FRANCIS WILSON'S LIFE OF HIMSELF

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

"I laugh for hope hath happy place with me"

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1924

HIMSELF

CHAPTER IX

THE THEATRICAL SYNDICATE

Up to 1895, the theatrical profession was mainly in the hands of actors and actor-managers. In that year a number of men, mostly Hebrews, and formerly silent partners, advance agents, box-office attendants, etc., banded themselves together in a close corporation and, through affiliation and leases, got possession of the principal theaters throughout the country and closed the doors to all actor-managers who would not submit to their terms.

This managerial "closed shop" was known and is still known as the "Manager's Lockout" or "Theatrical Syndicate." It was composed of six men. Al Hayman, of San Francisco and New York; Klaw and Erlanger, of New York; Nixon and Zimmerman, a theatrical firm of Philadelphia, and Charles Frohman, of New York. Frohman was a reluctant member of the organization and often said that he got a lot out of it — but it was mostly trouble. This statement, however true when made, scarcely tallies with the fact that the Klaw and Erlanger part of the Syndicate "assisted" the Frohman part at times to the extent of nearly, if not quite, a half-million dollars.

Whatever the attitude of the Syndicate may have been toward the actors it employed, and it certainly has not been one which it could regard with pride, it has

unquestionably shown a sustaining generosity toward itself.

The drastic action of the Syndicate in compelling actor-managers to submit to its terms or go elsewhere, there being nowhere else to go, did not apply to the rank and file of actors, but only to those who headed or controlled their own companies, the so-called "stars." These "stars," whose talent had won great favor with the public, were the most important attractions in the country, but were outnumbered by the "starless" companies which had been organized, or had come under control of the men forming the newly composed "Syndicate."

Managers of theaters in cities and towns outside of New York mostly resented this Syndicate as much as did the "stars," but were forced into affiliation with it by the threat of not being permitted to play the numerous Syndicate attractions, the formation of a powerful opposition, and the fear that the "stars" would ally themselves with the Syndicate. As it well knew, the Syndicate had the out-of-town manager on the hip; for, if forced to play only the Syndicate's comparatively inferior attractions, while it might keep his theater open for a longer period during the season, it would mean great loss of prestige with the public and still greater loss of profit. But, as was cunningly suggested by the Syndicate, if the out-of-town manager joined with it, there would be no theaters in which the "stars" could appear, and the out-of-town manager would soon have not only the Syndicate attractions, but also the

"stars" as well. It was as plain as day. The out-of-town manager yielded. The actor-managers were unorganized, had no stomach for organization, and were, therefore, an easy and natural prey.

The contention of the Syndicate was that it must control the "bookings" of theatrical companies throughout the country in order to avoid the ruinous opposition that happened from two prominent companies appearing in the same city or town at the same time; also that it could not run its theaters and pay the percentages demanded by some unattractive "stars" whom it did not wish to "book" at a loss. There was reason in the first plea, none in the latter. Refusal to play unprofitable "stars" was the answer. It was only too evident that the Syndicate had "cornered" the theaters throughout America and was attempting to shut out all competitors and to bend everything in one direction, namely, the commercializing of the drama. When it was suggested that, given the power it was seeking, it might well lead to the boycotting of many worthy plays and players, that nothing would be easier than a yearly scaling-down of the player-managers' incomes until these player-managers were under the domination of the Syndicate, the Syndicate to a man was shocked that its intentions should be so misconstrued.

"What, take possession of that which had always belonged to the actor, which of a right should always belong to him! Dominate the drama? Never!" It was unkind and unjust to suggest such a thing! A simple

protection of minor financial interests they declared was all that was sought. We shall see later how sincere was this disclaimer.

The application of the "third degree" methods of the Syndicate to the dramatic profession as a whole was considerately postponed to a later period when the Syndicate should have more firmly entrenched itself and felt surer of its ground. Just at this moment, with such players as Joseph Jefferson, Richard Mansfield, Fanny Davenport, Nat Goodwin, James O'Neill, Mrs. Fiske, and Francis Wilson arrayed against it, the Syndicate felt itself skating on thin ice and the outcome of its startling action much in doubt. It was also opposed by David Belasco.

Strongly organized, expert in matters of commerce and "business," its struggle was with nervous, sensitive, temperamental people to whom, as a rule, matters of business were distasteful, and especially to whom the thought of organizing to protect an art, their art, as mechanics organize to make employers unhappy, was repellently objectionable. "No," said most of these players, Richard Mansfield in particular, "let us not band ourselves into an association to oppose this Syndicate threat. It would be a mistake to lose the dignity and strength of individual, independent action"; and, so saying, helped to seal our doom. With such ideas the players never had "a Chinaman's chance" of success, as the saying goes.

Jefferson, nearing the end of his long and brilliant career, and fearful, in the event of the Syndicate's

success, of what might happen to his sons, all in the acting profession, grew lukewarm and straddled the issue. Richard Mansfield opposed the managers, but played in their theaters and remained importantly "individual" and independent. Nat Goodwin, who was determined to build a chain of theaters from Maine to Oregon, and, seconded by A. M. Palmer, meant to drive the Syndicate into the sea, fell a victim to alluring offers of increased percentages and the promise, later fulfilled, to play in a theater on Broadway where he had never before appeared. Fanny Davenport, who was going to do anything rather than surrender, soon changed her mind. Belasco was scarcely considered, it being felt that sooner or later he would ally himself, as a theater manager, with other managers.

I never had much confidence in either the stability or business acumen of that "eccentric planet" Goodwin, and I viewed with special distrust his large idea of a transcontinental chain of theaters. I felt that we had a man's-sized job on our hands in trying to defeat the Syndicate. I still think, with proper coöperation and direction, that defeat would have been accomplished. The situation was a serious one. To my mind, the managers had determined to wipe out of existence the control of any company by an actor, because such control was inimical to their plans. It was evident to me from the beginning that, with the Syndicate in control, the receipts of all companies must satisfy the greed and caprice of that organization, or the companies would be abandoned. They would have no

theaters in which to play. It was a foregone conclusion that the kind of play produced would be that which drew the most money, irrespective of its quality or character. There would be but one thought as to that. The receipts were the thing. It was an easy step to the conclusion that the financial returns from the smaller cities and towns throughout the country would ultimately fail to satisfy. Yet when I uttered such a thought, I was declared to be an alarmist. I did not foresee the complete abandonment of the smaller cities and towns, as to dramatic amusement, which has come to pass, except for moving pictures.

Sure enough, with the coming of the equally commercial Shuberts, there was soon no actor-manager in America, even at the head of his own company, and no matter how large his name might appear, who was not directed and controlled by Syndicate managers. Furthermore, if these jointly opposed, there is not now an actor-manager great or small in America who could follow his profession. How did these managers, this Syndicate, obtain a footing in the theatrical profession which was once, not long since, in possession of the actor and the actor-manager? How came they in a profession in which they are really unnecessary? If ever there were such a thing as a fifth wheel to an enterprise, they are it. There are just three essentials to this whole beautiful matter of the drama, no more; the author, the actor, and the audience. They are of equal importance and hold the same opinion of managers. All the rest can, and should, be hired. It is probably

entirely due to the actor's lack of appreciation of his duty to himself and to his profession that managers as we now know them have come into existence. And there they are dominating the situation and quite convinced that they are the sun around which the entertainment, refreshment, and instruction of the world revolves, yet caring nothing for the ethical part of it.

Like Barnum, they are "showmen." Like him again, they are proud of it, but unlike him they never boast that "my show is one of the greatest moral influences of the age." They have too many Woolly Horses, Mermaids, and Joice Heths in them. Barnum's last question to his secretary was: "What were the receipts of yesterday?" And then followed the expression of regret that they were not so good as at the Olympia, in London. The Syndicate are very like Barnum in this. Indeed, of such is the kingdom of the Syndicate.

In the old days, the actor-manager maintained a "stock" company the year through, or nearly so, in various cities throughout the United States, as, in New York, the Mitchells, Burtons, and Wallacks, the Burtons and the Davenports in Philadelphia, the Conways in Brooklyn, the McVickers in Chicago, the Popes in St. Louis, the Fords and the Albaughs in Washington and Baltimore, etc.

To these theaters came as traveling "stars" the Edwin Forrests, the Booths, the Charlotte Cushmans, the Mrs. D. P. Bowers, the Lucille Westerns, the Maggie Mitchells, the Joseph Jeffersons, the W. J. Florences, the Barney Williamses, the Lottas, etc., who

depended on the resident stock company for professional support in their tragedies and comedies. Causing many rehearsals and often resulting in uneven performances, particularly in the early stages of the engagements, the "stars" finally traveled with their own companies. This involved the employment of assistant managers and advance agents to aid the "stars" in matters of routine, and so allow them to conserve their energies for the more congenial task of acting. An assistant manager is seldom less than "a courtier-like servant" with a natural ambition to become associated financially through investment or what not with a winning enterprise. Sometimes these "investments," in form of loans, could not be repaid readily by the actor-manager and an interest was exacted or given in lieu of cash. The right, then, to suggest, even to dictate, grew.

From this condition of affairs to independent management was still not an easy step, but it was made possible by the detachment and comparative freedom of the agent or assistant manager to come and go in the actor-manager's interest, and by that agent's indefatigable energy in searching out new material for his "star," who, with proper activity, could and should have done it for himself. Routine knowledge once acquired, soon the more venturesome and speculative of these assistant managers, agents, etc., swift to realize how much the actor-manager would welcome freedom from all financial responsibility, assumed that responsibility, too often, alas, with little to support it but a glib tongue and irrepressible optimism! It is because the men

composing the Syndicate thought faster, not better, moved quicker, than actors that the latter lost direction and control of their profession. An analogous case is that of the artists and the dealers in art. The dealers often not only control the prices of the pictures, but dictate the vogue of the artist.

Finally awake to the danger of the situation, it became important to know how this attempt at control on the part of the commercial manager was to be fought. Among the youngest but not the least successful of the actor-managers, at the time, I did not presume to advise. I was present when Goodwin, carefully coached by A. M. Palmer, and several others, met for consultation in Chicago. Goodwin had to leave quickly to fill an engagement in New Orleans. *En route*, he telegraphed me long messages of enthusiastic appeal to which I soon replied that I would surely join with my fellow players in what I felt was a just cause. A few days later I was astounded to read in the daily papers that the irresponsible Goodwin had gone over to the Syndicate, declaring he would have nothing to do "with Francis Wilson's mad scheme to oppose it"!

It was no "mad scheme" of mine. I had not originated the opposition. It arose spontaneously. But I approved it heartily, and was proud to be invited to participate in it. Once in, I stayed in until beaten down hopelessly by the defection of my fellow actor-managers. Of all who started out so bravely to oppose the usurpation of the Syndicate but two "stars" of any influence remained — Mrs. Fiske and myself. So

situated, we had about as much chance of halting the Syndicate as a couple of old women armed with brooms would have in trying to keep Niagara from sweeping over the Falls. It is no disparagement of Mrs. Fiske to say that, though always an artist, she had not then the professional distinction she now enjoys. She had just returned to the stage after an absence of four years. While it is true that she had had success in Ibsen's "A Doll's House," two years were yet to pass before she would be seen in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," and four years until her presentation of "Becky Sharp," which was to delight the world and bring her real renown. From a financial point of view — and that was the only view it cared to take — the Syndicate did not regard Mrs. Fiske as a star of the first magnitude whatever may now be said to the contrary. They were unwilling for this reason to *allow* her the same terms as other stars.

It may be admitted, then, that at this juncture of the struggle, I practically stood alone. Though I did what I thought was best, I probably did the wrong thing. The principle of the matter had not changed, of course. There were just two alternatives open to me — to commit hari-kari on the doorstep of the Syndicate, or leave the country. Being but a human being, I stayed to fight on when opportunity and stronger wills would insure success.

In those days, all dates to play at theaters were tentative. Later, they were either canceled or confirmed. No dates were sure until contracts were signed. Not

knowing which of the two theaters in Washington would or would not go into the Syndicate, if it prevailed, I had dates held at both theaters. This was but ordinary protection. The Syndicate, always put to it to justify itself, on learning of this protective measure, cried "Treachery!" and declared I was to be "made an example of as a shining mark, for the benefit of lesser offenders." If the assumption and arrogance of all this had not been so comic, it might well have been maddening. Here was I, a member of a profession in which actors ought to have something to say as practitioners of the art, being publicly proclaimed as "an offender," because I opposed an assault upon my profession by a band of commercial exploiters.

Prohibited, except in New York, from playing in any theater of importance, I was obliged to rent the "Variety" theaters of the various cities throughout the country. The public did not understand and cared little about the theatrical squabble; and, not understanding, would not follow those of us who went into unaccustomed places to play. It is strange even now, it was shocking then, to know that so great an artist as Sarah Bernhardt, refusing to be "controlled" by a syndicate of managers, was obliged to play under a tent.

The little fortune that I had saved was greatly diminished in the unequal struggle, and I determined, rather than surrender, that I would abandon America and attempt to make my way to success in England. I hated England because, under the wretched teaching of

our schools, I had been taught as a boy that she was to be despised as our greatest enemy and oppressor — that nothing could be more despicable than a monarchy, however liberal and however much desired by people living happily under it. Like many another narrow American, even long past adolescence, I was still fighting the War of Independence. However, my hatred of England was mild as milk by comparison with the feeling that was mine for those who were literally driving me out of my own country. The more I studied the situation, the less I liked it, and I began to feel that I deserved to be driven out if I could not find a way to circumvent my friends the enemy. Of what use was the thing with which I was doing my alleged thinking if it did not serve me in such an emergency.

The fight was over. The enemy had decimated our ranks by flattery, cajolement, and tempting offers of increased monetary certainties and comfortable bookings, and so, had won the battle. Our people, meeting for the first time in their existence an emergency of this character, had fallen victims to what should have been easily detected as cheap cunning, and had especially fallen victims to their own selfishness and egotism. There was a lesson in all this, and I made up my mind that, if ever again the two parties met in conflict, the specious cunning of the one side and the disloyalty and egotistic selfishness of the other should be exposed, so far as I had the power, to a full measure of ridicule. The two sides did meet again in conflict, a bitter one, and the loyalty of the actors, brought about by a half-

dozen years of industrious education, won the day. But that was The Actors' Strike, an account of which will be given in another chapter.

Meanwhile, how was I to extricate myself from the dreadful position in which I found myself, how avoid expatriation? Was I to sit down and calmly permit the money-changers in the Temple to walk all over me? The matter gave me many an anxious, many an indignant, thought. Then it occurred to me that there was such a thing as fighting the Devil with fire. It was only too evident that independence as to where and with whom one should play was lost to the American player, that henceforth he must appear only where he would be allowed! An extremely bitter, uncoated pill for any well man to swallow, yet there it was, to be taken or rejected as prescribed.

I was cribbed, cabined, and confined. As was said by a writer at the time, "I confessed myself, after a year and a half's fight, overwhelmingly defeated." Yet I could not bring myself to ask for what had previously been solicited of me, the privilege of appearing in a series of first-class theaters throughout the country. I knew instinctively, because of the determined opposition I had offered to the plans of the Syndicate, that I, as the "shining mark," the most outspoken opponent, was not going to come off too easily if I were "to crook the pregnant hinges of the knee" and, bowing to the managerial "thrift," did a little "fawning."

The plan I conceived to avoid the necessity of appealing to these men for an opportunity to appear in

leading theaters was as follows: I was playing my company in a "Variety" theater in Philadelphia. With my trunks half packed to leave the country, if my scheme miscarried, I purposely bumped into Samuel F. Nixon-Nirdlinger, of the Philadelphia firm of Nixon and Zimmerman. Nixon was a vain little person with a tremendous appreciation of Nixon as an astute business man. In different ways he could squeeze more juice out of a business orange than any man I have ever met, and I have met many such squeezers. This quality in him was to be feared, but it was not to this side but to his vanity, I meant to address myself, and he succumbed like a meek and lowly Christian. I had always been greatly in favor with him. At the theaters he managed in conjunction with Zimmerman (quite another kind of person), I had played many long and successful engagements. Once he had refused to permit "Erminie" to be given without me at the Chestnut Street Theater, admittedly to his greater profit.

It was lamentable to be obliged to appeal to any one at all for the privilege of pursuing my profession, but there it was, and I must face it or begin life anew in another land. I did not want to begin life anew anywhere. The chances were much against those who so began. It was sure to be a long, hard, and doubtful pull. I had had that long, hard pull once, and had come through it victoriously, and I rebelled at being forced, like a newly released criminal, to make any such new and hazardous beginning. My feeling was not the less bitter in reflecting that these people, scarcely once removed from

aliens, were forcing out of his country a man with several generations of American ancestors back of him.

As my indignation grew at the thought of expatriation, I realized that, though I could now do nothing against such odds, it was possible to live to fight another day, and that I could not fight if I did not stay. I stayed. Under humiliating circumstances, to be sure, but I stayed.

Out of the wreckage I was adroit enough to make a part of that Syndicate pay what amounted to fifty thousand dollars for the privilege of associating itself with me, when with a little more patience the Syndicate must have forced that association for nothing.

This was not a poor bargain for one who had broken his fortune in fighting for a principle which he consistently hugged to his heart while biding his time for another opportunity. It seemed a thousand years in coming. When it did arrive in the formation of The Actors' Equity Association, advantage of it was taken to the full, to the discomfort of the Syndicate, the triumph of justice and the placing of the actor in his present position of respect and power.

I had stood firm against the Syndicate until long past the time when there was a possible chance of success to the actors' side of the controversy, and until our power to resist had been shot to pieces.

After the greeting, which was polite, Nixon began, as I felt he would, by saying how foolish I was to fight on against the all-powerful Syndicate; the struggle being

now in its second year. I declared myself satisfied with the situation, and that the Syndicate was not unlikely to meet with an unexpected opposition that would soon give matters theatrical an entirely different aspect. Busy with the thought he had in mind, this weak threat did not have any terrifying effect. "You'd better come on in," he said, "and resume playing to the old-time receipts at the Broad" (Street Theater). "We have always gotten on well together, and I'd like to be the one to take you over to our side."

"What," I replied, "go cap in hand to the Syndicate and say, 'Please may I play in your theaters?' Never!"

"*You* won't have to go to the Syndicate and ask for dates," he said quickly; "I'll be only too glad to get you all the dates you want!"

"No," said I; "I have no doubt you miss these old-time receipts, but with a business I have built up through my own efforts and energy I shall never consent to share it gratuitously with anybody. Ask for a 'date,' I never will, for I know that will lead to a demand that I surrender an interest in the thing, which, whatever else it may be, is, and always has been, my own. To that I never would consent."

There was a long pause, and then he said: "Why don't you sell an interest in your company, and make the purchaser your business partner? He could attend to securing a route from the Syndicate, which seems to stick in your crop."

I appeared to be taken with this idea, as if it might in some way lead to the solution of the difficulty. Taken

with it as if it had in no way been something upon which I had spent nights of thought, and the very thing I had been leading him on to suggest.

"That's not a bad idea," I replied, "for it would keep me from personal contact with the Syndicate. But I had thought never to part with any portion of my enterprise. The man that gets it would have to pay a good figure."

"What figure?" he asked.

"I am not prepared to say," I answered, "the thought of it is so new, but any one who will meet me at his office to-morrow morning at ten o'clock with a certified check for so much money" — naming the amount — "can have a half interest in my business for five years. I thought never to consent to such a thing, but since talking to you, I have changed my mind."

We parted with one of us — not Nixon — acting, as never before, the part of utmost indifference. That night at the theater I got a telegram from him saying he would meet me at his office and with the check the following morning. He kept his word. I got the check which, with only moderately computed interest for the time of our agreement, amounted to fifty thousand dollars.

This was surely something saved from the struggle, in addition to the formidable menace of banishment which was the consideration at the moment that gave me most concern. As I viewed it, it also was a million per cent greater than the treatment that would have been meted out to me had I gone to the Manhattan

contingency of the Syndicate. I had been outspoken in opposition to the conduct of the drama falling into the hands of a "trust"; into the hands of men who meant only too evidently to exploit that drama purely as a commerce. For months in speeches before the curtain and in the press I had pictured that Syndicate as a band of marauders who had the drama by the throat and were slowly but surely choking it to death. In the circumstances, now that they had won their point, I felt, if they could have willed it, my punishment, as Gilbert expresses it, would have been something lingering and accompanied with burning oil.

Had I determined to remain in America at whatever cost, Nixon, or any member of that Syndicate, must have acquired that business interest for nothing, as I have stated. I could not have helped it, for there was no other move for me to make in the theatrical field. A few days later, I explained this fully to Nixon. He gave me a swift look, and said something about what was to become of him in the next world, as "Well, I'll be d——d!" I hope he has escaped, for, with all his foibles, Nixon bore the financially inevitable with a chuckle.

I had fought the Devil with fire, and won — what? The privilege of remaining home, of being a citizen in my own country. I should have been humble and grateful, I suppose, but I was not. Instead, I was rebellious and resentful, and stayed so for years.

There was a little satisfaction in dealing the enemy a heavy blow in the financial "solar plexus," the region of

his conscience, but I was not too proud of my "victory"; it had the taste of myrrh in the mouth. I was soldier enough to make my defeat as costly as possible. Circumstances were such that I had to bend or break. Broken, I could do nothing. I accepted the momentary taste of myrrh. I say momentary, because it became evident to me that such a sweeping victory as the Syndicate was having would lead to injustices from which the people of the dramatic profession would be sure to suffer. Present, I might be of service. I had been a witness to leadership on the actors' side of the question, and was not favorably impressed with it. Given the opportunity, I began to believe that I might do better. It was not possible to do worse. Years later, when The Actors' Equity Association was formed to check the intolerable injustices of this Syndicate and other managers, and I was asked to be its president, I accepted with more cordiality than I permitted to be seen.

The Syndicate went on unhindered for years, doing as it pleased, making things easier for itself and more difficult and intolerable for everybody else, actors, dramatists, and other managers outside its ranks. It decided when and where a play should appear, or whether it should appear at all, and even what monetary share it should have in the play. It decided what changes a play should undergo after acceptance, no matter to what well-meant but ignorant maltreatment it was subjected. It decided that a season's engagement should last but a few nights, and were brutally frank

about it. It paid what it pleased, when it pleased, and where it pleased, and under conditions and agreements so one-sided, so far as the actor was concerned, as to be laughed out of court when, as occasionally happened, they reached there. Of course it produced and countenanced the type of play that "pulled the dough." With that, all thought, all ambition ended. It was a noble institution!

Then came the Shuberts.

They were no better and, in some respects, worse. It was a sad day, though, for the Syndicate when the Lord said, "Let there be Shuberts!" They were "the little willful thorns" in the rosebud side of the Syndicate. They have become its master. How they contrived to interest capital to construct theaters throughout the country and became the powerful competitors of the Syndicate is one of the mysteries of the theatrical profession. The history of it would make interesting reading, perhaps interesting disclosures.

Strong and extraordinary as the Shuberts have been in construction, competition, and opposition, strong as the Syndicate has been, they would have been weak by comparison with the coalition formed against them by the actors had the actors held against them in the 1890's as they did in 1917.