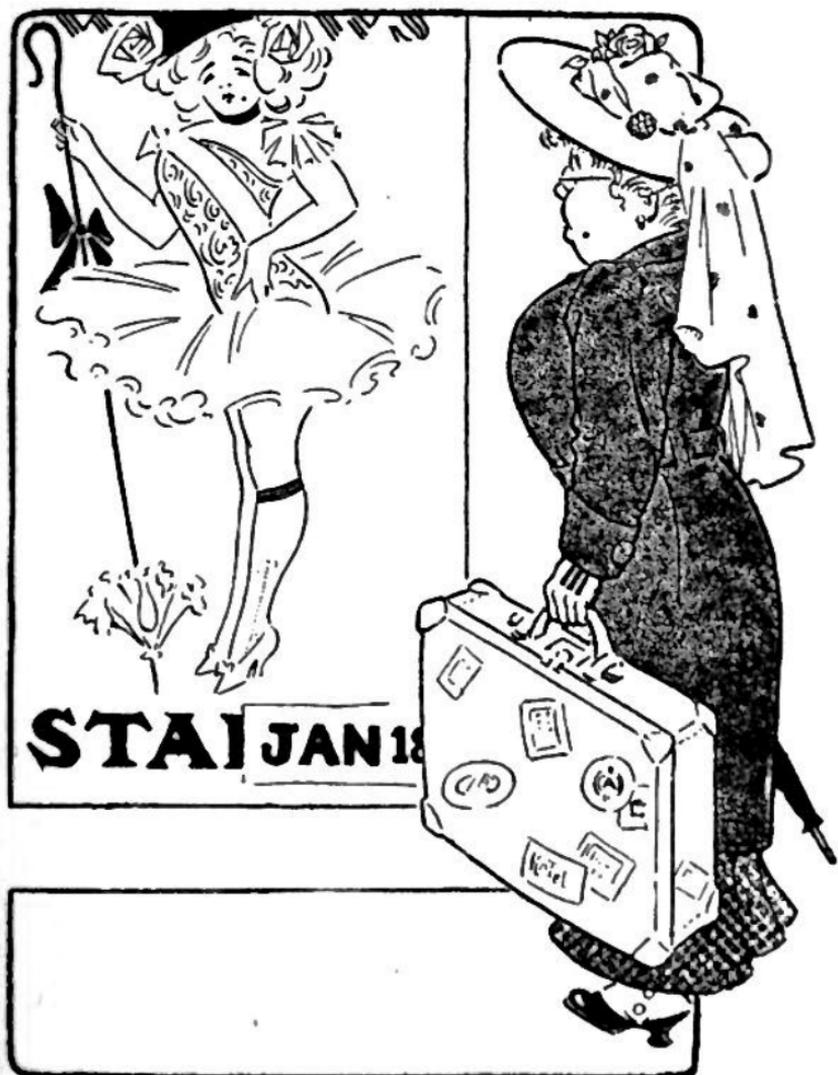
A. L. Wilbur, at the time when he conducted the well-known Wilbur Opera Company, printed in the program of his performances an advertisement for chorus girls. Successful applicants were paid twelve dollars a week, yet recruits came by the dozens from the best families in the territory through which the aggregation was touring. Scores of the young women who play merry villagers on Broadway today are well born and bred victims of the virus. "Society" has contributed even to the ranks of the chorus men, whose caste is far below that of their betighted sisters. When Maybelle Gilman opened her metropolitan season in "The Mocking Bird" a male chorister, whose weekly stipend was eighteen dollars, electrified the management by purchasing nine boxes. This Croesus of the chorus proved to be "Deacon" Moore, a Cornell graduate and son of one of the biggest mine operators in the West.

The germ of stage fever frequently is as slow to get out of the system as it is quick to enter it. Douglas Fairbanks is a clever comedian, who, after a long apprenticeship, has been elevated to the stellar rank by William A. Brady. Mr. Fairbanks fell in love with the daughter of Daniel J. Sully, and, according to report, was given parental permission to marry her if he would abandon his profession. Mr. Fairbanks retired from the stage, and was out of the cast of "The Man of the Hour" for a trifle less than two months. Margaret Fuller came to town a few years ago with an ambition to star. She enlisted the help of a well-known manager, who told her that he would give her a chance to play Camille if she could get rid of twenty pounds of superfluous flesh. Miss Fuller presented "Camille" at a special matinee, and has not been heard of since. She is still in the theatrical profession, content with minor roles, but clinging tenaciously to the vocation. There are hundreds of men and women haunting the agencies in New York, promenading that graveyard of buried hopes, The Great White Way, who might be enjoying the comfort of luxurious homes and the affectionate care of doting relatives.

In nine cases out of ten the mania to go on the stage is prompted by pure desire for glorification. Love of excitement, and the fallacious notion that the profession is one of

comparative ease and luxury, may be allying factors, but the essence of the virus is vanity. No other field offers the same quick approval of successful effort, and no other climber is quite so much the center of his eventual triumph. In the other arts, approbation follows less promptly and is less direct. The fortunate player hears the intoxicating music of applause a dozen times every evening and two dozen times on matinee days. He struts about his mimic world, the observed of all observers, conscious of the strained attention of the thousands who have paid to see him, profiting not only by his own achievements but by those of the author, the director, the scene-painter and the orchestra. The newspapers are full of his praise and his photographs, recording his slightest doing and giving to the opinions expressed by him, or by his press agent, an importance scarcely less than might be accorded the President of the United States. In the course of time he even begins to arrogate to himself the heroic virtues of the characters he impersonates. It is sweet to see one's name on the cover of a novel, sweet to scrawl one's autograph in the lower left-hand corner of a painting, but O, how doubly and trebly sweet to meet one's own image lithographed under a laudatory line and posted between advertisements of the newest breakfast food and the latest five cent cigar!

The temptation is the stronger, as the rewards are more numerous, if the aspirant happens to be a woman. The gentler sex may not have greater vanity than the stronger, but it takes greater delight in commendation and it has keener appreciation of luxury. If the much-mentioned "society belle" longs for the glitter and gaud supposed to exist behind the foot-lights, how can one blame the daughters of poverty and squalor who make up the rank and file of the chorus? James Forbes has embodied the minds of these girls in his Patricia O'Brien in "The Chorus Lady." What wonder that they try to escape the sordid commonplaces of their poor lives for the glory of the theater, and delight to strut their "brief hour" in a palace, even if that palace be of canvas and scantling? The prospect of diamonds and automobiles cannot exert a stronger appeal to the men and women who dwell in dreary drudgery than does the hope of becoming *somebody*, of enjoying even a temporary illumination of their obscurity.



“How sweet to meet one’s own image”

Charles Dickens vividly explained the psychology of this longing for prominence in his chapter on "Private Theaters" in "Sketches by Boz." In his day there were scores of these institutions in London, each "the center of a little stage-struck neighborhood." In the lobby of each was hung a placard quoting the price for which willing amateurs might play certain desirable parts. To be the Duke of Glo'ster, in "Richard III", cost £2, the part being well worth that amount because "the Duke must wear a real sword, and, what is better still, he must draw it several times in the course of the piece." We have no such private theaters on this side of the water, but there are nearly two hundred amateur dramatic clubs in Brooklyn, while other communities possess these organizations in proportion to their size.

There are three well-trod roads to the stage. One wanders through membership in a society like those mentioned, another and straighter is by way of the dramatic schools, while the third, and most frequented, goes direct from the home to the office of agent or manager. Of dramatic schools the number is legion, but only those conducted by dishonest adventurers promise employment to the enrolled student. "Be an actor for \$1", is the alluring caption of an advertisement carried weekly by a number of periodicals, but the aspirants who make it profitable for that institution to go on advertising must be exceptionally gullible. New York has many "academies" in which useful technicalities of the art are carefully taught, and the managers of several of these "academies" keep in close touch with the producing interests of the country. While they guarantee nothing, they frequently are able to place their graduates in small parts. Grace George, Margaret Illington, and other well-known stars have come out of these schools.

The direct path to which reference has been made is full of difficulties and obstacles. Agencies are established with the purpose of helping communication between managers and the actors most in demand. They are busy places, with little time to devote to the novice, and the average impresario is not more nearly inaccessible than their executive heads. Every year the producing manager is less inclined to see applicants or to make opportunities for people of whom he knows nothing. It

is all very well to be recommended by some acquaintance of the man who "presents", but friendship is only friendship, and nobody will risk the success of a production that has cost thousands of dollars merely to please an associate. The current method of selecting a company is quick and simple. A copy of the play's cast is sent to the manager, who writes opposite each character the name of the actor whom he thinks most likely to interpret that role to advantage. Then the manager's secretary sends for the fortunate Thespian. This system is undeniably hard, and perhaps unjust to the beginner, but such sentiment as gets into the theater comes in manuscripts, and, in these days of severe critical judgment, the investor in drama has the fullest right to minimize his risk.

Out of every hundred tyros who come to town in search of an engagement ten may secure the coveted prize, and not more than one person out of that ten makes a decent living from his or her adopted profession. It is too much to say that one aspirant in a thousand achieves real success. The average salary in the chorus is \$18, and for speaking parts in dramatic performances it cannot be more than \$40. No one is paid during the period devoted to rehearsal, and a long season lasts somewhere between thirty and thirty-five weeks. The sane way of computing wages in the theatrical business, therefore, is to multiply by thirty and divide the result by fifty-two. Following this system, it will be seen that the seeming \$40 a week really is only \$23. The most ardent and ambitious among the stage-struck will admit that this is not an income permitting the employment of a chauffeur or the purchase of a palatial residence on Riverside Drive.

Nor is the matter of remuneration the only disappointment connected with entrance into the theatrical profession. This is the one vocation in which the worker must begin again every year. If the fairly-successful actor "gets something" for the current season, he will find almost equal difficulty in getting something else for the season to follow. Unless he has made a prodigious hit—and prodigious hits are very rare—he finds himself no farther advanced next June than he was last September. Should he be lucky enough to remain in New York, he occupies a hall room in a boarding house, and, failing in this doubtful good fortune, he faces a long term on "the road."

Excepting only solitary confinement in prison, the world probably holds no terror surpassing that of touring the "one night stands." Lost to his best friends and companions, travelling at all hours of the day and night, grateful for board and lodging that would not be tolerated by a domestic servant, the player with a small road company has ample reason to repent his choice of a career. To illustrate the universal dread of this fate, I quote the lines printed under a comic picture in the Christmas issue of a prominent dramatic weekly:

DOCTOR—You're pretty badly run down, my friend. I should advise change of scene.

PATIENT—(Just returned from thirty weeks of "one night stands" with the Ripping Repertoire Company). Heaven have mercy on me! (He dies).

Of course, it is quite futile to recite facts like these to the victim of stage fever. That unhappy individual is certain that he or she will positively enjoy such discomforts as your feeble fancy can paint, and doubly sure that the ugly present will fade into a roseate future just as it does in the transformation scene at the end of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Tell this adventurer that one histrion in a thousand succeeds and your reply is bound to be: "I'll be that one." And, to speak truth, he or she *may* be that one. Celebrated actors are made from queer material sometimes, and the roster of well-known people on our stage includes the names of men and women who were originally plumbers, waitresses, floor-walkers and cloak-models. The beginner may be positive, however, that these players did not advance while they still had the intellects and the training required in the occupations mentioned. No person can possibly succeed on the dramatic stage without the foundation of genuine talent and a superstructure of culture and education. A woman whose pronunciation betrayed the baseness of her early environment could not win enduring fame if she had the temperament of a Bernhardt.

Generally, however, the woman who thinks she has the temperament of a Bernhardt really has only anaemia and a great deal of vanity. If she has not mistaken her symptoms, and, besides genuine ability, has a good education, some money, infinite patience, an iron constitution, and a mind made up to

the bitterness of long waiting and constant disappointment, she may eventually win a position half as important and a fourth as agreeable as that which she pictured in her imagination.

She is far luckier if her desire to go on the stage proves akin to and as fleeting as the average small boy's desire to be a burglar.