

Preface.

Mr. Grein has asked me to write a preface to *The Black Cat*. I cannot myself see much occasion for this. Why should an author be called upon to make a speech before the curtain? Because, I presume, people want to have something to talk about besides the play itself, and an author must surely have "views." Well, it is a day of views—and of talk.

The Black Cat was produced at the Opera Comique on December 8th, 1893, at one of the Independent Theatre Society's performances. It had a certain *succès d'estime* before a special audience, for whom, however, it was not written; and it has not been performed since.

The critics were wonderfully kind. They actually praised the play; some reluctantly, some with a reckless enthusiasm which quite astonished me. I had expected a much less pleasant reception.

The main objection they made to the thing was that it had a tragic ending, which they kindly suggested I had tacked on to my comedy, to appeal to the morbid taste of an "Independent" audience. Unfortunately I had done nothing of the kind. The play was conceived before the Independent Theatre had come into existence. The end was foreseen from the beginning; the tragedy being implicit in the subject. The tragic motive lay deeper than the death of the heroine, who might have been allowed to live, if that last symbolic pageantry had not had its dramatic fitness. Given the characters and the circumstances, the end is the absolutely right one.

Of course the circumstances might have been altered, and a sort of reconciliation patched up between husband and wife. But this would be a somewhat flat piece of cynicism, only justifiable on the ground taken by the *Telegraph*, that modern actors cannot play, and ought not to be expected to play, modern tragedy.

The conventional "happy ending" demanded by sentimental critics to suit the taste of sentimental playgoers, the divided parents left weeping in each other's arms over the recovered child, would also be quite possible. But surely even a modern dramatist may for once be allowed to preserve a grain of respect for nature and dramatic art? This would be an outrage against both. It would not be decent

comedy, it would be mere burlesque, as sentimentality always is to the judicious.

The only other alternative I see is the exodus of the wife, with or without her child; or of the husband, with or without his mistress. But this would be rank Ibsenism, and outrage British morality, which would be still more dreadful. Only a "practical dramatist" could cut the Gordian knot, and at the last moment introduce the erring Mrs. Tremaine, still charming in the garb of a Sister of Mercy, to bring down the curtain upon a tableau of Woman returning to her Duty, and Man to his Morality. And I, alas! am not a "practical dramatist."

Still, if the play had been an experiment, I might have further experimented with it, and rehandled its ending. But it was not in its main lines an experiment. It was a thing seen and felt; and so it must remain, in its printed form, at least—"a poor thing," it may be, "but mine own!"

After the performance, came the managers, wanting to see the play, and asking why I had not shown it to them before. Well, it never occurred to me that any of them would seriously have considered the production of a piece so far off the ordinary lines. They had not, like the enterprising Director of the Independent Theatre, undertaken the dreadful trade of educating the public. As a matter of fact, they fought shy of a piece in which "the new hysteria" was studied, and which ended badly, or at least sadly.

A Comedy of Sighs, produced at the Avenue last spring, was really an experiment on the taste of the British public. I wished to ascertain whether a play depending for its interest rather upon character and dialogue than upon plot and sensational situations, would be at first tolerated and afterwards enjoyed by an average audience. Perhaps the experiment was too audaciously conceived, and too carelessly conducted, by both author and management. It was unfortunately vitiated by the presence of a prevalent bacillus, the British bugbear, in the test-tubes.

The new play was received with inarticulate cries of horror by the critics. The *Telegraph* and the *World*, which had presided in auspicious opposition over the birth of *The Black Cat*, now hung terrific in unnatural conjunction in the horoscope of *A Comedy of Sighs*.

Here was Ibsenism again—nay, worse than Ibsenism, Dodoism, Sarah-Grandism, Keynotism, rampant on the English stage! For had I not most impudently exhibited *The Modern Woman* upon it? And although there was no tragedy this time, but beautiful reconciliation, and return to her Duty at the fall of the curtain, was she not there, the Abomination of Desolation?

Now we know that the Modern Woman ought not to exist anywhere, therefore she does *not* exist, therefore she must be stamped out. Mrs. Grundy and others have already begun the good work, and have been diligently stamping her out ever since; with such success that we may hope she will disappear, with infidelity, Ibsenism, the struggle for existence, and other such objectionable things. Meanwhile she has made her *début*, and may cry: *J'y suis, j'y reste!*

The *Comedy of Sighs* was slain, waving its tiny flag in the van of a forlorn hope; and over its dead body "Arms and the Man," its machine-guns volleying pellets of satire, marched to victory.

I do not solace myself with that belief, so comforting to the unsuccessful, that a play fails merely because of its goodness, or succeeds merely because it is bad; yet it is evident, I think, that other things besides its merits or demerits as a piece of dramatic writing may turn the scale for or against it. *A Comedy of Sighs*, with its somewhat "impressionist" sketches of character, and aberrations from the ordinary type of a "well-made play," proved to be "too lightly tempered for so loud a wind" as blows upon British bugbears—"Modern Women," and the like.

And now may I say a few words with regard to some misconceptions on the part of the critics as to my aim in writing these two plays? One of them, an enthusiast himself, did me the honour to hail me as a brother enthusiast, albeit an erring one. Possibly I am. But I have not been trying to educate the public, which is being educated past its old standards day by day, without such philanthropic effort on my part. I have not been trying to write "literary" plays. I quite agree with those who think that a play must be a play first. If it be "literature" afterwards, that is an added grace which gives it a permanent value. If it be not, still it may be a good play in its day and generation. I have not, for the sake of being unconventional, deliberately set myself to violate all the received canons of

dramatic art, as practised by the "practical dramatist," thus making a convention of unconventionality. Unconventional art is impossible, and the drama, like other arts, has its conventions. But conventions change, and new ones are evolved, as new problems in art and other things—even morality itself—come in with each new tide of the human imagination. The "well-made play" of the day before yesterday is not a canon for all time, even for the most conservative playgoer.

No, what I have been trying to do is simply to write a good play. Ah yes! But what *is* a good play? The enthusiastic critic has a ready answer: "The play that succeeds, that has a long run, that has money in it!" I accept the answer for what it is worth. This potentiality of money is, like "literature," an added grace: and it certainly, in a sense, marks the survival of the fittest. But there are other standards in the great workshop of the artist, Nature. Even the plant or play that lives but a short time may cast its seed into the soil, or imagination, of its day, and, like Banquo, beget a royal race, though not itself a king.

Now, how does such a play as *The Black Cat* differ from those we see succeeding on the stage every day? Really not so very much, after all. It merely accentuates a growing tendency in the plays of the period to get more of the stuff of life, our every-day human life, typically upon the stage; with less of the traditional theatrical-academic element. The "well-made play" has itself undergone evolution since the days when it was an aphorism that not what is said but what is done on the stage is the essential thing. This of course is at once true and false, like every other truism. Without action there can be no play; and a play may be made fairly intelligible without a single spoken word, just as a scene from history or fiction may be quite recognisably depicted in a few symbolic lines, dots, and dashes, though no single human figure be decently drawn.

We must not, however, forget that action itself is language. What is called the action of a play is simply a story told by the movements of the players. But when we see a man stabbed, or a woman kissed, our curiosity is excited. We want to know something more about the people whose actions we see. This, indeed, may be roughly told by gesture and facial expression, which are themselves language;

but, finally, to understand more than the barest outline of the story, we are forced to demand words. And the more we are interested in human nature the more we want to understand the thoughts, emotions, motives, characters, of the personages in action before us. Hence by gradual steps have come our latest attempts at studies of complex characters, in their struggle to solve the problems of life; or what are objected to as "problem plays." Well, why object? Every play, from *Charley's Aunt* to *Hamlet*, is a problem play. It is merely a matter of degree. Every play deals with the struggle of men and women to solve some problem of life, great or small: to outwit evil fortune. It may be merely to persuade a couple of pretty girls to stay to luncheon in your college rooms, when their chaperon has not turned up. It may be something more important.

The more interest the public and the dramatist take in human nature—that is to say, the better developed they are as regards dramatic sympathy—the more, rich, vivid, and subtle will be the play of character and passion, in the drama demanded and produced. In a word, the less wooden-pated and wooden-hearted they become, the less mechanical and commonplace will their drama be.

We are slowly emerging from the puppet-show conception of drama. Our dramatists are beginning to do more than refurbish the old puppets, and move them about the stage according to the rules of the "well-made" play. They are not content, like their predecessors, to leave their characters quite at the mercy of the actor who, in "creating" them, gave them whatever small resemblance to humanity they may have possessed. And as the play gains in vitality, the playwright begins to feel the absolute necessity for writing decent dialogue—not mere stage dialect that may be scamped and ranted *ad libitum* by the "star" to suit his own taste, or want of it, but real dialogue, which, while ideally reflecting the colloquial language of the day, taxes the intelligence and feeling of the actor to deliver properly.

This means real progress; for the dialogue is the very life of the play. It alone can bring out the essential import of the situation, the relation of character to character, at any given moment. An action, an incident, may have a thousand different shades of meaning or motive. Language, tone, and gesture give it its precise value. Plot

and situations are at best but the skeleton; character and emotion are the flesh and blood. The treatment is everything.

We still want more of life, of the vital movements of our own time, upon the stage; and we shall get it by degrees. Sentimental melodrama, with its male puppet, who is hero or villain, its female puppet, who is angel or devil, may still continue to flourish among us; for it still satisfies the natural craving for romance, ideality, which the drama is bound to supply. But these things belong to a decaying phase of romance; and our so-called realism is but the first wave of a new romantic movement, on the stage as elsewhere. For when the old ideals become decrepit, we must go back to nature to get the stuff wherewith to make new ones.

As our dramatists advance with the times, people begin to go to the theatre to see plays, and not merely an actor in a part. The "well-made play," which was a piece of mechanical contrivance into which the puppets were ingeniously fitted, may some day develop into a work of art—a thing born rather than made—growing up like a flower in the imagination of the dramatist.

When that day comes, the actor, who used to "create" the part, will have to be content to let the part create him. The play will make the actor, not the actor the play; to the great benefit of both play and actor.

But why be so serious over an art whose end is only to amuse? To amuse? Yes; but we are not all equally amused by the same things. There may be forms of humour which tickle some people more exquisitely than even that magnificent making of tea in an old gentleman's hat, which convulses the *Charley's Aunt* audience. And if amusement be the object of the drama, we must take the word in an extended sense. I should myself roughly define a good play as one that, when adequately performed, can hold the attention of an unprejudiced audience from beginning to end, whether it amuses or merely interests them. It does not follow that because it may shock, or even bore, some worthy people it is a bad play. Even farcical comedy bores some people, with whom I cannot sympathise.

And now, if I have been rather hard upon the "well-made play," it must not be assumed that it is because I do not value construction. I do value it. But it should be vital, not academic, organic, not me-

chanical. Still, even mechanical construction is better than none at all. A play without plot is invertebrate, without bones. It is at his peril that a dramatist departs from accepted rules, even those respecting "strong" curtains and "strong" exits, though in certain cases weak curtains and weak exits may be more really dramatic. Then, valuable as dialogue is, it may be redundant, and make a play "flabby." The actor's rule, that all talk that does not carry on the action is bad, is worthy of all due respect. "You literary fellows want to say everything twice over," was the shrewd criticism of a stage-manager in a certain case. But an actor is often so absorbed in his own part that he does not easily estimate the bearing of any given speech, even his own, upon the whole play. "Cuts" at rehearsal are not unfrequently found to be too hastily made. Then, what is the action? Not merely the external incidents, but the shifting phases of thought, emotion, character, in the *dramatis personæ*. It is these that give the incidents their value, and so give dramatic interest to the plot, or story. The dialogue and the incidents are but two phases of the presentment of the story. The action may be rapid or slow, direct, or with episodes. All depends upon the treatment; and the play that one audience finds detestable may delight another.

If *The Black Cat* ever again come to the ordeal of the footlights, I can only hope that it may find an audience as sympathetic as that of the Independent Theatre.

OPERA COMIQUE,

STRAND, W.C.

THE INDEPENDENT THEATRE.

Founder and Sole Director, J.T. GREIN.

Third Season, Fifteenth Performance.

FRIDAY, 8th December, 1893,

THE BLACK CAT,

A Play in Three Acts, by

JOHN TODHUNTER.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

Arthur Denham Mr. Bucklaw.

Fitzgerald Mr. Neville Doone.

Cyril Vane Mr. Orlando Barnett.

Constance Denham Miss Hall Caine.

Blanche Tremaine Miss Mary Keegan.

Miss Macfarlane Miss Gladys Homfrey.

Undine Miss Dora Barton.

Jane Miss Forrester.

The Play produced under the direction of
Mr. H. de Lange.

The Action of the play takes place in Denham's Studio in London,
at the Present Day.

The Black Cat.

Act I.

Scene: Denham's Studio. Large highlight window in sloping roof at back. Under it, in back wall, door to landing. l of the door the corner is curtained off for model's dressing-room. r of door a large Spanish leather folding screen, which runs on castors, shuts off from the door the other corner, in which is a "throne," pushed up against the wall. Above the "throne" hangs a large square mirror in a carved black frame. In front of the "throne" is a light couch of Greek form, without back.

Fireplace, with chimney-breasts panelled in old oak, and high overmantel, in which are shelves and cupboards, l.

Against r wall an old oak cabinet, with carved cornice, and inlaid panelled doors. Close beside it stands on a pedestal a bust of Demeter. Near the cabinet, halfway up stage r c, an easel, on which is seen the back of a large picture.

Beyond the fireplace, and at right angles to it, a large sofa, or lounge, with square ends and back, broad low seat, loose cushions, and valance. In front of the fireplace an armchair, with a book face downward on one arm.

The walls of the studio are distempered in greenish-blue, the curtains of the model's dressing-room are in rich yellow plush or brocade, the couch and sofa covered in greenish-yellow stuffs.

Various artistic properties, tapestries, embroideries, etc., hanging up, or thrown carelessly over Chippendale chairs and the screen.

Canvases leaning against the walls, on which hang designs and figure-studies in chalk and charcoal, with landscape-studies in oil and watercolour, nailed up without much attempt at arrangement.

Near the front, just r of the armchair, an oblong carved oak table, with materials for wood-drawing, paint-box, water in a tumbler, etc., is set end on to the footlights.

At the upper end of this table Undine is discovered, as she sits with a slate and arithmetic book before her, her elbows on the table, her head supported on both hands, holding a slate pencil from which a bit of sponge dangles by a string.

Undine.

(pouting) I hate these old sums! Mother's always making me do sums in the holidays. It isn't fair. Seven times three is — what's father reading? *(Rises, and takes up the book.)* That's French, I know. Father's always reading French. G.Y.P. Gyp? I wonder what it's about. *(Puts the book down, sits, yawns, and takes up the pencil.)* Seven times three is — twenty-one. Put down one and carry two. Oh, but it's pence and shillings. I can't do pence and shillings! *(Throws down the pencil; it falls off the table.)* Horrid old things! they're always coming wrong. *(She rises lazily, and stoops to pick up the pencil, then looks round her, stretching her arms and yawning.)* I say, what fun to make a libation to Demeter! I will! Let's see. I wish I had mother's Greek dress. I must have one of father's rags. This'll do. *(Drapes herself in a piece of embroidery, runs up stage, jumps on "throne," and poses before the mirror.)* It's awfully jolly dressing up. But I have no wine. Oh, I know — I'll take some of father's painting water — though it's rather black-and-whity. *(Takes up the glass, and approaches the statue.)* Hail, Demeter! I have no wine for you, but here's some water. *(Makes libation.)* I suppose I should pray for something now. Oh, I do wish you'd stop mother persecuting me in the holidays like this! But you can't, you dear old thing. Father says the old gods are dead. I wish they'd come alive again. *(Crosses to table.)*

(Enter Denham. Undine drops embroidery, kicks it under the table, and sits.)

Denham.

Well, imp, what's up now? *(He comes to the fireplace, and takes a pipe from the rack.)* Rags again! I shall have to lock them up, I see. *(Takes up the embroidery, and throws it over a chair.)* Get to your work at once! Sit up straight. *(He crosses l, seats himself in the armchair, lights his pipe, and takes up the book, Undine resumes her crouched position at the table.)*

Undine.

(pouting) It's very hard to have to do sums in the holidays.

Denham.

(crosses to table behind Undine) You are behind your class, you know. *(Looking over her.)* Well, seven times three?

Undine.

Let's see – twenty-one?

Denham.

And how many shillings in that?

Undine.

I suppose two shillings and one penny.

Denham.

Nonsense! Don't suppose anything so un-English. How many pence in a shilling?

Undine.

Twelve – I suppose.

Denham.

Well, twelve from twenty-one leaves –

(Undine counts on her fingers)

How many?

Undine.

About eight, I think.

Denham.

Try again, stupid!

Undine.

But, father, I think there *ought* to be ten pence in a shilling.

Denham.

Why *ought* there, you monkey?

Undine.

Oh, because then, don't you see, you could count on your fingers all right, but now there are too many pennies for your fingers, and so you never can tell how many are over.

Denham.

Very convenient. But come now, twelve from twenty-one?

Undine.

(*counting again*) Nine?

Denham.

(*resuming his book*) All right then. Down with it in the pence column, and get on.

Undine.

(*kissing him*) Oh, you jolly old father! I should like to do my sums with you always.

Denham.

Heaven forbid! Get on! Get on! (*Crosses to chair l.*)

(*A pause.*)

Undine.

Father! *Father!*

Denham.

H'm!

Undine.

I say, Father!

Denham.

Do let me read in peace.

Undine.

But, father—

Denham.

Well?

Undine.

Do the Greeks worship Demeter now?

Denham.

No, not now.

Undine.