

AT THE ALHAMBRA

IMPRESSIONS AND SENSATIONS

I



T the Alhambra I can never sit anywhere but in the front row of the stalls. As a point of view, the point of view considered in the abstract, I admit that the position has its disadvantages. Certainly, the most magical glimpse I ever caught of an Alhambra ballet was from the road in front, from the other side of the road, one night when two doors were suddenly flung open just as I was passing. In the moment's interval before the doors closed again, I saw, in that odd, unexpected way, over the heads of the audience, far off in a sort of blue mist, the whole stage, its brilliant crowd drawn up in the last pose, just as the curtain was beginning to descend. It stamped itself in my brain, an impression caught just at the perfect moment, by some rare felicity of chance. But that is not an impression that can be repeated. In the general way I prefer to see my illusions very clearly, recognizing them as illusions, and yet, to my own perverse and decadent way of thinking, losing none of their charm. I have been reproved, before now, for singing "the charm of rouge on fragile cheeks," but it is a charm that I fully appreciate. Maquillage, to be attractive, must of course be unnecessary. As a disguise for age or misfortune, it has no interest for me. But, of all places, on the stage, and of all people, on the cheeks of young people : there, it seems to me that make-up is intensely fascinating, and its recognition is of the essence of my delight in a stage performance. I do not for a moment want really to believe in what I see before me ; to believe that those wigs are hair, that grease-paint a blush ; any more than I want really to believe that the actor whom I have just been shaking hands with has turned into a real live emperor since I left him. I know that a delightful imposition is being practised upon me ; that I am to see fairyland for a while ; and to me all that glitters shall be gold. But I would have no pretence of reality : I do not, for my part, find that the discovery of a stage-trick lessens my

appreciation of what that trick effects. There is this charming person, for instance, at the Alhambra : in the street she is handsome rather than pretty ; on the stage she is pretty rather than handsome. I know exactly how she will look in her different wigs, exactly what her make-up will bring out in her and conceal ; I can allow, when I see her on the stage, for every hair's-breadth of change : yet does my knowledge of all this interfere with my sensation of pleasure as I see her dancing on the other side of the footlights ? Quite the contrary ; and I will go further, and admit that there is a special charm to me in a yet nearer view of these beautiful illusions. That is why I like to alternate the point of view of the front row of the stalls with the point of view of behind the scenes.

There, one sees one's illusions in the making ; but how exquisite in their frank artificiality, are these painted faces, all these tawdry ornaments, decorations, which are as yet only "properties" ! I have never been disappointed, as so many are disappointed, by what there is to be seen in that debatable land "behind the scenes." For one thing, I never expected to find an Arabian Nights' Entertainment of delightful splendour and delightful wickedness, and so I was never chagrined at not finding it. The *coulisses* of the Alhambra are, in themselves, quite prosaic. They form, of course, the three sides of a square, the outer rim ; the fourth side being the footlights. On the prompt side is the stage-manager's chair, the row of brass handles which regulate the lights and ring down the curtain, and the little mirror, with a ledge running along below it, which (with the addition of a movable screen) constitute the dressing-room accommodation of the "turns" who have to make a change of costume. Layer after layer of scenery is piled up against the wall at the side, and nearly the whole time there is a bustling of scene-shifters shoving along some great tottering framework, of which one sees only the canvas back and the narrow rim of wood. Turn to the right, pass under that archway, and the stone staircase going down leads to the canteen ; that going up leads to the dressing-rooms of the *corps de ballet*. Another staircase on the other side of the stage leads to the dressing-rooms of the principals, the extra ladies, and the children. Downstairs are some more dressing-rooms for the supers and the male "turns." The back of the stage is merely a passage : it is occasionally a refuge from the stampede of scenery in a quick change.

It is ten minutes before the ballet is to commence. Some clowning comic people are doing their show in front of a drop-scene ; behind, on the vacant space in the middle of the stage, the ladies of the ballet are beginning to assemble. They come down in twos and threes, tying a few final bows,

buttoning a few overlooked buttons, drawing on their gloves, adjusting one another's coats and wigs. As I shake hands with one after another, my hands get quite white and rough with the chalk-powder they have been rubbing over their skin. Is not even this a charming sensation, a sensation in which one seems actually to partake of the beautiful artificiality of the place? All around me are the young faces that I know so well, both as they are and as the footlights show them. Now I see them in all the undisguise of make-up: the exact line of red paint along the lips, every shading of black under the eyes, the pink of the ears and cheeks, and just where it ends under the chin and along the rim of throat. In a plain girl make-up only seems to intensify her plainness; for make-up does but give colour and piquancy to what is already in a face, it adds nothing new. But in a pretty girl how exquisitely becoming all this is, what a new kind of exciting savour it gives to her real charm! It has, to the remnant of Puritan conscience or consciousness that is the heritage of us all, a certain sense of dangerous wickedness, the delight of forbidden fruit. The very phrase, painted women, has come to have an association of sin; and to have put paint on her cheeks, though for the innocent necessities of her profession, gives to a woman a sort of symbolic corruption. At once she seems to typify the sorceries and entanglements of what is most deliberately enticing in her sex—

“*Femina dulce malum, pariter favus atque venenum*”—

with all that is most subtle, and least like nature, in her power to charm. Then there is the indiscretion of the costumes, meant to appeal to the senses, and now thronging one with the unconcern of long use; these girls travestied as boys, so boyish sometimes, in their slim youth; the feminine contours now escaping, now accentuated. All are jumbled together, in a brilliant confusion; the hot faces, the shirt-sleeves of scene-shifters, striking rapidly through a group of princes, peasants, and fairies. In a corner some of the children are doing a dance; now and again an older girl, in a sudden access of gaiety, will try a few whimsical steps; there is a chatter of conversation, a coming and going; some one is hunting everywhere for a missing “property”; some one else has lost a shoe, or a glove, or is calling for a pin to repair the loss of a button. And now three girls, from opposite directions, will make a simultaneous rush at the stage-manager. “Mr. Forde, I can't get on my wig!” “Please, Mr. Forde, may I have a sheet of notepaper?” “Oh, Mr. Forde, may Miss — stay off? she has such a bad headache she can hardly stand.” Meanwhile, the overture has commenced; and now a warning clap is heard,

and all but those who appear in the first scene retreat hurriedly to the wings. The curtain is about to rise on the ballet.

To watch a ballet from the wings is to lose all sense of proportion, all knowledge of the piece as a whole; but, in return, it is fruitful in happy accidents, in momentary points of view, in chance felicities of light and shade and movement. It is almost to be in the performance oneself, and yet passive, a spectator, with the leisure to look about one. You see the reverse of the picture: the girls at the back lounging against the set scenes, turning to talk with someone at the side; you see how lazily the lazy girls are moving, and how mechanical and irregular are the motions that flow into rhythm when seen from the front. Now one is in the centre of a jostling crowd, hurrying past one on to the stage; now the same crowd returns, charging at full speed between the scenery, everyone trying to reach the dressing-room stairs first. And there is the constant shifting of scenery, from which one has a series of escapes, as it bears down unexpectedly, in some new direction. The ballet, half seen in the centre of the stage, seen in sections, has, in the glimpses that can be caught of it, a contradictory appearance of mere nature and of absolute unreality. And beyond the footlights, on the other side of the orchestra, one can see the boxes near the stalls, the men standing by the bar, an angle cut sharply off from the stalls, with the light full on the faces, the intent eyes, the gray smoke curling up from the cigarettes. It is all a bewilderment; but to me, certainly, a bewilderment that is always delightful.

II

To the amateur of what is more artificial in the art of illusion, there is nothing so interesting as a stage rehearsal, and there is no stage rehearsal so interesting as the rehearsal of a ballet. Coming suddenly out of the clear cold of a winter morning into the comparative warmth of the dimly-lighted Alhambra (it must have been three years ago, now, I think), I found that one of the rehearsals of a ballet named after "Aladdin" was about to begin; and, standing at the far end of the hall, I saw the stage gradually filling with half-dressed figures, a few men in overcoats moving rapidly to and fro in their midst. Lit only by a T-light, these odd, disconcerting figures strolled about the stage, some arm in arm, some busily knitting; they formed into groups of twos and threes and half dozens, from which came the sound of a pleasant chatter, a brisk feminine laughter. I found my way between the lonely-looking stalls, disturbing the housekeeper at her work, and mounted to

the stage. The stalls were covered in their white sheeting ; white sheeting hung in long strips from boxes and balcony ; here and there a black coat and hat stood out from the dingy monotony of white, or a figure flitted rapidly, a sudden silhouette, against the light of a window high up in the gallery. The T-light flickered unsteadily ; a little chill light found its way through roof and windows, intensifying, by even so faint a suggestion of the outside world, all that curious unreality which is never so unreal as at the prosaic moments of a rehearsal.

I had the honour to know a good many ladies of the ballet, and there was no little news, of public and private interest, to be communicated and discussed. Thus I gathered that no one knew anything about the plot of the ballet which was being rehearsed, and that many were uncertain whether it was their fate to be a boy or a girl ; that this one was to be a juggler, though she knew not how to juggle ; and that one a fisher-boy, and that other a fisher-girl ; and that Miss A had been put in a new place, and was disgusted ; and Miss B, having also been put in a new place, was delighted ; together with much information in no way bearing on the subject of the ballet. All at once the stage-manager clapped his hands ; the ladies rushed to their places ; I retreated to a corner of the stage, behind the piano, at which sat a pianist and a violinist ; and the ballet-master came forward, staff in hand, and took up his position on a large square piece of board, which had been provided for the protection of "the boards" (technically speaking) against the incessant thump-thump of that formidable staff as it pounds away in time with the music. The rehearsal had begun.

Rehearsal costume, to the casual outside spectator, is rather curious. There is a bodice, which may be of any kind ; there is a short petticoat, generally of white, with discreet linen drawers to match ; the stockings are for the most part black. But a practising dress leaves room, in its many exceptions, for every variety of individual taste. A lively fancy sometimes expends itself on something wonderful in stockings, wonderful coloured things, clocked and patterned. Then there are petticoats plain and ornamented, limp and starched, setting tightly and flapping loosely ; petticoats with frillings and edgings, petticoats of blue, of pink, of salmon colour, of bright red. But it is the bodice that gives most scope for the decorative instinct. Many have evidently been designed for the occasion ; they are elaborately elegant, showy even. There are prints and stuffs and fancy arrangements in the way of blouses and jerseys and zouaves and Swiss bodices ; with white shawls and outdoor jackets for the cold, and ribbons and

bright ties for show. The walking-ladies are in their walking-dresses ; and it is with the oddest effect of contrast that they mingle, marching sedately, in their hats and cloaks, with these skipping figures in the undress of the dancing-school. Those who are not wanted cluster together at the sides, sitting on any available seats and benches, or squatting on the floor ; or they make a dash to the dressing-rooms upstairs or to the canteen downstairs. One industrious lady has brought her knitting. It is stowed away for safety in some unused nook of the piano, which is rattling away by my side ; presently it is hunted out, and I see her absorbed in the attempt to knit without looking at the stitches. Another has brought woolwork, which is getting almost too big to bring ; several have brought books : the works of Miss Braddon, penny novelettes, and, yes, some one has actually brought the "Story of an African Farm." Occasionally a stage-carpenter or scene-shifter or limelight-man passes in the background ; some of the new scenery is lying about, very Chinese in its brilliant red and blue lattice-work. And all the while the whole centre of the stage is in movement ; the lines and circles cross and curve, hands lifted, feet lifted ; and all the while, in time with the music, the ballet-master pounds away with his stout staff, already the worse for wear, and shouts, in every language but English, orders which it is a little difficult to follow.

As the bright, trickling music is beaten out on the perfunctory piano and violin, the composer himself appears, a keen profile rising sharply out of a mountainous furred overcoat. It was just then that the ballet-master had left his place, and was tripping lightly round the stage, taking the place of the absent *première danseuse*. It was only for a moment ; then, after a rush at some misbehaving lady, a tempest of Italian, a growl of good-humoured fury, he was back on his board, and the staff pounded away once more. The *coryphées*, holding bent canes in their hands, turned and twirled in the middle of the stage ; the *corps de ballet*, the children, the extra ladies, formed around them, a semicircle first, then a racing circle ; they passed, re-passed, dissolved, re-formed, bewilderingly ; with disconcerting rushes and dashes ; turning upon themselves, turning round one another, advancing and retreating, in waves of movement, as the music scattered itself in waves of sound. Aimless, unintelligible it looked, this tripping, posturing crowd of oddly-dressed figures ; these bright outdoor faces looked strange in a place where I was so used to see rouged cheeks and lips, powdered chins, painted eye-lashes, yellow wigs. In this fantastic return to nature I found the last charm of the artificial.

III

The front row of the stalls, on a first night, has a character of its own. It is entirely filled by men, and the men who fill it have not come simply from an abstract æsthetic interest in the ballet. They have friends on the other side of the footlights, and their friends on the other side of the footlights will look down, the moment they come on the stage, to see who are in the front row, and who are standing by the bar on either side. The standing-room by the bar is the resource of the first-nighter with friends who cannot get a seat in the front row. On such a night the air is electrical. A running fire of glances crosses and re-crosses, above the indifferent, accustomed heads of the gentlemen of the orchestra ; whom it amuses, none the less, to intercept an occasional smile, to trace it home. On the faces of the men in the front row, what difference in expression ! Here is the eager, undisguised enthusiasm of the novice, all eyes, and all eyes on one ; here is the wary, practised attention of the man who has seen many first nights, and whose scarcely perceptible smile reveals nothing, compromises nobody, rests on all. And there is the shy, self-conscious air of embarrassed absorption, typical of that queer type, the friend who is not a friend of the ballet, and who shrinks somewhat painfully into his seat, as the dancers advance, retreat, turn, and turn again.

Let me recall a first night that I still, I suppose, remember : the first night of "Aladdin." I have had to miss the dress rehearsal, so I am in all the freshness of curiosity as to the dresses, the effects, the general aspect of things. I have been to so many undress rehearsals that I know already most of the music by heart. I know all the dances, I know all the movements of masses. But the ballet, how that will look ; but my friends, how they will look ; it is these things that are the serious, the important things. And now the baton rises, and the drip, drip of the trickling music dances among the fiddles before the curtain has gone up on the fisherman's hut, and those dancing feet for which I am waiting. Already I see how some of my friends are going to look ; and I remember now the musical phrase which I came to associate with that fisher dress, the passing of those slim figures. The Princess flashes upon us in a vision, twining mysteriously in what was then the fashion of the moment, the serpentine dance ; and this dance transforms, by what she adds and by what she omits, a series of decorative poses into a real dance, for it is the incomparable Legnani. Then the fisherman's hut, and all mortal things, vanish suddenly ; and Aladdin comes down into a vast cave of

livid green, set with stalactites, and peopled with brown demons, winged and crowned with fire; reminding one of the scene where Orfeo, in the opera of Gluck, goes down into hell. Robed in white, the spirit of the Lamp leads on the *coryphées*, her genii; and they are here, they run forward, they dance in lines and circles, creatures with bat-like wings of pale green, shading into a green so dark as to be almost black. The Princess enters: it is "a wave of the sea" that dances! And then, the scenery turning suddenly over and round, the cave suddenly changes into a palace. There is a dancing march, led by the children, with their toppling helmets, and soon, with banners, fans, gilt staves, a dancing crowd moves and circles, in beautiful white and gold, in purple and yellow, in terra-cotta, in robes that flower into chrysanthemums, and with bent garlands of leaves. I search through this bewildering crowd, finding and losing, losing and finding, the faces for which I search. The Princess is borne on in a palanquin; she descends, runs forward (Simeon Solomon's "Lady in a Chinese Dress"), and in the quaintest little costume, a costume of a willow-pattern plate, does the quaintest little trotting and tripping dance, in what might be the Chinese manner. There is another transformation: a demon forest, with wickedly tangled trees, horrible creatures of the woods, like human artichokes, shimmering green human bats, delightful demons. The Princess, the Magician, Aladdin, meet: the Magician has the enchantment of his art, the Princess the enchantment of her beauty, Aladdin only the enchantment of his love. Spells are woven and broken, to bewitching motion: it is the triumph of love and beauty. There is another transformation: the diamond garden, with its flowers that are jewels, its living flowers. Colours race past, butterflies in pale blue, curious morbid blues, drowsy browns and pale greens, more white and gold, a strange note of abrupt black. The crystal curtain, a veil of diamonds, falls, dividing the stage, a dancing crowd before it and behind it, a rain of crystals around. An electric angel has an apotheosis; and as the curtain falls upon the last grouping, I try, vainly, to see everyone at once, everyone whom I want to see. The whole front row applauds violently; and, if one observed closely, it would be seen that every man, as he applauds, is looking in a different direction.

IV

Why is it that one can see a ballet fifty times, always with the same sense of pleasure, while the most absorbing play becomes a little tedious after the third

time of seeing? For one thing, because the difference between seeing a play and seeing a ballet is just the difference between reading a book and looking at a picture. One returns to a picture as one returns to nature, for a delight which, being purely of the senses, never tires, never distresses, never varies. To read a book, even for the first time, requires a certain effort. The book must indeed be exceptional that can be read three or four times; and no book ever was written that could be read three or four times in succession. A ballet is simply a picture in movement. It is a picture where the imitation of nature is given by nature itself; where the figures of the composition are real, and yet, by a very paradox of travesty, have a delightful, deliberate air of unreality. It is a picture where the colours change, recombine, before one's eyes; where the outlines melt into one another, emerge, and are again lost, in the kaleidoscopic movement of the dance. Here we need tease ourselves with no philosophies, need endeavour to read none of the riddles of existence; may indeed give thanks to be spared for one hour the imbecility of human speech. After the tedium of the theatre, where we are called on to interest ourselves in the improbable fortunes of uninteresting people, how welcome is the relief of a spectacle which professes to be no more than merely beautiful; which gives us, in accomplished dancing, the most beautiful sight that we can see; which provides, in short, the one escape into fairy-land which is permitted by that tyranny of the real which is the worst tyranny of modern life.

And then there is another reason why one can see a ballet fifty times, a reason which is not in the least an æsthetic one, but on the contrary very human. I once took a well-known writer, who is one of the most remarkable women of our time, to see a ballet. She had never seen one, and I was delighted with her intense absorption in what was passing before her eyes. At last I said something about the beauty of a certain line of dancers, some effect of colour and order. She turned on me a half-laughing face: "*But it is the people I am looking at,*" she said, "*not the artistic effect!*" Since then I have had the courage to admit that with me too it is the people, and not only the artistic effect, that I like to look at.

ARTHUR SYMONS.