

THE BALLET GIRL.

In France and Italy the ballet is considered as legitimate a profession as that of an opera singer or an actress, and as much care is taken in training the novice for the one as for the other, in fact, the application required to attain prominence as a *premier danseuse* is far greater than that of an actress or singer, who is presumed to bring to the task a natural gift, while the dancer can only hope for success by long years of patient study and laborious practice.

In Europe there are four different grades in the profession. First, the *premier*, who receives seldom less than one thousand francs per month, and in some cases many times that sum. She receives presents, attentions and honors from titled nobles and crowned heads, is petted and caressed by the wealthy, and while her brief reign lasts, no wish remains ungratified. Once she is supplanted by a new favorite, nothing is left her but a new field in which to make new converts.

The *coryphee*, like the *premier*, has also studied her profession, but has broken down in training, or from want of funds is compelled to give up her place in the academy; but the time devoted to study and practice has enabled her to take a second place in the troupe. Very rarely she becomes a *premier*; more frequently the *premier* fails, and is compelled to content herself with the position of *coryphee*.

The *coryphee* has generally a protector—in some instances is married. Upon her falls the hard work of the ballet—she must go on early and come off late. Her pay of 200 to 250 francs per month allows her few luxuries. Her protectors are seldom of the wealthy kind, and, anxious to make a good appearance in the little world with which she is surrounded, her life is one constant trial, anxiety, and in many cases disappointment.

It must be remembered that the *coryphee* and *premier*, except in very exceptional cases, are educated for their profession. They enter the academy at an early age, and devote years to study and practice—practice from which a strong man would shrink, and under which many of the poor creatures break down. When once the school is entered and the training begins, there is no rest. The gymnast knows how necessary to success it is, that one day's hard work should be followed by one equally severe, and knows how dearly he pays for even one day of rest or relaxation. The training of the *danseuse* is no less severe than that of the gymnast, and far more painful. A slight experiment will satisfy any one that a large amount of "toe torture" must be endured before the mimic steps we admire so much upon the stage, can be successfully produced. From three to six years of this unending toil is required before the novice attains to any great degree of skill and endurance; then, if she has succeeded in graduating, she makes her debut as *premier* and the battle in reality commences. Engagements are not readily secured by these debutantes—and once secured, great exertion and constant care and practice are required to retain them, unless the public are favorably impressed, when all becomes comparatively plain sailing, and if the tuition was thorough and the training successful, the debutante may soon become the pet of the town—breaking the hearts and depleting the purses of titled nobles in Europe, and winning golden and green-backed favors from opulent and obese brokers in America, who, like Achilles, are vulnerable only in the heel—and toe.

The *premier* furnishes her own tights and generally her own shoes. She has a dressing room for her own exclusive use, and is frequently accompanied by her mother, who aids her in dressing, &c. Where she is without such a guide, her career is generally a more brilliant one, but much briefer. She misses the restraining presence and maternal care of the "old lady," who knows "the way of the world," and does not allow the daughter's head to be turned by trifles.

The *coryphee*s are allowed more room and have a dresser to assist them in their changes of toilet, which the *corps de ballet* has not. They fold and put away their own dresses and are seldom guilty of pilfering. Their tights they furnish themselves. All else is provided and kept in repair by the manager. They give much less trouble than the *corps de ballet*, who in this country are all English, while the *coryphee*s are Italian and German, more used, from their education, to restraints; and, as is the case in every profession, being better paid, behave better.

The Royal Dancing Academy of La Scala, in Milan, has the reputation of

producing the most finished dancers of any in Europe. This school is supported by the government. Any one is admitted who wishes to be educated for a *danseuse*. If the girl shows no talent for the profession after a fair trial, she is dismissed. If, however, she is quick and apt, she is installed as a pupil, and her training commences. No charge is made for tuition, only a daily attendance for study and practice is exacted, and at night she is required to aid in tableaux and marches, but not in dancing. The pupil is allowed to leave at any time, and many are dismissed by the teachers when there is no longer hopes of making a *premier* that will reflect credit upon the school.

Entirely distinct from these are the *figurante* and the *corps de ballet*, who are not educated for the profession, but simply adopt it as a relief from work or a stepping-stone to something else. In Paris the *figurante* is almost always one of the *demi-monde*, and a beautiful woman. Her duties on the stage are to assist in tableaux and marches. All that is required to secure an engagement is a pleasing face, pretty figure, good hair and skill in making-up. Her pay is from 50 to 75 francs per month. The fines imposed upon her by the manager for non-attendance, mis-behavior on the stage, &c., frequently exceed this sum; the difference is the price freely paid for the opportunity thus offered for the public display of her charms, in which consists her capital. These creatures respect neither their obligations to the manager nor the laws of morality, and where fifty are required for the performance, one hundred are engaged, and there is seldom an excess of those actually necessary for the performance in attendance.

The *figurante* who desires it, can easily, by care and practice, gain for herself admission to the *corps de ballet*. These cases, however, are not frequent, and generally are the result of a desire on the part of the *figurante* to leave all others and cleave alone unto one protector. Her pay is then slightly, and her duties very materially, increased. In Paris, the members of the *corps de ballet* receive from 80 to 100 francs per month. A very strict attention to their obligations is required of them; their duties are arduous, and they are the recipients of attentions from the employees of the theatre, who, by their positions, are dressed in a little brief authority.

The entire wardrobe used by the *corps de ballet* and the *figurante* is the property of the theatre, and responsible persons are employed by the manager to care for and watch the delicate and costly dresses. It is a sad fact that these lovely creatures are not vested with a great respect for the laws of *meum et tuum*, and most of them being persistent "gatherers up of unconsidered trifles," unceasing watchfulness is required to prevent a material decrease in the "properties" of the wardrobe. Several of them are assigned to one dressing room, where, in closets marked with the names of each girl, the dresses are deposited, after being carefully folded by the person in charge, at the conclusion of each performance. During the day these dresses are carefully examined, spangles sewed on, rents repaired, shoes re-heeled and repaired in many ways, tights washed and colored, and everything kept in readiness for the evening's performance. The rouge, powder, &c., required for the make-up are furnished by the girls—and much less is used than is generally supposed, and little skill is required in applying it. A liberal application of cold cream, to make the powder take, is the first step, and an old stocking and some prepared chalk furnishes the whitening. A very considerable rouging finishes. This process is absolutely necessary—no complexion, however beautiful, could stand the glare of the gaslight. Their slight dresses preclude the possibility of padding to any extent. No ballet girl can dance with her limbs padded, and the most available article furnishes roundness of form. Stockings and handkerchiefs are frequently used, the former article with but partial success.

The *premiers* and, with one or two exceptions, the *coryphee*s now at Niblo's, are from La Scala. The *corps de ballet* is entirely English.

These girls have brought to America many of their European habits, and those in New York live very much as they did in their own country. The *premiers* live in comfortable rooms—in some instances furnished by themselves or their admirers; generally in some quiet locality not far from the theatre. They are the recipients of much attention from their friends, and are always jealous of each other. A liberal abuse of the rival is not at all unpleasant to

them. They have mothers for whom they appear to have great respect and love, whose counsel is seldom disregarded. The *coryphee*s in some instances live with their mothers, and these by their life of continence, show the good effect of motherly care. When the *coryphee* is without a mother, she almost invariably has a sister or some other near relative with her, and the life of these unprotected ones is not as blameless as it might be, and undoubtedly would be, were it not for the persistent annoyance and persecutions of brainless fops, whose plethoric purses furnish the means, and inordinate pride the incentive, for unceasing attentions, from which the unprotected and silly girl has no chance for escape.

A cheap stage bouquet tossed over the footlight, and graciously received by the *danseuse*, is the beginning, followed by more costly bouquets, containing notes, jewelry, &c. Invitations to supper, to dinner, and to ride, succeed an introduction easily obtained. The rest of the story is left to the imagination. It will not repay the trouble required to write it, or to read it.

Those who are unfortunate enough to have their board paid, live comfortably, if not very respectably. The other class live in a very unpretentious manner, striving to save money, and hoping for their return to their native country.

No one would recognize in the beautiful, fascinating *danseuse*, as we see her behind the footlights, the poor, wan, tired girl who, with her sister or mother, inhabits one or two small, illy-furnished rooms, doing her own scanty cookery and other domestic offices, fighting constantly against the insults of those heartless, senseless fops who can see no good in a ballet girl, and whose attentions are the greatest annoyance of the girl's life. Her duty compels her to be at the theatre nearly one hour before the performance commences, in order to dress and "make up;" the performance lasts nearly three hours, which time is spent by the *danseuse* in violent exercise before the glaring heat of the foot-lights, changing her dresses in the crowded illy-ventilated dressing room, and shivering in her thin, comfortless dress while waiting at the wing her turn to go on. If she is late for the performance; if, tired and exhausted, she is tardy in changing her dress, or repairing the wear to her "make up;" if, excited and careless, she is remiss or demonstrative on the stage, she is fined by the manager, which fines are religiously stopped from her not very liberal pay.

Late at night, reeking with perspiration, tired out and exhausted, they must wend their way to their cheerless homes—rain and snow, winter and summer, it is all the same unvarying routine of body, soul and spirit-wearing toil. A scanty supper off the remains of a poor dinner, washed down with liberal draughts of beer, and the night's labor at one or two o'clock in the morning is done.

The *coryphee* is seldom fined; she goes on later, is on less, and gets away earlier than the *corps de ballet*, and her pay of about fifty dollars per week she generally receives intact, while the twenty-five dollars of the *corps de ballet* is frequently much reduced.

The customs and regulations of stage management in this country admit of no *figurante*; their place upon the stage is filled by the extra ballet, who, as a general rule, are uneducated and ordinary women, who have no recognized position in society, and who resort to this means of gaining a livelihood in preference to the more arduous duties of shop girl, for which position, however, few of them have the ability. Their pay is from six to ten dollars per week.

Upon the *maitre de ballet* falls the responsible task of arranging the dances, marches, and tableaux; sometimes doing double duty as costumer, designing the dresses. Years of study and practice, and much patience and perseverance, are required to fit a man for this position.

Enough has been written to show that the life of the ballet girl is by no means all *couleur de rose*, and that in this profession, as in all others, there are bad women, actuated by the vilest of instincts, and others who are striving honestly and honorably to earn a livelihood by their own unaided exertions, and as such are entitled to our respect and sympathy.—*Billiard Table*.

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