

The Blumley Benefit.

BY GEORGE MADDEN MARTIN.



THE Blumley Benefit, however, was preceded by the Blumley misfortunes. As to the beginning of the latter, Owsley's Row were ignorant; they could testify only that from the very moment of moving into No. 20, the Blumleys appeared to be down on their luck.

Not that Blumley lacked energy, for during his brief residence in the Row he tried his hand as teamster, porter, substitute street-car driver, and bill poster, to lose the one job after the other through a varying combination of the misfortunes fatefully dogging his steps. Nor was Blumley to be held responsible when, just as he had secured steady employment on the bridge building across the Ohio, a pier went down, and he and a score of others with it.

A plain case for damages, of course, as the lawyer, seeking to constitute himself the Blumley's, assured them, and the Bridge Company, evidently of the same mind, hastened to compromise with him, \$450 finally reaching the widow.

But after paying for the \$95 funeral, an attention which, according to the Row, Blumley had justly earned, if one regarded the damages from his point of view, and after buying the family mourning and a set of red plush furniture, long the desire of hard-working little Mrs. Blumley's ambition, and after, also, paying for a gilt-framed crayon of Blumley, the \$450 was somewhat reduced. And a hard winter following, there was barely enough remaining to bury Mrs. Blumley when the fever, consequent to defective sewerage in No. 20, carried her off the following summer.

But when approached with a suggestion of asylums and separation, — seemingly the only outlook for a family whose head was aged but fifteen, — the orphaned Blumleys were obdurate.

"We'll try it first together," said Letitia Leonora, the eldest,

trembling on the verge of changing to tears. "I'm doin' well enough, as it is, at the woolen mills; an' Bertha, she'll begin there, too. Tom, he's out now, huntin' a job; an' Lemuel, he'll keep on with sellin' papers, an' we'll move inter one room, an' try it,— first."

"An' Livy May?" inquired the Row.

"Can keep house," said Letitia Leonora, "she's plenty smart to, is Livy May."

And Livy May, aged nine, did, with a little help from the other inmates of No. 20; and in the pauses nursed a rag doll-baby, with the same conscientious attention to duty that made her pans the brightest and her bread the lightest in No. 20.

As for Letitia Leonora, she collected the family revenues and disbursed them again, with a premature judgment and an anxious reckoning in her eyes that would have done credit to any housewife in the Row.

And seeing this, and that Tom and Lemuel even resigned from the ranks of the Marlborough Juvenile Dramatic Company,— to the professional requirements of which local organization much of their time previously had been given,— and instead settled down to the steady grind, the Row ceased its forebodings and watched the Blumleys struggle successfully through the first months of orphanhood, with a magnanimous pleasure at being proven in the wrong.

But it shook its united heads when the leg of the Blumley cooking stove gave way, and the Blumleys' worldly goods, plush furniture, crayon and all, were burned up or ruined by water, to say nothing of the damage to Livy May, incurred in her efforts, as housekeeper, to save what she could of the family fortunes.

And then No. 20, drawing breath at the narrow escape of the rest of the house, agreed with the Row that the Blumleys, if only for the safety of the neighbors, must break up family life.

"Not if we can only just get enough together to begin over again," begged Letitia Leonora, the rims of her eyelids quite pink with crying, and her hands seeking each other convulsively; "a a bed, a stove, and a stew-pan, please, and we'll be no trouble to nobody. An' Livy May, when she comes out the horspital, she'll be more careful, though it wasn't rightly her fault, do you think, stove legs being likely to be weakly for anybody?" — which last

the Row could not gainsay. Only, it argued, even while offering temporary accommodations to the homeless Blumleys, — only where were even these humble furnishings to come from, “not to make mention of clothes an’ beddin’.”

At which Letitia Leonora, counting the contents of her old, worn purse again, faltered and wept.

It was following this unpleasant scene that the Marlborough Juvenile Dramatic Company, in response to the summons of its manager, gathered, the same evening, under the gas lamp of Owsley’s Row. And here, rightly, the story of the Blumley Benefit begins.

The company having assembled, its manager, his arms folded across his ragged jacket, raised his eyes from a tragic study of the cobble-stoned thoroughfare, and gazed upon his colleagues from beneath a moody brow. “This ’ere Dramatic Comp’ny,” he then informed them, “is er disgrace to the perfeshion. Tom an’ Lem Blumley havin’ been members from the start, too. The Blumleys er goin’ to have er benefit, which they oughter er had long ago, an’ that’s the straight of it.”

This proposition being received with applause, the Juveniles were following it up with a general discussion as to ways and means, when their manager’s attention was seen to wander, and his eyes to fix themselves anxiously upon a figure advancing in the dusk. A figure, bucket and mop in hand, that tottered unsteadily along the opposite sidewalk, and went into No. 15.

“She,” and it was to be noticed that the manager’s stage voice and vernacular were dropped in his anxiety, “she mustn’t get onto it, if I’m in it, yer know,” and his glance, seeing the tottering figure safely in No. 15, came back to his companions.

The Juveniles, from their positions on curb, on inverted ash barrel, on the cobble stones themselves, nodded intelligently.

To the employees of the Marlborough Theater, the “sure enough” temple of melodrama, to which she was attached as scrub-woman, this tottering figure was known as the Sere and Yellow, in token of their wondering speculation over the number of times that the leaf had been turned when she was threatened with the loss of her position. By the younger population she was more familiarly hailed as “Ol’ Miss January”; still more familiarly ac-

costed as "Whoa, January," on those occasions when having received too much spirituous encouragement, the old Adam in the venerable lady aroused and took possession. But by the members of the Marlborough Juveniles she was regarded with due awe as their manager's grandmother and lawful guardian, whose oft-repeated mandates to hold himself aloof from things theatrical her grandson disobeyed only at peril to his small person's comfort. Other relatives he had none, though a dim tradition of the neighborhood connected him through a long-dead mother with the profession which his grandmother held in such disfavor.

And yet what could the old lady expect, with the rear entrance to the Marlborough Theater directly across from Owsley's Row? Not a boy in breeches about that neighborhood but was more at home in the Marlborough's peanut gallery than at his own fireside. Not a play seen twice on the Marlborough's boards but could, between memory and improvisation, be reproduced by the Juveniles, with a mimetic ability quite realistic. Keep himself aloof from things theatrical, indeed, — Lawrence Barrett, Jr., the star actor of the Juveniles!

Under the circumstances, the Marlborough Juveniles could only swear secrecy concerning their manager's connection with the affair, and go on making practical their plans for a Blumley Benefit.

For a theater, the modest scope of the Juveniles would not have risen above some member's family apartment, except for Adolph Hirsche, the proprietor of the Exchange, adjoining the rear entrance of the Marlborough Theater. To that gentleman the proposed benefit offered an opportunity to at last eclipse the counter attractions of the rival exchange, the Bijou, whose Christmas tree, given in the holidays just past, had not merely left the mild celebrations of the Mission and the Free Kindergarten almost unattended, but had even won away some of Mr. Hirsche's most paying customers.

Thus it came about that when the Juveniles went into active rehearsing the benefit was advertised to take place at the Marlborough Exchange.

Meanwhile "Ol' Mis' January," with bucket and mop, sometimes maudlin, always morose, came and went at the theater, nor paused, as is the custom in Owsley's Row, to pass the time of day

with her neighbors, or to gossip on the doorsteps, and so failed to hear of that near approaching event in local dramatic circles.

And in one of the intervals of her comings and goings, Lawrence Barrett January chose his opportunity, and presented himself at the office of the manager of the Marlborough Theater. And Lawrence being small and slight, except as to his eyes, it was to be wondered why the manager should have started so when he turned and saw the little figure at his desk, ragged hat in hand.

But Lawrence Barrett, Jr., had not, for good half his years, steeped himself in theatrical phrase and lore to be at a loss now. "The manager, I believe?" said he, and the advance agent for *The Greatest Show On Earth* could not have said it more suavely.

"The same," said the manager, and leaned back in his chair, and looked at the small boy as if trying to place him.

"And I," said Lawrence, with dignity and impressiveness, "am the manager of the Marlborough Juvenile Dramatic Comp'ny."

The gentleman coughed and bowed, and one would have said, looked amused, but for that absent and puzzled vagueness in his eyes.

"An' I called," continued the visitor cheerfully, "in the in't'rest of the Blumley Benefit to be give by my comp'ny."

Again the manager bowed, and coughed, and waved an approaching *attaché* to refrain from interruption.

Lawrence Barrett, Jr., came close to the desk, and his hands clasped the top of its railing. "They're orphans, yer know, the Blumleys," he explained, "an' their stove let down an' burned 'em out. Everybody is a helpin' get the benefit up. Mr. Hirsche is goin' to have it at his Exchange, an' his wife, she's fixin' us up, but we need some make-ups she don' no' how to do, er female wig in pertic'lar," and Lawrence Barrett's eyes sought the manager's persuasively.

Perhaps he did not find there what he sought, for, shifting on his feet, he added, "My gran'mer," hastily, "my gran'mer, ol' Mis' January, she's got er blonde wig in er trunk, we can use if you don't happen to have more'n one handy."

A flush was spreading up and over the manager's dark face. "Your name?" said he.

The visitor was obviously flattered, "Allie January, by rights, but I'm better known to the perfeshion as Lawrence Barrett January, you see."

The manager saw, and could also see what Lawrence, his back to the open door, could not, — an old woman, blear-eyed and tottery, coming up the hall, bucket and mop in hand, her gray hair straggling from beneath a rakish old bonnet fallen to one side. And for reasons of his own, entirely apart from his visitor's personal safety, the manager of the Marlborough arose from his revolving chair and kicked the door to.

"Does she — does your grandmother know that you came here for this?" he asked, and his black brows met suddenly above his handsome and aquiline nose, as he stood over the small boy.

But at the mention, Lawrence Barrett, Jr., glanced around apprehensively, and took a step nearer the other. "She says," he confided, "she's al'ays sayin' she'll whale the skin clean ofen me if she ever ketches me over here."

"Exactly," said the manager, and at the something in his voice, Lawrence found himself involuntarily backing toward the door; "but seein' that the Blumleys are orphans, we'll agree to compromise on the female wig and not inform her of this visit, for once. You quite understand me? *For this once*," and Lawrence Barrett, Jr., quite jumped at the emphasis, and at the unpleasant way the gentleman's lip lifted at the corner and showed his white and even teeth.

"An' he lent us this here one," explained the youthful manager on his return to his company, "but in my gran'mer's trunk is another, er blonde one, as 'll do fer me, an' some togs along with it, white slippers if I can wear 'em, an' all. I knows they're there, because sometimes she gets 'em out an' looks at 'em, and cries, an' one time she showed 'em ter me, when — when —" but Lawrence Barrett, Jr., paused, too loyal to state exactly when and under what circumstances his grandparent had turned thus confidential.

Meantime, elaborate preparations were going forward at the Exchange for the staging of the Juveniles' production. Industriously and ingeniously did Mrs. Adolph Hirsche ply her needle, converting cambric and silesia into results admirably calculated to

win back Owsley's Row's fickle favor. And when the day arrived, certain of the very fixtures of the place were torn from their foundations to make room for stage and audience; while at seven o'clock a passing street band was stationed in front of the Exchange, to crash alluring and welcoming strains to the gathering populace, quite after the manner of the Marlborough Theater itself.

And Owsley's Row, in a body, attended, family as well as local pride being largely involved, while even Pyncheon Street, and Todd, and Kirk, and Gannon were largely represented.

Altogether, the seating capacity of the place was so severely taxed that there was considerable trouble in finding places for the Blumleys themselves, arriving late, because of having to fetch Livy May, still in plasters and bandages, from the hospital, for the occasion.

"*The Pirate's Bride*," announced the program chalked upon the blackboard, which, in ordinary, stated the especial edible that day served on the free-lunch counter.

"*The Pirate's Bride*, followed by a Program of Variety Features."

And *the Pirate* (Mr. Shakespeare Hendricks, according to the blackboard, but known outside professional circles as Fisty Hendricks) raved and swore, and his victims fell in gory heaps. And *the Bride* (set apart for female parts by his high falsetto), having from the start declared her determination to die, by Heaven-n-n! and her own hand, rather than enter into the matrimonial relations insisted upon by her piratical wooer, swooned frequently, not to say perpetually. While *the Hero* (Footlight Tim, or Mr. Timothy Mulvaney) won storms of applause by reason of his highly morals sentiments, and finally brought matters to a finis, by transfixing *the Pirate* upon that gentleman's own bloody weapon, and then appropriating *the Bride*, who again took the occasion to retire into a swoon, immediately upon confessing her sentiments as regarded *the Hero*, to be identical with those of the audience.

And when the curtain fell, and the applause subsided, and the audience drew breath and began to gaze around, it was with thrills of pride, indeed, that Owsley's Row noted the manager of the Marlborough Theater among the spectators, leaning against the bar, and smiling at the bartender's remarks.

But their attention was recalled to the stage, or Owsley's Row might have wondered why, as the curtain rose again on the "Variety Features," the manager of The Marlborough should turn so ghastly pale, and why the hand resting on the bar should grasp its beveled edge until the knuckles grew white.

Why, indeed, they might have wondered, as they applauded the small figure upon the stage,—a picture, from the tilting toe of the little white slipper so saucily thrust forward on its heel from beneath the white skirts, to the big hat caught together to frame the roguish face smiling beneath the curly wig. Why, indeed, seeing that it was only little Allie January, making big eyes over his shoulder as he tripped about, singing an old song raked up for the occasion from the traditions of the neighborhood, the hit of the Marlborough Theater in by-gone days.

Nor did the audience, its eyes upon the stage, see the street door open, and ol' Mis' January, poor Sere and Yellow, come in.

Drunk? No; though her gaze, arrested by that flitting figure, was bleared and wild. Not though her gray hair streamed, and her old hands went out to ward the apparition off. Not drunk, though the white-lipped manager turning, found her in his path, with accusing eyes meeting his, and an outstretched, shaking finger pointing toward the stage. And when suddenly she turned and tottered to the door, as if fleeing the vision, her arms stretched, open-palmed, above her head, he followed into the dark and drizzling night, and watched her stumble across the cobble stones, then slowly crossed after, and more slowly followed, into No. 15, Owsley's Row.

When, the benefit brought to a gratifying close, Lawrence Barrett, Jr., returned to his home near midnight, it was with apprehension and much caution that he made his way into the January apartment. The hour of reckoning had come, and with the blonde wig and outfit in the bundle under his arm, Lawrence Barrett, Jr., feared it.

But the bundle fell, and he stood and gazed bewildered, as, closing the door, he saw his grandmother, her disheveled old head bowed into her hands, not maudlin, nor yet in drunken stupor, but weeping.

.

As for the Blumley Benefit, whether considered from a financial, artistic, or social standpoint, or as a drawing card for Mr. Adolph Hirsche's Exchange, it was what a theatrical agent would call an emphatic and triumphant success. And, on the very next day, the Marlborough Juveniles proudly counted their earnings into Letitia Leonora's worn purse, nor appeared to notice the suspicious red deepening about her eyelids, or the splashing of one great tear upon the thin hand.

But to the Juveniles the loss of their manager came as a staggering blow, when, following the Blumley Benefit, he disappeared out of the life of Owsley's Row as completely as if No. 15 had never known him.

His grandmother remained, however, and still, with bucket and mop, totters to and from the Marlborough Theater; only, varying the old program, at rare intervals she is seen to enter the manager's office and stand by his desk and listen, with a wistful questioning upon her face, to words accorded her grudgingly, and with averted face.

And on one of these occasions the carpenter, raising his head as the Sere and Yellow tottered by, is reported to have heard her muttering, "Growin' fast, an' happy, an' learnin' — aye, an' learnin', — learnin' to forget."

But the Blumleys continue living in Owsley's Row to this day, self-respecting, self-sustaining, taking their place in the social life with proper pride, even to the replacing of the plush furniture.

