

## A Brief History of the Juvenile Drama.



In the late eighteenth century Theatrical Prints of celebrated actors and actresses of the day, in their most dramatic roles, became popular. These single portraits developed into sheets of all the principal characters of popular plays and melodramas, and later still the scenery was added, so that a complete record of the theatrical hit of the season could be purchased. They would be sold either 'Penny Plain or Tuppence coloured.' From there it was a short step to stage the play at home, and the Juvenile Drama was born. Proscenium designs and orchestras were published so that an entire Model or Toy Theatre could be constructed on which to stage these productions.

The first publisher of these complete plays is generally agreed to have been William West, of Exeter Street, The Strand, who between 1811 and 1831 published some 146 plays, all of them complete with sheets of characters, scenery, and usually a play-book, adapted from the original script. Before the establishment of copyright, an artist would be despatched to the theatre, where he would sketch the characters and scenery as they appeared on the stage. So in West's work, and the many publishers who followed him, such as Green, Park, the Skelt family, Hodgson, Webb, and Pollock, we have a remarkably accurate record of the theatre of the early and mid nineteenth century.



Many of these plays were reissued time after time, neither were the various publishers averse to copying each other's work. 'The Miller and His Men', an enormously popular melodrama, was first produced at Covent Garden in 1813, and its last production was in the Haymarket Theatre in 1861. It is known in no less than 38 versions, the last being Webb's, which accurately records the final Haymarket production.



The 'Juvenile Drama', as it was generally known, appealed to the creative as well as the dramatic instinct, and the happy hours spent in colouring and cutting out characters, pasting them onto cardboard, and then rehearsing the play, almost made the final performance redundant. Lit by candles or miniature oil lamps, it is not surprising that many of these home performances ended in major conflagrations, particularly, when, as in the final scene of 'The Miller and His Men' the mill is blown up, and 'Blue or Red Fire', a special mixture of gunpowder, was used to add realism to the spectacle!



Charles Dickens was among many celebrities who had a Model Theatre as a boy. Other famous names were George Cruickshank, who as 'Phiz' was the illustrator of Charles Dickens' novels, John Teniel, illustrator of 'Alice in Wonderland', W.S. Gilbert, Robert Louis Stevenson, G.K. Chesterton, Sir Ralph Richardson, Sir Laurence Olivier, Sir Roy Strong, and Sir Winston Churchill, who revealed in a letter that his favourite play was 'The Miller and His Men', bought from Webb's shop in Old Street, where he was a regular customer.

In the final scene of that play occurs these lines, uttered by Grindolph, the leader of the Brigands, when called upon to surrender by Count Fribourg.

"Surrender? Never! I have sworn never to descend from this spot alive. I shall fight on! I shall never surrender!"

Surely there is an echo here of "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills: we shall never surrender!"

Perhaps the Juvenile Drama has played a more important part in the history of this country than we may have first imagined.