

Stage Children

By Robert Green Ingersoll

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Robert Green Ingersoll

THE CHILDREN OF THE STAGE.

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DISGUISE it as we may, we live in a frightful world, with evils, with enemies, on every side. From the hedges along the path of life, leap the bandits that murder and destroy; and every human being, no matter how often he escapes, at last will fall beneath the assassin's knife.

To change the figure: We are all passengers on the train of life. The tickets give the names of the stations where we boarded the car, but the destination is unknown. At every station some passengers, pallid, breathless, dead, are put away, and some with the light of morning in their eyes, get on.

To change the figure again: On the wide sea of life we are all on ships or rafts or spars, and some by friendly winds are borne to the fortunate isles, and some by storms are wrecked on the cruel rocks. And yet upon the isles the same as upon the rocks, death waits for all. And death alone can truly say, "All things come to him who waits."

And yet, strangely enough, there is in this world of misery, of misfortune and of death, the blessed spirit of mirth. The travelers on the path, on the train, on the ships, the rafts and spars, sometimes forget their perils and their doom.

All blessings on the man whose face was first illuminated by a smile!

All blessings on the man who first gave to the common air the music of laughter -- the music that for the moment drove fears from the heart, tears from the eyes, and dimpled cheeks with joy!

All blessings on the man who sowed with merry hands the seeds of humor, and at the lipless skull of death snapped the reckless fingers of disdain! Laughter is the blessed boundary line between the brute and man.

Who are the friends of the human race? They who hide with vine and flower the cruel rocks of fate -- the children of genius, the sons and daughters of mirth and laughter, of imagination, those whose thoughts, like moths with painted wings, fill the heaven of the mind.

Among these sons and daughters are the children of the stage, the citizens of the mimic world -- the world enriched by all the wealth of genius -- enriched by painter, orator, composer and poet. The world of which Shakespeare, the greatest of human beings, is still the unchallenged emperor. These children of the stage have delighted the weary travelers on the thorny path, amused the passengers on the fated train, and filled with joy the hearts of the clingers to spars, and the floaters on rafts.

These children of the stage, with fancy's wand rebuild the past. The dead are brought to life and made to act again the parts they played. The hearts and lips that long ago were dust, are made to beat and speak again. The dead kings are downed once more, and from the shadows of the past emerge the queens, jeweled and scepter as of yore. Lovers leave their graves and breathe again their burning vows; and again the white breasts rise and fall in passion's storm. The laughter that died away beneath the touch of death is heard again and lips that fell to ashes long ago are curved once more with mirth. Again the hero bares his breast to death; again the patriot falls, and again the scaffold, stained with noble blood, becomes a shrine,

The citizens of the real world gain joy and comfort from the stage. The broker, the speculator ruined by rumor, the lawyer baffled by the intelligence of a jury or the stupidity of a judge, the doctor who lost his patience because he lost his patients, the merchant in the dark days of depression, and all the children of misfortune, the victims of hope deferred, forget their troubles for a little while when looking on the mimic world. When the shaft of wit flies like the arrow of Ulysses through all the rings and strikes the center; when words of wisdom mingle with the clown's conceits; when folly laughing shows her pearls, and mirth holds carnival; when the villain fails and the right triumphs, the trials and the griefs of life for the moment fade away.

And so the maiden longing to be loved, the young man waiting for the "Yes" deferred; the unloved wife, hear the old, old story told again, -- and again within their hearts is the ecstasy of requited love.

The stage brings solace to the wounded, peace to the troubled, and with the wizard's wand touches the tears of grief and they are changed to the smiles of joy.

The stage has ever been the altar, the pulpit, the cathedral of the heart. There the enslaved and the oppressed, the erring, the fallen, even the outcast, find sympathy, and pity gives them all her tears -- and there, in spite of wealth and power, in spite of caste and cruel pride, true love has ever triumphed over all.

The stage has taught the noblest lesson, the highest truth, and that is this: It is better to deserve without receiving than to receive without deserving. As a matter of fact, it is better to be the victim of villainy than to be a villain. Better to be stolen from than to be a thief, and in the last analysis the oppressed, the slave, is less unfortunate than the oppressor, the master.

The children of the stage, these citizens of the mimic world, are not the grasping, shrewd and prudent people of the mart; they are improvident enough to enjoy the present and credulous enough to believe the promises of the universal liar known as Hope. Their hearts and hands are open. As a rule genius is generous, luxurious, lavish, reckless and royal. And so, when they have reached the ladder's topmost round, they think the world is theirs and that the heaven of the future can have no cloud. But from the ranks of youth the rival steps. Upon the veteran brows the wreaths begin to fade, the leaves to fall; and failure sadly saps on memory. They tread the stage no more. They leave the mimic world, fair fancy's realm; they leave their palaces and thrones; their crowns are gone, and from their hands the scepters fall. At last, in age and want, in lodgings small and bare, they wait the prompter's call; and when the end is reached, maybe a vision glorifies the closing scene. Again they are on the stage; again their hearts throb high; again they utter perfect words; again the flowers fall about their feet; and as the curtain falls, the last sound that greets their ears, is the music of applause, the "bravos" for an encore.

And then the silence falls on darkness.

Some loving hands should close their eyes, some loving lips should leave upon their pallid brows a kiss; some friends should lay the breathless forms away, and on the graves drop blossoms jeweled with the tears of love.

This is the work of the generous men and women who contribute to the Actors Fund. This is charity; and these generous men and women have taught, and are teaching, a lesson that all the world should learn, and that is this: The hands that help are holier than the lips that pray.

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