WHERE THE PLAYERS ARE MARIONETTES AND THE AGE OF CHIVALRY IS BORN AGAIN IN A LITTLE ITALIAN THEATER IN MULBERRY STREET: BY ELISABETH IRWIN

LIVE groves and sea blue skies now lie far beyond the reach of the Italian who has cast his lot in Mulberry Street. His Lares and Penates rest by prosaic tenement hearthstones, and the daily toil which at first promises speedy success and later but ekes out a sparse living, is unlike that of the long days in the Sicilian fields. The gay, pleasure-loving temperament of these newcomers is alone unchanged. It still finds outlet in religious festivals and wedding parties. The children still dance to music and one and all they celebrate San Rocco with candles and sugared cakes.

With all their bright colors, their chatter of dialects, their array of pomegranates and black ripe olives, their feasts and their festivals, the most Italian thing they have brought with them is their marionette theater.

Every evening, when the ditch is dug, or the pushcart safely housed for the night, when macaroni and polenta are finished, these swarthy children of pleasure, men and women alike, give themselves over to an evening of pure recreation.

In Elizabeth Street, however, there is nothing earnest, nothing thoughtful. The air is charged with pleasure-seeking, with irresponsibility. Red wine flows freely, a mandolin tinkles here, a hand organ jingles there, while the men in their gay bandanas and the women in their flowered shawls stand about laughing and talking. As nine o’clock approaches, the little puppet theater, a room half way up a dark, narrow flight of stairs, begins to fill with its regular habitués. Here again is bright color and music. The bare brick walls are painted with Italian villas, with flower gardens stretching wide before them—a mass of roses and lilies in wild profusion. From one corner, a piano of ancient lineage and a guitar, quite its contemporary, are pouring forth in unison dulcet melodies and gay waltzes in turn. In the front of the room a tiny curtain adorned with warriors in armor gives promise of the marvelous performance to follow. Tumbling over the two front rows are several small boys, half asleep, half on the outlook for some stray American for whom they can act as interpreter for a few cents. When the music stops, a friendly chatter begins. The first note of the piano brings silence again, however, and the men smoke in rapt appreciation of “Ah, I have sighed to rest.
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me” or “Toreador,” and the women sigh at the memories it brings.

WHEN the proprietor, who has been chatting with the audience, goes across the room into the little door beside the stage it is the sign that the play is going to begin. The curtain rises and enter La Bella Rosanna. In sweet, plaintive tones she mourns her father’s death; no sooner has she prayed to Heaven for a avenger than enters an armored soldier and pledges his life to her cause. With a speech of gratitude she withdraws, showing a swarthy hand and battered cuff from above as she makes her graceful bow. So the play runs on for a while, working up to the climax of the evening, which is always, time without end, a fierce battle. One incident a night is all that must be expected, for the play lasts a whole year. Every October a new play begins and every June it ends. Sometimes during the summer, short pieces—they might be called curtainraisers—are put on. These last only a month apiece. But never during the winter does a play change. The neighbors drop in as if to call on a friend. “Let us see what Rosanna has to say to-night” is their feeling. There is no monotony to be feared, when a battle comes here as inevitably as a friend proffers a glass of wine—and a battle is a never-ending source of joy and excitement. They all proceed along the same unstrategic lines.

After the battle many of the audience go home, but the play goes on. Brass shields and steel swords are laid aside and love is the theme for a time. Ortolano with honeyed tones woos the wooden lady of his heart with a grace that is as convincing as many a stage effect produced by flesh and blood actors. Sometimes this polemical bit is a death scene. The hero’s father dies, while his son and faithful warriors gather round. Then as the music plays softly, there is scarcely a dry eye in all the company. For forty nights this old king in his satin robes and jewelled crown has ruled the kingdom of the marionettes. His passing is no little grief to those who have waited on his words.

Now and again the amiable master of ceremonies comes to the door and beckons for an extra helper; the nearest one gladly departs to the inner room, and he who ten minutes ago wept for the vanquished foe now supports Rosanna as she waltzes in the arms of the prince.

A long bench, behind the background of painted salon, holds half a dozen boys and men who from long practice keep the gestures in perfect accord with the varying music of the piano.
and the deep, much inflected tones of Signor, who recites the lines with unstinted emphasis. Little boys grab the figures as they are slung into the wings and hang them on bars along the back ready for the next scene of the next night. Others push forth the characters as they come, calling for each by name. "Give me Il Cattive Torquinito and take La Bella Regina, mind you hang her near for the next act."

So carefully considered are the feelings of these puppets that, with forty of them appearing in one evening and seven boys and men manipulating their destinies, never once does La Bella Rosanna speak words of love to any but her real Ortolano, nor does the king ever hurl his curses at the wrong culprit.

The villain, with his sinister expression and long, evil-boding, black mustache, is greeted with a hiss before he has a chance to utter his first malign intention. Any disturbance in the audience meets with an impatience that proves the intensity of interest with which it is held. A crying child is nearly smothered and carried forth by the abashed mother, who is forced reluctantly to leave the incident unfinished. She at least is saved the financial loss that she would mourn elsewhere, for no one pays for his seat until he goes out and in the case of the mother, not at all. Fifteen cents is the exit fee and the proprietor finds it a paying business. Every week he adds new characters to his cast and he and his wife and all their friends take the pleasure of children dressing dolls in arraying the new puppets.

Whenever one of these new stars appears for the first time, he or she is acclaimed with applause and watched with an interest that might well encourage any star entering upon an untried career.

In these simple plays are combined for the Italian all that the miracle play, Shakespeare and the modern vaudeville has had to contribute; the morals are beyond reproach, the speeches are marvels of eloquence, and the variety and novelty of the scenes are a monument to Italian imagination and ingenuity.

The tired laborer here forgets that the hour is midnight and all is dark without, that the season is winter and ice and dirty snow cover the streets, that the country is America where sweatshops and tenement houses bound his horizon. To him it is the age of chivalry, he basks in eternal sunshine, he smells ever-blooming flowers, he is again in the land of his dreams, of his youth, of all his romance, under the sea blue skies of his beloved Italy.