

## The London Theatres—Captain Shaw's Report

### Observations Question

#### THE EARL OF STRAFFORD

, in rising to put a Question to the Government, remarked that he believed he was correct in saying that in 1882 Captain Shaw inspected and reported on all the London theatres. This work was thoroughly done; the results of the investigation in each case were noted, and changes and improvements in the structure and accommodation of the various buildings were suggested. If this document had seen the light it would have served as a valuable reference both to London and country theatrical managers and to the public. In London it was stated that there were 50 theatres with a holding capacity of 70,000 persons, while there were upwards of 475 music-halls, 31 concert-halls and so-called "palaces," with a holding capacity of 445,000 persons. It was said that upwards of £4,000,000 capital were invested in these places of amusement, and that they afforded direct employment to about 150,000 people. At no time probably were theatrical entertainments more popular than they were now; managers and performers were reaping rich harvests from the support of the public; and the public had a right to expect that, so far as human foresight and appliances could avail, they should be protected from the dangers of overcrowding and the still more hideous dangers of fire. Within the last few years there had been some terrible calamities from the burning of theatres; the Ring Theatre at Vienna, the Opéra Comique at Paris, the principal theatre at Exeter, the Grand Theatre at Islington, and the theatre at Bolton had all suffered in this respect; and it was clear that better precautions ought to be adopted for the security of the audiences. It was true that from time to time officials from the Lord Chamberlain's Department and from, the Metropolitan Board of Works visited the theatres and were presumed to make suggestions for the better comfort and security of the audiences; but these recommendations had not the same weight as those emanating from so distinguished and competent an authority as Captain Shaw. If it were true that the Government intended to deal with the subject of the safety of theatres, he thought that it was desirable before they did so that the public should know the opinions of Captain Shaw. Believing also that his Report would be of much use for the future guidance of theatrical managers, he ventured to hope that it might be presented to Parliament. He would conclude by asking Her Majesty's Government, in the terms of the Notice, Whether there would be any objection to produce the Report made by Captain Shaw, head of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, in the year 1882, upon the condition of the London Theatres, and their probable safety from fire, the said Report having been sent to the Home Secretary and printed by the Metropolitan Board of Works "for the consideration of Members of the Board only?"

#### LORD MAGHERAMORNE

said, that as Chairman of the Metropolitan Board he desired to state that since this Report every theatre in London had been thoroughly and efficiently inspected, and successive Home Secretaries, including Sir William Harcourt, Viscount Cross, and the present Home Secretary, considered that it would not in any way conduce to the public interest to make this Report public. In his opinion the publication of it would produce unnecessary alarm, because it had been considered and acted upon, and many of the defects which it pointed out had been remedied. Some theatres had been shut up because they were not in a proper condition as to safety, and every new theatre had been thoroughly inspected. Many music-halls had been dealt with, and others were still under

the consideration of the Board. Many and many a weary day had been spent in going over theatres from top to bottom for the purpose of testing their safety. He did not say that everything had been done that ought to be done, because the powers of the Board were circumscribed. When he was in the House of Commons he introduced a Bill for the purpose of increasing the powers of the Board; but, unfortunately, it met with obstruction. Another Bill was now before the House in charge of his hon. Friend and Colleague the Member for Knutsford (Mr. Tatton Egerton), whose success, he hoped, would be greater than his own had been.

THE PRIME MINISTER AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS (The Marquess of SALISBURY)

In the absence of my noble Friend the Lord Chamberlain (the Earl of Lathom), I have been requested to say, in answer to the Question of the noble Earl, that the Secretary of State for the Home Department has consulted the Metropolitan Board of Works, and he has received from them an opinion very much of the character which my noble Friend behind me has just given. The Report of Captain Shaw is dated as far back as 1882, and since that time a great deal has been done, and many alterations have been made, while some theatres have been shut up by the action of the Metropolitan Board, and of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. We are of opinion that it would produce a false impression upon a subject on which a false impression would be eminently undesirable if the Report of Captain Shaw, so much out of date, were now laid upon the Table.