

ROBT. BUCHANAN & THE THEATRE.

The following, from the pen of Mr Robert Buchanan, has been contributed to the *Melbourne Argus*—

"There was a time, not so very long ago, and even within the dim recollection of myself, when the theatre in England was a fairly peaceful place, devoted to honest and harmless, if somewhat old-fashioned, public amusement. One went thither with a fair prospect of spending a quiet evening. There were few critics then, and many reporters; the number of journals was less, and the space devoted to dramatic doings was small; but there was everywhere among the public an easy-going sympathy with plays and players. Now and then there was disturbance—as on the famous occasion when a gentleman of the name of Tomlins jumped up in the stalls of the Princess's Theatre and vociferously denounced the 'barbarities' of Charles Reade's *It's Never Too Late to Mend*. The gentleman has disappeared from this world, but the good old play still keeps the stage, surviving into a period when the theatre has become the scene of noisy and clamorous animosities. There are still, I learn, in this land of oddities and hypocrisies, persons who regard it as a serious institution of great importance to modern progress. It is nothing of the sort; it is a sort of race-course, devoted to popular and not too rational entertainment. Attached to it are large numbers of people, professional and non-professional, of the 'sporting' order, who are very 'knowing,' very prone to back the favourite; a considerable proportion of whom are honest; the large majority of whom are cocksure; some of whom talk of the dignity of the Drama, just as other sporting gentlemen talk of the 'noble art of self-defence.' But the Theatre is no more dignified, no more serious, just at present, than the racecourse, and a play seems to have one sterling quality in common with a racehorse—it tends to demoralise all who have to do with it; so that round the stage, as round the stable, cluster groups of shady characters who, having failed in every walk of life, have taken to the theatrical turf. The whole thing is reduced to a question of money. 'Betting' and 'gambling' prevail. A play, like a horse, is judged by the amount of current coin won or lost upon it. The question is, simply, how will it 'run?'

"Nowadays a play is classed as a failure if it does not run at least 100 nights in London, and as only a doubtful success if it does not reach its 200th. Yet it is obvious that a drama may be very excellent, and yet run only for a short time, and that a drama may be very worthless, which runs for a year.

"A First Night.—Critics of all dimensions, bodily and mental, in the stalls; many garrulous, some prophetic, like persons who have odds upon a 'fight.' A sprinkling of shady notabilities. The fashionable physician who will help the piece by circulating 'orders' among society people who talk, and the fashionable lady who likes the leading man. A few professional ladies who are 'resting.' Mr Cocksure, Q.C., with his eye-glass, and Mr Ben Isaacs, the nondescript, with his nose. All have come to witness the miracle described by the Critic of the Dauntless Grammar as 'seeing a function!' The rest of the house is crowded. In the front row of the pit sit the young gentlemen from the city who come to see the 'fun.' There is general nervousness behind the scenes. The manager is swearing; the leading lady is a terror to her 'dresser.' Disappointed dramatists loom everywhere in the lobbies, praying for a catastrophe; some of them also have come to criticise, but if fortune is adverse to the author they will be round at the stage door next morning with the milk. For at least half the play everybody on the stage is paralysed with nervousness. If the play has not by that time begun to 'go' the actors become desperate, forget their business, and murder their lines. Small critics steal secret glances at great critics, smile if they smile, sneer if they sneer, while the players look pleadingly to men and gods. Everybody is waiting for the fun of the Bear-Garden. An unfortunate line may do it, and the sport begins. The howl is echoed in next morning's newspapers, and the public for a few hours is deafened by all the wild clamour of the course just after a race is lost or won.

"The wonder is that, under such conditions, we get any decent plays at all. There would be no progress in any department of literature or art whatsoever if the dogmatism of experts were allowed to intervene instantly between authors and artists and the great public, or if the noisy clamour of gamblers and 'sports' were to affect the life of pictures or books. More serious even than the fact that good work by outsiders is condemned at haphazard is the fact that bad work by public favourites is generally lauded to the skies. I will pass over the question of the intellectual qualifications of those who sit in judgment. I will only ask how it is possible for even the coolest intellect to gauge the merits or demerits of any production under the hazy and perfunctory conditions I have described. If the answer to this should be, as usual, the statement that audiences are generally instructed, I reply that such a statement is refuted by the most ordinary experience. Dramatic criticism, at any rate, is a branch of 'sporting' criticism, and the Drama is only, as I have said, a 'sporting' institution.

"For this reason, among others, I am inclined to sympathise with that excited minority which has recently been clamouring for novel dramatic literature, and which insists that instant and noisy popularity is rather a doubtful proof of dramatic merit. Having freely expressed my opinion of the foreign importations which have recently been experimented with upon our stage, for the edification of a small section of playgoers, I am the more ready to admit the right of the minority to be heard. All such agitations by individuals, whether wrong or right in essence, prevent intellectual stagnation, and I for one am grateful to unconventional writers for their outrage of the proprieties. The charge of 'indecent' and 'immorality' hurled so violently against certain dramatists, is utterly untenable. No earnest writer, no man who believes he is uttering a spiritual message, can be indecent or immoral. It would be as rational to accuse a comparative anatomist of indecency, or a professor of midwifery of immorality. This, of course, does not affect the artistic question of how far morbid anatomy and sexual pathology have a place in literature. There is something to be said, however, on the side of any author who arouses critical antagonism while causing intelligent individuals to espouse his cause, and to exclaim, 'This is new! This is what we want! This is at least a transcript from the life!'

"Hasty criticism, long runs, dependence on the suffrages of the majority, and a general 'sporting' disposition on the part of playgoers, are all very bad for dramatic art. All these things lead to bad taste and noisy manners. So long as the test of a dramatist's merit is simply commercial, there can be no real advance towards a dramatic literature. If we glance back over the plays of the past, we shall find that nearly all those which hold the boards do so by virtue of their charm for the average intelligence. Take an example. For one time that *The Beaux' Stratagem* or *The Recruiting Officer* is acted *The School for Scandal* is acted a thousand times; yet the two first-named plays are veritable transcripts of human nature, while Sheridan's masterpiece is completely stagey and mercenary. Amid all the artificial effects and verbal pyrotechnics of *The School for Scandal*, we look in vain for such subtly drawn characters as Archer and Mrs Sullen, as Captain Brazen and Sergeant Pike, for such dialogue as we find in the first scene of *The Recruiting Officer*, for such masterly humour as we find in the last scene of *The Beaux' Stratagem*. The 'well-made' conventional play, with its excellent plot, its familiar characters, and its 'smart' dialogue, pleases generation after generation. The masterpieces of an original humorist, with their splendid humanities and audacious naturalism, are practically forgotten, because the average intelligence finds them dull.

"Literature, in fact, is not the quality which either the 'classes' or the 'masses' demand in their stage plays. The 'masses' still demand broad, conventional treatment; while the 'classes' are still attracted by spicy, and even salacious suggestions. It would be invidious to cite contemporary examples of this truth, but any intelligent reader who cares to examine the theatrical successes of recent years will discover that each success has been in proportion to either its

conventionality or its 'suggestiveness.' Such exceptions as may be discovered only prove the general rule.

The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
And those who write to please must please to live.

This fact, however, is not altogether a primal case of decadence in the Drama. In every art the point of view of the spectator has to be considered. The misfortune in the case of the Drama is that the point of view taken must be that of a large heterogeneous audience. However beautiful a play may be, it is useless if it fails to please the great majority.

"And so, after all, I hear the reader saying, 'the London theatre is a racecourse.' Quite so; but its honours are due to the outer ring of 'sports' and 'gamblers,' who turn an innocent amusement into a means of 'rowdyism' and acrimonious dispute. More than most men, our managers are eager to produce artistic work, but often enough, when they experimentise, they only arouse critical clamour or ensure popular neglect. Their problem is to please a large mass of people; their difficulty, while endeavouring to elevate public taste, is not to sail royally above the people's heads. They have to face a rough-and-ready public, and rough-and-ready criticism. They have seen the Poet Laureate howled down as remorselessly as if he were the poet Close. They have seen recently a poet and a scholar, Dr. Todhunter, execrated as if he were an absolute ignoramus. They have to contend with the rough in the gallery, and with the 'crank' or 'faddist' on the newspaper. They know that the shabbiest hanger-on to a society journal 'written for men and women' would discuss *Æschylus* or *Shakespeare* as jauntily and as patronisingly as if he were discussing a writer of farces for Mr Toole. When the howl of the race begins no one is spared; there is neither reverence, nor mercy, nor decency. Old favourites like Mr Gilbert are cheerfully cuffed and bonneted. Even Mr H. A. Jones, a favourite of the 'ring,' has been savagely knocked about. The theatrical sporting man objects to half measures. An author is either an angel or an ass; a play is either a masterpiece or a monstrosity. All is decided by the humour or the prejudice of the moment. If, as I have already suggested, such a test were applied to books or pictures, what would become of Art or Literature? So long as it is applied to plays, the Drama will remain a sporting institution, and the manners of the betting-ring would drive both managers and authors to despair.

"So far I have glanced at the gloomy side, rather than at the bright one, of the Drama in England. The art of playwriting, even under the conditions I have been describing, has its compensations. I do not, indeed, go as far as the distinguished French critic, M. Francisque Sarcey, and affirm that success and long life are absolute proofs of intrinsic merit in a play; but I do hold that merit in a play is very often the chief factor in its success. Large heterogeneous audiences often respond fully to natural character-painting and natural acting, and popularity may and frequently does imply an artistic appeal to human nature. If this were not so, if audiences were not often both sympathetic and intelligent, there would never be any good plays at all. Such modern pieces as *Olivia*, *Arrah-na-Pogue*, *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, *A Pair of Spectacles*, *Caste*, *School* (to quote a few names at random), appeal to every class of spectator; while the humours of Mr Gilbert and Mr Pinero are genuinely literary. I can hardly call to mind any play which has failed to attract purely on account of its superiority as literature.

"Of late years, as we all know, there has been a reaction in favour of Realism—perhaps if I said in favour of Ugliness, I should be nearer the mark. The cynicism and pessimism of Continental fiction has affected our Drama all along the line, and there has arisen a school of critics which stigmatises all 'sentiment' as old-fashioned, and all 'poetry' as retrograde. Fortunately for both Art and Literature, the very simplicity of theatrical audiences has been their protection against the realistic epidemic. Cynicism has no flavour, no zest, for the great public; pessimism has no charms for any but the most jaded appetites; and the good Playgoer, now as heretofore, seeks in the theatre not edification, but entertainment. At the same time the public, having become alive to the fact that sentiment may be overdone and poetry overstrained, demands from the playwright the subject and the dialogue of life. The artificial and conventional plays of the last generation please no more. Humour replaces horseplay, and true pathos supersedes the counterfeit. Realism, though it fails to succeed on its own merits, forces upon its rival, Optimism, more and more attention to the truths of ordinary experience.

"I have briefly pointed out the causes which limit the freedom of intellectual activity in the Drama in England. These are:—

(1) The hasty and perfunctory judgments on new pieces, consequent on the 'sporting' character of those who criticise plays.

(2) The system of long 'runs.'

(3) The demand of the 'masses' for sensationalism, and of the classes for salacious suggestions.

(4) The heterogeneous nature of popular audiences.

"To these drawbacks, which are indisputable, there is no necessity to add, as a recent writer has done, a charge of venality and dishonesty against professional critics. Critics, like other human creatures, are impulsive and fallible, prone to praise their favourites and abuse their foes, but they are not, as a rule, either interested or dishonest. Their very disagreement is a proof of their candour. What Mr Clement Scott praises in the *Daily Telegraph* Mr William Archer abuses in the *World*, and what is gall and wormwood to the critic of the *Standard* may be sweetness and light to the critic of *The Times*.

"As a rule, critics take their function too seriously, and advance opinions too recklessly. No living writer for the stage is half as hysterical and unreliable as some of those who criticise him. All this, however, is not peculiar to the Drama, but is inherent in Criticism itself, which from time immemorial has blundered over works of art. It would be well, I think, if first-night judgments were confined to mere reporting of the subjects and general nature of new plays; for it is inconceivable that a writer, fresh from the excitement of the race or 'ring,' should speak judiciously on what, after all, is a matter of taste. Many an excellent play is lost to the world through the *ad captandum* and savage abuse generated under false conditions, and many a bad play is lifted into temporary popularity by hasty and indiscriminate approbation."

THE PLAYS OF ARTHUR PINERO.—(1) *The Times*, (2) *The Profligate*, (3) *The Cabinet Minister*. One vol. William Heineman.—Mr Pinero has done the stage much service by the publication of these three plays. It would be idle to reopen the discussion to which the second on the list gave rise. The first is still running successfully, and a perusal of the third simply confirms our original estimate of its imperfections, but brings out its merits even more distinctly than did the original performance, the keen humour of the lines cutting even more sharply in type than in delivery. A capital portrait of the author is prefixed to *The Profligate*. With respect to the details of the edition, we should have preferred the stage directions, &c., in smaller type, and we incline to resent the allotment of a "make-up" description to the principal characters. As, for example:—"Dunstan Renshaw enters. He is a handsome young man with a buoyant, self-possessed manner, looking not more than thirty, but with the signs of a dissolute life in his face. His clothes are fashionable, and suggest the bridegroom." This somehow reminds us of the old-fashioned playbills—"Ephraim Evildow, a bold bad man, merciless to the widow and orphan, servile to the great, a deep, dark scoundrel." Mr Pinero's character is so well drawn that it is easy to form a Renshaw of the brain without a kind of assistance which savours of a slur on our power of imagination. It should be noted that these plays, though published in paper covers, can be had bound in cloth at a higher price. They certainly deserve the better presentation.

ON Monday evening the chorus gentlemen in connection with the Prince's pantomime in Manchester held a supper in the Crown Hotel, Manchester, under the presidency of Mr Robert Sutherland, the chorus master. The usual toasts were honoured, and the evening was pleasantly spent.