FILON AUGUSTIN

THE ENGLISH STAGE: BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE VICTORIAN DRAMA

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INTRODUCTION

By Henry Arthur Jones

I have rarely had a more welcome task than that of saying a few words of introduction to the following essays, and of heartily commending them to the English reading public. I am not called upon, nor would it become me, to recriticise the criticism of the English drama they contain, to reargue any of the issues raised, or to vent my own opinions of the persons and plays hereafter dealt with. My business is to thank M. Filon for bringing us before the notice of the French public, to speak of his work as a whole rather than to discuss it in detail, and to define his position in relation to the recent dramatic movement in our country.

But before addressing myself to these main ends, I may perhaps be allowed to call attention to one or two striking passages and individual judgments. The picture in the first chapter of the old actor's life on circuit is capitally done. I do not know where to look for so animated and succinct a rendering of that phase of past theatrical life. And the pilgrimage to the deserted Prince of Wales's Theatre also left a vivid impression on me, perhaps quickened by my own early memories. In all that relates to the early Victorian drama M. Filon seems to me a sure and penetrating guide. All lovers of the English drama, as distinguished from that totally different and in many ways antagonistic institution, the English theatre, must be pleased to see M. Filon stripping the spangles from Bulwer Lytton. To this day Lytton remains an idol of English playgoers and actors, a lasting proof of their inability to distinguish what is dramatic truth. *The Lady of Lyons* and *Richelieu* still rank in many theatrical circles with *Hamlet* as masterpieces of the "legitimate," and *Money* is still bracketed with *The School for Scandal*. It is benevolent of M. Filon to write dramatic criticism about a nation where such notions have prevailed for half a century.

The criticism on Tennyson as a playwright seems to me equally admirable with the criticism on Bulwer Lytton, and all the more admirable when the two are read in conjunction. Doubtless Tennyson will never be so successful on the boards as Lytton has been. *Becket* is a loose and ill-made play in many respects, and succeeded with the public only because Irving was able to pull it into some kind of unity by buckling it round his great impersonation of the archbishop. But *Becket* contains great things, and is a real addition to our dramatic literature. It would have been a thousand pities if it had failed. On the other hand, the success of Lytton's plays has been a real misfortune to our drama. You cannot have two standards of taste in dramatic poetry. Just as surely as the circulation of bad money in a country drives out all the good, so surely does a base and counterfeit currency in art drive out all finer and higher things that contend with it. In his measurement of those two ancient enemies, Tennyson and Lytton, M. Filon has shown a rare power of understanding us and of entering into the spirit of our nineteenth-century poetic drama.

If I may be allowed a word of partial dissent from M. Filon, I would say that he assigns too much space and influence to Robertson. Robertson did one great thing: he drew the great and vital tragi-comic figure of Eccles. He drew many other pleasing characters and scenes, most of them as essentially false as the falsities and theatricalities he supposed himself to be superseding. I shall be reminded that in the volume before us M. Filon says that all reforms of the drama pretend to be a

return to nature and to truth. I have elsewhere shown that there is no such thing as being consistently and realistically "true to nature" on the stage. *Hamlet* in many respects is farther away from real life than the shallowest and emptiest farce. It is in the seizure and presentation of the essential and distinguishing marks of a character, of a scene, of a passion, of a society, of a phase of life, of a movement of national thought – it is in the seizure and vivid treatment of some of these, to the exclusion or falsification of non-essentials, that the dramatist must lay his claim to sincerity and being "true to nature." And it seems to me that one has only to compare *Caste*, the typical comedy of an English *mésalliance*, with *Le Gendre de M. Poirier*, the typical comedy of a French *mésalliance*, to come to the conclusion that in the foundation and conduct of his story Robertson was false and theatrical – theatrical, that is, in the employment of a social contrast that was effective on the stage, but well-nigh, if not quite, impossible in life.

It is of the smallest moment to be "true to nature" in such mint and cummin of the stage as the shutting of a door with a real lock, in the observation of niceties of expression and behaviour, in the careful copying of little fleeting modes and gestures, in the introduction of certain realistic bits of business – it is, I say, of the smallest moment to be "true to nature" in these, if the playwright is false to nature in all the great verities of the heart and spirit of man, if his work as a whole leaves the final impression that the vast, unimaginable drama of human life is as petty and meaningless and empty as our own English theatre. A fair way to measure any dramatist is to ask this question of his work: "Does he make human life as small as his own theatre, so that there is nothing more to be said about either; or does he hint that human life so far transcends any theatre that all attempts to deal with it on the boards, even the highest, even Hamlet, even Œdipus, even Faust, are but shadows and guesses and perishable toys of the stage?"

Robertson has nothing to say to us in 1896. He drew one great character and many pleasing ones in puerile, impossible schemes, without relation to any larger world than the very narrow English theatrical world of 1865-70.

In his analysis of the influence of Ibsen in England and France, M. Filon seems to touch the right note. I may perhaps be permitted a word of personal explanation in this connection. When I came up to London sixteen years ago, to try for a place among English playwrights, a rough translation from the German version of *The Dolls' House* was put into my hands, and I was told that if it could be turned into a sympathetic play, a ready opening would be found for it on the London boards. I knew nothing of Ibsen, but I knew a great deal of Robertson and H. J. Byron. From these circumstances came the adaptation called *Breaking a Butterfly*. I pray it may be forgotten from this time, or remembered only with leniency amongst other transgressions of my dramatic youth and ignorance.

I pass on to speak of M. Filon's work as a whole. For a generation or two past France has held the lead, and rightly held the lead, in the European theatre. She has done this by virtue of a peculiar innate dramatic instinct in her people; by virtue of great traditions and thorough methods of training; by virtue of national recognition of her dramatists and actors, and national pride in them; and by virtue of the freedom she has allowed to her playwrights. So far as they have abused that freedom, so far as they have become the mere purveyors of sexual eccentricity and perversity, so far the French drama has declined. So cunningly economic is Nature, she will slip in her moral by hook or by crook. There cannot be an intellectual effort in any province of art without a moral implication.

But France, though her great band of playwrights is broken up, still lords it over the European drama, or rather, over the European theatre. There is still a feeling among our upper-class English audiences that a play, an author, an actor and actress, are good *because* they are French. There is, or has been, a sound reason for that feeling. And there is still, as M. Filon says in his Preface, a corresponding feeling in France that "there is no such thing as an English drama." There has been an equally sound reason for that feeling. M. Filon has done us the great kindness of trying to remove it. We still feel very shy in coming before our French neighbours, like humble, honest, poor relations who are getting on a little in the world, and would like to have a nod from our aristocratic kinsfolk.

We are uneasy about the reception we shall meet, and nervous and diffident in making our bow to the French public. A nod from our aristocratic relations, a recognition from France, might be of so much use in our parish here at home. For in all matters of the modern drama England is no better than a parish, with "porochial" judgments, "porochial" instincts, and "porochial" ways of looking at things. There is not a breath of national sentiment, a breath of national feeling, of width of view, in the way English playgoers regard their drama.

M. Filon has sketched in the following pages the history of the recent dramatic movement in England. If I were asked what was the distinguishing mark of that movement, I should say that during the years when it was in progress there was a steadfast and growing attempt to treat the great realities of our modern life upon our stage, to bring our drama into relation with our literature, our religion, our art, and our science, and to make it reflect the main movements of our national thought and character. That anything great or permanent was accomplished I am the last to claim; all was crude, confused, tentative, aspiring. But there was *life* in it. Again I shall be reminded that dramatic reformers always pretend that they return to nature and truth, and are generally found out by the next generation to be stale and theatrical impostors. But if anyone will take the trouble to examine the leading English plays of the last ten years, and will compare them with the *serious* plays of our country during the last three centuries, I shall be mistaken if he will not find evidence of the beginnings, the first shoots of an English drama of greater import and vitality and of wider aim than any school of drama the English theatre has known since the Elizabethans. The brilliant Restoration comedy makes no pretence to be a national drama: neither do the comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith. There was no possibility of a great national English drama between Milton and the French Revolution, any more than there was the possibility of a great school of English poetry. And the feelings that were let loose after the convulsions of 1793 did not in England run in the direction of the drama. It is only within the present generation that great masses of Englishmen have begun to frequent the theatre. And as our vast city population began to get into a habit of playgoing, and our theatres became more crowded, it seemed not too much to hope that a school of English drama might be developed amongst us, and that we might induce more and more of our theatre-goers to find their pleasure in seeing their lives portrayed at the theatre, rather than in running to the theatre to escape from their lives.

After considerable advances had been made in this direction, the movement became obscured and burlesqued, and finally the British public fell into what Macaulay calls one of its periodical panics of morality. In that panic the English drama disappeared for the time, and at the moment of writing it does not exist. There are many excellent entertainments at our different theatres, and most of them are deservedly successful. But in the very height of this theatrical season there is not a single London theatre that is giving a play that so much as pretends to picture our modern English life, – I might almost say that pretends to picture human life at all. I have not a word to say against these various entertainments. I have been delighted with some of them, and heartily welcome their success. But what has become of the English drama that M. Filon has given so many of the following pages to discuss and dissect? I wish M. Filon would devote another article in the *Revue des deux Mondes* to explain to his countrymen what has taken place in the English theatre since his articles were written. It needs a Frenchman to explain, and a French audience to understand, the full comedy of the situation.

For ten years the English theatre-going public had been led to take an increasing interest in their national drama, – I mean the drama as a picture of life in opposition to a funny theatrical entertainment, – and during those ten years that drama had grown in strength of purpose, in largeness of aim, in vividness of character-painting, in every quality that promised England a living school of drama. It began to deal with the great realities of modern English life. It was pressing on to be a real force in the spiritual and intellectual life of the nation. It began to attract the attention of Europe. But it became entangled with another movement, got caught in the skirts of the sexual-pessimistic blizzard sweeping over North Europe, was confounded with it, and was execrated and condemned without examination. I say without examination. Let anyone turn to the *Times* of November 1894,

and read the correspondence which began the assault on the modern school of English drama. Let him discover, if he can, in the letters of those who attacked it, what notions they had as to the relations of morality to the drama. It will interest M. Filon's countrymen to know that British playwrights were condemned in the interests of British morality. And when one tried to find out what particular sort of morality the English public was trying to teach its dramatists, one discovered at last that it was precisely that system of morality which is practised amongst wax dolls. Not the broad, genial, worldly morality of Shakespeare; not the deep, devious, confused, but most human morality of the Bible; not a high, severe, ascetic morality; not even a sour, grim, puritanic morality. No! let any candid inquirer search into this matter and try to get at the truth of it, and ask what has been the recent demand of the English public in this matter, and he will find it is for a wax-doll morality.

Now, there is much to be said for the establishment of a system of wax-doll morality, not only on the English stage, but also in the world at large. And all of us who have properly-regulated minds must regret that, through some unaccountable oversight, it did not occur to Providence to carry on the due progress and succession of the human species by means of some such system.

I say it must have been an oversight. For can we doubt that, had this excellent method suggested itself, it would have been instantly adopted? Can we suppose that Providence would have deliberately rejected so sweetly pretty and simple an expedient for putting a stop to immorality, not only on the English stage to-day, but everywhere and always?

I know there is a real dilemma. But surely those of us who are truly reverent will suspect Providence of a little nodding and negligence in this matter, rather than of virtual complicity with immorality – for that is what the alternate hypothesis amounts to.

But seeing that, by reason of this lamentable oversight of Providence, English life is not sustained and renewed by means of wax-doll morality, what is a poor playwright to do? I am quite aware that what is going on in English life has nothing whatever to do with what is going on at the English theatres in the autumn of 1896. Still, like Caleb Plummer, in a matter of this kind one would like to get "as near natur' as possible," or, at least, not to falsify and improve her beyond all chance of recognition. I hope I shall not be accused of any feeling of enmity against wax-doll morality in the abstract. I think it a most excellent, nay, a perfect theory of morals. The more I consider it, the more eloquent I could grow in its favour. I do not mean to practise it myself, but I do most cordially recommend it to all my neighbours.

To return. The correspondence in the *Times* showed scarcely a suspicion that morality on the stage meant anything else than shutting one's eyes alike to facts and to truth, and making one's characters behave like wax dolls. As to the bent and purpose of the dramatist, there was so little of the dramatic sense abroad, that an act of a play which was written to ridicule the detestable, cheap, paradoxical affectations of vice and immorality current among a certain section of society was censured as being an attempt to *copy* the thing it was *satirising*! So impossible is it to get the average Englishman to distinguish for a moment between the dramatist and his characters. The one notion that the public got into its head was that we were a set of gloomy corrupters of youth, and it hooted accordingly. Now, I do not deny that many undesirable things, many things to regret, many extreme things, and some few unclean things, fastened upon the recent dramatic movement. And so far as it had morbid issues, so far as it tended merely to distress and confuse, so far as it painted vice and ugliness for their own sakes, so far it was rightly and inevitably condemned, nay, so far it condemned and destroyed itself. But these, I maintain, were side-tendencies. They were not the essence of the movement. They were the extravagances and confusions that always attend a revival, whether in art or religion. And by the general public, who can never get but one idea, and never more than one side of that idea, into its head at a time, these extravagances and side-shoots are taken for the very heart of the movement.

Take the Oxford movement. Did the great British public get a glimmer of Newman's lofty idea of the continual indwelling miraculous spiritual force of the Church? No. It got a notion into its

head that a set of rabid, dishonest bigots were trying to violate the purity of its Protestant religion, so it hooted and howled, stamped upon the movement, and went back to hug the sallow corpse of Evangelicalism for another quarter of a century. The movement was thought to be killed. But it was only scotched, and it is the one living force in the English Church to-day.

Take, again, the æsthetic movement. Did the great British public get a glimmer of William Morris's lofty idea of making every home in England beautiful? No. It got a notion into its head that a set of idiotic fops had gone crazy in worship of sunflowers; so it giggled and derided, and went back to its geometric-patterned Brussels carpets, its flock wall-papers, and all the damnable trumpery of Tottenham Court Road. The movement was thought to be killed, but it was only scotched; and whatever beauty there is in English interiors, whatever advance has been made in decorating our homes, is due to that movement. Again, to compare small things with great, in the recent attempt to give England a living national drama, we have been judged not upon the essence of the matter, but upon certain extravagances and side-tendencies. The great public got a notion into its head that a set of gloomy, vicious persons had conspired to corrupt the youth of our nation by writing immoral plays. And the untimely accident of a notorious prosecution giving some colour to the opinion, no further examination was made of the matter. A clean sweep was made of the whole business, and a rigid system of wax-doll morality established forthwith, so far, that is, as the modern prose drama is concerned. But this wax-doll morality is only enforced against the serious drama of modern life. It is not enforced against farce, or musical comedy. It is only the serious dramatist who has been gagged and handcuffed. Adultery is still an excellent joke in a farce, provided it is conveyed by winks and nods. The whole body of a musical entertainment may reek with cockney indecency and witlessness, and yet no English mother will sniff offence, provided it is covered up with dances and songs. I repeat that if a thorough examination is made of the matter, it will be found that the recent movement has been judged upon a small side-issue.

We may hope that the English translation of M. Filon's work will do something to reinstate us in the good opinion of our countrymen. I think, if his readers will take his cue that during the last few years there has been an earnest attempt on the part of a few writers to establish a living English drama, that is, a drama which within necessary limitations and conventions sets out with a determination to see English life as it really is and to paint English men and women as they really are – I think if playgoers will take that cue from M. Filon, they will get a better notion of the truth of the case than if they still regard us as gloomy and perverse corrupters of English youth.

A passage from George Meredith may perhaps serve to indicate the position of the English drama at the present moment, and to point in what direction its energies should lie when the gags and handcuffs are removed, and the stiffness gets out of its joints. At the opening of *Diana of the Crossways* these memorable words occur: —

"Then, ah! then, moreover, will the novelist's art (and the dramatist's), now neither blushless infant nor executive man, have attained its majority. We can then be veraciously historical, honestly transcriptive. Rose-pink and dirty drab will alike have passed away. Philosophy is the foe of both, and their silly cancelling contest, perpetually renewed in a shuffle of extremes, as it always is where a phantasm falseness reigns, will no longer baffle the contemplation of natural flesh, smother no longer the soul issuing out of our incessant strife. Philosophy bids us to see that we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab; and that, instead of everlastingly shifting those barren aspects, the sight of ourselves is wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight. Do but perceive that we are coming to philosophy, the stride toward it will be a giant's – a century a day. And imagine the celestial refreshment of having a pure decency in the place of sham; real flesh; a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending. Honourable will fiction (and the drama) then appear; honourable, a fount of life, an aid to life, quick with our blood. Why, when you behold it you love it, – and you will not encourage it? – or only when presented by dead hands? Worse than that alternative dirty drab, your recurring rose-pink is rebuked by hideous revelations of the filthy foul; for nature will force her way,

and if you try to stifle her by drowning she comes up, not the fairest part of her uppermost! Peruse your Realists – really your castigators, for not having yet embraced philosophy. As she grows in the flesh when discreetly tended, nature is unimpeachable, flower-like, yet not too decoratively a flower; you must have her with the stem, the thorns, the roots, and the fat bedding of roses. In this fashion she grew, says historical fiction; thus does she flourish now, would say the modern transcript, reading the inner as well as exhibiting the outer.

"And how may you know that you have reached to philosophy? You touch her skirts when you share her hatred of the sham decent, her derision of sentimentalism. You are one with her when – but I would not have you a thousand years older! Get to her, if in no other way, by the sentimental route: – that very winding path, which again and again brings you round to the point of original impetus, where you have to be unwound for another whirl; your point of original impetus being the grossly material, not at all the spiritual. It is most true that sentimentalism springs from the former, merely and badly aping the latter; – fine flower, or pinnacle flame-spire, of sensualism that it is, could it do other? – and accompanying the former it traverses tracks of desert, here and there couching in a garden, catching with one hand at fruits, with another at colours; imagining a secret ahead, and goaded by an appetite sustained by sheer gratifications. Fiddle in harmonics as it may, it will have these gratifications at all costs. Should none be discoverable, at once you are at the Cave of Despair, beneath the funeral orb of Glaucoma, in the thick midst of poinarded, slit-throat, rope-dependent figures, placarded across the bosom Disillusioned, Infidel, Agnostic, Miserrimus. That is the sentimental route to advancement. Spirituality does not light it; evanescent dreams are its oil-lamps, often with wick askant in the socket.

"A thousand years! You may count full many a thousand by this route before you are one with divine philosophy. Whereas a single flight of brains will reach and embrace her; give you the savour of Truth, the right use of the senses, Reality's infinite sweetness; for these things are in philosophy; and the fiction (and drama) which is the summary of actual Life, the within and without of us, is, prose or verse, plodding or soaring, philosophy's elect handmaiden."

"Dirty drab and rose-pink, with their silly cancelling contest" – does not that sum up the English drama of the last few years? There was certainly a shade too much dirty drab outside a while back, but within there was *life*. What life is there in the drama that has followed? Where does it paint one living English character? Where does it touch one single interest of our present life, one single concern of man's body, soul, or spirit? What have these rose-pink revels of wax dolls to do with the immense, tragic, incoherent Babel around us, with all its multifold interests, passions, beliefs, and aspirations? When will philosophy come to our aid and depose this silly rose-pink wax-doll morality?

"But," says the British mother, "I must have plays that I can take my daughters to see."

"Quite so, my dear ma'am, and so you shall. But do you let your daughters read the Bible? The great realities of life are there handled in a far plainer and more outrageous way than they are ever handled on the English stage, and yet I cannot bring myself to think that the Bible has had a corrupt influence on the youth of our nation. Do you let them read Shakespeare? Again there is the freest handling of all these subjects, and again I cannot think that Shakespeare is a corrupter of English youth."

The question of verbal indecency or grossness has really very little to do with the matter. A few centuries ago English gentlewomen habitually used words and spoke of matters in a way that would be considered disgusting in a smoking-room to-day. We may be very glad to have outgrown the verbal coarseness of former generations. But we are not on that account to plume ourselves on being the more moral. It is a matter of taste and custom, not of morality.

The real knot of the question is in the method of treating the great passions of humanity. If the English public sticks to its present decision that these passions are not to be handled at all, then no drama is possible. We shall continue our revels of wax dolls, and our theatres will provide entertainments, not drama. I do not shut my eyes to the fact that many of the greatest concerns of human life lie, to a great extent, outside the sexual question; and many great plays have been, and can

be, written without touching upon these matters at all. But the general public will have none of them. The general public demands a love-story, and insists that it shall be the main interest of the play. And every English playwright knows that to offer the public a pure love-story is the surest way of winning a popular success. He knows that if he treats of unlawful love he imperils his chances and tends to drive away whole classes – one may say, the great majority of playgoers.

"Then why be so foolish as to do it?" is the obvious reply.

The dramatist has no choice. He is as helpless as Balaam, and can as little tune his prophesying to a foregone pleasing issue. A certain story presents itself to him, forces itself upon him, takes shape and coherence in his mind, becomes organic. The story comes automatically, grows naturally and spontaneously from what he has observed and experienced in the world around him, and he cannot alter its drift or reverse its significance without murdering his artistic instincts and impulses, and making his play a dead, mechanical thing. There are many stories which treat of pure love thwarted and baffled and at last rewarded. I do not say that these stories may not be quite as worth telling as the others. But from the nature of the case, the course of a lawful love, though it may not run altogether smooth, does not offer the same tremendous opportunities to the dramatist. In affairs of love, as in those of war, happy are they who have no history! Almost all the great love-stories of the world have been stories of unlawful love, and almost all the great plays of the world are built round stories of unlawful love. David and Bathsheba, "the tale of Troy divine," Agamemnon, Œdipus, Phædra, Tristram and Iseult, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, Abelard and Heloïse, Paolo and Francesca, Faust and Margaret, Burns and his Scotch lassies, Nelson and Lady Hamilton – what have they to do with wax-doll morality? What has wax-doll morality to do with them?

I know the question is a difficult one. Much may be said for the French custom of keeping young girls altogether away from the theatre. I believe Dumas *fils* did not allow his daughter to see any of his plays before she was married – a fact that reminds one of Mr. Brooke's delightful suggestion to Casaubon – "Get Dorothea to read you light things – Smollett —*Roderick Random*, *Humphrey Clinker*. They're a little broad, but *she may read anything now she's married*, you know."

But whatever liberty may for the future be allowed to the dramatist or to his hearers, I am sure that no play which came from any English author of repute during the years included in M. Filon's survey could work in any girl's mind so much mischief as must be done by the constant trickle of little cheap cockney indecencies and suggestions which make the staple of entertainment at some of our theatres. But, as I have said, it is only the serious dramatist who in the present state of public feeling can be called to account for immoral teaching.

I have strayed far from my immediate subject. But if I have written anything that cannot be considered appropriate as a preface to M. Filon's book, I hope it may be accepted as a supplement. At the time M. Filon wrote, the English drama was a force in the land, and had the promise of a long and vigorous future. Now those who were leading it stand, for the moment, defeated and discredited before their countrymen. But the movement is not killed. It is only scotched. The English drama will always have immortal longings and aspirations, though we may not be chosen to satisfy them.

Meantime, one cannot help casting wishful eyes to France, and thinking in how different a manner we should have been received by the countrymen of M. Filon, with their alert dramatic instinct, their cultivated dramatic intelligence, their responsiveness to the best that the drama has to offer them. France would not have misunderstood us. France would not have treated us in the spirit of Bumble. France would not have mistaken the men who were sweating to put a little life into her national drama, for a set of gloomy corrupters of youth. France would not have bound and gagged us and handed us over to the Philistines.

M. Filon has done us a kindness in bringing us for a moment before the eyes of Europe. He will have done us a far greater kindness if the English edition of his book helps our own countrymen to form a juster opinion of those who, in the face of recent discouragement and misrepresentation,

who, with many faults and blunders and deficiencies, have yet struggled to make the English drama a real living art, an intellectual product worthy of a great nation.

HENRY ARTHUR JONES.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The French public has heard a great deal about modern English poets, novelists, statesmen, and philosophers. What is the reason that it hears nothing, or next to nothing, about the English drama? Your first impulse is, perhaps, to make answer – "Because there is no such thing!" A conclusive reason, and one dispensing with the need of any other, were it true. But is it true? As it seems to me, it was true some thirty years ago, but is true no longer.

And, indeed, were there no English drama at the moment at which I write, this in itself would be a phenomenon well worth studying, a problem that it would be interesting to solve. The understanding of the miscarriages of the mind, of the ineffectual but not wholly vain endeavours, the frustrated efforts of Life, contains for the critic, just as it does for the follower of any other science, the most fruitful of lessons, the most strangely suggestive of all spectacles. Were there no English drama, we should have to seek for the reasons – psychological, social, æsthetic – why the Anglo-Saxon race, which produced a Shakespeare at a time when it counted a bare three millions and covered a mere patch of ground, should now be able to produce but clowns and dancers, when it is forty times as numerous, and has spread itself throughout the world.

But, as a matter of fact, these premises would be false. There *is* an English drama. The demand for it has been felt, and the supply is forthcoming. Or, rather, it has come. It is a strenuous youngster, determined to keep alive, bearing up pluckily, if with trouble, against all the maladies of childhood, against the dangers of evil influences – the brutal roughness of some, and the undue tenderness of others. Its growth is slow and laborious; it recalls in no way that marvellous development of the early drama, which, towards the end of the sixteenth century, passed almost in a breath from the hesitating and halting speech of youth into the rich utterance of full maturity. Here we still see doubt, uncertainty, confusion. The struggle slackens at times. Improvement is followed by lamentable relapse. But there the drama is; it is alive, and it is growing.

Ten or a dozen years ago, it was hard to say whether the drama was in process of decline or of renascence, whether there was to be an end of it, or a new beginning. There were many even among the critics who raised their eyes in sorrow to heaven, and spoke of the drama as one speaks of the dear departed. And they talked of the past as of a golden age – "the palmy days, the halcyon days."

To-day, these pessimists are non-existent. Their place has been taken, it is true, by those intolerable carpers who, in every generation, would prevent youth from daring, regardless of the fact that youth's chief business is to dare. But these good people remain unheeded. Everyone is agreed that to-day is better than yesterday; and almost everyone, that to-morrow will be better than to-day. Twenty or thirty years ago, the dozen theatres of London were almost always empty; there are now three times as many, almost always full. The actors, then, were for the most part mere clowns; they are artists now. Then, some of the best of them had little more than a bare sustenance; now, there are some of the second rank who have their house in town and their house in the country. About 1835, a well-known author was glad to sell a drama to Frederick Yates, manager of the Adelphi, for the sum of £70, *plus* £10 for provincial rights. In 1884, a successful play (that had not yet exhausted its popularity) brought its author £10,000 within a few months, of which £3000 came from the provinces, and to which America and Australia had also contributed. This is a very sordid aspect of the case, but a very important one. £10,000 to an author must prove as effectual an incentive to the modern English author, as did a *coup d'œil de Louis* to the French dramatist in the reign of the Grand Monarque. Such profits should serve to encourage talent, if it be beyond them to generate genius.

It is not difficult to find the real reason why the French public is kept so little and so ill informed as to the present prospects of the English drama. To read Lord Salisbury's latest speech, all one has to do is to buy a paper. One need but go to a bookseller to procure for oneself a volume of Swinburne's poems, or a novel by Stevenson, or a work by Lecky or Herbert Spencer. It is different with plays.

From motives commercial rather than literary, it has been the custom not to print these until long after their production, and I could instance really popular dramas of twenty or forty years ago which have never yet been published. It is necessary, therefore, in order to study the drama, to become a regular frequenter of the theatre; or rather, it is necessary to have followed its course for a number of years in order to note, season by season, the changes it has been undergoing, the tendencies which have been developing, the growth or disappearance of foreign influences, and, finally, the course of each individual talent and of the taste of the public. This study, direct from nature – from the life – is not without difficulty, even to Englishmen; how much less easy must it be to a Frenchman? Ever since it has become the business of an actor, not merely to recite and declaim, but to reproduce faithfully life itself, how many small points must escape the ear of a foreigner?

And if it be hard to say where the drama now stands, to foresee whither it is going, it is still harder to ascertain whence it has come. You expect from a critic, and quite properly, not merely a snapshot of a literary movement at a certain specified moment, but some record also of its process of formation. Affairs in England, even more than elsewhere, require to be thus approached by the historical method. There is no understanding what they are until you have learned what they have been. In the present instance, before examining the resuscitated drama, it is necessary to see of what it died, and how long it remained entombed. All this has to be found out for oneself. The critics of the preceding generations wasted their energies upon inessential details. Theatrical "Reminiscences" are crowded with fictitious anecdotes. This department of history is like a garden that has been neglected and grown wild; the pathways are lost to sight.

I have believed – fondly, perhaps – that, by my special opportunities, I should escape some of these difficulties. I have resided long in England. I know something of its people and its customs. I know how much value to attach to individual testimonies, aided as I am by the thousand opinions and feelings which are in the air, so to speak, but which find their way never into print. I get the impressions of the public from the public itself. Lastly, I love the theatre, and have been an enthusiastic playgoer. During the last three or four years more especially I have seen all the new pieces; and I may perhaps take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation of the courtesy so kindly extended to me in this connection by the principal managers. I may mention, among those to whom I am most indebted, Mr. Tree, Mr. Hare, Mr. Wyndham, Mr. Alexander, and Mr. Comyns Carr, the talented dramatist who, in his *King Arthur*, provided Sir Henry Irving with the opportunity of rendering a last homage to the genius of Tennyson. Indeed, I have met with wide-open doors and outstretched hands wherever I have sought assistance in theatrical circles. Many authors have been good enough to place at my disposal copies of their works which had been printed only for their own use, or for that of their interpreters upon the stage.

But my greatest debt, of course, is to contemporary critics. After having first assisted me in my studies, they have done me the further kindness of encouraging me with their sympathy upon the publication of the successive instalments of my work in the pages of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Their mere attention had been a reward; their kindly approval was more than I had hoped for. I trust they will be able to accord the same indulgent reception to my book, now that it is complete, and that the spirit and feelings which have actuated me in my work will be more fully apparent.

I owe a special acknowledgment to Mr. William Archer. You will see in the course of my book the part which he has played and is still playing, the excellent seeds which he has sown broadcast, not all of which have yet borne fruit. Here, I shall say only that, had I not had his books as a guiding thread, I should have hardly ventured to risk myself in the labyrinth of theatrical history.

There are, in the England of to-day, two schools of dramatic criticism, whose divergence of opinion is clearly marked. They are called "New Critics" and "Old Critics," though accidents of date or age are hardly at all accountable for their antagonisms; it is possible that during the next few years the old criticism may become rejuvenated and that the new criticism may age. For my part, I have sided with neither the one nor the other, because the rôle of neutral is best suited to a foreigner. I

have supplemented my own personal impressions by quotations, taken impartially from both camps, of what has struck me in their criticisms as noteworthy, or happy, or true. I think that the new school is right in wishing to free the English theatre from foreign influences, and in its efforts to give the drama a moral value and an ideal. But I think the old school is not far wrong when it defends, to a certain extent, the more popular forms of dramatic art, and when it would have the drama follow the indications of success, and not isolate itself from that public of whose feelings it should be the living expression.

One word in conclusion. Among the French critics who have done me the honour of discussing my work during its serial publication, more than one has come to the conclusion that, after all, these new English dramas were not such great affairs, and that it was hardly worth while to make so much fuss about them. They forget, these good people, that I promised them no marvels; I did not invite them to a display of masterpieces. If there are to be masterpieces at all, they will be of to-morrow, not to-day. What I have set out to do is to ascertain at what temperature the drama comes to flower, to see how a great section of the human race sets about making to itself a new vehicle of enjoyment, of emotion, of thought, and, I may even add, of moral education. It is an essay in literary history, but also in social history. The two things go together, – are, indeed, henceforth inseparable.

I do not merely follow, step by step, the gradual transformation of the theatrical world; I have endeavoured to make clear the attitude taken up by the drama in presence of the crisis through which society has been passing during the last score or so of years. In this strange conflict between laws and manners, upon which side will the drama definitively take up its stand? What part will it play, and what place will it assume, in the renovation of England by the democracy? Will it help democracy with earnest homilies? Or check it with satire and ridicule? Or will it turn aside from such things altogether, and aspire to those serene heights of art, to which the noises of the plain can never reach? The secret of its downfall or glory lies perhaps in the answering of these questions. It was time to submit them, pending the hour of their solution.

CHAPTER I

A Glance back – From 1820 to 1830 – Kean and Macready – The Strolling Player – The Critics – Sheridan Knowles and *Virginius*– Douglas Jerrold – His Comedies —*The Rent Day*—*The Prisoner of War*—*Black-eyed Susan*– Collapse of the Privileged Theatres – Men of Letters come to the Rescue of the Drama – Bulwer Lytton —*The Lady of Lyons*—*Richelieu*—*Money*.

From 1820 to 1830 the Theatre, or, to be precise, the theatres, prospered to all appearances exceedingly. We shall see just now the real significance of this prosperity; it may be compared to the great ball given by Mercadet on the eve of his bankruptcy. But no one foresaw the collapse that was impending. It was the reign of the Adonis of sixty, who had spent his life inventing pomades and breaking oaths. It would have been droll, indeed, had the man who washed his dirty linen in the House of Lords pretended to be scandalised by the licence of the stage. And his heir, also a worn-out man of pleasure, had lived for a time with an actress, Mrs. Jordan, who, before his accession to the throne, died of grief, and forsaken, at St. Cloud. The small girl named Victoria, who roamed at this time amongst the lonely avenues of the old park at Broadstairs, and who was destined presently to bring marital love and the domestic virtues back into fashion, was still engrossed in the minding of her dolls.

The "privileged" theatres were frequented, or patronised, – to use the recognised English expression, with its savour of old-time condescension, – by Society. By the term "privileged," subventioned must not be understood. To Drury Lane and Covent Garden alone belonged the right of producing the legitimate drama, the plays of Shakespeare, that is to say, and of his successors. This was their "privilege," a privilege which might soon have become but a doubtful benefit had not great actors arisen to keep alive the classical drama by their command on the suffrages of the masses. The generation of actors who had studied in the school of Garrick, and had maintained its traditions, was taking its farewell of the stage in the person of John Kemble and Mrs. Siddons – Siddons, "whose voice," one of her contemporaries tells us, "was more delicious than the most delicious music." Edmund Kean had already come forward, and after him, Macready.

I try to picture to myself these two men as they appeared upon the stage, to produce for myself from all the accounts of them that I have read the illusion of their living presence. The first thing that comes home to one is Kean's Bohemianism, Macready's respectability and good-breeding. Macready was the friend of the leading men of letters of his time, and had the advantage of their advice and support. Kean's only intimate was the brandy-bottle that killed him. Writing to Frederick Yates, the manager of the Adelphi, to ask him for a box, he says, "I don't want to herd with the mob. I like the money of the public, but the public itself I scorn." He in his turn might be looked upon with scorn, were it not for the sufferings of his childhood and youth. If ever man had the right to hate life, it was he.

At Madame Tussaud's the two rivals may now be seen standing side by side, Kean wearing the kilt of Macbeth and Macready the chlamys of Coriolanus. Save for his small size, the former seems the better endowed by nature; his countenance is sombre and bears the stamp of the tragedian. The angular and wrinkled face of Macready, on the other hand, – his slitlike mouth, his close-compressed lips and projecting jaws, – might have made the fortune of a clown. He had only to emphasise or modify its effects, indeed, for his tragic qualities to become comic. It was thus that he rendered so admirably the officiousness and fussiness of Oakley, the sly sensuality of Joseph Surface, the English Tartufe. Alas! he evoked a smile sometimes as Othello; when the Moorish *condottiere*, this personification of a passionate, noble, and high-strung race, was lost in an insensate negro or, if Théophile Gautier were to be believed, something lower still, "an anthropoid ape."

Contemporaries seem agreed in attributing to Kean more genius, more talent to Macready. But there are many occasions when talent serves better than genius. To see Kean, said Coleridge, was to read Shakespeare by flashes of lightning. It is a method which has its merits, but by it one misses a good deal. Kean had some wonderful moments, then relapsed into dulness and insignificance. He would stumble, like a schoolboy reciting a lesson which had no meaning for him, through the whole of the speech of the Moor of Venice before the Senate, "letting himself go" only in the last verse, in which his emotion on seeing Desdemona brought down the house. He concentrated a whole passion into these final words. It was always thus with him.

I may say of them, following Mr. Archer: of the two, Kean was the greater actor and Macready the greater artist. Everything that pertained to instinct was stronger in the one, and everything that pertained to intellect was stronger in the other. Macready bore himself best in moods of calm, rendered with most effect the more virtuous emotions, —*moral* passions one may call them. All that was greatest in Shakespeare, the very soul of his poetry, was revealed through Kean. On one point only had Macready the advantage: he had a way of gazing into space when his lined and haggard countenance seemed to tell of the seeing of things invisible. There was no one like Macready for the suggestion of the supernatural. In all the other provinces of terror Kean was the real master.

Mr. Wilton, the father of an actress of whom I shall have much to say in these pages, used to tell how in his youth, when he was still a young and unknown actor, he had had the honour of playing with Edmund Kean. They were rehearsing the scene in which Shylock, baulked of his coveted gain, rushes frantically upon the stage crying out for his prey.

"Have you ever seen me in this before?" inquired the great actor of his humble colleague.

"No, sir."

"Well, we must rehearse it then, otherwise you would be too much startled this evening."

They went through it, and yet Wilton tells us that when the evening came, Kean terrified him so by the indescribable violence of his performance that he was within an ace of losing his head and fleeing from the stage as one might flee from the cage of a wild beast.

It may be supposed from all this that Kean was in the habit of abandoning himself entirely to the inspiration of the moment. Now, inspiration upon the stage is almost a meaningless expression. In the very moments when the terrifying actor was crossing the stage like a madman, he was counting his steps. As for Macready, immediately before the great scene of Shylock he would work himself up into excitement, emitting every imaginable oath, and brandishing a heavy ladder until he panted actually for breath. Then he would rush down the stage, pallid, breathless, the sweat coursing down his face, the very picture of a man bursting with rage. The audience would have laughed rather than have shuddered had they seen the ladder!

Macready's voice was so rich and so beautiful that it delighted even those who could not follow the meaning of the words which it gave forth. But he was too intelligent an actor to make use of it as a mere instrument of music. Until his time verses were chanted on the stage. He himself was content to declaim them. English dramatic verse consists of a succession of five iambics, which, by the alternation of short feet and long, results in a regular and cadenced rhythm. From time to time an imperfection, the deliberate introduction for instance of a trochee, or perhaps a redundant syllable added at the end of the verse, has the effect of breaking this monotony, but it recommences at once, and the mind relapses under its sway, just as a child is sent to sleep again by a lullaby. My foreign ear was long in taking to it, but at last I began to derive from its melody the same delight that the music of Greek and Latin verse had given me long before. This verse, so interesting and curious in its structure, seems to bear a certain secret affinity with the genius of the English race; the rhythm would seem to have been suggested by the clattering of a horse's hoofs, or by the murmuring of waves.

It is, then, no easy matter to deal with it. Macready approached it reverentially, as was but fitting in a scholar and a devotee of Shakespeare. He wished to leave to it all its melody, its poetic beauty, but he wished at the same time to emphasise the most important words and to bring out the full

force of their meaning. He wished to blend the pure classicism of John Kemble with the passion of Kean, and to add that tendency to realism which marked his own temperament, and which sometimes carried him too far; when as Macbeth he came back from Duncan's room, he looked, according to Lewes, like an Old Bailey ruffian.

It is enough for me to have shown that Macready, like many others in different parts of Europe in 1825, was prepared for a drama that should be in closer touch with life. In France, Romanticism came to turn aside and check the movement. In England, there came absolutely nothing.

But the bankruptcy of the new school was still far off, and the literary atmosphere was charged with warlike sounds at the time when Macready made his appearance in France, with an English company, in the course of the year 1827. He was received as a missionary. He had come to preach Shakespeare to a tribe of poor "ignoramuses," whom their fathers had taught to worship the idols of Lemierre and Luce de Lancival, but who were now anxious to be converted. The young "leading lady" was a Miss Smithson, whose Irish accent clashed somewhat with the verse of Shakespeare. The Parisians thought she had talent, and lost their hearts to "la belle Smidson."[1] In London she was a joke. It is certain, however, that these performances revealed to him who was to be the only true dramatist of the romantic school – to Alexandre Dumas – the secret of a new art; that they made an epoch, therefore, in our literary history, and that they affixed the seal to the reputation of the English tragedian.

Over and above the privileged theatres, there were a number of others, such as the Haymarket and the Adelphi, at which farces and melodramas were chiefly given. In the provinces there prevailed a curious system, without any analogue, so far as I know, in France, that of going on circuit, – a term borrowed, like the system itself, from the language and customs of the law. Just as the English judges make the round at certain dates of all the important towns within a certain district, holding assizes at each, and accompanied by an army of barristers, solicitors, and legal officials of all kinds, so the travelling companies of actors would cater for a whole county, or group of counties, giving a series of performances in the theatre of every town at certain fixed dates, in addition to fête-days and market-days. Communication was slow and costly in those days, and trips to London infinitely rarer than they are now. The country folk had to look to their travelling company to keep them in touch with the successes of the moment.

On arriving in a new town, the manager's wife would go about soliciting respectfully the patronage of the ladies of the place. The manager busied himself over everything, played minor rôles, presided over the box-office, undertook the scene painting, and would even take off his coat and turn up his sleeves and lend a hand to the machinist. His life, and the life of all his company, was half *bourgeois*, half Bohemian; always *en route*, but always on the same beat, always coming upon familiar and friendly faces, – a beat on which his father and grandfather before him had followed the same career. He had friends living in every city, dead friends in every churchyard. Children were born to him on his travels, and when four or five years old made their appearance upon the stage. These comings and goings, the journeyings over green fields, the stoppages and ample breakfastings at little hillside inns, while the horses browsed at large along the hedges, – the freshness and peaceful rusticity of all these things, alternating with the tinsel of the theatre and the applause of the audiences, with the artificiality and feverishness of theatrical life, – must have been a constant entertainment to the little actors and actresses of eight or nine. For the adults, however, the life was a hard one, and only too often their *roman comique* was a *roman tragique* in reality.

The public of these small towns wanted, on their part, to know something of what went on behind the scenes. Sides were taken on the subject of the actor's life, and hot discussions were called forth. Idle pens took to writing pamphlets for or against individual actors, and these had to defend themselves as best they might against their malignant inquisitors, using their booths as pulpits for the

[1] Berlioz did so literally, and married her.

purpose. Here, for instance, is an incident that occurred one evening in a Northern town after the curtain had been raised for *Antony and Cleopatra*. The *jeune premier* comes forward to the footlights, and takes the hand of one of the leading actresses with the stiff, staid courtliness of former days, and the following dialogue is exchanged between them: —

"Have I ever been guilty of any injustice of any kind to you since you have been in the theatre?"

"No, sir" (she replies).

"Have I ever behaved to you in an ungentlemanlike manner?"

"No, sir."

"Have I ever kicked you?"

"Oh, no! sir!"

The audience applauds. Antony and Cleopatra assume their correct attitudes and (this prologue to Shakespeare successfully performed) proceed with their rôles.[2]

From time to time a great artist came forth, after three or four generations of mediocrities, from one of these theatrical nurseries. The others remained tied to their stake, revolving ceaselessly within the orbit of their chain. For them there was no question of glory or fortune. They lived simply and happily, if only they came to the end of the year without having gone to prison, and if only at the end of their life they saw their children growing up and getting educated. Their courage they derived in part from the bottle, in part from religion. A correspondence which has come to light through an unforeseen chance (a grandson who had become famous) revivifies for us the actor-manager on circuit. He is a good fellow, but a trifle sententious. He quotes from the works of his authors, tragic and comic (he has them at his finger-ends) axioms upon all the incidents and experiences of life. He quotes them just as Nehemiah Wallington or Colonel Hutchinson used to quote the Bible. He is as easily excited and as easily calmed as a child. A storm troubles him as a bad omen. A rainbow smiles on him as a promise. Providence may be trusted, he believes, to look after the takings of poor players. He is the Vicar of Wakefield become *père noble*.

Neither in this monotonous and easy-going phase of life, nor in the theatrical world of London, had anyone any idea of modifying the forms or the tendencies of the stage. Those whose duty it should have been to give the necessary impulse did not seem even to suspect that there was any such work for them to perform. The critics of the time, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Charles Lamb, have achieved a permanent place in literature. And yet when one reads them one is disappointed. Except for a few pages of Lamb, one may look to them in vain for the expression of anything like a general idea. They are taken up almost altogether in discussing and comparing the different actors. It does not occur to them to attempt an appreciation or a classification of the plays, for these plays had already been definitively classified and pronounced upon. There was no drama, they seemed to think, except that of Shakespeare and his satellites; and as for comedy, it had said its last word when Goldsmith and Sheridan died. And they were quite content that this should be so. They saw no reason why they, their successors, and the general public, should not continue until the end of time to carp over an entry of Macbeth or an exit of Othello! – or why they should not sit out revivals without end of *The School for Scandal* or *She Stoops to Conquer*. There are eras which will have novelties at all cost, and eras which cling to antiquity.

Macready, with the instinct of a "realistic" and "modern" actor, kept on the lookout for authors. A former Irish schoolmaster, who also had been an actor, and whose name was Sheridan Knowles, brought him a tragedy entitled *Virginius* which he had written in three months. He made a good deal of this point, never having read, probably, the scene of the sonnet of Oronte. The piece was put into rehearsal and played at Covent Garden in the spring of 1820. Reynolds introduced the unknown author to the public in a carefully-written prologue. In it he ridiculed the drama of the period, which he described as "stories" —

[2] William Archer, *Life of Macready*.

"… piled with dark and cumbrous fate,
And words that stagger under their own weight."

He promised to return to Truth and Nature, the invariable programme of all attempts at reforming the drama. And as a matter of fact, *Virginius* might be accepted in a certain sense as a return to Truth and Nature. It belonged to what we were going to call in France, twenty-five years later, the School of Common Sense. Or if one prefers to look back instead of forward, one might say that in it the rules of Diderot and Sedaine's *Drame Bourgeois* seem to have been transferred to Roman tragedy. The piece, like the plays of Shakespeare, was partly in verse and partly in prose, but the verse was little more, really, than metrical prose. The plot developed clearly and logically with a scrupulous observance of the probable and natural. The heroine (one smiles at having to describe her by so grand a name) is for all the world a little *pensionnaire* who might have got her ideas on rectitude from Miss Edgeworth. She occupies herself with her needle in working together her initials and those of the young man of her choice, who is no other than the tribune Icilius. It is this piece of embroidery which reveals her secret. "My father is incensed with you," she says to Icilius, and, her lover becoming impassioned, she covers her face with her hands, saying (as is correct at such a juncture), "Leave me, leave me!" He does not obey, and the author, not knowing how else to prolong the scene, has recourse to high-sounding language… "Thou dost but beggar me, Icilius," exclaims Virginia, "when thou makest thyself a bankrupt." And Icilius replies, … "My sweet Virginia, we do but lose and lose, and win and win, playing for nothing but to lose and win. Then let us drop the game – and thus I stop it," and he stops it by seizing her in his arms.

In the scene in which the client of Appius attempts to possess himself of her, Virginia remains absolutely mute. She is mute also in the great scene of the judgment, and she seems, moreover, to have understood nothing of what has been happening, for she asks her father if he is going to take her home. From the angels and furies of Shakespeare and Corneille we have come down to a virtuous idiot, and are told that this is a return to Nature.

Virginius is an excellent father, a liberal-minded member of the middle class, interesting himself in politics. He knows his rights and does not stand in awe of the ministers. He reminds one of the city man who returns home to his comfortable residence in Chiswick or Hampstead after his day's work in his Leadenhall Street office. He is a widower, but his house is looked after by a very respectable elderly person, in whose excellent sentiments and weak intelligence we recognise a housekeeper of the superior type. The whole household is tranquil, well behaved, Christian, – I might even say, Puritan.

Doubtless the Romans of the republic were men like ourselves, but a true picture of their humanity should reveal characteristics different from ours. The author should either have sought out these characteristics, or else have restricted himself to that sphere of great passions and heroic madnesses in which all the centuries meet on common ground. One is obliged, however unwillingly, to admit the impossibility of retrospective realism.

When Virginius returns from the camp to defend his child, he gazes on her long, and tells her he had never seen her look so like her mother —

"… It was her soul, … her soul that played just then
About the features of her child, and lit them
Into the likeness of her own. When first
She placed thee in my arms – I recollect it
As a thing of yesterday! – she wished, she said,
That it had been a man. I answered her,
It was the mother of a race of men;

And paid her for thee with a kiss."…

There is something at once virile and moving in this passage, but how many such cases are to be found in this tragedy? The paternal emotion of Virginius prepares us but ill for the heroic crime which he is to commit. There is the same contrast between the antiquity of the events and the modernness of the characters.

But the ruin of the piece was the fifth act. Virginia dead, it remains only to punish Appius according to the good old laws of tragic justice. For that, a single moment and a single gesture had been enough. Sheridan Knowles was in the position of being obliged to write his fifth act and having nothing to put into it. He had recourse to a mad scene. Merimée has written that "*il faut laisser aux débutants les foux et les chiens*." This doctrine has Homer and Shakespeare against it. On the other hand, the example of Sheridan Knowles proves that the recourse to madness will not always get the beginner out of his difficulty.

Virginius has succeeded in making his way into Appius's prison —

"How if I thrust my hand into your breast,
And tore your heart out, and confronted it
With your tongue. I'd like it. Shall we try it?"

When the old centurion plunged his hands into the robes of the *decemvir*, as though he expected to find Virginia in his pocket, and when Appius, horrified at finding himself "caged with a madman," appealed for help with all the strength of his lungs whilst calling out to his assailant, "Keep down your hands! Help! Help!" – I cannot imagine how the spectators of 1820 can have refrained from laughter. The two men quitted the scene fighting, and turned up again in another room, – for the prison was a veritable suite of rooms. Having killed Appius, the old man grew calm, and Icilius had but to call him by his name to bring back to him his reason. He slipped a small urn into his hands. "What is this?" asks Virginius. "That is Virginia." And the curtain fell.

Contemporary critics admitted that the last act was somewhat weak. It was curtailed, but delete it as one would, it was still too long. Had it been reduced to ten lines, these ten lines had been ten lines too much.

In spite of everything, however, *Virginius*, by Macready's help, remained a masterpiece for twenty-five years! Knowles made haste to produce some more. He tells in one of his naïve prefaces, how he went to stop with his friend, Mr. Robert Dick, near an Irish lough known for its scenery and its fish, how he would spend the morning at his composition and the afternoon angling, and how his host would snatch his fishing line from his hands whenever he caught him using it before midday… If only Mr. Dick had let him fish in peace! The trout he might have hooked had been at least as valuable as his verse and prose.

If there was any sort of foreshadowing of a national drama in the years 1830 to 1840, it must be sought for in the works of Douglas Jerrold. France knows little of Jerrold, who knew France so well. His was a valiant little soul; his life was one long battle – a battle against obscurity, against ill luck, against the enemies of his country, against the oppressors of the poor, last but not least, against all those whom he disliked. He belonged to that theatrical world at which I have glanced. He was the son of a provincial manager who had met with failure. In his early youth, while yet a child, one may say, he served as midshipman in the wars against Napoleon. He became a journalist later, and threw himself into the midst of politics. Whatever may be said of his caustic and aggressive temperament, he belonged, every inch of him, to that noble generation which aspired so fervently after better things, which strove so strenuously for what was right, which believed it could help humanity forward on the way to a progress without bounds. For forty years he vibrated with generous passions, and grew calm only in the presence of death, which he met like a stoic but with a simplicity not all the stoics

knew. I have been brought into intimate relations with his son, who has repeated to me his last words – "This is as it should be." To fight for justice and to accept the inevitable without fear, – this was the life of a man.

The Rent Day was played on January 25, 1832, that is to say, at the commencement of the memorable year which was to see the passing of the Reform Bill. It is the day upon which the rents have become due. The tenants have brought their money. There is drinking and laughing and singing, the while the heaps of crowns are exchanged for receipts, – for nothing was accomplished in England in those days without drinking, and on rent day it had been almost a disgrace not to be at least "well on." The middleman is presiding over the function. This morning he has received a letter from the young squire, thus expressed – "Master Crumbs, use all despatch, and send me, on receipt of this, five hundred pounds. Cards have tricked me and the devil cogged the dice. Get the money at all costs, and quickly. – Robert Grantley." The middleman therefore must have no pity. There is one farmer who cannot pay; his brother the schoolmaster comes to plead for him. He himself is too poor to lend —

> *Toby* (the schoolmaster): "My goods and chattels are a volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, ditto *Pilgrim's Progress*, with Plutarch's *Morals*, much like the morals of many other people – a good deal dog's eared."…
>
> *Crumbs*: "Has your brother no one to speak for him?"
>
> *Toby*: "Now, I think on't, yes. There are two."
>
> *Crumbs*: "Where shall I find them?"
>
> *Toby*: "In the churchyard. Go to the graves of the old men, and there are the words the dead will say to you: – 'We lived sixty years in Holly Farm; in all that time we never begged an hour of the squire; we paid rent, tax, and tithe; we earned our bread with our own hands, and owed no man a penny when laid down here. Well, then, will you be hard on young Heywood; will ye press upon our child, our poor Martin, when murrain has come upon his cattle and blight fallen upon his corn?' This is what they will say."

The middleman is not one to be moved by the supplications of the schoolmaster. He replies monotonously, inexorably – "My accounts; I must settle my accounts!" Grouped round him, farther back, are the instruments of his lowly tyrant, the beadle (for whom a young writer now hidden from the public eye in the gallery of the House of Commons, Charles Dickens, has in store so terrible a cudgelling) and the appraiser. In those days it was the beadle's function to execute evictions for the benefit of young squires who had lost at cards. The first act of *The Rent Day* concludes with a spectacle of this kind. We witness the seizing of the peasant's bed and of all his furniture, down to a bird-cage and the children's toys. The scene follows its course; entreaties, curses, threats, then silence and desolation. It was thus that the social question was submitted. Had we been there, and in our twentieth year, – you and I who have to contest against the grandsons of the victims, become in their turn slave-drivers, – we should have joined with the rest of the pit in cheering Jerrold.

The first act gives promise of a vigorous comedy of manners, but we sink gradually into a dense melodrama crowded with absurd incidents and extravagant surprises. Was this Jerrold's fault, or that of a public which insisted upon monster jokes and monster crimes? I am inclined to adopt the latter explanation, for supply is regulated by demand; a mercantile axiom which resolves itself in a great natural and highly scientific law.

Jerrold could achieve a light and realistic touch at need, and he has given proof of it in *A Prisoner of War*. The scene is laid in France shortly after the rupture of the Treaty of Amiens. Quite impartially, and with consummate wit, Jerrold holds up to ridicule the *chauvinisme* of the two nations. He does not confound bombast with valour. "Soldiers," says one character, "should die and civilians lie for their country." We are shown – and this has some historical value – the English prisoners living comfortably in a French town, frequenting the Café Imperial, regaling themselves on the bulletins

of the "Grande Armée," with no other obligation than that of answering the roll-call morning and evening. They have money, for the lodging-house keepers compete for their favour; and they pay little French boys to sing "Rule Britannia." As it seems to me, if Garneray's Memoirs are to be believed, our compatriots were hardly so well off on the English hulks.

But what strikes me most in *A Prisoner of War* is one really ingenious and moving scene. It is the evening. An old officer, a prisoner, has remained late over a game of cards with a comrade. Meantime his daughter Clary has a man in her bedroom. Don't be alarmed – the man is her husband. A secret marriage is always introduced in English plays wherever a seduction is to be found in ours. Suddenly Clary is called out to, loudly, by her father. She imagines herself found out, and arrives quite pallid. What had she been doing? her father asks. How was it she had a light still in her window? So she had been reading, eh? Still reading – always reading. And what had she been reading? Novels! As though there weren't enough real tears in the world – real, scalding, bitter tears from breaking hearts – but we must have a parcel of lying books to make people cry double! And what was this silly novel of hers? Clary doesn't know what to answer, and begins telling her own story – the youth of no family and fortune, the moment of recklessness, the giving of her heart to him and then her hand. "Well, and how did it end?" asks the old officer. Clary had "not come to the end"! Ah, then (he resumes), she had turned down the page when he had interrupted her? But he could tell her how it ended. The young couple went upon their knees, and the father swore a little, then took out his pocket handkerchief, wiped his eyes, and forgave them.

At this Clary's face lights up with hope. So that would be the ending, according to him! He could assure her of it? Yes, he replies, he could assure her of it. She is on the point of falling upon her knees. Behind the half-open door, behind which there glimmers the light of a candle, her lover waits, ready to rush forward upon a word from her. "Of course, in real life it would be quite another thing," goes on her father. "If it were I, what would you do?" "I'd kill him like a dog. And as for you – But there, it's too horrible to think of! Let's talk of something else." And he tells her he has found a husband for her. Naturally she protests. The old man goes off again into a fury. "These cursed novels are turning your head. I shall go and burn them this instant." And he steps towards the door, behind which Clary's lover stands trembling.

All this is old-fashioned enough; it dates from the time when the drama was made out of the materials of a vaudeville. And yet I think that even nowadays this scene would tell.

But once again Jerrold had to follow the public taste which led him so terribly astray. His greatest success was his worst production, *Black-eyed Susan*, the popularity of which does not appear to have been even yet exhausted. The hero is a sailor, who translates the simplest ideas into nautical phraseology; the heroine a woman of humble birth, who expresses the loftiest sentiments in the finest language. The prolonged success of such a piece shows the delight which the lower sections of the public derive from the extravagant and the absurd, – the gross idealism, as one may call it, of the masses.

It is more difficult to understand how Jerrold, who had some regard for realism, and who had himself served on the sea, could have brought himself to write a drama which had in it not a semblance of truth, not a touch of nature. In spite of all, however, even in *Black-eyed Susan*, one may find that unrestrained violence, that *diable au corps*, which our fathers accepted willingly as passion.

It was not the public taste alone that was at fault; from the year 1830 the commercial decadence of the English theatre became more and more marked. As often happens, contemporaries failed to appreciate the real meaning of this, and attributed it to accidental causes; amongst others, to the rivalry between Drury Lane and Covent Garden, a rivalry which was carried to absurd extremes under some of the managers, who bid against each other, both for plays and players, to an extent that ruined them. Then came the notion of ending this dangerous competition by uniting the two houses under the same management, but the enterprise proved too big for one man and for a single company. The separate existence had to come into force again. A certain Captain Polhill, who aspired to the rôle

of a Mæcenas, lost fifty thousand pounds in two years over the management of Drury Lane. Then Macready in his turn had a try, and managed the two theatres successively from 1838 to 1843.

The privileged theatres were no longer living on their privilege; they were dying of it. Theatres were springing up all round them, which succeeded sometimes in drawing the public by strange means. Edmund Yates, whose father was then manager of the Adelphi, has given us in his memoirs some idea of the attractions then in vogue: a Chinese giant, Indian dancers, a legless acrobat who got himself up with spreading wings as a monstrous fly, and who sprang about, tied on to a thread, from floor to ceiling. The privileged theatres had no other course than to emulate the unprivileged ones. They produced Shakespeare in the form of curtain-raisers, or to wind up the evening before half-empty benches. They sliced him, carved him limb from limb, and served him up in bits, or floating in a dish of music, with a garnishment of loud and vulgar *mise en scène*, of which the contemporaries of Elizabeth would have been ashamed. And, in spite of all, in spite even of Macready's talent (Kean had died in 1833), they could not get the public to accept him. The new public which filled the theatres was gluttonous rather than *gourmet*, and wanted not quality but quantity – at least six acts every evening, and sometimes even seven or eight. Masterful, clamorous, ill-bred, uncouth in its expression both of enjoyment and of dissatisfaction, its attitude astounded Price Puckler-Muskau, a very careful observer who visited England about the time. Macready acknowledges that there were some corners in Drury Lane where a respectable woman might not venture. The barbarians had begun to arrive; it was the first wave of democracy before which the *habitué*, the playgoer of the old school, was forced to flee.

In 1832 a Commission was instituted by Parliament for the purpose of going into the question of liberty for the theatre. The members could not agree upon the subject, and the question was not settled until after eleven years of discussion. Before this ultimate surrender of Privilege and Tradition to the new spirit, one last effort had been made by men of letters to save the theatre. This was when the great tragedian undertook the management of Covent Garden. There was only one feeling in the world of literature: "We must back up Macready!" Everyone helped. John Forster applied himself to the stage management. Leigh Hunt left aside his criticisms to undertake a tragedy (based on a legend in which Shelley had already found inspiration), and those who could not do so much penned prologues and epilogues and brought them to Covent Garden, just as in former days, at moments of national peril, the patriotic rich brought their valuables to the Mint.[3]

From this abortive renaissance there remain one reputation and three plays. The three plays are *The Lady of Lyons*, *Richelieu*, and *Money*; the reputation is that of Bulwer, the first Lord Lytton. Bulwer passed himself off as a *grand seigneur* and a genius; he was really but a clever man and a dandy, who exploited literature for his social advancement. He affected a lofty originality, but his talents were mostly imitative. His chief gift, almost entirely wanting in his books, but very notable in his life, was what we call *finesse*. He took from the Byronian Satanism as much as England would put up with in 1840. He copied Victor Hugo secretly and discreetly. A sort of Gothic democrat, he managed at the same time to charm romantic youths and flatter the proletariat by pretending to hurl down that society in whose front rank he aspired to take his place. His novels were terribly long-winded, but there are generations which find such a quality to their taste. When at last it was discovered that his sublimity was a spurious sublimity, that his history was false history, his "middle-ages" bric-a-brac, his poetry mere rhetoric, his democracy a farce, his human heart a heart that had never beat in a man's breast, his books mere windy bladders, – why, it was too late! The game had been played successfully and was over – the squireen of Knebworth, the self-styled descendant of the Vikings, had founded a family and hooked a peerage.

He had an eye for all the popular causes which were to be served – and were likely to be of service. When there was talk of reforming the drama, he at once came to the front and took the

[3] "Write me a drama," said Macready to young Browning, "and save me having to go off to America." The drama was written, but attained only a fourth performance, and did not save the actor from his impending expedition.

lead. He was the heart and soul of the Commission of 1832. He was one of those who came to the support of Macready in 1838. It was to this end he wrote *The Lady of Lyons* (without putting his name to it at first).

This is a literary melodrama; a detestable combination, for melodrama, considered either as a variation from drama proper or as a separate type, is not to be raised to the dignity of literature by the veneering of it with a thin layer of poetry. This operation does but produce wild and violent incongruities. In the first act of *The Lady of Lyons*, Madame Deschappelles is a Palais Royal *Maman*. Only a Palais Royal *Maman*, and only one of the most pronounced of them at that, could imagine she would become a dowager princess by marrying her daughter to a prince. Pauline belongs to the same repertory. What are one's feelings, then, on hearing tragic verses from her lips in the third act and seeing her compete with Imogene and Griselda in the sublimity (and absurdity) of her self-sacrifice! In the fourth act she has resumed something of her natural temperament – the temperament of a prim and tedious governess.

But I suppose I must put up with Pauline Deschappelles willy-nilly! It is one of the accepted doctrines of the old dramatic psychology that a character can pass from good to evil at critical moments, and pass out again even when all egress is barred. It is an absurd notion, but if Bulwer conforms to it, at least he is in the same boat with many others. Where he is himself at fault – that which indicates the obliquity of his moral outlook – is his having presented to us in Claude Melnotte a hero who is a double-dyed cheat. A mere peasant by birth, he passes himself off as a prince and marries under his false name the daughter of a rich bourgeois; a soldier by profession, he becomes a general within two years, and in these two years amasses a fortune. How? By what methods of brigandage we are not told, but we are left to accept it as a matter of course. As regards the first point, love may perhaps be held to excuse the crime; as regards the second, no one seems ever to have raised any objection, and it has been left for me to state my difficulty. In a sufficiently disingenuous preface, Bulwer accounts for the incoherences and extravagances of his hero by the state of extraordinary excitement into which men's minds had been thrown by the French Revolution. This explanation has sufficed for the author's fellow-countrymen, and the Revolution has a broad back. But I am afraid that Bulwer was not clear in his mind as to the kind of madness to which Frenchmen were impelled by it, – and still more, that he has confounded our generals with our contractors. Our Desaix and our Ouvrards are not made of the same clay nor moulded in the same form; a fact as to which, unfortunately, he remained unenlightened.

After having made his anonymity serve the purpose of an advertisement, the author consented to reveal his identity whilst announcing at the same time that *The Lady of Lyons* would be a sole experiment. The very next year he appeared before the public with the tragedy of *Richelieu*, in which Macready played the principal rôle. This piece may be compared with the Cromwell of Victor Hugo. It was marked by the same mixture of tragedy and melodrama; the same display of historical documents and the same ignorance of what is essential in history; the same use of the lowest and the most eccentric expedients to raise a laugh or cause a shudder; the same superficial and crude psychology which in each character, male or female, great or small, reveals the personality of the author. Even when this author is a Victor Hugo it is bad enough! But when it is a Bulwer – !

When he blended into one plot the *journée des Dupes* and the conspiracy of the Duc de Bouillon, together with some features borrowed from the adventure of Cinq-Mars and De Thou, the author mingled together two periods which could not and should not be thus confounded, the beginning and the end of Richelieu's career.[4] He managed, too, to falsify English history as well, incidentally, by making Richelieu refer in Council to Cromwell, at that time a still obscure member of the House of Commons. Richelieu speaks of the antagonism between Charles and Oliver at a period when the

[4] As a matter of fact, Bulwer had not even the merit of inventing this arrangement for himself. His play was founded on the novel by X. – B. Saintine.

latter is not even a captain of cavalry. But what is an anachronism of this kind compared to that which involves the principal character in one continued topsy-turveydom? It is the drawback both of the historical play and the historical novel, that they put the great figures of history before us in a form and in an attitude that their contemporaries could have never witnessed; confessing, describing, revealing themselves just to illustrate their character by their conversation, always dilating on their deeds instead of doing them. But of all the braggarts in theatrical history, Bulwer's Richelieu is the most vainglorious and the most intolerable. It is all very well for the author to say in his preface that the cardinal was the father of French civilisation and the architect of the monarchy; he may say what he likes: but we cannot stand Richelieu when he talks of himself in the same strain and in the third person, just as Michelet and Carlyle might in a fit of raving; nor when he counterfeits death in order to play the ghost, nor when he weeps theatrically, and addresses declamatory love messages to "La France." – "France, I love thee, – Richelieu and France are one!" Nor can we believe in him when he sees modern France come to life again from out the cinders of feudalism. After such nonsensical dicta, indeed, one would be hardly surprised to hear him exclaim, "I am the precursor of 1789; what I cannot consummate, Bonaparte shall achieve in the Sessions of the Conseil d'Etat!"

The secondary characters are one idea'd. Beringhen can say nothing but "Let's discuss the pâté!" and the Duc d'Orleans is limited to "Marion dotes on me." To the tragi-comedy there is tacked on a melodrama made after the approved methods of the Boulevard – a succession of events and surprises which cancel out. You feel you are expected to shout, Bravo Richelieu! bravo Baradas! Just as at the Porte Saint Martin or at the Ambigu you cry out, Bravo d'Artagnan! bravo Mordaunt! It is the system of Dumas without his art.

Lord Lytton lacked both imagination and ingenuity. His effects are poor, and he overdoes them. The first resuscitation of Richelieu comes near to impressing one, the second is simply silly. The kernel of the play consists of a document which passes through every pocket but never reaches its address. At the moment, the owner of this treasure is a prisoner at the Bastille. Instead of searching him, the Government sends a courtier to seize him by the throat and rob him of it. The scene is witnessed through a key-hole and described to us by a little page of Richelieu's – the rôle being played by a woman. The page throws himself on the courtier the moment he comes out in order to snatch from him the fateful paper, and the conclusion of the drama results from these two encounters. One might sum up *Richelieu* as a mixture of bad Hugo with worse Dumas!

Money is by way of depicting English Society as it was in 1840. It recognised itself, or rather its enemies recognised it, in this caricature! Are we to believe that the gambling scene in the third act takes place in an aristocratic club? It is more in keeping with the back parlour of a public-house. A very well-known critic, who represents the ideas of a whole class and of a whole school, in alluding to the success which the piece met with in the first instance, and which it meets with still on every revival, declares that the spectators wished to show their appreciation of the "humour of a scholar." I must confess that I can recognise neither the scholar nor the humour. On the contrary, what I see in it is a spurious sensibility and that moral obliquity to which I have referred. Alfred Evelyn, who has been enriched by the will of an eccentric cousin, and who now sees the world at his feet after having experienced its disdain, decides to share his fortune with an unknown girl who has sent £10 to his old nurse at a time when he himself was too poor to come to her aid. It is in this silly intention that he is throwing away his happiness, and that the plot finds its motive. He is engaged to a young girl whom he doesn't love, and in order to get rid of her, this mirror of refinement, this Alcestes with all his fine scorn of average humanity, pretends to ruin himself at play in the presence of his destined father-in-law. The girl whom he loves has refused (in Act I.) to marry him, not because he is poor, but because, poor herself, she was afraid of being a drag on him in his career. But someone had entered during her explanation and she had not been able to finish her sentence. She finishes it in the last act, and it transpiring also that it was she who had really sent the £10, the two lovers fall into each other's arms.

That is really all there is in *Money* over and above the social satire, which to my thinking is terribly far-fetched, and that wonderful "humour" which I have been unable personally to discover.

Bulwer was not the man to save the erring Drama. Stronger men than he might have tried in vain to do so. It was not to the men of letters, the scholars, that it was to owe its salvation. The democracy had to come to the use of reason and to educate itself. Instead of the artificial drama which was offered to them, they held out for a drama sprung from its own loins, born of its own passions, made after its own image, palpitating with its own life; literary it might become later, if it could. And to this end, in the words of Olivier Saint-Jean, "It was necessary that things should go worse still before they could go better."

CHAPTER II

Macready's Withdrawal from the Stage – The Enemies of the Drama in 1850: Puritanism; the Opera; the Pantomime; the "Hippodrama" – French Plays and French Players in England – Actors of the Period – The Censorship – The Critics – The Historical Plays of Tom Taylor and the Irish Plays of Dion Boucicault.

Macready played once more in Paris in 1846, but the times were changed, and he achieved only a *succès d'estime*. He then visited America, where his presence evoked professional jealousies and bad blood, resulting in serious riots in which lives were lost. On February 26, 1851, the great actor gave his farewell performance. A brilliant page of Lewes has kept alive until our own day the emotion of this memorable occasion, which marks an era in the history of English art. Macready was in deep mourning; he had just lost a daughter of twenty years of age. He did not declaim his speech, but gave it forth with dignified sadness. In it he laid claim only to two merits – that of having brought back the text of Shakespeare in its purity, and that of having made of the theatre a place in which decent folks need not hesitate to be seen. He foresaw that if his glory as an artist should fade with the gradual disappearance of those who had witnessed it, his work as a literary restorer and a moral reformer would survive. And he was right.

The farewell performance was followed by a banquet, at which the inevitable Bulwer took the chair. John Forster read aloud at it some verses by Tennyson. The Laureate had graven on the tomb of the tragedian's career the three words, "Moral, Grave, Sublime."

Then all was over. The voice that had thrilled so many souls was to be heard only at charitable entertainments and provincial gatherings. And when he died in 1873 England had forgotten him.

There is a story of his last days which I cannot refrain from repeating, though it has no bearing really upon the subject of this book. When the old man, confined by paralysis to his armchair, was cut off from the world by the loss of several of his senses, he would be seen acting to himself (barely so much as moving his lips the while) the masterpieces he had loved. There was nothing to reveal the progress of the play save the light that would illumine his ever-mobile countenance, to which new lines had been given by conscious use and solitary thought.

How fine they must have been, these impersonations – Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth – in the mysterious half-shades of his life's evening and in the silent theatre of his mind, where there was nothing to shackle the artist in his struggle after perfection, where every aspiration was an achievement!

If I have spoken at some length of Macready, it is because I cannot bring myself to regard him as the representative of a dead art, the last High Priest of a shattered idol. On the stage and off the stage, Macready was a pioneer. He was the first to see the coming of Realism, and he was the first actor of good breeding. But a long time was to ensue ere his example would be followed and understood. The stage, when he left it, was in a state of confusion and of squalor difficult to describe.

Strive as Macready would to cleanse the theatre, the prejudice which kept certain classes apart from it seemed to grow and spread. The accession of the young Queen heralded one of those moods of puritanism which are chronic with English society. Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations multiplied, and, in providing innocent and free amusements for the artizan, they competed with the theatre at the same time as with the public-house. With the higher classes it was music that was injuring the drama by its rivalry. For a long time – as Lady Gay Spanker put it in a comedy of the time – the English had known no music but the barking of the hounds; now it was that Society began to scramble for boxes at extravagant prices to hear Grisi sing. A quarrel between the singer and her manager having led to a severance, the now "star"-less company, by a marvellous stroke of luck, was enabled to shine afresh with Jenny Lind. This rivalry continued, and together with

the burning of Her Majesty's Theatre it led to the invasion of the two great London theatres by foreign musicians. The opera held sway from the end of March to the end of July. The Pantomime, at first humble and modest, but growing stronger every year, began now at Christmas and lasted throughout a considerable portion of the winter. A short autumn season was all that remained for the drama, or rather melodrama, and for what was worse than the others, the "Hippodrama." Thus was entitled a new kind of production in which horses had the principal rôles. More than one popular author was glad to invent plots for these singular protagonists. Shakespeare, who had had to go turns hitherto with the lions of the tamer Van Ambrugh, – he and they roaring on alternate evenings, – had to give in completely before the Hippodrama. He took refuge in a suburban theatre, Sadler's Wells, with the actor Phelps, and there he was able eventually to boast, like that survivor of the Reign of Terror —*J'ai vécu*. To arouse any interest in him amongst the English public, it was necessary that he should be stumbled through by foreigners or lisped by babes.

According to an old brochure of the time which groans over the depth of the humiliation of the theatre, people stood still to look a second time at the madman who could attempt to run Covent Garden or Drury Lane. To the reckless amateur succeeded the shameless adventurer, the shy contractor with empty pockets that called for filling. About 1850 one of these great theatres was managed by an ex-policeman who had started a restaurant; later it passed into the hands of a theatre attendant. One manager was arrested for theft in the wings of his own theatre. It is easy to imagine how dramatic art would develop in the hands of such men. They dispensed with scenery and stage properties, and made shift with an empty stage; they squandered their substance and lavished their genius upon the art of advertising; their puffs and prospectuses were the only masterpieces of the times. There were some who sought to excite English chauvinism, pre-jingoism as one may call it, by such performances as that of the national acrobat who turned head over heels ninety-one times while his American rival was achieving but eighty-one, thus conquering the New World by ten somersaults.

These things succeeded in attracting the public, but *what* public? Theatre-goers were but a small section really of the public – a group apart on whom lay a certain suspicion of immorality connected with an evil reputation of being un-English. There was some ground for this last reproach. Foreigners were gaining ground. It would seem that there was no getting along without us French between 1850 and 1865. We were translated and adapted in every form. Our melodramas were transplanted bodily; our comedies were coarsened and exaggerated into farces; sometimes even, that nothing might be lost, our operas were ground down into plays. Second-rate pieces were honoured with two or three successive adaptations; and dramas which had lived a brief hour at the Boulevard du Crime, in England became classics. There is a tradition that the director of The Princess's had a tame translator under lock and key who turned French into English without respite, his chain never loosened nor his hunger satisfied until his task, for the time being, should be complete.

Our actors had at this time a permanent home in London, kept for them by Mitchell, the Bond Street bookseller, at the St. James's Theatre. Thence they made incursions upon all the others. Some years previously Madame Arnould Plessy, having taken into her head to act in the tongue of Shakespeare, Théophile Gautier had complimented her on the grace with which she had succeeded in "extracting English from her mouth." Others now attempted to emulate her accomplishment and to turn it to account. Fechter resolved not merely to play Hamlet, but to play as it had never been played before, and he did so to rounds of applause for seventy nights. An *ingénue*, escaped from the Comédie Française, made a similar effort in the rôle of Juliet, and despite her bad accent, and intolerable pretension, she was able to keep it up, thanks to powerful supporters, in the teeth of the quite excusable hostility of the pit. Things did not always pass off so harmlessly, and in more than one instance the brutal anger of the public, as under Charles I., drove intruders from the stage, which it wished to see occupied by native actors alone.

As a matter of fact, there were some notable English actors and actresses at this time. Helen Faucit (now Lady Martin) preserved the pure diction of John and Charles Kemble. Charles Kean,

despite his inadequate physique, won for himself gradually an honourable place on the stage over which his father had held sway. Ryder had a presence, and a sonorous voice, deep and hollow and tragic, like that of Beauvallet or of Maubant. Keeley was a massive man, who could act with subtlety; his wife, incisive, keen, *amère*, had a leaning towards the serious drama – towards the realistic even. Robson, a queer and wonderful little figure, made a mark in *le drame noir* and in outrageous caricature. Farren had made his *début* in old men's parts at eighteen, and played them for fifty years without advancing in his art a step, without introducing a shade of emotion or a touch of humanity into his effects. Charles Mathews impersonated impudent youth, just as Farren impersonated unpleasant and ridiculous old age. Elegant, lissome, light, mobile, Mathews skipped and fluttered and chirruped like a bird. In his old age he reminded me of Ravel, his contemporary, whose method and rôles offered some analogy with his.[5] Buckstone made the Haymarket prosper for twenty years, where I saw him, secure in the favour of the public, with his colleague, Compton, whose speciality was a certain dryness of humour. Buckstone at this time had lost both his hearing and his memory. But what a sly look there was in his eye! How his mouth would twist and turn! What irony lurked in the expressive ugliness of that wrinkled old mask of his!

These good actors injured rather than served their art. They revelled in, and limited themselves to, their own speciality, exaggerated their idiosyncrasies day by day, and left them as a legacy to their imitators. The authors were too insignificant, did they see the danger, to oppose their will to that of Charles Mathews and Farren. They took their measures to order and tried to satisfy their patrons. Thus became gradually narrowed at once the field for invention and for observation. As substitutes for the infinity of living human types and characters, seven or eight *emplois*, as one may say, came into existence —*emplois* often further specified and characterised by the name of an actor. There was the low comedian and the light comedian, the villain and the heavy man. All diversities of womenkind were grouped into one of these four ticketed sections: the *ingénue*, the flirt, the chaperon, and the wicked woman. The valet of Comedy had become a rascally steward whose rogueries took on a certain aspect of Drama. There were two or three types of old men. There was the surly old curmudgeon in whom the author vents his spleen, and who draws up eccentric wills. There is the old beau, cowardly and cynical, who in the last act marries his fiancée to his own son and swears to reform. And there is the old peasant who is descended in a straight line from the father of Pamela, always talking of his white hairs and his contempt for gold, and always greeting the traveller, who has been overtaken by a storm and has lost his way, with "Be welcome to my humble roof." The peasant, one need hardly remark, never existed. On the stage he has lived more than a hundred years. Hardly less indispensable to the comedy or the drama was the captain, the "man about town," addicted to drink, with a diamond pin resplendent in his tie, wearing salmon-coloured trousers, and top boots that he is always dusting with the end of his riding-whip. He represents the selfishness, the folly, and the insolence of the higher classes, as imagined by a man who has never been inside a drawing-room. Did he know Society at his finger-ends, the man would never think of painting it. He never paints from nature. He copies for the thousandth time from the old models, Sheridan and Goldsmith, or his new masters, Scribe and d'Ennery.

It was for the critics, one is inclined to say, to instruct the public, the actors, and the author. I am almost ashamed to tell of the pass to which dramatic criticism had come. A paragraph in an obscure corner, a quarter of a column on the more important works, – that was about all the space the great newspapers accorded to the theatre. Dramatic criticism was a nocturnal calling that enjoyed a not too good repute, and was frowned on by respectable people and fathers of families. It was entrusted to tyros, who hoped by their good conduct to earn their advancement presently to the reporting staff in the police courts. The one writer undertook both drama and opera. Dramatic criticism and musical criticism, owing to the natural gifts which they require, are two absolutely different callings. What

[5] Charles Mathews played at the *Variétés*, in French, in *L'anglais timide*, an adaptation of *Cool as a Cucumber*, by Blanchard Jerrold.

mattered it, however, to the writer, who was expected only to praise the pieces and the performers, without being too much of a bore?

John Oxenford, the critic of the *Times*, was sent for one morning to the office of the editor. In analysing a new piece he had criticised freely the performance of a certain actor, and the latter had addressed a letter of remonstrance to Mr. Delane. “These things,” said the editor majestically to the writer, – “these things don’t interest the general public, and I don’t want the *Times*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.