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# ON A CERTAIN PROVINCIAL PLAYER

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It has been said that literature must use its gift of praise or it will come to nothing. Those of us who keep up a little dribble of ink, though we aspire to be very Swifts, must ultimately bestow our commendation somewhere: our praise is the last, greatest and kindest weapon in our poor armoury. If we can applaud where most men have kept silent, so much the better: we are fine fellows, using our little tricks to sweeten the world. So much preamble is necessary because I wish to bring forward, in this season of burning questions, the figure of a poor player who died over one hundred and fifty years ago and whose very name is now only known to a few. True, it can be found in many places, but who goes to them? For my part, I have rescued him from the pages of *The Eccentric Mirror*, a quaint production of four volumes, 'reflecting (I quote the title-page) a faithful and interesting delineation of Male and Female Characters, Ancient and Modern, Who have been particularly distinguished by extraordinary Qualifications, Talents, and Propensities, natural or acquired.' There, among fat men, giants, freaks and eccentrics, I found our hero, Bridge Frodsham, a country actor, once known as the 'York Garrick.' He comes rather late in the series of characters, and is only there at all because the compiler was probably running short of better material, such as fat men, murderers, misers, and the like. Even then, Frodsham is scurvily treated; he is set down simply as a very good specimen of the conceited, self-opinionated young fool; the

greatness that was in him is entirely missed; and it has been left for us, at this late hour, to give him his meed of praise. But let us turn to the details of his story, which I shall filch for the most part from *The Eccentric Mirror*, and thereby get myself some return for the four shillings and sixpence I paid for it.

Bridge Frodsham was born at the town of Frodsham, in Cheshire, in the year 1734. As you may guess, he belonged, like a true hero, to an ancient family. His education was begun at Westminster, but owing to some youthful imprudence he ran away and joined a company of strolling players. It was not long before he had drifted to York, where he became the leading actor at the little make-shift theatre. He was not, it appears, without talent, for he soon became the darling of the theatre-going crowd, such as it was, of that city. York knew no better actor than Frodsham, who was acclaimed in all the local pot-houses, where he was something of a boon companion. Hear the author of *The Eccentric Mirror* on this very theme:

‘Such was the infatuation of the public at York, and indeed so superior were Frodsham’s talents to those of all his coadjutors that he cast them all into the shade. This superiority was by no means a fortunate circumstance for Frodsham. It filled him with vanity and shut up every avenue to improvement; nor had he any opportunity for observation, as no actors of any high repute were ever known to tread the York stage, and he was never more than ten days in London.’

Even in this passage, short as it is, you will have remarked a certain air of patronage, a suspicion of asperity,

and you will be on your guard; for this London hack, this biographer of dwarfs and infant prodigies, who dotes on filthy misers and becomes lyrical in praise of Daniel Lambert, is trying to rob our sturdy provincial of his greatness. For greatness he certainly achieved, and not at York, mark you, among his pot-house followers, but in London, during a short visit of ten days or so. He had been given a fortnight's holiday, which he determined to spend in London, to the great distress of the people of York, who thought that once Garrick saw Frodsham, the Yorkshire stage was doomed to lose its bright particular star. They did not know their man, as you shall see. Fate had decided that for once Garrick should meet his match, or more than his match, in a fellow actor; and it is Frodsham's conduct in this encounter that gives him some title to our applause. For my own part, I applaud more readily because it happened to be the great Garrick who was so disconcerted by the unknown player from the country. We have all our little prejudices, and one of mine chances to be against the swollen fame of Garrick. I am no great hater of mummer-worship, and am always ready to believe what I read of Betterton, Mountford, Kemble, Kean, Macready, and I know not how many more old actors; but somehow I have always been suspicious of Garrick. No doubt I could invent, if necessary, half-a-dozen respectable reasons, but suffice it to say that I have always felt that he was over-rated, that things went too easily with him, that for all his sense of humour he took himself too seriously; I see him as a strutting, perky little figure. I may be wrong, and it is quite possible that I do Garrick an

injustice, but that matters little, in no way detracting from the newly burnished fame of our friend from York.

At the time when Frodsham determined to take a holiday in London, Garrick was at Drury Lane, and at the very height of his fame. Adulation was his daily food, and no flattery was too gross for him to swallow. A chorus of praise from high and low followed him everywhere; he could do nothing wrong; and, it goes without saying, he could make the fortune of a fellow actor with a nod of his head.

Judge then of Garrick's surprise when, one day, a card was left at his house in Southampton Street, 'Mr. Frodsham, of York,' unaccompanied by any humble request or letter of adulation. This cool conduct on the part of one who turned out to be nothing but a country player so excited Garrick's curiosity that, on the day following, Frodsham was admitted into the great man's presence. Not unnaturally, he imagined that Frodsham had come to solicit an engagement, but after some slight conversation, during which the young stranger showed astonishing coolness, Garrick, finding that no such request was made, determined to cut short the interview by offering his visitor an order for the pit for that evening, when he was to play Sir John Brute, one of his favourite parts. At the same time, he asked Frodsham if he had seen a play since his arrival in London.

'O yes,' replied Frodsham, 'I saw you play Hamlet, two nights ago,' and remarked further that it was his own favourite part.

At this, Garrick, not without irony, said that he hoped Frodsham had approved of the performance.



‘O yes,’ cried the provincial, unmoved, ‘certainly, my dear sir, vastly clever in several passages; but I cannot so far subjoin mine to the public opinion of London, as to say I was equally struck with your whole performance in that part.’

Garrick was dumbfounded. The thing was unheard of. Here was monstrous heresy, high treason, madness, we know not what.

‘Why,’ he stammered, ‘why now—to be sure now—why I suppose you in the country...’ And then, bringing all his artillery to bear on this fortress of impudence: ‘Pray now, Mr. Frodsham, what sort of a place do you act in at York? Is it a room, or riding house, occasionally fitted up?’

‘O no, sir, a theatre, upon my honour,’ returned Frodsham, as cool as ever.

Garrick was nonplussed, and tried to carry it off lightly: ‘Why—er—will you breakfast to-morrow, and we shall have a trial of skill, and Mrs. Garrick shall judge between us.’ The thing was beneath his dignity, but he was piqued and determined to lower the fellow’s colours. With this, he dismissed his strange visitor, crying: ‘Good day, Mr. York, for I must be at the theatre, so now pray remember breakfast.’ If he expected his man to be daunted, he was mistaken, for Frodsham, still composed and affable, promised to attend him at breakfast, and retired. And I wish that our sturdy provincial could have had drums and trumpets to escort him as he marched down Southampton Street, for he certainly bore away the honours.

The next morning found him seated at Garrick’s table. To quote my authority: ‘During breakfast, Mrs. Garrick waited

with impatience, full of various conjectures why the poor man from the country did not take courage, prostrate himself at the foot of majesty, and humbly request a trial and engagement.' But the 'poor man from the country' did nothing of the kind, though from no want of courage; and at last Garrick himself was compelled to break the ice.

'Why now, Mr. Frodsham,' he said, sharply, 'why now—I suppose you saw my Brute last night? Now, no compliment, but tell Mrs. Garrick—well now, was it right? Do you think it would have pleased at York? Now speak what you think.'

'O certainly,' replied the other, 'certainly; and upon my honour, without compliment, I never was so highly delighted and entertained; it was beyond my comprehension. But having seen your Hamlet first, your Sir John Brute exceeded my belief; for I have been told, Mr. Garrick, that Hamlet is one of your first characters; but I must say, I flatter myself I play it almost as well; for comedy, my good sir, is your forte. But your Brute, Mr. Garrick, was excellence itself! You stood on the stage in the drunken scene flourishing your sword, you placed yourself in an attitude—I am sure you saw me in the pit at the same time, and with your eyes you seemed to say—'D——n it, Frodsham, did you ever see anything like that at York? Could you do that, Frodsham?'

Could anything have been more friendly? But it did not please Garrick, who did not relish being treated by an unknown country player with such ease and familiarity. Comedy his forte, indeed! He pretended to laugh the thing off, but determined to put an end to the fellow's impudence and folly, and said: 'Well now—hey—for a taste of your

quality—Now a speech, Mr. Frodsham, from Hamlet, and Mrs. Garrick bear a wary eye.'

Here was an awkward position indeed for a young bumpkin standing before the greatest actor of the age. It had no effect, however, upon Frodsham, who plunged into Hamlet's first soliloquy without more ado. This he followed up with 'To be or not to be.' Garrick, we are told, made use of a favourite device of his when dealing with inferiors, 'all the time darting his fiery eyes into the very soul of Frodsham.' I make no doubt that as a rule it was a very effective trick, but on this occasion it failed, for Frodsham was in no way embarrassed by it. His chronicler, in a malicious vein, adds: 'On Frodsham, his formidable looks had no such effect, for had he noticed Garrick's eyes and thought them penetrating, he would have comforted himself with the idea that his own were equally brilliant or even still more so.' And why not?—we might ask. Is there a monopoly of fiery eyes that dart into souls? At best, this darting of eyes was simply a mean little trick, which deserved to be brought to nothing by a youngster's harmless conceit of himself.

When Frodsham had done, Garrick thought to finish him with a shrug and said: 'Well, hey now, hey!—you have a smattering, but you want a little of my forming; and really in some passages you have acquired tones I do not by any means approve.'

'Tones! Mr. Garrick!' returned Frodsham, tartly; 'to be sure I have tones, but you are not familiarised to them. I have seen you act twice, and I thought you had odd tones, and Mrs. Cibber strange tones, and they were not quite

agreeable to me on the first hearing, but I dare say I should soon be reconciled to them.'

This was unsupportable. Neither the presence of greatness (darting its eyes) nor adverse criticism could crush this extraordinary young man from nowhere. The astounded Garrick decided to come to business, which would at least restore the proper relations between the two, the famous actor and the impudent nobody, and put the latter in his only possible place, that of a humble suppliant. 'Why now,' he cried, 'really, Frodsham, you are a damned queer fellow—but for a fair and full trial of your genius my stage shall be open, and you shall act any part you please, and if you succeed we will then talk of terms.' Which was, I think, a fair offer.

Then came the masterstroke. 'O,' said Frodsham, indifferently, 'you are mistaken, my dear Mr. Garrick, if you think I came here to solicit an engagement. I am a Roscius at my own quarters. I came to London purposely to see a few plays, and looking on myself as a man not destitute of talents, I judged it a proper compliment to wait on a brother genius: I thought it indispensable to see you and have half an hour's conversation with you. I neither want nor wish for an engagement; for I would not abandon the happiness I enjoy in Yorkshire for the first terms your great and grand city could afford.' With that, he withdrew with a careless bow, leaving Garrick speechless.

It is to Garrick's credit that he often told the story of this strange visit to members of his company. But as he probably thought that Frodsham was merely a lunatic, for he always referred to him as 'the mad York actor,' and so possibly did

not realise that there was more than one side to the story, and that he was telling it against himself, we will not give him too much credit. Nor will I, for one, pass his epithet, for if Frodsham was not a mere conceited young fool, as our historian foolishly suggests he was, neither was he a plain madman. His point of view was not Garrick's, but it was a very reasonable point of view. The remarks he made were certainly not without a good deal of sound sense; they were critical, honest, and not, I think lacking in courtesy. It is true that he had a very good opinion of himself, but then so had Garrick, and so, by your leave, have you and I. The difference between Frodsham and the dozens of other young actors who sought out Garrick lies in the fact that one made no attempt to disguise his opinions, whereas the others, in all probability, cringed and lied unblushingly for an hour or two. But Frodsham, you may urge, had no sense of proportion, no idea of relative values; he could not understand the difference between the applause of York and that of London; he could not see the gulf that stretched between the darling of a local fit-up and the captain of Drury Lane. The charge is true, but is it very damaging? Such a habit of mind has prevented many a man from getting on in the world, but it never kept any man from greatness. I maintain that, over and above all conceit, there was a certain simplicity in Frodsham that came very near to greatness, if it did not achieve it, and that, in its elemental frankness and disdain of worldly wisdom, was not without a touch of real poetry.

Now that our hero has had his great moment, and has lounged, as it were, into the wings, followed by our

applause, I hesitate whether to bring him back again upon the stage. Encores are rarely satisfactory to the audience, and I fear an anti-climax. To speak of Frodsham's visit to Rich after describing his encounter with Garrick is to talk of Quatre-Bras after Waterloo; and yet, seeing that our man is ready for us and may not be heard of again for many a year, I will venture it.

During his momentous holiday in London, Frodsham conceived it to be his duty, as a fellow-player and a gentleman, to pay a visit to Rich, of Covent Garden, just as he had done to Garrick. It was simply a point of good breeding, for having been told that Rich was a superficial person, more given to pantomime than good drama, he thought very little of him. So he called upon Rich and found him stroking his cats and teaching a young lady to act. After keeping him waiting some time, Rich condescended to look at his visitor, viewing him up and down through a very large reading-glass, took a pinch of snuff, and drawled: 'Well, Mr. Frogsmire, I suppose you are come from York to be taught, and that I should give you an engagement. Did you ever act Richard, Mr. Frogsmire?' On hearing Frodsham answer that he had acted the part, Rich went on: 'Why then you shall hear me act'; and proceeded to recite a speech in a very absurd manner. When he had done, Frodsham told him very plainly that he had come from York to visit him, neither to be taught nor to hear him recite, but merely 'for a little conversation and to visit his Elysian fields.' This reply must have astonished Rich, but he was of different metal from Garrick, and it neither disturbed his indolent self-satisfaction nor roused his curiosity. With a large gesture, he said that

unless Mr. Frogsmire would with humble attention listen to his Richard, he would not hear Mr. Frogsmire at all; and was proceeding to mouth—

'Twas an excuse to avoid me!  
Alas, she keeps no bed!

when he was cut short by a curt 'Good-morning' from Frodsham, who stalked out of the room.

Thus ended his second polite call upon a fellow-player, after which, his short holiday being at end, he returned to York well content, with no great opinion of London and its favourite performers. There he remained, the idol of the York playgoers, until bad hours and the brandy-bottle put an end to his life at the early age of thirty-five, in October 1768. There is even a suggestion of heroic legend and strange destiny about his end, for on the very last night that he ever spoke on the stage, he announced to the audience that the next performance would include 'What We must All Come to.' As an actor, he is said to have been not without real genius, and to have suffered only from lack of proper training, and, later, his dissipated way of living. As a man, or rather, young man, he seems to me, at this distance, to have had some admirable qualities. There was, as I have remarked, a touch of poetry in his composition, and I can well believe that his Hamlet was worth seeing. But of all his parts, there is no doubt that by far the best was that which he played without limelight, make-up or properties during his ten days' holiday in London. And I suggest that all spirited provincials, who are quick to recognise a kindred soul, should honour his memory.

# ON A NEW KIND OF FICTION

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THE literary year books and reference books do not make very cheerful reading these days, but there is a certain note in one of them that should not be allowed to remain in obscurity. It is contributed by the editor of an American journal, *Ambition*, who informs all writers and would-be writers that he and his paper are prepared to accept:

Stories, 4,000-4,500 (words), in which the hero advances in position and earnings through study of a trade or profession by means of a correspondence course. (Preferred occupations indicated by Editor on application.)

One can only hope that this passage has not met the eye of any reader of *Ambition*, one who has urged himself along the steep, narrow way, and found sustenance in such heartening tales, for he might become disillusioned, lag in his course (if only a correspondence course), and turn cynic or communist. Our editor, with true occidental ruthlessness, takes us behind the scenes with a vengeance; he strips each wretched player and spares us neither paint nor plaster-and-lath; had we any illusions on the matter, any roseate dreams of 'advancing in position and earnings,' which we have not, how rudely we should have been awakened. But one would have thought that the readers of *Ambition*, grimly practical fellows, every one of them essentially 'a man of this world,' were above the mere trifling of the story-teller, that they were ready, nay, eager,