

# fantastic

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**A STAR FALLS ON  
BROADWAY**

**By HARRY FLETCHER**

**T**HE old man got up from his chair, stood there swaying slightly for a moment, then walked slowly toward his wife. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. Trembling hand grasping the back of her chair, the old man bent down and kissed her.

"Goodbye, my dear . . . and thank you."

No one in the audience stirred; no one coughed; no one whispered. All were aware that they were witnessing something more than a mere simulation of a character in a play. That feeble, drooping, shaking old man there on the stage, with his cracked, quavering voice. Was he, in reality, under pencilled wrinkles and white wig, a handsome, vibrant young man of twenty-six? Nonsense! No, there were limits. Not even the great John Iddington . . .

As with most, if not all, geniuses, John Iddington's prodigious talents became evident very early. It is told, though this need not be believed, that at the age of four, having somehow procured all the necessary properties including a pair of stilts, John, in his father's absence, presented himself — *disguised as his own father* — to his unsuspecting mother.

You can imagine, if you choose to accept the story, the expression on the mother's face when, at sound of a heavy tread, she looked up and beheld, standing there in

the doorway of the living room, staring at them with open mouth, the letter-perfect twin of the "husband" who sat nonchalantly in the chair opposite her.

This, if it actually happened, was the first of a long and unending series of impersonations, which astonished all who witnessed or heard of them.

His professional career more than fulfilled the glittering promise of his amateur days. His first stellar role, his first really prominent appearance, which occurred at the age of fourteen, was in the role of *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

The boy was a master; he could handle much more exacting parts. It is comparatively easy for a child-actor to play a character older than himself; a much tougher proposition is the impersonation of a child younger than himself. It is told — and this, too, rather puts a strain on the credulity — that the boy repeatedly brought the house down with his characterizations: first of a child of three; next of a child of two; and finally of an infant, a girl infant at that, in swaddling clothes. He was heard at this period to bewail the fact that no vehicle existed, or was ever likely to exist, which contained in its *Cast of Characters* an unborn babe.

And so the years sped, the great Thespian passing from one triumph to another; the critics raving and swearing in unanimity

that the summit of Art had been scaled.

Now, those same critics, intently watching the old man on the stage, sat there and wondered.

"Goodbye, my dear," the old man said, ". . . and thank you." He turned, totteringly, back toward his easy-chair.

The curtain began a slow descent as the old man, throwing out his arms, staggered and fell to the floor — obviously dead.

The audience, without exception, rose to its feet and thundered applause such as had never before been heard under those century-old rafters.

The curtain stayed down.

The doctor said softly, "He's dead." Then, suddenly, a startled look came into his eyes.

"Good God!" he muttered.

The players and stage-hands crowded closer, and gasped as the doctor raised Iddington's hand.

It was shrivelled up and scrawny, claw-like — an old man's hand.

The physician stared hard at Iddington's face; and then, slowly, he lifted the white wig.

John Iddington's face, beneath the makeup, was deepened and dried up. His hair was white.

Later examination showed that his internal organs had undergone the degenerative processes associated with senility.

John Iddington's art had reached perfection.