

History of the Jefferson Family

The Jeffersons and The Rivals are so closely associated that he who would write a history of one must write the history of the other.

The Family Itself.

It was in August, 1774, that Richard Brinsley Sheridan, then a boy in his twenty-third year, was commissioned by the manager of the famous old Covent Garden theatre in London to write a comedy. With the exception of a very few minor scenes, young Sheridan had no idea whatever as to what should constitute the comedy.

Despite his youth, he was a writer of considerable note, and, confident of his ability and strong in his hopes, he set to work. Early in December of the same year, he delivered to the Covent Garden theatre manager the manuscript of *The Rivals*.

A masterpiece of comedy had been born and wonderful was the career that awaited it,—a career that would have been lost to the world but for the persistence of its boyish author.

First Time Failed.

The play was immediately put into rehearsal and on Jan. 17th, 1775, it was produced for the first time on any stage. It was a dismal failure; a failure because of the wretched performance of the actor to whom was allotted the role of Sir Lucius O'Trigger.

His performance was so bad, and it marred the work of the other artists to such an extent, that the play was almost hooted from the stage on the opening night.

Young Sheridan had faith in his play and insisted upon its being presented the second night. It was presented and failing again, was then withdrawn. The author took his manuscript, made several minor changes, secured another actor to portray Sir Lucius O'Trigger and prepared to try again.

A Dramatic Triumph.

The play, which had received the widest notoriety on account of its first night's fiasco, was again presented. The audience assembled at the theatre with the one idea of hooting the play from the stage. But nothing of the kind occurred. This night, the genius of young Sheridan was to be vindicated. The new actor, in the part of Sir Lucius, had fully grasped all the delicacies of the role and added such finesse and artistic atmosphere to the entire performance that the audience sat spell-bound. They left extolling its merits and the talent of him who had created it.

The play became a fad. The best people of London became enamored of it to such an extent that it was not long until the fame of the play had reached the ears of the king. The royal family witnessed the production and with the approval of royalty, *The Rivals* soon developed into the most astounding comedy success that London had ever known. Sheridan's fame was established and in *The Rivals* one finds that indescribable something that is a combination of boyish charm, youthful understanding, boyish philosophy, and a knowledge of life that is totally different from that exploited by the writers whose youth, with its optimism, is lost to them, and upon whom the pessimism of age is steadily encroaching.

A Jefferson Enters.

In 1774, while Sheridan was working on the manuscript of *The Rivals*, Thomas Jefferson, an actor who was born in 1746 and who was the first of the distinguished family to adopt a stage career, became a member of the company then under the management of David Garrick, who was, at that time, considered the greatest actor of his day.

Mr. Jefferson was essentially a comedian, and about this time Garrick, who had a fondness for the heavier styles of playing, decided to refrain from appearing in any comedies. This was the opportunity for Jefferson, who at once assumed the principal comedy roles in all of the David Garrick productions.

It was about 1779 that Garrick produced *The Rivals* for the first time. Of course it was only natural that Garrick's principal comedian should be allotted the part of Bob Acres. Here it was that the combination of a Jefferson portraying the part of "Fighting Bob" began and ever since that memorable night that combination has continued.

A Joseph Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson, the first, died in 1807, leaving behind him a wife and two sons, the elder of whom was called Joseph. He was born in 1774.

As a young man, Joseph evinced a decided talent for the stage, and in 1795, in a very mediocre company, he portrayed Bob Acres in one of the small English cities. He appeared in the part for several performances and then, for some reason which is now unknown, abandoned the play.

Comes to America

He came to America in 1797, bringing with him a carefully constructed prompt-book of *The Rivals*. This he never personally used in America, yet he treasured it and gave it to his son, who was born in 1804.

This young man was also named Joseph—after his father. This makes him Joseph Jefferson the second—although he represented the third generation concerned in this narrative.

This young man, at a very early age, showed a decided talent for painting. This talent was fostered by his parents, and it was not until he was nearly twenty years of age that the family trait asserted itself in a yearning for the stage.

Throughout his entire life, he never abandoned his first love,—painting. He was a distinguished artist and some of the most precious heirlooms now in the possession of the Jefferson family are specimens of the artistic handwork of Joseph Jefferson, the second.

While still a young man, he married Miss Cornelia Frances Thompson,—at that time the most noted singer in America. There were four children born of this union,—two of whom died in infancy. The other two were Joseph Jefferson, the third,—our Joe Jefferson, and Cornelia Jefferson.

The Great Jefferson.

We are now down to our own dear old Joseph Jefferson,—the best known

of all that talented family of Thespians,—the beloved actor whose name has been written on every heart.

Joseph Jefferson, the third (representing the fourth generation), was born in Philadelphia on Feb. 20th, 1829, and at the early age of three years, made his theatrical debut.

His first appearance on the stage was a very unexpected affair, so far as the audience was concerned. He first really began in what was then the rage, Living Statues. The boy witnessed many of these entertainments, and won a juvenile reputation for himself for his imitations of these statues. In fact, young Jefferson was imitating everything and everybody that came to his notice. Genius began to show its presence early in Joseph Jefferson, the third.

Mimics T. D. Rice.

It happened that eventually the boy saw T. D. Rice, a popular performer of that period, who was creating a furore as a burnt cork comedian. Mr. Rice's performance was filled with little mannerisms capable of imitation and to the surprise of everyone, our Joseph Jefferson—then only three years old—began giving imitations of Mr. Rice that were screamingly funny.

Mr. Rice himself saw them and waxed enthusiastic. Much to the boy's delight, Rice helped him to perfect his imitations, and it was but a few weeks until this mere baby could accomplish nearly every move made by Rice himself.

Rice suggested the idea of having the boy appear on the stage with him and the father,—realizing that the Thespian mantle was to fall upon the shoulders of his son, interposed no objection and the stage career of Joseph Jefferson, the third, began.

Thrown on Stage.

It had not been publicly announced that young Jefferson would appear with Mr. Rice, and only a few of the actors themselves knew that the boy was to appear. Those who did, however, were thrown into consternation when Rice, in grotesque make-up, and carrying his old carpet bag, appeared on the stage without the boy.

Rice began his performance as usual and after about three minutes, opened the carpet bag to get, as he stated, his handkerchief. Then came a gasp of feigned surprise and after a severe shaking of the bag, out rolled young Joe Jefferson. The audience fairly shrieked its approval. It may be said with all truth that the greatest actor America has ever known was fairly "thrown on the stage."

Rice recognized in the boy a worthy rival, for his work that evening was as clear cut, as distinct, as much imbued with personality, as that of any professional could have been.

Appears in Chicago.

In 1838, the boy's father, after negotiations with the manager of a theatre in Chicago, then a town with a population of a little more than 2000, journeyed to the city for which such a brilliant history was just beginning.

With him, over that memorable journey by canal and on horseback, he took his son, the family paying for their passage by giving a number of entertainments on the old, slow moving boat, the proceeds of which went to the captain.

In Chicago, the children were given every advantage possible at that time. The father, with his great fondness for drawing and painting, instilled his knowledge into the mind of his son, but always the longing for the stage was uppermost in the boy's mind.

As Legitimate Actor.

During the awkward age, from 12 to 15, young Jefferson appeared but seldom. In the meantime, the first theatre in Chicago burned and on its site was erected a more modern play house.

It was in this temple of amusement that our Joseph Jefferson, whose name is revered throughout all stageland, first appeared as a legitimate actor. It was in Chicago, too, that he was given the treasured manuscript of *The Rivals*, which the father had brought from England.

The boy had often heard his father talk of the possibilities of the part of Bob Acres and he remembered that his father, grandfather, and great grandfather, had all achieved success in the role. Then came the idea to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors—the ambition to again give the world another Jefferson as Bob Acres.

Carefully he read the play and learned, with something akin to absolute horror, that it was almost totally unfit for modern presentation.

When Sheridan wrote the play performances began at 5.30 and 6 o'clock in the evening and lasted until midnight. Long talks scenes were, at that time, prevailing marks of dramatic construction. It was on these antiquated lines that Sheridan had constructed *The Rivals*. The original ending of the comedy was not in accord with modern ideas, so young Jefferson set to work to revise the play and make it conform to the demands of the modern audiences.

The Graceful Epilogue.

With him, this work was a labor of love. Carefully he did his work and wonderfully well, too. The abrupt ending of the old play he changed and, thanks to his effort, *The Rivals* can now boast of a graceful and beautiful epilogue.

The All Star Cast.

This version Mr. Jefferson used for upward of fifteen years, during which time the possibilities of the role of Bob Acres appealed to him to such an extent that he was continually making minor improvements, and studying out and planning a generally reconstructed version.

About twenty years ago, Mr. Jefferson finally completed a manuscript of *The Rivals*. In it, he had eliminated every talky scene and every superfluous word. He gave the play its most delightful ending, and it was this version that he used during the remainder of his life, and which he handed down to his son and namesake, Joseph Jefferson, the fourth.

It was this version that the famous all star cast used during their memorable tour of this country in 1896. This company, composed of Joseph Jefferson, Nat Goodwin, Wm. H. Crane, Francis Wilson, Joseph and E. M. Holland, Robert Taber, Mrs. John Drew, Julia Marlowe, and Fannie Rice was it must be admitted, the greatest company that ever appeared in any one play and the full value of Mr. Jefferson's version of *The Rivals* was in every way worthy of their ability.

The Jefferson Favorite.

During the many years that Mr. Jefferson was before the public, although he was well known for his rendition of several other parts, that of Bob Acres was always his favorite. He claimed to find more pleasure in portraying Bob than any other character in his entire repertoire. He played it more than one thousand times and in each performance, found something of new interest.

When Mr. Jefferson and W. J. Florence formed their famous combination, Mr. Florence found in the part of Sir Lucius just as many things to interest him as Mr. Jefferson found in Bob.

The Boys Follow.

And now comes the most peculiar coincidence of the entire romance of *The Rivals* and the Jeffersons. Two of Mr. Jefferson's sons, Joseph and William, each considered the play the finest example of theatrical literature in existence. They have never abandoned this idea, and even to-day, either of these two young actors advance argument after argument in support of their contention.

When Jefferson and Florence were at the height of their fame, the two young Jeffersons never missed a production of the old play. Joseph, the elder of the two, from the time he was a boy had but one ambition,—the one desire to play the part of Sir Lucius O'Trigger in his father's company.

The younger son had just as great ambition, only his dream was to live out again the life of Bob Acres, as his ancestors, for generations back, had lived it out for the delight of thousands.

Joe Realizes Ambition.

After Mr. Florence died, young Joe Jefferson was chosen to succeed him as Sir Lucius. He claimed at that time, that his life's ambition had been realized, for, at last, he was Sir Lucius.

How thoroughly artistic was his first performance can be attested by the tremendous ovation he received on his first appearance. Both press and public, the country over, had been fairly imbued with the idea that Sir Lucius O'Trigger had virtually died with Mr. Florence. How erroneous was this idea can be appreciated when the younger Jefferson fairly electrified the theatre-going world with his performance of that role in his father's company.

Critics attended the first night to ridicule the young Jefferson,—to kill him by comparisons of his work with that of Florence. Nothing awful happened. Those who were prepared to belittle the efforts of the young player changed their ridicule to praise and he was unanimously pronounced a distinguished success.

Once again *The Rivals* had changed ridicule to praise, as it had done away back there in England, more than a century before. As long as the elder Jefferson appeared upon the stage, his son was prominent in his support and naught but praise has been showered upon his efforts.

Willie Jefferson's Daring.

Meanwhile the younger son, William, was begging for the opportunity to play Bob Acres, his father's role. He knew every line, every gesture, of the entire play. He had faith in his ability and his father shared it with him.

In 1898, when the father was appearing in Pittsburgh, Pa., Willie went to visit him. That trip to the Smoky City is an epoch in the boy's life. The father was taken suddenly ill. It was impossible for the old gentleman to appear that evening, and, with every seat in the house sold, disaster seemed imminent.

Willie begged for the opportunity to play the part; to take the place of him who stood foremost on the American stage. It was the height of daring, but finally the father, believing in his boy, and his boy's faith, consented that Willie should appear as Bob.

A Pronounced Success.

What dreams were his that night Willie Jefferson alone can tell. He dressed for the part, and, with a vast audience waiting there to see the great Joe Jefferson (for the substitution was not announced), he stepped out upon the stage as Bob Acres. For him, too, ambition had been realized.

So masterly was his performance; so accurate was it in every detail; so closely did it resemble the work of the elder Jefferson; that few in the audience were aware that a change had been made. Voice, eyes, gesture, every movement of the body, were identically the same. The long years of waiting and patient study had borne fruit.

The next day the change was announced to the Pittsburgh papers and with one voice,—the critics sounded the praise of another Jefferson. Willie Jefferson, playing in his father's very shoes, had jumped into fame. Another Jefferson had been given to the world.

A Strange Contrast.

Hereditarily, strange law that governs so much in this universe of ours, has played a wonderful part in the life story of the Jeffersons. But the story is not yet complete, for, aside from this handing down of talent from father to son, of the passing of the play from generation to generation, there is another side, a side as intensely interesting, if not even more so, than that which has been related.

The elder Jefferson was possessed of what might be called a dual personality. To his intimate friends, he was more like a grown up schoolboy than anything else. Always fond of a practical joke and with a merry greeting and a joyful demeanor, he was the embodiment of all that one would expect of the world's greatest comedian.

To the stranger he would casually meet, he was the dignified and sincere gentleman, straightforward in all of his business dealings, and always possessing an attitude that demanded respect.

In Other Ways.

In a professional way, he likewise possessed a dual personality. In preparing for the presentation of a play, he would cold-bloodedly figure out every possibility. He was a thorough master of every bit of dramatic technique. He knew what was possible and how to obtain it and it was this sort of careful preparation that made him famous.

On the other hand, when occasion demanded it, he was the personification of spontaneity. Almost unconsciously, he could grasp the possibilities of a situation and extract from it the

comedy element. This is, beyond a doubt, a wonderful talent, permitting, as it does, its possessor to do what he wants to do in an almost unconscious manner.

The possession of this dual personality stamped Joseph Jefferson as a genius. He possessed those three greatest things an actor can hope to attain: a thorough knowledge of all that can be attained in theatricals; a knowledge of just how they could be attained, and the power of instantaneously grasping a situation in order that none of the comedy points be lost.

The Young Joe Jefferson.

These different talents are the priceless heirlooms of the sons, and to one has been given that which was denied the other.

Joseph has a most brilliant understanding of the technique of the drama. In this line, he was always a most profound student, and in it, he was greatly helped by his father.

When the old gentleman was working on a play, young Joe was his constant companion. It was nothing else than this close study of his father's methods that perfected him in his knowledge of theatricals and the drama.

The elder Jefferson, too, was a most astute business man—always upright in his dealings,—never making a bargain unless it was entirely satisfactory to him, but, once that bargain was made, fulfilling it to the letter and demanding as much of him with whom it had been made.

Young Joseph inherited, too, this talent, and although business does not appeal strongly to him, when he does enter its realm, he is keen, shrewd and his father over again.

Genial Willie Jefferson.

The younger son, Willie, is the personification of the characteristics of the father that were best known to the intimate friends of the loved actor.

In the language of the day, if there was ever a little imp of mischief—mischievous and prankish—full of effervescent humor and an uncontrollable and gigantic fondness for practical jokes and good fellowship, it is Willie.

In a professional way, he is bubbling over with merriment and can grasp the comedy situations in an instant. Yet, when he endeavors to arrange things beforehand,—to map out a campaign,—he is strictly followed, his plans always fail.

Willie Jefferson is spontaneity itself. His methods of procedure during a performance are totally different from that of his brother, yet his results are as eminently satisfactory.

Favored of Providence.

For business, he has not the slightest desire and to enjoy himself is his delight.

After his work in the theatre is done, and for a goodly portion of his time before it has commenced again, his entire idea of his private life is to enjoy himself to the absolute limit. Willie Jefferson is one of those lucky individuals whose geniality, wholesomeness and absolute loveableness, seems to have won the gods themselves, and Providence takes forethought for his welfare.

Every business venture in which he embarks seems to turn out successfully and Joe insists that if Willie fell down in a well, Willie would probably find a half-peck or so of lost diamonds at the bottom.

Willie Jefferson is the happy-go-lucky side of his father, with all of the illustrious sire's catch-as-catch-can methods, while Joe is the business man, the artist, the planner, and the possessor of the father's marvelous knowledge of technique. These are the mental legacies inherited by the young men,—men whose place on the stage is already amply secured and whose names will be long remembered.

The Physical Resemblance.

The physical resemblance of these two boys to their father is marked. Features are absolutely the same—and one who has looked into the face of the lamented Joseph Jefferson sees the dear old features again in the faces of the boys.

In the accompanying profile pictures of the father and his sons, this resemblance is easily seen. In the center is the father. Before him is Joseph Jefferson, his elder son and on the other side is his younger boy, Willie. All that is in the face of the father is found in the face of the one boy or the other. Did not know that these pictures had been made from three photographs, taken from life, it would be easy to believe that some artist, studying the two boys, had drawn a composite picture for that central figure.

In Joe, there is less of the humor and the twinkle of the eyes which were so characteristic of his father.

In Willie Jefferson, this is found to a marked degree, and though the years have not yet been sufficient to work the familiar wrinkles about the face, one knows of a certainty that will come there.

In Willie, then, is less of the sterner sides of the father, and this, in its turn, is found more fully developed in Joe. It is a fascinating study—this study of portraits, with its contrasts and resemblances,—its likenesses and its opposites. The more one studies that picture the more there is that he sees hidden there.

"I Am a Jefferson."

This, in brief, is the wonderful life story of the Jeffersons. This is a little insight into the romance of *The Rivals* and the Jeffersons and the more one thinks over the story, the more wonderful it becomes.

A play and the names of the players inseparably connected for 133 years! Five generations of actors in one family! That in itself is a wonderful record, and yet, how doubly wonderful is it when one remembers that each representative of each generation has appeared in the same role.

Each father has, in turn, handed down to the son a priceless legacy of talents, genius and a knowledge of technique of the drama. Each has handed down likewise, his own prompt book of that master piece, *The Rivals*. The first Jefferson he with whom we began the story away back there in 1774, walked penniless into London and the second and third generation found it necessary to act as a means of livelihood. The fourth generation was more favored with the goods of this world and the elder Jefferson, at the time of his death, left a goodly fortune.

This the boys among whom are Joe and Willie have all used. Yet one and all insist that the most valued legacy left them is the fact that they can look the world in the face and say proudly and in all truthfulness, "I am a Jefferson."

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