

## THE GREAT SALT LAKE THEATER

Clem's fascination with the stage shows put on by the Dramatic Association of Brigham City increased with each visit to the opera house. Actually, he was only an occasional attender at the theatricals since there was not always extra co-op scrip available for the price of admission. The local thespians put on a good show for amateurs, but an appetite for something better was gradually being whetted in the boy.

The fulfillment of his dream was not as far in the future as he might have assumed. One Saturday afternoon his Uncle Harry, who ushered at the Great Salt Lake Theater, came in on the train from the big city and stayed for two days, filling his ears with wonderful reports of the great classic plays and the renowned players who made them live on the Salt Lake stage.

Among America's stage greats of that day was the tragedian Edwin Booth, brother of John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin. After his brother's tragic involvement, Edwin had abandoned his career for a short time and had lived for a while in temporary retirement from the stage. According to Uncle Harry, he was back again by popular demand, touring extensively and thrilling theater audiences all over the country, especially with his portrayal of Richard III.

Clem knew nothing of Shakespeare in those tender years and, in fact, was growing up in a sheltered society which was in the process of producing at least two generations contentedly and happily unexposed to anything but the mildest form of sophistication, and oblivious to Darwin and Huxley.

The allusion to a great tragedian who played Richard III was high sounding, however, and he was all enthused until casual mention was made of the fact that Booth's brother had shot President Lincoln. Clem was stunned. Abraham Lincoln was the object of his adulation, his symbol of American democratic and righteous authority. How could anyone related to his assassin be considered great? It was a difficult reconciliation but his mother's reasoning finally made sense.

The sixty mile ride to Salt Lake on the train in response to Uncle Harry's invitation to "come stay over night and attend the theater" was more exciting and rewarding than any journey of much greater distance in subsequent years. Clem, who had been to Salt Lake only once before in his life, had never seen the inside of the theater. It was one of the most imposing buildings of the city, and the posters and pictures on its great doors and front pillars stirred the onlooker with an inquisitive urge to discover what was concealed behind those doors. Actually, it was no secret that Brigham Young had spared nothing to provide theater at its best in the desert basin. Its accommodations and appointments were comparable to some of the best in the country.

Uncle Harry's duties called him to the theater two hours before curtain time, and his young guest was ushered in without ticket or front door formalities through the stage door. Once inside with two hours to wait before starting time, Clem had the run of the place. He wandered about exploring first one area and then another. "What would it be like to sit in the president's box?" he said to himself. "What about the rooms where the actors get ready, and where do they

store all the stuff?" Before it was time to take his place in the balcony, where Uncle Harry had found an unclaimed seat for him, he had satisfied his curiosity about such things and was anxious for the play to begin.

The fascination and wonder of it all was even more than he had anticipated, and it ended all too soon. Still, there was yet another surprise in store for him. After the last curtain call the final phase of the evening's theater labor really began. Stage crew and building personnel were all hustling and bustling so as to get the work done as soon as possible, and Clem had to jump spritely two or three times to keep out of the way.

After about an hour he felt a tap on the shoulder and Uncle Harry led him off stage to the star's dressing room. The door was slightly ajar and Edwin Booth, who was waiting for his carriage to come, asked them to come in. The actor seemed to be such a gentle and warm person, but after the formalities of introduction the young admirer was still so overwhelmed by what was happening to him that he was at a loss to know what to say. The best he could do was to ask the actor if he liked the Salt Lake Theater. Booth winked at Harry while he was pondering his answer. "Several years ago I told my friends that I liked to play the Salt Lake Theater best of all because I could always be sure of a full house even if Brigham Young and his family were the only ones there."

Clem wasn't sure that he caught all the humor, but the amusement of the other two was contagious and he thought to himself, "I'll remember what he said," and he did so that he could tell the story time and again in the years to come.