Theatrics in Sauk

SAUK, a brisk, lively little city, with several railroad connections and a good business, was quite capable of supporting one theatre, and did so. But when it came to have two houses, rivals, one must needs eat the other up, under penalty of starving itself, and so the war of the Montagues and the Capulets began in Sauk. The process by which there came about two theatres in Sauk was analogous to what the naturalists are used to call fissiparous growth, in which a crack begins in a body and widens continually until the body is cleft in two and each goes off by itself, an independent affair. The old Sauk Theatre, parent of the two rivals, was a prosperous and popular concern, and though not rigidly devoted to high art — which has not as yet made much progress in Sauk—was much liked by stars of less than Alpha magnitude. It seated twelve hundred right comfortably, and was quite well appointed. The proprietors and managers, Medybemps and Wibbald, were fast friends, "like to a double cherry,"

"Two lovely berries moulded on one stem,"

though to call them lovely is, I confess it, hyperbole.

They were both actors, comedians, and could both sing right well, old Krank Medybemps having a harsh, effective bass voice, and Tom Wibbald a soft, pleasing tenor of moderate scope, but with a certain unctuous suggestiveness about it that had all the flavor of after-dinner minstrelsy. So far their resemblance extended, but no farther. Krank was small, weazened, gray, wrinkled, fifty years old, with heavy eyebrows, a prodigious Jewish nose, a humped shoulder, and a very bad temper. He was an actor *incompris* — great at certain exceptional forms of eccentric comedy, his ambition ran towards serious parts and tragic instances. He had been hissed more often than applauded, and he was sour and envious. At the same time he had a certain sort of genius all his own, and a sense of the dignity of his profession which never abandoned him. Tom Wibbald, on the other hand, was a stout, rosy, jovial fellow, with merry eyes, shiny cheeks, and curly brown hair; always joking and laughing, full of boisterous health and animal spirits, great at Indian-club exercise, easy, disposed to conciliate, without a spark of dignity on any occasion, but concealing a good deal of the fox under his careless insouciant manner. His professional aspirations were registered entirely by the box-office thermometer — what paid, he wanted to play.

This was probably the rock upon which the split began. Medybemps wanted to do the creditable; Wibbald would hear of nothing except the profitable. Tom sought to put money in his pocket; Krank, to "elevate the drama." In a genial way, Tom poked a good deal of fun at his partner's quixotism. In his savage way, Krank, while liking Tom immensely, despised his mercenary views of things. Some of their good-natured friends began to carry to each the remarks the other had made about him, and an estrangement began, marked only, however, by an increasing politeness in the terms of their intercourse. Krank loved Tom too well, perhaps, to be willing to part with him; while Tom had too exalted an opinion of his valuable franchise in the joint proprietorship of the "Sauk Varieties" to be willing to do anything that might imperil it.

However, a breach had begun, and such a breach is seldom mended. In this case, events tended to widen it rapidly and bring things to a sudden rupture. Krank wrote a play — a *divertissement,*

such as he thought would be attractive to the public of Sauk, while bringing out all the talents of the company — a medley of brisk action, song, dance, &c. The piece was cast and rehearsed, its production announced, and its attractions extensively billed.

Wibbald had no great opinion of his partner's dramatic resources, and here he was probably right. He objected to the play also, and wanted Medybemps to insert a sensational scene or two; but the latter refused, and the rehearsals went on. Wibbald made no more objections, seemed to enter heartily into the preparations for making a success of the new piece, and privately fired off an endless volley of wit and satire about the effort and its author. The most of this somehow got to Krank's ears in an exaggerated form, and some of the most flippant and stinging jokes crept into the Sauk newspapers, creating much amusement, but really adding to the chances of the play, for people are apt to want to see that which is much written about. This made it probable that Wibbald was privy to these squibs; Medybemps, at any rate, thought so, and by the time the first night came he was worked up into a fury of rage against mankind in general and Tom Wibbald in particular. There were several passages-at-arms in the interval between the last dress rehearsal and the performance, in which Krank's sharp tongue cut so deeply that Tom at last was perceived to get angry, and the affair had progressed so far that, by the time the curtain rose upon the first act of the *divertissement* the partner-managers had ceased to speak to one another except on professional business, and when they did so, snapped out the most commonplace remarks with the spitefulness of a brace of terriers snarling over one bone.

The house was full enough to put even angry managers in a good humor, and all went off nicely until the finale of the third act was reached, when what the reporters style "an incident not down in the bills" occurred. This finale, which Medybemps had calculated upon to bring down the house and win him great applause, was in the nature of a duet between him and Wibbald, bass and tenor. It was meant to be a sort of amoebean ode, a quarrel followed by a reconciliation, the alternation of bass and tenor remonstrance, objurgation and boisterous protest, toning down finally into a duo of harmonious agreement and mutual consideration. Krank and Tom seemed to feel rather sheepishly the ludicrous appositeness of their situation; but the former, artist before man, sang his opening part faithfully amid much applause. Wibbald, as if inspired by a week's pent-up rage, responded so earnestly, and withal so boisterously, that he not only brought the house down, but kindled the fires of Krank's wrath by the pointed personality of his manner. Krank responded in kind, and now, to the delight and it must be confessed some little to the mystification of the audience, who had never known their favorites to act so well and could not know that they were not acting at all, the quarrel in music became a quarrel in earnest, and the duet lapsed into a duel. Both were seriously angry, and the actors at the wings, prompter and all, forgetting their duties, stood like spectators watching a prize-fight.

The denouement of the unexpected interlude came soon. While the actors, singing with all their fury, were shaking their fists at one another, Wibbald's face purpled through all his paint and Krank's eyes flashing and his mouth foaming, Tom garbled the text, and improvised a verse, which had no reference to the play whatever, but must be confessed very pat to the impromptu comedy in which he and his partner were acting:

"Of all the Kranks that wound the gods

A-groaning ‘gainst the daylight,
The rustiest Krank, by very long odds,
Is poor old Krank, the playwright.”

The house roared with laughter. The next minute Krank had Wibbald by the throat; a second later Tom had Krank’s head in chancery, and the drop was rung down while Krank’s eyes were being blacked terribly, and the audience frantically calling for an encore of the best scene in the play.

But the curtain stayed down, and, in fact, never rose again in the Sauk Theatre, for the next morning that delightful place of amusement was where Krank’s head had been the night before, in chancery, the partnership dissolved, and the partners incurable enemies and rivals. They went to law with *acharnement,* and each at the same time hastened to start another theatre. After a long and exhausting litigation the old Sauk theatre was sold at auction, and converted into a hall of the Young Men’s Christian Association, while Medybemps became manager of the Sauk Opera House and Wibbald manager of the Sauk Olympic.

The Opera House and the Olympic both opened the new season with good companies, and what even the most exigent play-goers of Sauk admitted to be very strong attractions. The papers were kept in good humor with long advertisements very “fat”; and the champion bill-stickers of the place, after exhausting street-corners and fences of lots, ran races to see which could plaster up most barn-doors in the vicinage with gigantic posters. For several weeks, while the novelty lasted, both houses were kept full and both managers made money. When, however, the audiences settled down again into the regular average theatre-loving public of Sauk, there were plenty of empty seats both in the Olympic and the Opera House, and now the war began in earnest, for it had become a question of existence.

Krank, always aiming at art, engaged a succession of prominent “stars.” These filled his house indeed, but consumed all his profits, their charges being higher than the size of his theatre, the prices and the quality of his audiences permitted. Wibbald, on the other hand, gave more of what is known as the “variety” character to his performances, and as soon as Krank’s leading stars ceased to move in the Opera House orbit, the tide of custom flowed in a strong stream to the other house.

Matters continued about in this way for two seasons, at the end of which Krank and Wibbald hated one another more vindictively than ever, for both found that they had lost money, and each realized that he must break up the other’s house before he could expect a steady flow of profits into his own. Krank, under the influence of his disappointments, had grown sour, morose, black-humored, brooding morbidly and secretly over the injuries he conceived his rival to have done him. Wibbald had lost some flesh and appeared older, but recognized the need to seem as genial, pleasant and amiable as ever, to keep up his personal popularity.

For the coming season Krank announced a new and original attraction of an extraordinary character, and it was evident that his preparations were many and costly. He had in fact dramatised a popular novel of considerable force, and made a leading and striking part of one of those eccentric characters in which his acknowledged excellence best displayed itself. There was

in this play a very effective scene of the sort called "realistic." Krank is a faithful old clerk employed in the counting-house of an eminent firm, where his eccentricities are pardoned on account of his usefulness and his past services. Krank's son, a little "wild," is employed also by the firm as entry-clerk, but has received warning that his desk is in peril unless he ceases his dissipation. The youth is really not bad, but Krank does not understand how to manage boys, and he and his son cannot get along somehow. The old clerk, however, is honest and faithful, and watches with the fidelity of a dog over his employers' interests. He discovers that some of the firm's money has been embezzled or stolen, and while pursuing his investigations, fancies he has detected his own son in the very act of robbery. Frantic with rage and shame he deals the youth a blow which leaves him senseless; and then thinking he has murdered his son, a robber, the old clerk, fairly insane, rushes into the counting-house and sets the place on fire, determined to destroy at once the evidences of his son's crime and his own at the same time that he destroys his own life. From this melodramatic situation the scene deftly shifts to the outside of the building, already on fire, shows the son staggering out, his gradual return to consciousness as the flames spread, and finally his thrilling rescue of his father from an upper window, &c., &c.

The play was well put on, and Krank Medybemps acted so well that he drew crowded houses and left the Olympic almost deserted. Wibbald had made no particular announcements for the new season, but was observed to say, with a peculiar smile, that he would soon be ready with something "to trump old Krank's trick." In fine, in about two weeks there began to be whispers in Sauk that the Olympic would soon produce a new burlesque of the most atrociously funny description, and simultaneously the town was flooded with posters containing simply the mysterious legend: "I GO HIM ONE BETTER!" Wibbald's company were very secret and close about the character of the new burlesque, but expressed their conviction that it would take the town by storm.

The new play came out in due course, and was found to be a clever burlesque of Medybemps' play now running at the other house, full of fun and stocked with "hits." The chief feature of the piece, however, and what made it so cruel, was that Wibbald had somehow picked up an actor who when "made up" for the stage was almost a facsimile of old Krank. Wibbald, who knew Krank completely, had fitted this man with all his phrases, all his ways and odd turns and eccentricities, so that when the caricature was put upon the stage, the audience, after the first moment of doubt whether it were not Krank himself, shouted their approval and enjoyment of the joke. The piece drew largely for a week or so, but would perhaps not have lasted much longer of itself, nor have stood wear and tear so well as Krank's own play, had it not been for Medybemps' unhappy temper. He went to see the piece, which he learned from the newspapers and common report "took him off" so perfectly, and entertained a crowded house by his utter incapacity to control his rage and indignation. Rising in his seat in front of the house at one of the most happy hits of his counterfeit presentment, foaming with fury and unable to articulate for very wrath, old Krank shook his fists at the caricature and looked murder. The counterfeit Krank, full of the humor of the occasion, imitated the old actor's gestures and manner so precisely, yet so extravagantly, that the audience were almost beside themselves with laughter; and Krank, after attempting to climb to the stage, and being prevented by the musicians in the orchestra, ran hatless from the house like a man under demoniacal possession. This or something like it was what Wibbald had coolly and cruelly calculated upon in getting up his travesty. He did not

expect the piece to run long by its own weight, but he knew Krank's foibles well, and was very sure that the burlesque would gain more through Krank's extravagance than its own deserts.

Next night Krank's piece at the Opera House, which had given place the night before to a performance by some star, was announced for performance, but was not played, it was said, because the manager was ill. A large audience gathered at the Olympic, attracted as much by the hope that the scene of the night before would be repeated, as by aught else in connection with the play. Krank, however, did not make his appearance, and the burlesque went off rather tamely. A day or two later Medybemps entered suit against Wibbald for grossly libelling him in caricaturing his appearance in a certain stage-play, &c., and applied to the court for an injunction restraining Wibbald from continuing to make him ridiculous. All this was just what Wibbald desired and had prepared for. The more notoriety he could gain for his play the longer it would run, and the more money he would make out of it. He resisted the injunction in court, and made a comedy in the awful temple of justice which came nigh being peremptorily fatal to all Krank's chances for redress by casting him into jail for contempt of court. In substantiating his reasons why the injunction should not lie against his client, Wibbald's lawyer contended that the actor who took the chief part in the burlesque could not help his looks, nor be punished because of his undeniably close resemblance to the plaintiff. To give effect to his words he pointed to the actor, who, sitting behind Krank, and cunningly like him even in dress, was imitating Krank's eager attention to the case and his uncouth demonstrations of personal feeling. There was an explosion of laughter all over the court-room, in which the judges themselves could not help but join. Krank turned suddenly, saw his double, and with clenched fists sprang after the actor, who, terrified at his menacing aspect, fled incontinently. Krank pursued, the bailiffs shouted "silence," and the court was thrown into confusion, until the caricaturist had escaped from the room and Krank been taken into custody for contempt. His offence, however, was condoned after a sharp reprimand, while the petition for an injunction was dismissed, and Krank went home the most infuriated person in Sauk.

Krank's "double," who seemed to be a timid sort of person, now had the old manager put under heavy bonds to keep the peace towards him. Krank fancied this was done at Wibbald's suggestion, and he made an assault upon Tom in the corridor of a hotel, striking him heavily with a cane. Wibbald, enraged and smarting, closed with the old man, threw him, and inflicted such severe punisliment that Medybemps had to go to bed and send for a surgeon.

During his confinement to bed there was a suspension of hostilities, and this was followed by a promise of entire peace. The surgeon who was in attendance upon Medybemps called to see Tom Wibbald, and seriously represented to him that his patient's sanity was in peril, and a longer continuance of the persecutions Wibbald had subjected him to would certainly end in driving him mad. Wibbald was at heart a good-natured man, and he had some lingering vestige of fondness for his old partner besides a well-founded respect. In addition to all this, the surgeon is said to have brought Wibbald a note from Medybemps' daughter Azalia, a young lady for whom he was often suspected to entertain feelings which the hostilities with her father did not allow him to express. Miss Azalia besought Tom to spare her afflicted father and withdraw the offensive play, and she would be ever grateful.

Wibbald, touched with something like remorse, did this and more also. He came out in the newspapers with a card announcing the permanent withdrawal of "I go you one better" from the boards, and expressing his regret that he had done anything to give offence —he confessed he had — to his former partner, whom he sincerely respected and esteemed, and so forth. There was perhaps a little stroke of policy in all this, for the surgeon had told him old Krank was quite ill, but at bottom it was good nature which prompted Tom. He showed this by going to Medybemps' house, seeing the surgeon and Miss Azalia, and asking for an interview with Krank himself. At first the old man utterly refused this, then, with a sudden change of manner and an indescribable look, told his daughter to "ask Tom up."

Wibbald found him still in bed, bandaged and plastered, and propped up by pillows. Tom quickly approached the bed and said, "Old friend, I'm sorry for this. I'm ashamed of my part in it. There's my hand on it — let bygones be bygones. Be my friend again — I'll make amends."

Krank gazed at Tom from out his bushy eye-brows, and at the extended hand, gazed so long that Tom felt uncomfortable and uneasy. At last Krank took a cold hand from under the bed-clothes and placed it in Tom's.

"Wibbald," said he, speaking slowly, and in a sepulchral sort of tone that was not natural to him, "Wibbald, I never injured you in all our long intercourse, nor since. You have injured me. You have held me up to ridicule and laughter. You have beaten and wounded me." Then, abruptly changing his tone, he said: "There's my hand — I forgive you — let bygones be bygones, as you say.— Azalia, give me my medicine."

After a brief and unimportant conversation the interview ceased, and Wibbald retired, while Medybemps withdrew into his own somber meditations.

For some time after this, relations of the most distinguished courtesy subsisted between the rival houses and their managers. Tom fell into a way of visiting Medybemps' house right often, and it was reported he was paying a great deal of-attention to Miss Azalia. Krank used to drop in at the Olympic quite frequently, in a quiet way, made himself familiar with the house from the box-office to the paint-bridge, and showed a kindly interest in all the affairs of Tom's theatre, which was fairly prosperous, while the Opera House was generally thought to have gone behind so much that it no longer paid expenses.

After a few months it became known that Miss Azalia was to marry Tom Wibbald, and, when that happy event should arrive, old Krank would give up his management of the Opera House and accept a good engagement elsewhere, thus leaving to his son-in-law a clear field. The day for the wedding had been fixed, and was less than a fortnight off, when all Sauk was startled by the news of an attempt to assassinate Tom Wibbald, the popular manager. The attempt just failed of complete success, but Tom was so severely wounded with a ball in the shoulder that the marriage had to be put off. He had been attacked at midnight one dark night while returning from a visit to his affianced, by a very large man, who had attempted to stab him with a dirk, and when after resisting the first assault Tom turned and fled for his life, the assassin pursued and fired three shots at him, one of which, as described, took effect in his shoulder. Tom could not recognise his

assailant, and as he did not know of any one who might have reason for such an assault upon him, the affair was wrapped in mystery.

Krank was very assiduous in his attentions to Tom while he was suffering from his wound, and made himself serviceable by looking closely and intelligently after the affairs of the Olympic. Tom was considerably sobered by his injury, lost a great deal of his joviality and fun, and even after he got about again seemed ill-at-ease and troubled. He offered no reward for the assassin's apprehension, but employed a detective of some repute from a neighboring city, with whom he was observed to have a good many consultations. Several persons were arrested, but soon discharged again, and the affair was presently forgotten except by the principals.

After Tom came out, a day was again fixed for the wedding, and there was only a month to elapse before it was to take place. Medybemps also announced that in three weeks he would finally close the Opera House, the last performance to be that of his play with the realistic scene already described, and the especial occasion a grand complimentary subscription benefit extended by the citizens of Sauk to the retiring manager, Krank Medybemps. No efforts were spared to make this quite an ovation. The rival house was closed for the night, a poet of Sauk had written an "address," which the leading lady was to deliver, and the employees of the Opera House had purchased a handsome chronometer watch and intended to present it to their old manager. Surely Old Krank Medybemps ought to be happy on this one night at least.

Tom Wibbald had secured one of the best boxes in the house, but Miss Azalia was unfortunately not coming; she had been nervous and low for some days, and did not feel well enough to be present. Tom, however, was there *en grande tenue*, delighted to see such a fine house and distinguished audience, for all the notabilities of Sauk were in the house. Just as the curtain rose Tom was pulled from behind, and found his friend the detective, with whom he had some minutes of very earnest conversation, after which the detective went out. The play was very handsomely performed, and it was noticed upon all hands that old Krank acted with surprising vigor and intensity, so much so as to win by force more than the applause which the well-disposed audience were eager to accord to him.

In the midst of the counting-room scene, at the moment when it was his cue to strike down his son, old Medybemps hurled the actor playing that part off at the wing, suddenly turned, crossed the stage abruptly, and came close to the stage-box where Tom Wibbald was sitting in full view of the audience. His face was a sight of horror, filled with demoniac fury and insane exultation, rage and madness struggling for mastery in every distorted feature. Tom drew back appalled; it was all so sudden. The audience, half-rising, watched, breathless, not understanding anything.

"You!" hissed Krank, and every word he spoke was distinctly audible all over the house, "You! You! My shot failed, my hireling did not kill, but I am still revenged for all! You have beat me, cheated me, humbled me, ruined me! You took my money, my good name, my honor, my daughter; but I am revenged! Revenged! Know, dog, that your theatre is in ashes this minute, your mistress is dying, and you —"

He drew a dagger and rushed towards Tom, leaping into the box and striking furiously. This time the audience were not deceived as to the real terrors of the occasion. They rose tumultuously,

with shrieks and confusion of hands and feet; but Tom Wibbald's clarion voice compelled them again to breathless silence. He had wrested the dagger from the maniac's hand, and holding him with his knees v firmly against the parapet of the box, shouted:

"Ladies and gentlemen! This unhappy maniac is in my charge. I will take care of him. Go out at once, and quietly, but speedily. In his mad frenzy this poor man has set fire to his own theatre, and it is already burning. There is only time for you to escape."

In five minutes more the Opera House was empty; in half-an-hour it was a smoldering ruin. Tom Wibbald bore the struggling Medybemps from the flames and gave him into safe keeping. Then he flew to assure Azalia of his safety, and himself that she was safe.

Old Krank had grown mad by nursing his hatred. A word let drop in his daughter's presence made her suspect that he had hired the unknown assassin to attack Wibbald. The detective easily found means to worm his secret from the demented man. It was agents furnished by him whom Krank had hired to burn Wibbald's theatre on that eventful night, and it was with poison bought for him by the detective that he had attempted to destroy his daughter's life. He had been closely watched all that evening, but still with a maniac's cunning had managed to secrete the dagger and to set fire to the theatre under the stage.

Tom Wibbald still monopolizes theatricals in Sauk. He has a happy home; and a feeble, harmless, white-haired old man, who is somewhat imbecile, nurses the children, and tells them keckling old stories that might be vastly funny, but have somehow lost their point in the telling. People call him Old Krank Medybemps, and say he was a great actor once.

EDWARD SPENCER.

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