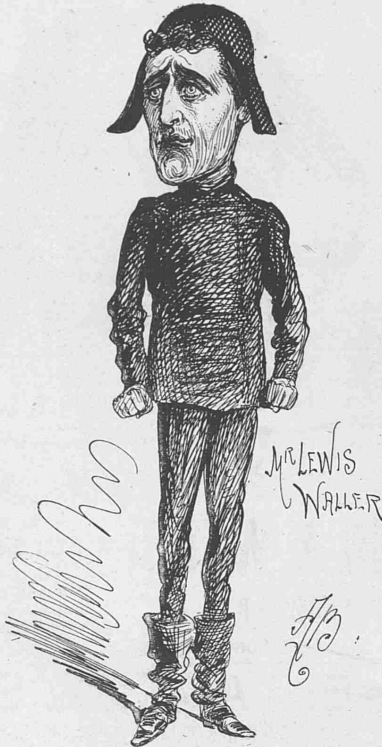


OUR CAPTIOUS CRITIC.

"THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT."

"He always has some excuse," one may say of Mr. Buchanan. There is invariably either a preface or a footnote to his bill of the play. But good wine needs no bush, and perhaps he would give us more convincing work if he could produce one piece without the usual explanation. The out-



come of the apology in the present case is to make us understand that Mr. Buchanan has taken a hint or two from a Russian novel, and, having admitted so much, hopes that no comparisons will be drawn. There is really very little reason for comparison. The English author, like the French adapters, finding himself compelled to reproduce a psychological study without the psychology, so much of the individuality of the original is lost that what remains raises no new issue—at least, no serious one. It is true that the valet-like servitude of the chief of police to the profligate Prince Zozimoff might be questioned if desirable. But it would not be desirable; for *The Sixth Commandment* is so lugubrious a production on the whole that everything is to be cherished which tends to vary its monotony of melancholy. To see an official before whom all Russia trembles, trotting about like an errand boy at the behest of a man whom he could crush like a fly—or he would be unfit for his position—is more or less funny. Take the comic policeman and his associations away, and what remains of rational plot and character Mr. Buchanan need hardly have gone all the way to Russia to find. The hero commits a murder and regrets it; so does Eugene Aram, so does Macbeth, so does Mathias, so does

will not reveal to her maddened lover—it would seem as though Mr. Buchanan had not the courage of his text. However—without continuing comparisons to which the playwright objects, I may be content to say that from this point—subject to the vagaries already mentioned of the chief commissioner, Snaminski—the story of Fedor proceeds as with variations we have seen criminal stories proceed before. Fedor has no sooner slain the Jew than he wakes to the full consciousness of his crime. Simultaneously comes the news of the death of a relative which makes him a count and a millionaire. Had he known an hour earlier, he would have been able to avoid the murder and also to save Liza, whose position in the piece is broadly a parallel of his own. She does an act which might have been heroic, but afterwards, by pleading deception—when there was so little—at once destroys any nobility of self-sacrifice. No woman can be a Donna Pia and an Isabella in one. The younger sister of Liza is dying from hunger—we see the child on her bed through a transparent wall. The father, a drosky driver, has returned drunk and penniless. The elder girl, stirred to desperation by the cries of the little one, hurries to the Zozimoff Palace, whence she returns dishonoured, but with money. Then at once, like Fedor, she regrets what she has done, and while he would tone down his crime to manslaughter, she in turn endeavours to persuade herself that she has been trapped. In fact, both contradict their professions, expressed or implied. But their want of thoroughness afterwards cannot make them or their sorrows sympathetic. The man has slain a feeble old usurer, the woman has sold her virtue, or at least has received money from the profligate aristocrat who has ruined her; how can one feel any healthy hope in their subsequent fortunes, except the hope that their miseries may keep them apart? I have not space to follow incident by incident the vicissitudes of the story of these unfortunate lovers as they are influenced by the extravagant omnipotence of the dreadful Zozimoff. This cool and terrible young nobleman—who for some reason which I did not fathom possesses a mastery over men and things before which the White Czar himself might

grow whiter with envy—determines, although women are but reeds in his hands, that for once he will marry, and that Fedor's sister Anna shall become his bride. When she was poor, the lady gave him encouragement; now that she is rich, she would fain go back to her first love. But the Prince has discovered the secret of Fedor's crime, and makes the brother's safety the price of the sister's hand. Anna doubting the guilt of Fedor, Zozimoff, with the assistance of the chief of the police, takes her to an empty room adjoining that of Liza, where she overhears his wild confession and Liza's sad story of her fall. The sister yields her promise to the man who holds her brother's life. In the meantime, however, another person has been arrested, an old fellow who, tired of his troubles, assumes the burden of the assassination in order to get out of the world. Zozimoff is willing to let him die as he wishes, and the chief of police after some demur agrees to this to oblige Zozimoff. But Fedor, for the sake of Anna and for his conscience sake, denounces himself; Anna is freed from her hateful engagement, and Fedor is sent to Siberia to the mines. Snaminski, the chief of the police, is sent to Siberia too. He holds a minor appointment which he owes to the haughty Zozimoff, who has betrayed him, and he is now indebted to Fedor, the convict, for saving his life. He makes the young man's banishment as little unpleasant as may be, and when Liza, tramping with a convoy of exiles, appears on the scene, is equally kindly to her. The episodes in the military outpost—as a military outpost—are too ridiculous. However, they include the arrival of Anna with her lover—come to visit Fedor—and Zozimoff in pursuit of Anna. In Siberia as in St. Petersburg, Zozimoff is for a while supreme. He orders Anna's lover into confinement and is left alone with the lady. He would have made her his wife at home, now in Siberia she must be his mistress. She has her lover's revolver to defend herself with, but when Zozimoff reminds her of Fedor's crime and regrets, she lets the pistol fall (*à la Lady Anne*). The prince has no gratitude and no compunction. Anna is *in extremis* when—enter Fedor from a window and the general in command of the district by the street door. A despatch of the Czar has been received, the murderer is pardoned, the profligate is detained a convict, and the curtain falls on a group—with talk about repentance and forgiveness—of Anna and her lover and Liza and Fedor united. The first act is dull, and the last is tedious. The middle of the piece is not without interest, and there are at intervals points of considerable dramatic strength, although without great freshness; for with all its local colour, the body of the story, made up as it is of the remorse of Fedor the murderer, the sorrows of Liza the magdalen, and the sacrifices of the devoted sister, reproduces a series of well-worn situations which variations of scenery cannot jilt out of stage commonplace. The part of Zozimoff, the calm and frank aristocratic villain, is admirably played by Mr. Waring. I think that perhaps with a blonde moustache instead of the heavy black one which he wears, Mr. Waring would give the playgoer unprovided with glasses a better idea of his acting with the face. Mr. Waller shows with his present better opportunities a great advance upon his previous successes, and as the enthusiastic, conscience-stricken, memory-haunted Fedor is realistically intense. Mons. Marius is as good as may be as the chief of police; he does the extraordinary work asked of him with courage and skill, making the part a consistent one, even in its incongruities. Miss Wallis is a graceful and gentle Anna; the conditions do not allow of great force, but the part is perfect as to finish. Miss E. Robins is exceedingly good in the character of Liza; indeed, it would be difficult to be better. In the sub-story there is the courtship of Sophia, daughter of the Princess Orenberg, with Arthur Merriion, an English *attaché*—the girl lively and spirited, the swain agreeable but undemonstrative. There is an elderly general—Skobloff he is called—whose eyes are dim, and his hearing defective. He is the Englishman's rival, and his suit is favoured by the Princess Orenberg. The parts of the young lovers are played with character by Miss Marion Lea and Mr. Herbert, and Mr. Ivan Watson as the General and Mrs. Richardson as the Princess are adequate. Two or three of the other parts might be more effectively filled. The piece is very liberally mounted; the *salon* of the Princess Orenberg, with its rich furniture and splendid dresses, is a most elaborate affair.



everybody almost. In the novel he is a theorist, who argues that crime may be properly committed for gold if the plunder be devoted to the relief of distress. In the play Fedor Ivanovitch expounds the same doctrine, but acts from a different motive altogether. The Jew, Abramoff, is strangled because he has sold the girl Liza to a betrayer whose name he