STAGE FOLKS AND THEIR SUPERSTITIONS

Edith Angus Writes of Their Strong Belief in Good and Evil Omens.

BY EDITH ANGUS.

"ARE stage people a superstitious lot?"

A friend asked me this question and I answered that I believed they are more so than any other class of intelligent people in the world. "And why—if as you say they are men and women of more than ordinary mentality?" she again questioned.

Superstition has a stronger hold on stage people than others because the profession is the most uncertain, the most fickle, of any which men and women engage in. A throw of the dice, a never-ending question—"Shall I take this chance or that?" and Providence often being absent on a more important mission, as it were, one must decide by the pin on the pavement, which presents point or head, whether it is better to knuckle to or buck against a managerial proposition which involves food, raiment, railroad fares and other necessities, to say nothing of luxuries to which we all take so kindly when feasible.

Formerly the dramatic profession was far from being the intelligent whole that it is now. The average actor of 50 or 75 years ago was seldom the well read and generally educated man that he is today. Where there was one of this class he probably had a dozen illiterate contemporaries and among the latter superstition was like a religion, having been received as a heritage from impressionable ancestors. If a man who firmly believed, and whose father before him believed, that a yellow cornet in the traveling orchestra was an omen of bad luck, repeatedly told the members of the company that this was the cause of the houses being empty and salaries not being paid they would all unintentionally begin looking askance at the poor old instrument, and if the owner, feeling that he was regarded as a hoodoo, exchanged it for a silver horn and business, by mere chance proved better, the superstition gained a footing, though unacknowledged by all.

I have heard of many odd superstitions which I cannot now remember, but some that I do recall are rather interesting. William Gillette, it is said, firmly believes that he cannot give a good performance unless his cat, "Sir Henry Irving," is in the dressing-room while he is making up. Virginia Brissac, of the Whittlesey Company, declares that she is not at all superstitious and doesn't believe in signs, but for all that she will not venture to "fix up" her dressing-room when playing a long engagement, as the belief is that if one attempts to decorate or make homelike the dressing-room assigned for the season the engagement will be lost in less than two weeks.

The "tag," or last word, of a play is never spoken at rehearsal, for if it should escape anyone's lips before the first night's performance it would surely condemn the production to failure. This is a superstition which holds good in theatrical circles the world over. The hoo-doo of the round-top trunk is often explained away by the fact that express companies cannot handle them so well as square ones, but the truth of the matter is that managers are afraid of them and believe that they will bring bad luck to the company. I had an experience of the kind right here in Portland. It was my first season on the road and I was traveling with an old round-top Saratoga trunk for theater use, not knowing that one of those unfortunate boxes was considered sufficient cause for terrible misfortune. Through bad management and a poor play the company was showing to empty houses, and finally the manager and all the rest decided that it was all due to my poor, old round-top trunk, and I was besieged with entreaties to dispose of it, which I finally did and purchased one constructed especially to bestow good fortune upon a superstitious manager. But the poor, old round-top had done its deadly work, for the company soon went to pieces, and I had to take my new square "lucky" trunk home.

Every theater, to be successful, must have its cat, a black one being preferable. Strange to say, some consider it good luck to travel on the same train with a corpse. If two people pass each other on the stairs in a theater it is believed that the one going down is sure to be discharged shortly. If any one is so daring as to whistle in a dressing-room the one nearest the door is in danger of losing his engagement. My sister, Marion Barhyte, often creates a furore at the Columbia by whistling in her dressing-room, for she doesn't quite realize the awful results which might follow.

The direst of all misfortune, however, is the playing of Macbeth music in the theater. Manager, stage director, company and theater-owner all go up in the air if a strain from this music is heard, for of all bad luck it is the worst. Rose Eytinge declares that the play of Macbeth has always been an unlucky one, and that is the reason the reproduction of its witch music is so ill-fated. Miss Eytinge unhesitatingly acknowledges that she is superstitious, as she lived in the Orient many years where superstition has its origin and its home. She told me of a case which came under her personal observation in London where the black cat figured as a mascot. A man named Gooch purchased the old Princess Theater when it was doing a very bad business. Everything looked dark for the future, but he took the risk and got it cheap. The first time he entered his new house he encountered an emaciated, half-starved black cat. Immediately he sent out for steaks and milk and had the cat treated better than his star. It grew fat and sleek and business began to pick up. Before long a second black cat appeared at the theater—from where no one questioned. It received a warm reception and was also fed on the fat of the land. A third shortly appeared and in a few weeks the little colony was augmented by a fourth. All the while business was flourishing—in fact, was almost phenomenal, and the black cats had the run of the theater, either in front of the curtain or behind. One day one of them disappeared, much to the manager's annoyance. After awhile a second mysteriously disappeared, and it was noticed that the boxoffice receipts were falling off. To make a long story short, the cats disappeared one by one, and with them the business, and by the time the last one was gone, Mr. Gooch was declared a bankrupt. So from this I take it that black cats are good luck, as long as they stay with you.

No prudent, far-seeing manager will have his lithograph printed on yellow paper, and there are many in the profession who will not take a part if an open umbrella or parasol has to be used on the stage. I know one manager who will almost have a fit if any one twirls a chair on its back legs, and any number of actresses would not think of buttoning one glove before both were on her hands. To walk under a ladder is considered bad luck the world over, I believe, but in the theater it is especially so as there is always a constant danger of it from the ever-present step-ladders. There is a man in the Alcazar Stock Company in San Francisco who will not make up unless he has a piece of money above his mirror. He generally puts 50 cents there and as regularly as he leaves it it is "swiped" by some of his fellow-players, who like to joke him.

I have never considered the number 13 unlucky and this is one very general superstition which is not as prevalent in theatrical circles as one would suppose. James Neil claims that it is his lucky number and to my knowledge he started out one season on Friday the thirteenth of the month, with 13 members in his company and 13 letters in the name of the play. He did a good season's business and declares 13 to be his mascot. I myself have 13 opals which I have been advised to throw away, as both the number and the gems are forerunners of evil. Some have openly declared their belief that the opals were the cause of my illness, but I do not look at it in that light and shall keep them as I did before. There are many other superstitions which I have not mentioned which might be of interest to those who like the mysterious.

To pass a flock of sheep on the right when traveling on the train is good luck, and a load of hay on the left is just as good. It is bad policy to remove a ring which has been "wished on" until the time set by the wisher expires. A shoe hung over one's mirror by some one else will bring dismissal from the company or misfortune of some kind. This is considered a good way to rid a company of an undesirable member. The use of a real Bible or prayerbook on the stage is generally prohibited by stage-managers as an omen of misfortune. Robert Peyton Carter, one of the actors in the original productions of "The Little Minister," was stopped by Mr. Frohman himself when he attempted to take a Bible on the stage at rehearsal. Mr. Frohman objected to it seriously on the ground that it was sure to bring bad luck, but as Mr. Carter convinced him that he could do some really funny "business" with the book he finally gave a reluctant consent for its use, and the phenomenal success of the play which followed, the "sure-sign-of-bad-luck" Bible was forgotten.

I have often been asked the origin of the expression used when salaries are about to be paid, "the ghost will walk today." This originated in olden times when traveling players in England always fell back on "Hamlet" as a moneymaker when other plays failed to draw. After a week or so of poor business the management would put on "Hamlet" and with the receipts would pay salaries, so it soon became natural to associate the walking of the ghost with the paying of back salaries, and the saying has held good ever since.

MORALS OF STAGE WOMEN

Bernard Shaw Replies to William F. Stead's Arraignment of Actresses.

IN A RECENT number of the Review of Reviews, Mr. William Stead gave his "First Impressions of the Theater," in which he seemed to imply that the charge that the stage appealed to the worst passions and combined in itself "all the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil," had never been disproved. He also said that when a youth of 16, though he had never been in a theater, he conceived a romantic passion for an actress he had never seen merely from looking at her photograph in shop windows. Mr. Bernard Shaw sends the following amusing reply to Mr. Stead:

"My Dear Stead: As a play-goer of nearly 40 years' standing, a playwright and a practiced critic of the theater, I have read your maiden effort with many chuckles.

"As to your autobiographical beginnings, we knew already that you were very badly brought up, and are a person of outrageously excessive temperament. All that need be said in this connection is to point out that if you had been taken to the pantomime when you were six, and thereafter regularly every year, you would have compounded for all later temptations in your childhood by a perfectly innocent adoration of the fairy queen, and would have been as proof at 21 against the leading lady's make-up as you are now against the blandishments of a lady journalist. The real danger of "cloistered virtue" is that when it is let out of the cloister (as it needs must be sooner or later) it is duped by the tawdriest wiles of vice, and beglamoured by attractions that no self-respecting profligate would deign to look twice at.

"If you really went to the theater for the first time expecting to see something like D'Annunzio's "Foscarini," and trembling lest she should rouse your ardent nature to disreputable transports, then I offer you my sincere condolements. You must have been frightfully disappointed. If you ever do hear "the vibrating accents of passion" from the lips of a beautiful young actress, will you be so good as to send me her name at once? Dramatists do almost all their playgoing in a tedious search for her, and often die without succeeding in finding her. What a gorgeous thing it must have been for you to live for forty-five years happily believing that there was such a treasure in every theater!

Is the Theater Righteous?

"YOUR question 'Is the Theater a power making for righteousness?' is as useless as the same question would be about Religion, Gravitation, or Government, or Music. There are theaters in England in which the entertainment on the stage is simply a device to lure people to the drinking bars, which are the real sources of profit to the management. There are theaters everywhere which deal in nothing but dramatic-aphrodisiacs. And there are theaters which deal with more serious representations of life and the greater achievements of literary art than any to be found in the grossly over-rated bundle of Hebrew literature which you were taught to idolize to the exclusion of your natural literary birthright. Between those extremes lie every possible grade of theater; and to lump them all as an unreal abstraction called 'the theater' will only land you in confusion. A theater is a potent engine for working up the passions and the imagination of mankind; and like all such engines, it is capable of the noblest recreations or the basest debauchery, according to the spirit of its direction. So is a church. A church can do great things by precisely the same arts as those used in a theater (there is no difference fundamentally, and very little even superficially); but every church is in a state of frightful pecuniary dependence on Pharisees, who use it to whitewash the most sordid commercial scoundrelism by external observances; it organizes the sale of salvation at a reasonable figure to these same Pharisees by what it calls charity; it invariably provides occasion for envy and concupiscence by an open exhibition of millinery and personal adornment for both sexes; and it sometimes, under cover of the text that God is love, creates and maintains a pseudo-pious ecstatic communion compared to which the atmosphere of the theater is prosaically chilly. That is why many people who take their children to the theater do not send them to church. The moral is as 'pagans like Domitian and Trajan' saw, that both churches and theaters need to be carefully looked after so as to prevent them from abusing their powers for pecuniary profit.

Actress and Society Women.

"FINALLY, don't talk about immoral actresses. What do you mean, you foolish William Stead, by an immoral actress? I will take you into any church you like and show you gross women who are visibly gorged with every kind of excess, with coarse voices and bloated features, to whom money means unrestrained gluttony and marriage unrestrained sensuality; but against whose characters—whose 'purity,' as you call it—neither you nor their pastors dare level a rebuke. And I will take you to the theater, and show you women whose work requires a constant physical training, an unblunted nervous sensibility, and a fastidious refinement and self-control which one week of ordinary plutocratic fat feeding and self-indulgence would wreck, and who anxiously fulfil these requirements; and yet, when you learn that they do not allow their personal relations to be regulated by your gratuitously unnatural and vicious English marriage laws, you will not hesitate to call them 'immoral.' The truth is that if the average British matron could be made half as delicate about her sexual relations, or half as abstemious in her habits, as the average stage heroine, there would be enormous improvement in our national manners and morals. When you sit in the stalls think of this, and, as the curtain rises and your eyes turn from the stifling grove of fat, naked shoulders round you to the decent and refined lady on the stage, humble your bumptious spirit with a new sense of the extreme perversity and wickedness of that uncharitable Philistine bringing-up of yours.

"Hoping that your mission will end in your own speedy and happy conversion, I am, as ever, your patient mentor,

"G. BERNARD SHAW."

"The abnormal development of this bump betokens a most remarkable veneration for old age. You are doubtless an archaeologist." "No, I'm the editor of the comic supplement of the Sunday Talk."—Town and Country.