

Some Stage Effects

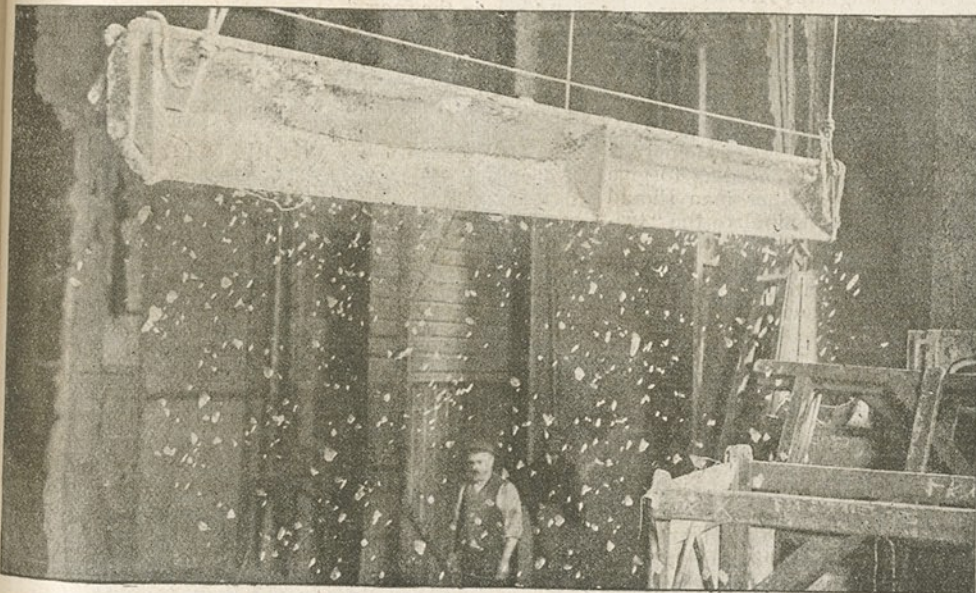
SNOWSTORMS, LIGHTNING, THUNDER, RAIN AND MOONSHINE
MADE TO ORDER.

IT was at an Edinburgh theatre, and the piece was *Lear*. The king himself was battling manfully with the storm, and the audience was hushed in sympathy with the struggles of the poor old man. Suddenly a terrific crash of thunder that startled even Lear himself, though he had encountered that same storm in that same place for a fortnight, was heard, and there immediately burst through the scene a score of nine-pound cannon-balls. These rolled down the sloping stage with accelerated velocity to the footlights, making the patriarchal king seek refuge in the wings with more alacrity than dignity, and presenting an aspect so threatening to the musicians that they incontinently fled.

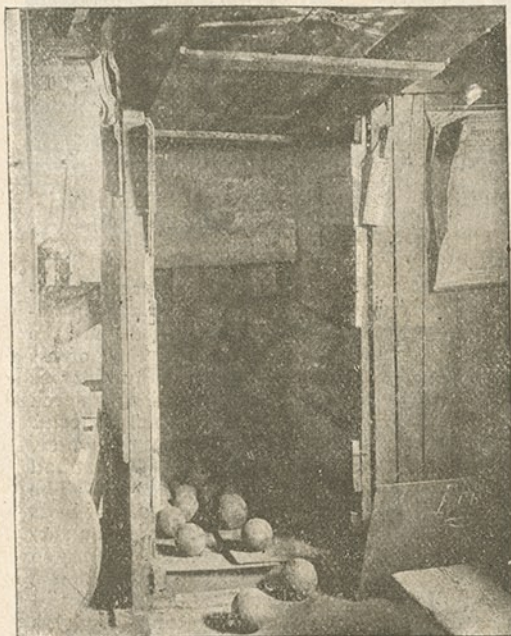
Something approaching a panic was on the point of seizing the audience, for the scene had been knocked down, and other sounds of alarm mingled with the rumble of the balls, when the last shot having come to a stop the real state of matters dawned upon the cooler portion of

the spectators. They had been treated unexpectedly and unintentionally to a peep behind the scenes. It so happened that the manager of this theatre had a method of his own for making thunder, and his thunder was regarded by all who heard it, and considered themselves judges of thunder, as magnificent. Its component parts were the stage carpenter, a wheel-barrow, and the cannon-balls that had so inauspiciously revealed themselves. The carpenter would wheel his barrow load of balls to and fro over wooden ledges and uneven surfaces at the back of the stage, these being so constructed as to send into the auditorium a fine full and sonorous roar. On the night in question, however, the carpenter missed his footing, the barrow upset, and the catastrophe we have been describing happened.

This was a special make of thunder. A very common kind is produced by rattling suspended sheets of iron or tin, and, to punctuate with crashes the roll thereby caused, by dropping



STAGE SNOW (PAPER SHAKEN FROM THE BOX).



STAGE THUNDER.

at intervals cannon-balls or heavy pieces of iron or lead. How much it resembles real thunder may be judged from a story that is told of Sir Augustus Harris.

He was staging a storm. "Now, then," he shouted, "hurry up with that thunder."

Immediately he had spoken a clap of real thunder burst over Drury Lane Theatre.

"Not a bit like it!" exclaimed Sir Augustus angrily, proceeding to give directions that another man should be employed to manipulate the "teatray," as the thunder sheet is sometimes flippantly called.

At another theatre, thunder is produced by beating with a drum-stick a six-foot square leather-bound reverberator. When the thunder-maker was new to this instrument and had not yet learnt its power, he played upon it with such effect that many rushed in terror to the exits. From the same instrument, differently manipulated, is produced the booming of cannon.

Though thunder is often heard in Nature without lightning being seen, it is seldom so in the case of the manufactured article. Lightning is easily made, and it helps to bear out the

illusion. Some thunder is so bad that, but for the lightning, it would not be recognised. In pre-electric days powdered resin, which is still burnt to imitate conflagrations, used to be blown through a flame to make flashes; now electric lamps, quickly flashed and extinguished, are employed. In outdoor scenes, the electric light is flashed behind cloud scenery, in which there is a zigzag opening covered with some transparent material. This gives a very powerful effect, vividly resembling the forked lightning of actuality, with its blanching terrors. By means of electric light, shed through coloured screens, all ordinary shades of sunlight and moonlight are now strikingly imitated. When the moon herself is visible, and supplies the light direct, she consists of a glass disc set in a case, with a light and a powerful reflector.

An idea of how some other broad stage effects are produced may be gathered from a conversation between a tender-hearted young girl, who was witnessing her first play, and a somewhat cynical and matter-of-fact elder brother. The scene represented a woman dying of hunger in a snow-storm.

"This is dreadful," said the young girl with a shudder.

"Why," replied the brother, "it's as warm on the stage as it is here, and at the present moment they are arranging a summer scene at the back of the stage, with beautiful paper roses growing out of shaggy door-mats, painted green to look like grass."

"But I can't help feeling sorry for her, lost in the snow."



RAISING THE WIND,

By rapidly turning the wheel against a highly stretched piece of silk.

"Snow!" ejaculated the other. "It's not snow at all. It's note-paper torn up—old letters and the manuscripts of rejected plays sifted through the perforated bottoms of paste-board boxes; and the man up in the flies, who is directing the storm, isn't spreading it enough. It's all going on one side of the poor woman, and she can't die properly."

Later on, there was a water-scene before the house. "Oh, dear, they're surely not going to throw him into the river."

"Yes, they are," exultingly rejoined the hardened brother, "but there's no water there; it is green cloth shaken to look like water, and when the man falls into it, he will do so with a crash rather than a splash."

Here is another illustrative story:—

"So you think you can play Hamlet?" asked the manager.

"I do," confidently answered the applicant for work.

"Of course, you've had stage experience?"

"Certainly, sir."

"In what parts?"

"Well, for three weeks I shook one end of the canvas waves in the great open-sea scene in *A Life on the Ocean Wave*."

Water-scenes, however, which used to be generally represented by mirrors, are now made more realistic by means of the presence of actual water in the stage-tank. This water, coloured green and plentifully supplied with suds to provide foam, agitated by a broad paddle with hinged blade, becomes an ocean, the swish of the waves being represented by slowly working the rain-making appliance. If required, a rocking deck-scene can be added by an additional flooring placed upon the stage and hinged to it in front; the back corners are then drawn irregularly up and down by cables worked by machinery. A most effective and thrilling touch is given to such a scene by the introduction of twinkling stars. These come from judiciously distributed incandescent lights, shining through a dark blue curtain allowed to swing gently. The scenic artist can easily provide a fog or mist, if wanted, by means of gauze suspended in front of the scene. Movable clouds are painted on canvas, and can be made to rise or fall diagonally or otherwise by winding-machinery. The patter of rain comes, true to nature, from a rapidly-revolved, large metallic drum, containing small shot or hard peas; and the howl of the wind from a cogged cylinder worked against a tightly-stretched sheet, which gives an exaggeration of the whistling sound one hears on moving the hands over new silk.

Stage mechanics are now so advanced that horse-races and even rapidly-passing railway trains can be vividly presented for quite satisfactory periods of time. The general principle upon which these illusions are based can

be readily understood when one reflects how utterly impossible it is for horses to continue galloping across a stationary stage that they can almost cover with one leap. The stage must move, and obviously it must move in a direction opposite to the direction the horses are heading in.

In railway-scenes the illusion is produced by a long and thick screw of wood, placed under the ties and striped in the groove of the spiral.



THE RAIN-MAKING MACHINE

(Full of shot, and worked by a band from the stage.)

When this screw is put in action, the ties appear to move, and though they are not moving at all, they appear to move at the rate at which the brightly-painted groove is disappearing. The effect is complete when the dummy of the train is pulled slowly across the stage simultaneously with the rapid rotation of the screw, and the spectators receive the impression that the engine and coaches are going at a terrific rate. If the rate were as great as it appears to be, needless to add the moving figures would not be perceptible, the train itself would be smashed to pieces every night, and considerable damage done to stage scenery—to say nothing of the actors and scene-shifters, who would now and then be slaughtered.



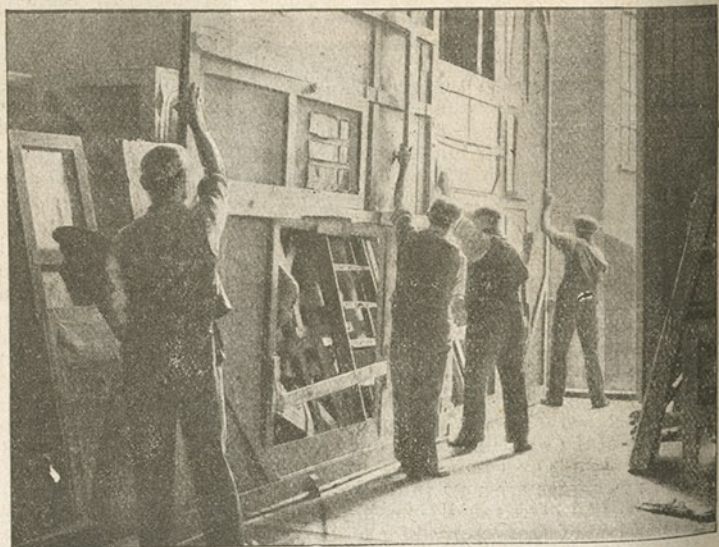
A HOUSE IN FLAMES.

In racing-scenes the horses do run at full speed; they run, however, not on the fixed stage, but on what may be called treadmills, which keep the horses in front of the house for longer or shorter periods, as they are moved quickly or slowly. A picket-fence, placed between the audience and the course, not only makes the scene more realistic; it hides the mechanism of the treadmills. This fence has contributed in another way to add to the effect by being moved in opposition to the direction of the horses, and so lending to their apparent speed. As to the sounds made by the footfalls of horses to be heard as though passing outside an interior scene, they are reproduced by the dried hoofs of dead horses, or wooden imitations mounted on handles and hammered against surfaces of

stone, gravel, clay, or whatever the occasion may demand. They are also more elaborately manufactured by revolving a cylinder with pins protruding from the surface. These pins are arranged, like the spurs on a hand-organ roller, to imitate trotting, galloping, or walking when struck against other substances. If the sound of a carriage is to be added to the trampling of horses, wheels are run on sand.

Minor effects are produced with equal simplicity. Thus, a steaming hot joint—which is, of course, no joint at all, but only a bit of painted cardboard or canvas, and which, moreover, has never seen a fire—is brought on. How is it made to steam? Simply by making it damp and putting some water in the platter for gravy, and then sprinkling it with lime. In *Drink*, as produced at the Britannia, there was a very realistic scene—a number of washerwomen amongst steaming tubs. There never was such a steaming scene; there was also plenty of water dashed about, yet the stage was never wet. As to the steam, it was supplied from a boiler at the back by means of a small pipe to each tub; and as for keeping the stage dry and ready for use the moment the washerwomen were done, that was effected by an oilskin covering so contrived as not only to keep the floor dry, but also to drain the water into a sink beneath the stage.

Comment upon some of the illustrations accompanying this article may be superfluous to some, but not to all. One thing about them can safely be said, and that is that never before has so complete a view of the hidden workings of stage management been presented. That



AFTER THE FIRE: CLEARING AWAY THE "BURNT-OUT" PREMISES TO THE SCENE-STORF.

view will in no way diminish the general enjoyment of stage effects; for though everyone already knows that the whole thing is only acting and pretence, we are none the less moved by touching scenes, and none the less amused by comic situations.

Enough has already been said of a stage



BACK VIEW OF A STAGE LOCOMOTIVE.
(The men inside are pushing it along.)

snowstorm to make our opening picture quite intelligible. Sea-scenes are usually only bits of painted canvas on a frame, and the cottages on the shore, though made of equally fragile material, are in no danger of ever being overwhelmed in the stormiest night. How often have we all seen a beautiful stage-sea and a beautiful moon rising over it; but how seldom have we understood how it is done! Now we know; for the hole in the screen is the moon, and the limelight manipulated by the man on the ladder is the moonlight, and as the screen with the hole is raised, the light is made to follow it, and you have a rising moon!

One or two different methods of manufacturing stage-thunder have already been described. In the contrivance illustrated cannon-balls are also used. These are let go on an inclined plane, and roll rumbling down till they strike the iron plate at the top of the box, so giving the crash which is succeeded by another crash when they reach the bottom.

How many of the general public have ever had a back view of a stage locomotive? Not many, we may safely assert. Here, however, is one—revealed for the first time, we believe, in all its nakedness to the world. It can even make you believe that it whistles and puffs.

The two men are its steam, for they push it along on its little wheels, and make it gracefully take any desired curve. Of course, there is a station platform between it and the audience, and its lower members are consequently not visible. When it whistles—and “property” engines never lose an opportunity of whistling: this helps to make you think them real—it doesn't whistle at all. That is done quite apart from the engine—to wit, by a whistle attached to a steam boiler at the back of the stage. Similarly with regard to its puffing and panting, of which it makes a great deal—that is done by a man and a tin can filled with peas. The man shakes the tin can up and down with all his might, and the rattle of the

peas against the tin gives the “sh! sh! sh!” associated with an actual engine.



“THE PALE MOONLIGHT.”

(Copied by throwing the limelight upon a hole in a curtain, which is slowly raised to give the effect of the rising of the moon.)

“WHAT is a house without a baby?” asked a writer, and an old bachelor editor replied:

“It is comparatively quiet!”