

THE RECENT DRAMATIC SEASON.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

It has been so long the habit of criticism to regard the theatre as in a hopeless decay, that one has first to make one's peace with one's prejudice and then with one's public, before venturing to say that, during the past season, there have been seven or eight new plays given in New York worthy of the heyday of the English drama. Whether this means something worthy of

"The spacious times of great Elizabeth,"

or those of the second Charles, or the third George, or the fourth William, I would rather let the reader decide. It is enough for me to launch my faith in air, without attempting to limit or direct it.

I.

The season has not been exceptional in being somewhat peculiar. There have been no such signal productions as that of "The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith," or "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," or "The Case of Rebellious Susan," or "The Manoeuvres of Jane," among the London importations, and among the American pieces there has been nothing so fresh or surprising as some things hitherto done in the native drama. But I have seen four good American plays, and four English plays so much better that my patriotic pride in the first has been chastened to impartial pleasure by a sense of the superiority of the last.

It is, in fact, quite useless for us to contest this superiority of the English playwrights. Somehow, they have got there, while our dramatists are still only more or less well on the way. They seem to have got there, too, in spite of making their plays such good literature that one likes to read them as well as see them. This is true not only of the work of brilliant wits like Mr. George

Bernard Shaw, who confessedly writes too well for the stage, but whose "Arms and the Man" is almost the best comedy on it; and poor Oscar Wilde, who did things almost as fine from a humor almost as rich and daring; but it is true, also, of such tempered geniuses as Mr. Pinero and Mr. Henry Arthur Jones and Mr. R. C. Carton and Mr. R. Marshall. In the work of all these you taste the literary quality as you taste it in the plays of Goldsmith and Goldoni, of Molière and Sheridan, of Björnsen and Ibsen, of Hauptmann and Sudermann, of Echegaray and Estebanez. The like can be said of no American playwright that I know of except Mr. Augustus Thomas, some of whose printed dramas I have read with the sort of enjoyment they give me in the theatre. But for the rest, our dramatists seem to be submissive to the impudent assumption of the theatre that a play cannot be good if it is literary, or other than the worse for its literature. There is, consequently, so little literature in them that one is left to wonder why they are not indefinitely greater dramatists; they ought logically to be something super-Shakespearean; for Shakespeare's plays are much more literary than any of theirs.

II.

In speaking of the dramatic season I do not primarily concern myself with the acting. That has nothing to do, of course, with the goodness or badness of the plays. If it is bad it cannot spoil the plays; if it is never so good it cannot impart excellence to them. It is a thing apart and a subordinate affair; though it can give such exquisite joy if it truly interprets a true thing. All that I have to say of it is what I have several times said before; the playing is commonly better than the plays. This is true even of the uneven playing of the American companies; and it is only not true of the playing of such an English company as Mr. John Hare's in "The Gay Lord Quex"; there the play was best, though the playing was of a refined perfection that none of the American playing could rival. I do not know, but it seems to me that the histrionic art has degenerated in American hands through the necessity of being so English. An American actor or actress conforming to the London standard of tone and accent, is as obviously acting as an American "club man" or "society woman" trying to do the same thing. At the same time, I do not see what else they are to do; and I remark upon their disability

without proposing a different ideal. It results in something so strange to both the English and American utterance that it suggests the despair of exile without the hope of naturalization. One feels it most acutely as a remembered ache in listening to an English company like Mr. Hare's (if there is any other like that), and feeling the perfect charm of those trained English voices in those English inflections which our actors on or off the stage parody so ineffectually. Next to this pleasure, which is such a very great one, is the pleasure of hearing the pure American note in its variety, as we get it in Mr. Herne's "Sag Harbor," or Mr. Thomas's "Arizona." I could fancy English people delighting in that; but they would have to be English people of more delicate perceptions than most of their race to be able to recognize the perfection of the New York note, moral as well as vocal, in the first act of Mr. Clyde Fitch's comedy, "The Climbers."

To be done with the theatre as soon as possible and get on to the drama, one must put Mr. Richard Mansfield's "Henry V." behind one at once. It was better than one could have hoped, since it was the Shakespeare history shaped to a point and used for the constant conspicuity of the actor; that is, there was more Shakespeare and less Mr. Mansfield, though there was always a good deal of Mr. Mansfield, and in one supreme spectacular passage there was nothing of Shakespeare. But it was never such a triumph for the actor over the author as Mme. Bernhardt's "Hamlet," which, in that way, was quite the greatest triumph possible. One did not think of Shakespeare at all; one thought only of Mme. Bernhardt. Yet she is artist enough to have wished the poet's supposition that Hamlet was a man of rich fancy, of tender if troubled spirit, and of most endearing sorrow to have some weight with the spectator so that one should not go away thinking him an elderly woman, harsh, hard, noisy and restless.

I did not see her in "*L'Aiglon*"; Miss Maude Adams in one act of that play had given me all of it that I could bear; and after the "Hamlet" of Mme. Bernhardt, I perceived that I could have lost little in not having tried to imagine her a still younger man. In fact, the "Cyrano de Bergerac" of M. Rostand was more than enough, false as it was in every moment and motive of the preposterous fable devoted to making one believe that a man of decent conscience, not to say of brilliant intellect, could hoodwink the woman he loved into marriage with a stupid dolt.

After seeing that, I was quite willing to let any one that liked think M. Rostand another Shakespeare; but I was not willing to see an exquisite talent like M. Coquelin debased to the uses of such tawdry melodrama. After Coquelin in Molière, I did not want Coquelin in Rostand.

III.

Perhaps I was the more sensitively reluctant, because I had already had Mr. John Drew in "Richard Carvel." That play is, of course, worse than the novel of the name, and the novel itself is better than the other historical romances, which, it was easy to foresee, would soon get out of their covers and expose their spiritual and intellectual nakedness on the stage. But, with the warning of that play before me, I excused myself the more readily from witnessing the other plays made from the other historical romances. I cannot justly, therefore, condemn them, and if any one were to say that they were as good as the novels they were made from, or better, I could believe him.

I did not feel the same apprehension of a fine actor's humiliation in "David Harum;" not because Mr. Crane is not a fine actor, but because "David Harum" is an indefinitely better book than the other great commercial successes. It is, in all that relates to Harum on his simple horse-trading and country banking level, a very true and a very good book. It is when it attempts to rise from this level, and soar in the fine air of sudden benefactions to insolvent widowhood, that it betrays the perfunctory motive of a flying machine. The dramatist, however, felt obliged not only to emphasize this sorry performance, but to add a factitious motive of his own in a heroine who tests the moral quality of Harum by various experiments, in order to marry his protégé when Harum proves pure gold. In spite of this, the play is very amusing, and finds a true climax in the triumph of Harum over the Deacon in a horse-trade. The spectators who bore the sentiment patiently, and probably, poor souls, thought they liked it, roared with joy in the comedy, which was really funny. They had the curtain up again and again on the Deacon trying to start the balky mare in a pouring rain. They could not get enough of that.

It was a simple pleasure, from a very elementary source, but it was genuine, and in that it was akin to such pleasure as the false motive of "Sag Harbor" allowed one to get from its true charac-

terization. The motive was the tattered superstition that a woman may, can, will, or ever did marry the man she does not love and refuse the man she does love, because the man she does not love has been good to her, and loves her, and will be broken-hearted if she does not marry him. Of course, it is strictly her sole business, and her supreme duty to marry the man she loves, unless he is an unreformed drunkard. Any other marriage is treason to her nature and a pollution of her womanhood; and Mr. Herne, having made his heroine commit this sin, is employed through the rest of the play in trying to trammel up the consequence. Of course, he can only pretend that she had chosen the best man and done the best thing, after all; but nobody believes this, even when she says it. Less than ever one believes it then, for the poor falsehood is the culmination of the falsehood by which the character continually perishes in the play. The pity was the greater because it was Miss Julie Herne, a most delicately conscientious and pleasing young artist, whose endeavor to put truth into a part incapable of it was a long defeat throughout. Her pretty and winning art failed of any effect comparable to that made by Miss Chrystal Herne, in a single moment of honest comedy, when she tries to have the young man of her choice realize that he is in love with her, and say so. Mr. Herne himself, who is after Jefferson the best American actor living, could not put reality into an action essentially disabled from the beginning, though he brought to the task all the beautiful naturalness of his mimetic skill, and all his ingenuity as a playwright. The author of "Margaret Fleming," of "Shore Acres," and of "Griffith Davenport," cannot be named by the critic without a sense of his rare dramatic gift; but this was not equal to the impossibility which he had attempted in "Sag Harbor." The characterization, both by author and actor, was admirable, but you could not believe what either said. In minor points the play was faultless; and, when one could forget the monstrous fib at its heart, one was, if a lover of life, happy in moments of most courageous fidelity to nature, in touches of pure comedy, native in its fineness as well as its grotesqueness.

IV.

If Mr. Thomas could have marked more distinctly his own sense of the fallacious sentimentality which actuates the hero of

his "Arizona," he would have saved me from much the same discomfort I suffered in seeing "Sag Harbor." But, apparently, he could not find the moment to take that mistaken young man aside and say to him, in the hearing of the audience, "Now, go on if you must, and sacrifice your good name to save from public dishonor a woman who has dishonored herself by consenting to leave her husband for her lover. Be scorned by her husband as a thief; suffer yourself to be forced out of the army; break the hearts of your friends who see in you the disgrace you will not explain; put to cruel and senseless proof the faith of the good girl who loves you; do all this, if you will, because you are a young, romantic ass; but don't expect me to back you. Any one else would see that this woman who has allowed her heart to be turned from her husband because she finds army-post life dull and has no amusement but flirting, is a fool and worse, and not worth saving from the shame she has consented to at the cost of any shame to others; she is spoiled and lost already, for it is not the adultery, but the adulterous heart that counts in these things. Instead of 'saving' her, by throwing dust in her husband's eyes—for that is what it comes to—do the straight, honest, manly thing. Tell the truth; say that you have stopped her from eloping, and that you took from her lover the jewels found on you with a purpose of safeguarding them, and so make me a situation worthy of my skill. *Don't* load me up with another stage hero, when I am looking for a *real* hero; give *me* a chance, and I will make your reputation."

Probably the young man would have denied any such appeal, but Mr. Thomas would at least have washed his hands of him, if he had made the audience understand that he had no sympathy with his self-sacrifice. It seems not so central, so pivotal, so structural (or destructural), somehow, as the self-sacrifice of the heroine in "Sag Harbor," though I should be puzzled to say why it does not seem so. It may be because it is postulated of that military life which is the negation of the ideals of the civil life. What is certain is that the situation gains in possibility (not to go so far as to say probability) by being imagined of army people, and after a good deal of war drama one still finds a refreshing novelty in Mr. Thomas's pictures of army-post life in Arizona. The sense of being in safe hands with regard to the lesser as well as larger facts enhances the comfort of the spectator, and one

thrills in the exciting effects with the conviction that one's thrills are fully authorized. The dramatist has mastered his material so thoroughly that one has a pleasure in the details of his action, such as one feels in the authenticities of, say, "The Gay Lord Quex." In both plays the same sort of exhaustive and scrupulous æsthetic conscience has been at work, and the same sort of keen and alert intelligence. The result is a restful evenness in the composition which the nerves can feel better than the words can say. In the "Arizona" one had not a moment's fear that the dramatist did not know the road he had taken, or that the passengers would have to get out anywhere and walk.

The American atmosphere in such dramas as we have produced is of the thin clearness of the atmosphere which wraps our portion of the planet; and in "Arizona" it lacks even such mellowness as softens the outlines of personality in "Sag Harbor" and other creations of the home-keeping invention of our playwrights. In its intense distinctness the local color has a peculiar charm; the picturesqueness of the life is extraordinarily vivid, and there is no shadow of uncertainty in the action; it is sharp and rapid, as if it were the nervous response of human nature keyed to sympathy with the moistureless air of the region, and unclogged by the vapors of misgiving that burden it in other climes. In the whole *entourage* there is the fascination of something old, something Oriental, as if the far West had got beyond itself in the farthest East. Whenever we part company with the army people, and find ourselves amidst the mixed population of the Arizona ranch where the scene mostly passes, it is with a sort of dream-like bewilderment in the encounter of such types as the old, over-drinking, raucous, bragging, joking rancher and his wife, who bully each other and threaten and then give way, and are really always good friends in spite of themselves. The plot is closely wrought, and vigorously operated, with its sort of threefold movement in the several affairs of the Colonel and his fool wife, of the hero who sacrifices himself for her and is in love with her sister, and of the young Mexican who sees no reason against marrying a girl in the fact that her trust has been abused by another, and who resents the obtrusion of the fact upon his knowledge as a sort of disgusting impertinence. The weak point in the piece is the hero's self-sacrifice, and that seems rather his fault than the author's.

V.

If he had been older he would have known what a very old convention it was, but in "The Climbers" I do not know how young the people ought to have been not to realize the remote antiquity of the convention that took the life out of that piece, otherwise so promising and so amusing. The situation of the lover of another man's wife uniting with her in the recognition and renunciation of their passion was invented so long before the discovery of America, and is so distinctly proper to pre-historic conditions, that it never seems otherwise than alien when predicated of our society; yet it was this decrepit tradition which Mr. Clyde Fitch asked us to be content with, after giving us a passage of as fresh and native comedy as I have seen on our stage. In fact, a certain essence of New York has never been so perfectly expressed as in that encounter between the two "society women," on the one side, and the bereaved mother and daughter on the other, whom they visit the day of the husband's and father's funeral, to be first in bidding for the new Paris dresses which their sudden bereavement must prohibit the widow and orphan wearing. The play is worth while if for nothing but that scene, in which the incomparable worldliness, the indecent hardness, breaking at times through the shell of their decorums, and at all times palpable under them, represents in these women the spirit of the most commercialized society in the world. It is a great thing to have done, and the author is not to be blamed if he could not keep its level throughout. He is to be blamed, however, for not feeling that in such light work lay his example and his value. It was light, but not superficial; it was deeply and really tragical; whereas his apparent tragedy was superficial and really ridiculous. The tawdry wife and her tawdry lover were only less tawdry than her dishonest and defaulting husband, who did not essentially differ from her in a certain shamelessly selfish ideal of personal happiness.

In "Unleavened Bread" this ideal was ultimated and illustrated with a kind of final ugliness in the character of Selma, as it was dramatized from Mr. Robert Grant's novel. The dramatization was one of the best I have seen from a novel, and I thought it almost the best American play of the winter. It certainly was the freshest in the variety of its material, as Selma

herself has been the latest revelation in American character. I do not say that it had the strong dramatic movement of "Arizona" or the comic charm of "Sag Harbor," but it was more firmly based, more truly structural than either in the verity of its motive.

Its motive was simply the sort of insensible selfishness which appears oftener or more notably in women than in men, and renders them the monsters they can never see themselves. From her first consciousness, Selma Babcock, or Littleton, or Lyons (for in her successive marriages she is all three), has had no thought but for herself, and no principle but a pitiless personal ambition, which she mistakes for several finer things, especially for "true Americanism," especially when she is snubbed in her society aspirations. Her second marriage brings her to New York from the West, where she has ruthlessly, but justly enough, divorced her first husband for infidelity; and, almost from the first moment, we see her soul gnawed by that longing to be "among those present," which is the hatefulest effect in woman of the contact with great wealth and fashion. She could have a beautiful, refined and truly elect life in the circle in which she is welcomed as the wife of the young architect Littleton; and that light New Yorky spirit, Flossie Williams, can see it and value it from the world in which she gets on and Selma cannot get on. But Selma is not capable of the happiness which her gay friend imagines her; it galls her that Flossie is "among those present," and she is not; and she quarrels with her because of that. Because of that she spoils and embitters her husband's life, and would willingly degrade his art; when he dies, she goes back to the West and marries the lawyer who got her divorce for her. He is now Governor, and can be Senator if he will break his faith with the men who made him Governor. She plays upon his passion with an infernal sophistry, not the less infernal because it is unconscious, and makes him break his faith. The play leaves her in her ugly triumph secure of the Senate, and, for all we know, of the White House.

This is the story of the play which is so fairly representative of the novel. The playing left something to be desired in the clever actress who did Selma with insufficient subtlety, and made her too openly declamatory. The part of Flossie Williams was admirably done, with real truth; and such moments as we had of Governor Lyons were of such pure joy as only the full

realization of a type can give. The actor who could suggest without exaggeration, but with such satisfying distinctness, the inner make and outer manner of such an American politician has a future upon which he may be congratulated. The character so perfectly lived before us that, when the poor, flabby old scoundrel burst into a speech from Mrs. Littleton's window, and confirmed to the crowd below the promise of breaking faith which he had given her, one could hardly repress a shudder.

The character of Flossie Williams had more put upon it than it would bear, in the office of persuading the spectators that Selma had lost something in being unfit for fashionable society. She was deficient through her essential hypocrisy, and in meanly longing for what she affected to despise; but the novelist and the playwright failed to give relief to her foible by pretending that she had lost something which could justly be prized. Rich and fashionable society is hardly, in any country, the scene where refined character and ultimated civilization triumph; and it is not better, if not worse, in ours than elsewhere. To the careful observer, its manners seem bad and its morals doubtful; as for its amusements, they appear stupefyingly dull and of the intellectual quality of people who have no real duties or interests. Selma was vulgar at heart, because she wanted a place in it; but her vulgarity would not have disqualified her for a place in it.

VI.

To go from the American to the English plays is to pass from clever sketches, from graphic studies, brilliant suggestions, to finished pictures. It may be that we shall never produce such finished pictures as the English, at least till our conditions have lost their provisional character. Perhaps our drama is the more genuine in sympathizing with the provisionality of our conditions, and it may be that our success is still to be in the line of sketches, studies, suggestions. I thought so when, years ago, I praised the work of Mr. Edward Harrigan; I thought so the other night, after I saw the widow and orphan bargaining off their Paris gowns in Mr. Fitch's play, and perceived that the sketch was worth all the rest of his drama. At any rate, such even perfection as Mr. Pinero's in "The Gay Lord Quex" is yet far before our dramatists; but I believe that it is so not solely because our conditions are provisional. It is so, also, because they have not sought the

literary quality in their plays which the English dramatists have sought, and which they have found. The drama is distinctly a literary form; it is, in fact, the supreme literary form; but our theatricians have vainly imagined that the presence of literature in it is deleterious; and it must be owned that they have pretty well emptied it of the life that once filled it. I have noted some exceptions to this lamentable superstition; and I will note another in the authors of "Unleavened Bread," who were not afraid to put much of the literary spirit of the book into it. But their work cannot be compared in literary effect to Mr. Pinero's or Mr. Marshall's or Mr. Carton's or Mr. Jones's.

Mr. Marshall's work one already knew from his delightful librettos; and the motive of "A Royal Family" I found a distinct comic opera motive. How much of its charm the pretty drolling owed to the gentle and lovely art of Miss Annie Russell, of course, one was aware; but the piece was so little dependent upon the playing that I should have been quite happy to read it. So should I have been to read "Lady Huntworth's Experiment," which was again very literary, and of a like kindly humorousness. It was more seriously sociological, however, than "A Royal Family," and played with a possible problem, though it failed to reach a solution before it reached the end. How to rehabilitate one's self if one is a woman and has been guiltlessly divorced by a drunken brute of a jealous husband, is a difficult question; and "Lady Huntworth's Experiment" of going *incognito* as cook into a bachelor vicar's family does not so much answer it, as bring out amusing phases of human nature in the vicar, butler and semi-detached visiting officer, who all, together with her divorced husband, want to marry her. The comedy is delicious, and the tragedy is there only as an ingredient to keep the comedy from insipidity.

The problem in Mr. Henry Arthur Jones's play, "Mrs. Dane's Defense," means business indefinitely more than that in "Lady Huntworth's Experiment;" and I do not remember any problem play which so clearly gets the better of its problem. The problem is one well known to the theatre, and consists of the old question of what shall be done with the "erring woman" whose "error" will not be left behind, but insists upon following her into society, and claiming her just at the moment when a fine young fellow has fallen in love with her and wishes to make her his wife. Mrs. Dane's error has been a particularly unhandsome one, and a

rather prolonged one. As governess she wins the love of her pupil's father, and when the wife finds it out she kills herself, and the husband becomes insane ~~from~~ remorse. The girl goes out to Canada, where she takes the name of a dying cousin, and then returns to England, where she finds a place in county society, safe from her past, apparently. But one unhappy witness of it lets it escape him that he thinks she is the notorious Felicia Hindmarsh, and the cat can never afterwards be got quite back into the bag. An implacable aunt of the witness will not hear his protestations that he was misled by a resemblance, and pursues Mrs. Dane with the relentless fury of a virtue that ranges most of the nicest people on Mrs. Dane's side. It must be owned she is a most plausible presence, and that it is no wonder she imposes upon the eminent lawyer, adoptive father of her young lover, who takes her part and has her set her whole history down for him, in order to prove an *alibi*. The great scene of the play—and it is a great one—is where her narrative goes to pieces under his benevolent question, and turns out a string of such palpable lies that the man who wished so much to be her friend is forced to convict Mrs. Dane of being Felicia Hindmarsh. His exposure of her to herself is terrible, but altogether righteous, and compact of such good sense and honest frankness as rarely gets on the stage. The miserable soul is of such thorough falseness that she has always pitied herself, and would still like to pose as a victim; she can only realize that she is to be saved from public shame, and may steal away unconvicted if she will. Admirable in every point, this passage is in nothing more admirable than the enforcement of the fact that a certain kind of evil is done only by a certain kind of woman, and that she is never a good woman, no matter how much she is sinned against. Her judge brings this home to the audience rather than to her; she is too false ever to know how bad she is and has been. The part was wonderfully played by Miss Anglin, an actress who contrived with consummate skill to make appreciable the unconscious depravity, the subjective iniquity, of the creature.

Mr. Pinero, in the "Gay Lord Quex," has got a step farther. He has reached the Ibsenian pass of dealing with a predicament, rather than a problem. Here is the case of a nobleman who has spent a sufficiently indefensible youth, and later in life has fallen sincerely in love with a nice girl, but is antagonized by the nice

girl's foster sister, a fashionable manicure, and is pursued by the ghost of an old *liaison* in an amusingly romantic duchess, who clings fondly and devotedly to their regrettable past. There is the case, and you are left to make the most of it when the manicure gets herself into an awful box in her attempt to expose Lord Quex by spying and eavesdropping; and he, in a perfectly credible way refrains from his advantage, and lets her go upon the chance of her ruining his hopes of the nice girl. The fact that he gets the nice girl at last, and all ends well, is comparatively unimportant; the most important things in the play are its veracious characterizations, and the wonderful fidelity with which it paints manners. The manners of the nobleman and the manicure toward each other must greatly interest the American student of English civilization; on their different social grades he speaks to her as if she were a baddish boy, or a skulking dog, and she passively accepts this form of address; but when it comes to their flinging social conventions away, and meeting each other in a purely personal quality, she has no more deference for him than he for her; it is a fight between terrier and cat—both English. The scene is really tremendous, and, as Mr. Hare and Miss Vanbrugh play it, there is nothing to be asked either of the drama or the theatre.

VII.

One cannot say this of the American plays or players; and yet one can say much in honest praise of them. At no period of our dramatic history—the term is rather large—has there been so much prospect and so much performance of actual and potential excellence. We have actually advanced, and things are done now by both playwrights and players, and received as matters of cool expectation, which lately would have been acclaimed as surprising triumphs. The advance has been in the right direction, for we must leave out of the account, in the interest of self-respect, the dramatizations of the romantic novels; one *cannot* consider these. But one can consider the sort of plays which I have been speaking of, and find reason for taking courage and taking hope for an American drama. Of course, the great matter is that it should be a *good* drama; but after that point is made, it is for the common advantage that it should be American, for it could not very well be English, with the same promise of fruitfulness and the same fact of raciness. W. D. HOWELLS.