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***Jack London Goes to a Burlesque Show and Here's What He Has to Say About It***

The burlesque stage has certainly changed. I remember, not so long ago, that burlesque was a vague memory of my wild and silly youth, when one went, as to a stag party, to see things that one would not care for his womankind to see. The audience was quite wholly male. Of course there were the low comedians – two Dutchmen, or two Hebrews, or an Irishman and a Dutchman, impossibly made up, with grotesque and repulsive facial decoration, large red noses, green whiskers, and fright wigs.

And of course their dialogue explained the absence of women in the audience.

Then there was the soubrette, a bleached blonde, with a raspy voice, whose tinselled skirts were as short as her knowledge of grammar, and as atrocious as her pronunciation. And the “prima donna” – a fat woman, rather run down, who quite casually breathed in the midmost of a word, and who just as casually permitted her voice to quarrel with the key, and with all the keys.

And the chorus. Ten or twelve women, ungainly fat, whom the manager, with unerring taste, had selected to charm the dolts that constituted the audience. Surely, one had to be very young or exceedingly stupid to be charmed by such choruses. The entertainment was void of originality, consisting of “bits” from the Bowery varieties, vulgar and indecent. The “cooch” dancer, or worse, won the applause; slap-stick and knock-down-and-drag-out aroused the heartiest laughter. The only truly interesting events in such entertainments were when the police pulled the house.

A few nights ago, while dining with my friend, Judge Aaron J. Levy, the judge suggested witnessing a performance at the Columbia Theatre. I knew from the advertisements in the daily newspapers that this was a burlesque house, and I wondered at such a proposal from my distinguished companion, but when I expressed my surprise, the judge said, “Why, you won’t see a cleaner or better show in town.”

So, for the first time in many years I found myself en route to a “burlesque show.” I felt like a naughty boy, but I was relying on the judge.

At the entrance I was struck by its perfect resemblance to other high-class theatres in the neighborhood, and, passing into the lobby, I observed the treasurer in the box office window arrayed in evening clothes and serving the well-dressed people in a long line that extended far up the street with the politeness of the well-bred man that he evidently was. Our tickets were taken by a clean-cut man in a neat, well-fitting uniform, and when we entered the foyer a dapper director, also in uniform, politely turned us over to a spic and span usher, who conducted us to our box. Settling comfortably in my seat, I observed that the theatre was handsomely decorated,

with huge marble columns supporting the balconies, and orchestra chairs of the most approved modern make.

I had begun to think that the Judge had played a trick on us, but glancing at the programme that idea was dispelled by the announcement that the show was being given by “Bert Baker and His Bon Tons Company,” presenting a two-act burlesque in five scenes, called “My Wife’s Husbands.” It was burlesque, all right, but there remained absolutely no semblance of the thing that I had seen years ago that masqueraded under the appellation of burlesque.

The scenery was massive and finely painted, and the stage, which was set to represent the interior of a fashionable hotel lobby, was furnished with huge leather lounges with gold chairs all around, while spread upon the floor were great rugs such as one would see in any perfectly appointed lobby. I had to look at the programme again.

The stage was full of exceedingly pretty girls, beautifully costumed, and moving gracefully about, singing lively tunes of the popular sort, with voices clear, in tune, and of evident cultivation. The principal comedian was an artist of the first rank, and kept the audience in constant roars of laughter. I have never heard such hearty, unrestrained laughter in any theatre in my life. Then came the soubrette, a remarkably agile young woman, beautiful of face and figure, and possessing a sweet singing voice and dancing skill — and then the leading woman.

Here was where surprise at this “burlesque” performance reached the limit. She was a young woman of remarkable beauty and poise, gowned in the latest “creations” and wearing them “to the manner born.” Her voice was of remarkable range and sweetness.

For two hours I sat admiring the show and marveling at the great transformation that has taken place in burlesque since the old days when, as a boy out for a frolic, I gave up the little old dime for a seat in the gallery to “see the girls.”

Incidental to the burlesque there were specialties rendered by clever acrobats; a couple of young women did the Apache and the Barbary Coast dances as well as I had ever seen them, and Mr. Baker himself contributed as meritorious a monologue as one could wish to hear in the very highest class vaudeville theatre.

The whole scheme of present-day burlesque impressed me greatly. From first to last there was not an objectionable word uttered nor the slightest approach to vulgarity in action or glance. Burlesque, as we used to know it, seems to have passed away, and in its place there has risen up a form of amusement to which men and women may go without the slightest misgiving.

It was a new one on me. Thanks judge.