

OUR CAPTIOUS CRITIC.

AT THE VAUDEVILLE THEATRE.

COKE upon Lytelton! Schlegel upon Shakespeare!! Gladstone upon Homer!!! Buchanan the Bowleriser upon Fielding the Freetongue!!!! But that I am conscientiously averse to filling these columns with any other work than my own, I should be sorely tempted to quote in full the Scots poetaster's estimation of "our first and greatest satirical novelist," as set forth in an "author's note" on the programme of the Vaudeville Theatre announcing the performance of *Sophia*, a new comedy in four acts, "written by Robert Buchanan, and founded on Henry Fielding's Famous Romance 'Tom Jones.'" Famous Romance, quotha! Here is praise indeed, and it is further supplemented by the quotation of "noteworthy opinions on 'Tom Jones,'" emanating from all kinds of people, from Coleridge down to Lord Monbodo. The idea of its being thought necessary to quote opinions on "Tom Jones"!



The "author's note" is indeed of such a character that I cannot help lingering over it. Its glozing apologies are surely in bad taste, and whilst serving to show that Mr. Buchanan is unable to appreciate the healthy animalism of Fielding, go out of the way in calling attention to the very peculiarities objected to. *Ex cathedra*, the author of *Sophia* states that "Despite a certain taint, which is coarseness rather than immorality, 'Tom Jones' has gained its immortality as a work of art, because it is fundamentally right and pure in its pictures of human nature." It does not need a Buchanan to tell us this much; but why proclaim it at all, and especially upon a play-bill? He also informs all whom it may concern that although the leading characters and incidents in his comedy are based upon the novel, "care has been taken to select only what is perfectly staid and void of offence." Would any man, catering for a modern audience, have dared to state that he had done otherwise? And he concludes with the remark, "Whatever merit the play may possess belongs to him whose supreme genius inspired it; for whatever shortcomings it may show, the dramatist is alone to blame."

Now, surely after this self-condemnatory sentence, the dramatist cannot take exception to my pointing out such shortcomings as, in response to his implied challenge, I can claim to have discovered. In the first place, "although he has taken leave to purify the character of the hero somewhat," the piece is not wholly free from one or two little peddling double meanings and innuendoes, which, if of no very great moment, might very well have been left out, and come somewhat strangely after the flourish of purity already spoken of. It is not my intention to reproduce them here, but I have in my mind especially a sentence placed in the mouth of Squire Western, and running pretty much on all fours with a rather memorable one in the late Mr. Charles Reade's comedy, *Shilby Shalby*.

"Almost all the dialogue and the leading situations are original," we are told, "so far, at least, as anything can be original which is in no true or absolute sense the dramatist's own, but the merest echo of a great master." Well, there were several sentences enunciating dear old-fashioned sentiments, and most favourably received by the pit and gallery, which seemed to me to echo most resonantly. As, for instance,



when Tom Jones talks of going to the wars and getting shot very much in the style in which another young man named Claude Melnotte is in the habit of doing. As for situations, it is certainly a triumph to hide three ladies at once in three separate cupboards. Still, there is really no limit to this sort of thing, and some future dramatist may hide six. I must hasten, however, to congratulate Mr. Buchanan, so far as the dialogue is concerned, on the fine old crusted eighteenth century tone he has managed to impart to it by besprinkling it with "Prithee," as though from a pepper-caster, and by making the characters "buss," instead of kiss. Still, in the capacity of a humble inquirer, I would venture to ask him why he elects to make Honour address her young



mistress as "Miss" instead of "Ma'am" as in the original? In Fielding's day—and despite the exasperating variations of costume, I presume the incidents represented are supposed to occur in Fielding's day—Miss was a term of contempt. I would further ask in what dance practised during the first half of the eighteenth century did ladies and gentlemen whirl round in each other's arms as he makes Lady Bellaston talk of doing with Tom Jones? Also in what part of rural England at the same epoch people went to church three times on a Sunday? My doubt on this point is still further increased by the question as to whether the early scenes of the piece are laid in Gloucester-

shire or Somersetshire, since both of these counties are incidentally referred to in the course of the play. I would likewise inquire why Partridge, an independent village barber, should speak of Jones as his "dear young master," before ever he enters his service? And I should really desire to know the reason that



prevented Squire Western, on witnessing *Sophia's* departure in the coach, from having a horse saddled and galloping at once in pursuit. At the rate of coach travelling in those pre-Palmerian days it was odds on his catching her up. The costumes, as I have hinted, are as incongruous as the dialogue, and range through far too wide a gamut. The cravats sported by some of the characters are of a kind seen only on the stage, and the shirt that Partridge washes is, to say the least of it, fearfully and wonderfully made.

With all these drawbacks, it is a pleasure to me to be able to record that *Sophia* seems to be well received by the public, and that there appears to be a chance of the rather long spell of ill-luck which has haunted the Vaudeville management being broken. Towards this result several of the actors in no slight degree contribute. Mr. Charles Glenney presents us with a somewhat Bourbonian-visaged Tom Jones, afflicted with a singular trick of groping at times at the back of his neck, as if a hair had slipped down and was tickling him, but otherwise manly, earnest, and attractive, even in his cups. I did not like to see him so snappish with poor Partridge in the garret, though that, of course, was the author's fault; but I must congratulate him on the foresight that enabled him to dress so far in advance of his epoch. Mr. Thomas Thorne is also to be congratulated on being able, by his own ability, to make a great deal more out of the part of Partridge than even the author. His dry utterance is very effective, and his washing and wringing evidently studied from nature; but I must cavil a bit at his shaving, and especially his lathering. He ought to have gone and seen *Sweeney Todd* at the Elephant and Castle Theatre.

Mr. Fred Thorne is not Squire Western. He lacks the fiercely jovial roughness which is rather that of the tyrant than the boor. A squire in those days was a local despot, and, from having it all his own way, despite any occasional "village Hampden," acquired a habit of command, even under a coarse exterior. Mr. Gilbert Farquhar plays Mr. Allworthy with quiet finish. Mr. Royce Carleton is an admirable Bliffl who has been baptised John. Mr. H. Akhurst, his form rather smartly

