THE PLAYS OF YESTERYEAR

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

In the eleventh chapter of *Other Days*, by Mr. William Winter,—a wistfully pathetic volume in which the author eloquently recollects the high delight he used to take in going to the theatre half a century ago,—the following statements may be found: "It is undeniable that the condition of the American Stage, at present, is unsatisfactory to persons who possess judgment, knowledge, and taste. . . . The pendulum,—which is always swinging,—has swung backward. The character of the Theatre has deteriorated, and there has been a corresponding deterioration in the character of its followers. . . . The immediate point is that the present day happens to be a day of theatrical decline. There has not been a time in the history of the American Stage when the Theatre received so much attention as it receives now, from the Public and the Press, and there has not been a time when the quality of its average presentments so little deserved the respect of intellect and judicious taste. . . . The theatrical audience of this period is largely composed of vulgarians, who know nothing about art or literature and who care for nothing but the solace of their common tastes and animal appetites: on that point observation of the faces and manners of the multitude would satisfy any thoughtful observer. . . . The stage has 'fallen on evil days.' The pendulum may swing forward again, by and by, and the tide may rise again, but no indications are now visible that a change for the better is near at hand."

If these statements were true, no consideration in the world could tempt the present commentator to continue to criti-

cise the current drama, month by month, in the pages of this magazine. He could not afford to waste his evenings in so degenerate a theatre, nor to waste his mind in the analysis of such insignificant material. But Mr. Winter's statements are not true. The truth of the matter is that there has never been another time within its century of history when the American Theatre has been patronised by so many "persons who possess judgment, knowledge, and taste," nor when so many new plays have been presented every year which "deserved the respect of intellect and judicious taste." The pendulum is swinging forward with a tidal chant; and the quality of our dramatic art and the judgment of our audiences have risen steadily for fifty years and now are rising more rapidly than heretofore.

Mr. Winter's disparagement of the contemporary theatre-going public is sufficiently disproved by the civic success of Mr. Richard Bennett's recent production of *Damaged Goods,* a translation by John Pollock of the famous work of Eugène Brieux entitled *Les Avariés.* This piece was not intended as an entertainment: it is a clinical disquisition upon one of the most terrible of civic sores by the greatest living Professor of Social Hygiene. The purpose and the method of the preachment may best be indicated by the following words, which were composed by the author to be spoken as a prologue at the first and only presentation of the piece in Paris in 1902:—"The object of this play is a study of the disease of syphilis in its bearing on marriage. It contains no scene to provoke scandal or arouse disgust, nor is there in it any obscene word; and it may be witnessed by every one, unless we must believe that folly and ignorance are necessary conditions of female virtue."

The interest of this work is wholly intellectual; and since it offers no allurement to the prurient, and no entertainment to the idle-minded, one might have supposed that it would have appealed only to a small and special audience. It was first presented at two private matinées, held under the auspices of the Sociological Fund of the *Medical Review of Reviews;* but in response to a general and undeniable demand it has since been offered to the public as a regular attraction at the Fulton Theatre. This house had had a disastrous season; for several weeks it had been dark; and a superstition had arisen that the public would not patronise a play that was offered on its stage. Yet *Damaged Goods* has run six weeks, attracting audiences that have tested the capacity of the theatre; and, except for the setting-in of summer, it might, apparently, have run for many months. In six weeks, over fifty thousand people have witnessed the production: over fifty thousand people have paid their money to listen to a lecture by the most earnest-minded dramatist of contemporary France.

This phenomenon seemed of sufficient importance to the present commentator to induce him to look in at the performance of *Les Avariés* on four or five occasions. Could it be possible, one wondered, that so eager an audience could be—in Mr. William Winter's words—"largely composed of vulgarians?" . . . On each occasion, the first hasty "observation of the faces and the manners of the multitude" was completely reassuring. The theatre housed no smutty-minded idlers. Such spectators as admire the half-dressed chorus of the Ziegfeld *Follies* were conspicuously absent. The auditorium was filled to the final row with people who looked like those who habitually furnish audiences for the great Free Lecture System of the Board of Education. They were earnestly eager to inform themselves of "the best that is known and thought in the world." Perhaps the majority of the auditors were men,—the sort of men who toil in Social Settlements to ameliorate the lot of their less lucky fellow-citizens; but it was, upon the whole, more interesting to observe the women in the audience. They were the sort of women who teach school, or work in other worthy ways to support the society that supports them.

The type of woman who meekly allows herself to be kept by her father or her husband and offers the world no intellectual return for the energy that is expended to maintain her in a desuetude that is at best innocuous seemed scarcely to figure in the audience. Many of the women auditors were young; and it was gratifying to observe that they listened to the lecture of the great Brieux without a simper or a blush. They would have denied indignantly that "folly and ignorance are necessary conditions of female virtue"; and they went away informed of many important facts which otherwise might not have been brought to their attention.

Would Mr. William Winter venture to maintain that such an audience as this could possibly have been assembled, for six weeks running, in any theatre of New York half a century ago?

Mr. Winter's other contention, that "there has not been a time in the history of the American Stage when the quality of its average presentments so little deserved the respect of intellect and judicious taste," can, fortunately, be disproved with equal ease. In recent years it has become the custom of many managers to devote the spring season to the revival of old plays; and several of the pieces that have thus been resurrected have cured us of any sentimental sighing for "the good old days." How lucky, on the contrary, we are, to have escaped the era of *The Lady of Lyons* and to have been born in an age when such writers as Pinero and Maeterlinck, Hauptmann and Barrie, Shaw and Sudermann, Galsworthy and Brieux, are devoting their mental energies simultaneously to the traffic of the stage!

It is surely not unfair to Mr. Winter to take the recent adequate revival of Lester Wallack's *Rosedale* as a text for considering what he has assumed as a "deterioration" in "the character of the Theatre" in America. *Rosedale* was by far the most successful play that was presented in America in the decade of the eighteen-sixties, and there seems no reason to doubt that it was one of the best plays of that epoch. In its first season, 1863, it ran for one hundred and twenty-five performances, thereby setting a new record for American theatres; and it played, at the same time, to receipts that averaged $900 a performance,—a sum looked upon, in that period, as unprecedented and likely never to be surpassed. The piece was received with scarcely less acclaim when it was revived in 1865, 1868, 1871, and 1874. Surely it seems not unfair to accept this enormously successful work as a representative example of the dramaturgy of its period.

Yet how does *Rosedale* look to-day "to persons who possess judgment, knowledge, and taste"? It seems, in comparison with only our second-best contemporary efforts, a mass of childish nonsense. This impression is not owing to the fact that its dramaturgic method is old-fashioned. Old fashions may be good fashions, in the theatre as in life; and a modern audience does not find it difficult to accept the immeasurably more antiquated technical devices of Molière or Shakespeare or even Sophocles. This fact was proved this recent winter by the deep impression made upon artistic minds by the production of *The Yellow Jacket*,—a play that easily conveyed its delicious blend of poetry and humour by the uncustomary and naïve conventions of the Chinese stage. If *Rosedale* seems unsatisfactory to-day, it is not because of its soliloquies and its asides, its alternation of front and back scenes, its symmetrical balancing of character against character and mood against mood, or its dialogue of laboured and artificial prose. These were merely technical conventions in Lester Wallack's day; and a reasonable mind will always accept any convention of expression for the sake of receiving the thought to be expressed. The play seems silly to us now for a deeper and a more important reason. It is silly because it consciously and deliberately tells lies about life.

And here we set our finger on the difference between the best plays of fifty years ago and the best efforts of our

drama of to-day. When Mr. Winter was a young man, people went to the theatre to be told lies about life: nowadays they go to the theatre to be told some serious and searching truth. This may seem an extreme statement; but it may be verified by anybody who will take the trouble to compare *The Lady of Lyons*—which is probably the best English play of the eighteen-thirties—with such a piece as Mr. Galsworthy's *The Pigeon*—which is only one of a dozen of the best English plays that have been written in the last few years.

The purpose of every artistic endeavour is to tell the truth; and no effort that is not actuated by this aim is worthy of the name of art. Half a century ago the drama, in the English language, had ceased to be an art; and it has resumed the responsibility and the dignity of art only in the last twenty years. In *Rosedale,* for example, no effort whatsoever was made to hold the mirror up to nature. The characters are false to life, the incidents are false to life, the plot is impossible, and the dialogue is lacking in any suggestion of veracity. But if these accusations should be fairly made against a new contemporary play, it would speedily be derided to oblivion.

It is an interesting fact that no one thought of urging these objections in the period when *Rosedale* was produced. No one thought, at that time, that it was the duty of the drama to endeavour to fulfil the aim of art. Otherwise this childish composition could never have been so highly vaunted at a time when Thackeray and Dickens had already accomplished their great labours and when George Eliot and George Meredith were at the height of their powers. How—unless the theatre was similingly regarded as a realm of triviality—could any intelligent person of the eighteen-sixties read such a novel as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and subsequently sit through such a play as *Rosedale?*

It is only lately that the drama has caught up with the novel as a medium for expressing an artistic view of life,—that is to say, a vision of life that is actuated by the high endeavour to enlarge the horizon of our understanding. The sum-total of what we know of human character has been increased by Pinero, Jones, Barrie, Galsworthy, Barker, and many other English-writing playwrights of the present period; but it seems scarcely an exaggeration to say that it was, to all intents and purposes, decreased by the playwrights of half a century ago. For, though people must have known in 1863 that Lester Wallack was lying, his piece was so effective in the theatre as to woo them for the moment to forget that they knew better than to believe the lies he told them.

When our modern drama, in the hands of Henrik Ibsen, began anew to illuminate the world with the torch of truth, it was assailed on all sides as "immoral" by people whose minds had been drugged and drowsed by easy and amiable lies. This is the accusation that is always raised by the unilluminated multitude against the Teacher who causes the light to shine before them; and it is upon the basis of this accusation that, in every age, they crucify him. Doubtless, at the present time, there are many who would accuse Eugène Brieux of "immorality" because, in *Damaged Goods,* he has dared to wage war against that horrible conspiracy of silence which continues to submit thousands of the innocent ignorant to the infection of a devastating disease of whose nature they are unaware. But the only immorality of which art is really capable is the immorality of bearing false witness against life; and it is just as immoral to make life appear more easy than it is as to make it appear more difficult. We are learning at last that such a play as *Rosedale* is immoral, and that the most pernicious works of fiction are those that smilingly assume what may be called a girl's-boarding-school outlook upon life. *Rosedale* is immoral because it teaches the doctrine that virtue will inevitably be rewarded and villainy will always reap discomfiture. This is an easy doctrine, but it is not true. It is immoral, also, because it teaches that all people

may be divided into sheep and goats—those who are very, very good and those who are very, very bad—whereas we know that human character is so complex that no final and sweeping judgment can be passed upon the infinite entanglement of motives that leads to the lifting of a little finger. There is no soul so pure that it does not succumb occasionally to error; there is no soul so black that it does not rise occasionally to the height of human heroism. Such plays as this teach also that women are lovable in proportion to their ignorance, that all good people are handsome, that self-sacrifice is always noble, and innumerable other doctrines that are devastating to the mind. God defend us from the "sweet and wholesome" plays of yesteryear!