

THE PEACOCKS' FEATHERS. *By Robert Buchanan.*

ILLUSTRATED BY BERNARD PARTRIDGE.

"Stop!" cried the Author, springing from his seat at the prompt table, and fiercely waving his gingham umbrella.

The rehearsal was in full progress. The Stage Manager, with his hat tilted on the back of his head, was standing at the Author's right hand, looking on while the Soubrette of the company ran glibly through a comic love scene with the Light Comedian, a tall and somewhat cadaverous person attired in shabby finery. The rest of the company thronged the wings, whispered together, or studied their parts. The stage was illuminated by the flashing jets of the T light, which only served to cast the rest of the theatre, including the auditorium, into cavernous gloom.

"Stop!" cried the Author, so suddenly and sharply that even the Stage Manager recoiled in amazement. All eyes were fixed on the figure wildly gesticulating at the prompt table and glaring angrily at the Light Comedian.

"Anything the matter?" asked the Light Comedian somewhat airily.

"The matter, sir?" echoed the Author, pointing at him with his umbrella, and panting with indignation, "What have you got there?"

Puzzled for a moment, the Light Comedian glanced at himself from head to foot with a feeble attempt at a smile.

"How dare you laugh, sir?" cried the Author.

"Upon my soul," began the Light Comedian.

"Silence!" the Author thundered. Then turning to the Stage Manager, he added, "Take his part away. Tell him to leave the theatre at once!"

There was general consternation, intensified by the fact that no one as yet knew the cause of the trouble. The artists gathered whispering together. The Stage Manager looked at a loss what to say or do, and the most stupefied and puzzled of all was the Light Comedian, who, after speaking in animated tones with the Soubrette, at last approached the prompt table as if determined to get at the heart of the mystery. He was a man of between thirty and forty, gentlemanly in look and bearing, but at the same time a little airy and supercilious.

"I don't know what's the matter, sir," he said, "but I demand to know. You have no right to fly at a chap like that without telling him what he's done to offend you!"

By this time the Author had grown somewhat calmer. Sinking into his chair, and passing his hand wearily across his forehead, he answered:

"Go away, sir! Leave the stage!"

"I shall do nothing of the kind till you give me the explanation which one gentleman has a right to demand from another!"

These bold words sent a thrill of surprise through the groups that listened—for the Author, like others of his class, was a despot, and even the manager of the theatre seldom dared to dispute his authority. Further than that, he was a man famous far and wide in more than one branch of literature, a man whose genius was universally admitted in spite of a thousand shortcomings and eccentricities.

Personally the Author and the Comedian presented a curious contrast. The Author was dressed like an old-clothes man, with boots several sizes too big for him, a soft wideawake hat, and not too spotless linen. For age, he had passed the sixties; his beard and moustache were white as snow; his tall figure stooped at the shoulders and bent at the knees, and otherwise he rather affected the manners of advanced years. The Comedian, on the other hand, was

spruce and dapper, though a keen eye would have detected underneath his light manner the traces of secret trouble and in his smart attire the threadbare signs of impecuniosity. For the rest, the Author was wealthy and prosperous, the Actor in that condition which is technically known in the profession as "at the back of God's speed." In point of fact the engagement to play in the piece then being rehearsed meant life or death to the Comedian, who knew when he bearded the great man that he was possibly throwing his last chance away.

"You'd better go, Thornton," said the Stage Manager nervously; "we'll discuss this matter privately."

"I would rather discuss it now," replied the Actor, still pale and trembling, but determined. "I desire to know what offence I've given?"

By this time the Author had recovered from his excitement, though not altogether from his anger.

"The matter is very simple, sir," he said, "you are totally unsuited for the part which you

fingers, and laughing nervously. "This, sir? Really, if I had had any idea that you were so superstitious—"

"That is enough!" cried the Author, rising and turning his back on the offender. "Mr. Robinson, we will dismiss the rehearsal till eleven o'clock to-morrow."

The rehearsal was accordingly dismissed, and the members of the company, including the Light Comedian, who had placed his part down on the prompt table, drifted slowly out of the theatre. A little later the Author was closeted in anxious consultation with the Stage Manager.

"I'm sorry about this," the latter was saying. "You don't really think, do you, that an accident like that could possibly prejudice the success of your piece?"

"It was no accident," was the irate reply. "I am convinced that that young man, on whose incompetence and levity I have had more than one occasion to remark, deliberately intended to wreck my piece! Besides, he cannot play the part—it would be madness to let him attempt it.

We must think of someone else."

"I'll tell him what you have decided. He's rather a proud chap, and I don't think he'll persist if you say he's really unsuitable. But I know he's devilish hard up, and can't afford to lose the engagement."

"Hard up, sir," cried the Author, "when he can dress like that and give himself the airs of a duke? He's a jackanapes, and he must be taught a lesson!"

So saying, the Author shuffled out of the theatre, and calling a four-wheeled cab at the door was driven towards his mansion in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park. The Stage Manager watched him depart, and then shook his head lugubriously.

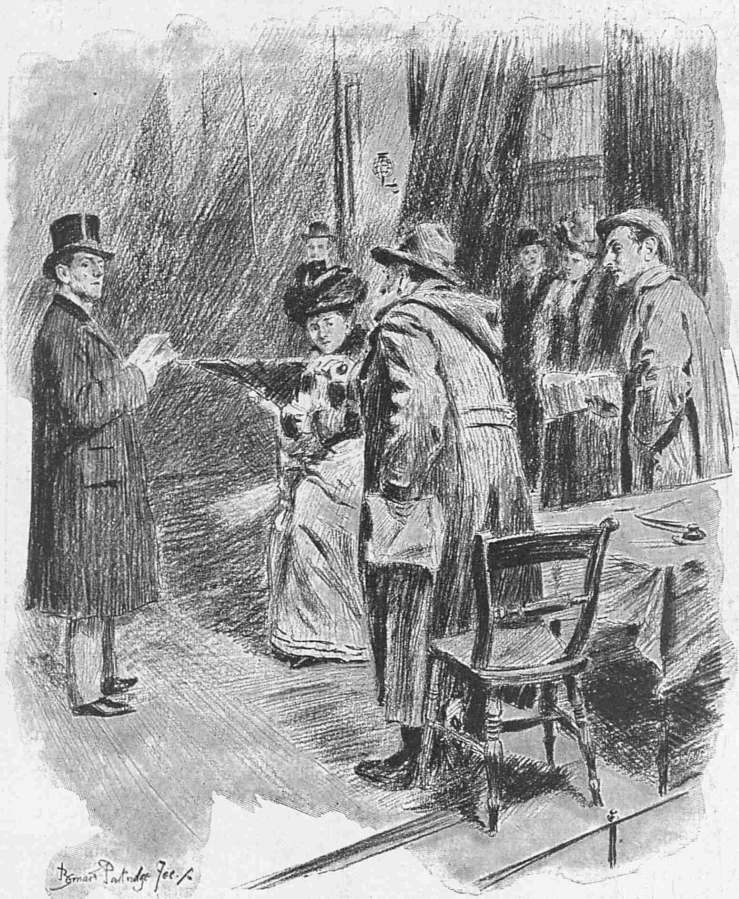
"They say genius to madness is precious nearly allied," he soliloquised, "and, by George, I think they are right. Fancy a great man like that going on like an old woman over a peacock's feather!"

In point of fact, the Author was a mass of peculiar contradictions, uniting in his person the most unique intellectual and logical power with ideas of almost childish simplicity. Late in life, after earning no little distinction as a Fellow of his College, he had taken to novel-writing, startling the world with a series of powerful stories dealing boldly with the great social problems of the day, and still later he had dramatised his own works for the stage with less success but even greater enthusiasm. Personally he was at once arrogant and gentle, opinionated and kindly. Although his good deeds were many, his personal

whims and oddities were legion, and only one person in the world had any power to control them.

In his early manhood he had been a member of a little circle consisting of himself and two friends, one of whom was married. The wife kept house for the three; then her husband died, and she continued to keep house for the two; then one of the two died, and the Author was left alone with the Widow, who continued to keep house for him. Long years of intercourse had knitted those two lives closely together in bonds of friendship. They had grown old together like brother and sister.

Close upon Knightsbridge was the Author's abode, with a garden looking upon the Lady's Mile of Hyde Park. Hither he hastened, eager to confide the day's annoyances to the lady who was at once his housekeeper and his dearest living friend, and who was indeed at that very moment seated in a large sitting-room or study opening on the garden, and anxiously awaiting his return.



"The matter, sir?" echoed the Author, "What have you got there?"

have been rehearsing, and as the casting of the play is entirely in my hands—"

"Quite so," interrupted the Actor, growing still paler, and folding up the part nervously. "I'm sorry, however, you didn't tell me so earlier in the day. But when you first interrupted the rehearsal your attention seemed to be attracted by something peculiar in my wardrobe, and—"

"It was, sir," interrupted the Author. "Is it possible that you are ignorant of the enormity of coming to rehearse a new part in my play with a peacock's feather in your buttonhole?"

A murmur, not unaccompanied with a titter, ran through the assembled company. The Author's whims and eccentricities were known, but the extent of his prejudices had hardly as yet been understood. The mischief, however, was out, and visible to every eye present. In the buttonhole of his walking coat the Comedian carried a small peacock's feather.

"A peacock's feather?" cried the Comedian, lightly fingering it with his shabbily-gloved