

How Charlotte Cushman Came to Play "Nancy Sykes."

Anne Brewster in Boston Advertiser.

During our intimacy she often related to me incidents of her artistic career, and most interesting were her recitals, for she was as dramatic off the stage as on. Her stage life had begun early, and had been a hard and painful one, with much to contend against—not only poverty, but envy and ill-will; she was a brave, vigorous woman, resolute and prompt, and these qualities gain what interesting recitals was how she created "Nancy Sykes." I forget the date, but it must have been some time before I knew her, as "Nancy" was then one of her leading roles. Miss Cushman and her sister were stock actresses on a New York stage at the time. For some unlucky reason she had gained the ill-will of her manager. One day the casts came from the theater while she was out. Miss Susan Cushman opened the paper and found among other work, an order for her sister to act "Nancy Sykes" in "Oliver Twist," the following week. It was an unimportant character, and always given to actresses of little or no position in the company. "Charlotte will be furious," was the remark of the mother and sister; and so she was.

"But what could I do?" said Miss Cushman, sally, when she told me the story. "I was at the mercy of the man. It was mid-winter; my bread had to be earned. I dared not refuse or even remonstrate, for I knew he wished to provoke me to break my engagement."

"Shall you act it?" asked her family. "Certainly," was the reply. Up to the night appointed for "Oliver Twist" she was not seen by any one except at business hours. She took her meals in her room, and spent her time there, or out of the house,—where, nobody knew. What was she doing? Studying that bare skeleton of a part; clothing it with flesh, giving it life and interest.

"I meant to get the better of my enemy," she said. "What he designed for my mortification should be my triumph."

And it was so. She went down into the city slums; into Five Points, and studied the horrible life that surrounded such a wretched existence as Nancy Sykes. In the first scene Nancy only crossed the stage, gave a sign to Oliver, who was in the hands of the officers, then went off. It was an entrance and exit hardly noticed, a small accessory incident in the terribly realistic drama. But after Miss Cushman created the character, this silent scene was always tremendously applauded. It was curious to see how quickly the public seized on her clever meaning. Instead of crossing the stage once, she made three passages. Before the second, the whole house came down with thundering applause. Her make-up was a marvel. There was not the sign of feminine vanity about Miss Cushman. She was always ready to sacrifice her appearance at any time to the dresses required by her parts. And surely that horrible perfection of a Five Points feminine costume was a sacrifice. An old dirty bonnet and dirt-colored shawl; a shabby gown and shabbier shoes; a worn-out basket with some rags in it, and a key in her hand! She entered swinging the key on her finger, walked stealthily on the outside of the crowd, doubling her steps; looked with sharp cunning at the boy; attracted his attention, winked one eye and thrust her tongue into her cheek. It was a tremendous success, and each succeeding scene sealed down her triumph, and the discomfiture of the manager. The play had a long run; and, as I have said, the part of Nancy continued to be one of Miss Cushman's most powerful roles until she went to England, where she never acted it.