

## The Passing Show.

WILLA CATHER.

I have seen recently two old plays revived, "The Lady of Lyons," produced by E. H. Sothern, and "The Country Girl," produced at Daly's theatre in New York, and I begin to wonder why managers put on pieces like "The Tree of Knowledge" and "The Conquerors."

Now "The Lady of Lyons" is not a great play; Bulwer was not a great man. But it certainly discounts half the stuff that is put on the boards today. The chief difficulty about presenting such a piece is the fact that it has become hackneyed, weighted down with traditions and laden with memories of the fair lady stars who have ranted through the cottage scene. The mere fact that Mr. Sothern himself occupies the centre of the stage in this particular production gives it a touch of variety. The piece has been preempted and dominated and tramped upon by the fair *Pauline* long enough; it is only fair that *Claude* should have a chance.

Mr. Sothern has broken away from the old traditions of the piece almost entirely. In the first place his very personality makes his *Melnotte* essentially different from those of the great men who have played it before him. For the lofty and semi-tragic conception of the part which has become traditional, he has substituted an ardent, fervidly romantic one. Bulwer was not a sincere man, and the greatest fault of his plays is that they bear openly the mark of theatric insincerity. Mr. Sothern's forte is that in the most impossible situations he can make you believe in his sincerity. Nature has endowed him with a pair of soulful eyes which are capable of looking unspeakable anguish for hours together, and would deceive the elect themselves. He takes his caramel heroics and his amorous woes so seriously that you have nothing left but to do likewise. He goes at the antiquated "Lady of Lyons" as if it were an altogether new play and one of vital importance, and for the time being it becomes such.

The most remarkable thing about his *Claude* is the absolute freshness and firmness which he gives those well-known lines. His reading is really remarkable in its originality. In that famous speech about the palace by Lake Como he absolutely breaks away from every tradition, and the more pedantic critics have strenuously objected to it. But be that as it may, his is the only probable or possible reading I have ever heard of those lines. He does not roll their long syllables about as a sweet morsel under his tongue; he does not expand with pride at his own eloquence, he shuns the very appearance of declamation. This *Melnotte* is no orator, but a poet sighing to his lady. He sits a little behind *Pauline*, hovering over her. How that man can hover! He is past master in the art. He begins to speak in a low tone, watching her face as she leans back. He reads the lines almost brokenly, stopping short at times to look forward into his lady's eyes, watching only her face, caring only for the effect of his words on her, half forgetting himself that he is lying to her, seizing with all his yearning soul the opportunity to pour out all the impassioned dreams of his fancy to the woman who is mistress of them.

"We'd have no friends  
That were not lovers; no ambition save

To excel them all in love;  
We'd read no books  
That were not tales of love!"

Why, those lines were written for Sothern! What other speech ever gave such golden opportunities for hovering and languishing! Of course he never gets much further than hovering and suffering; his leading ladies have to be content with that.

I have seen Virginia Harned do some very clever and charming work in Anthony Hope's new play "Lady Ursula," but in the cottage scene of the "Lady of Lyons" I must say she is disappointing. Her faults of elocution outnumber those of Margaret Mather in that lady's palmy days. She does not understand the first principles of reading blank verse. She rasps out the lines in a harsh, jagged, incoherent fashion, and her scream is like nothing so much as the squeal of an infuriated kitten. I prefer to see a lady remain a lady even when she is angry and thereby lift the vulgar passion of rage to a righteous indignation. But Miss Harned behaves very much like a cook who has just received her two weeks' notice. I should think *Melnotte* would have had dark forebodings of the future. I fear me that I do not appreciate Miss Harned's beauty. I wish she would go to a boarding school and learn to hold her shoulders up, and I hope that the first thing *Claude* did after he finally got the willowy *Lady of Lyons* was to get her a pair of braces.

Mr. Sothern, however, quite outdoes himself in the cottage scene. I did not believe that any human being could make those hackneyed remarks on pride impressive, but he did. After *Pauline* had finished her screeching and screaming and had bowed her head on the table, he turned a little away from her, his face quivering with emotion, his eyes looking their wonted woe at the furniture, and murmured slowly, to himself rather than to her:

"Pauline, by pride  
Angels have fallen ere their time!"  
That line was a triumph!

The ending of the fourth act was splendidly worked up. When *Claude*, despite the protests of the fair *Pauline*, accepts a commission in the army, the Marseillaise is heard outside, the soldiers go marching by with the tri-color, and he tears himself from his clinging bride and rushes out to join them. A perfectly absurd and improbable thing of course, but he does it well.

I, for one, quite forgot that "The Lady of Lyons" was an old and a florid play, so near to our own time and feeling does this intense young man bring it. Caramel heroics, do you say? Very well; for the time being I am quite willing to declare that all the world's a candy shop, men and women but confectioners, and that caramels are the best that life has to give.

Surely the gravest sin William Winter has to answer for is the manner in which he has prejudiced people against *Ada Rehan*. For ten years or more the dramatic columns of the *Tribune* have been devoted to triumphal paeans on this lady's art, and the language has been drained dry of eulogistic adjectives to describe her beauty and charm. The object of such unmitigated adoration is necessarily

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made ridiculous. With what awful apprehension must Miss Rehan look forward to those rhythmic notices in the *Tribune* at which her good sense must revolt! Next to having written a play the greatest misfortune which can befall an actress is to own a critic.

"The Country Girl" is, of course, just doughty old Wycherley's "Country Wife," expurgated first by David Garrick and sterilized and refined by Augustin Daly. Now from the nature of William Winter's voluminous commentaries upon Miss Rehan's interpretation of the leading part I expected to see a proper and discreet and very "lady-like" *Peggy Thrift*, a *Peggy* who might have come into town from the green hills of Vermont. I found instead a broad and adequately vital piece of comedy work treated with absolute freedom and fearlessness. Mr. Daly has toned down and refined to his heart's content, but Miss Rehan has not. It was Wycherley's *Peggy Thrift* that I saw, a hoydenish young romp without many fine sensibilities, quite in harmony with Wycherley's time and country. And yet in playing this broad conception the actress was never coarse. I think it is because of her very fearlessness that she never offends. Divest old English comedy of its objectionable language, and it is not so bad.

One can not help wondering at Miss Rehan in boy's apparel. What a sturdy, manly, full-blooded chap she makes, how different from the poetic languorous youths of Julia Marlowe! And how eager for life and thirsty for experiences is this clumsy *Peggy Thrift*, this *Peggy* who is not afraid to sprawl ungracefully upon a sofa or to call things by their good old English names, or to joyously remark how different are the kisses of a London gallant from those of her grouchy old guardian. I still laugh incontinently at the memory of this *Peggy's* first experience of the divine flame, which Wycherley did not think divine. It was so entirely without sugar-coating, and yet so utterly inoffensive. Next day when I was making the acquaintance of that criminally happy, Boston-banned bacchante of McMonnies at the Metropolitan museum, I bethought me of this gleeful *Peggy Thrift* in her love-making scene.

Miss Rehan really gave the part that vigorous, spirited realism that robustness which is the saving grace of old English comedy. The lady gives one the impression of a very high and independent intelligence, of a flexible and wholesome temperament. I'll warrant she has a personal fondness for the stout old English

classics and can read Fielding and Sterne by the hour and laugh over them. Everything considered, one cannot greatly blame William Winter. It must mean a great deal to a man who has spent his life in thankless labor in a vineyard where the fairest blossoms fade short of fruition because the roots do not go deep enough to at last find a penetrating and discriminating intelligence like Miss Rehan's.

One cannot leave the performance without a passing regret for poor old William Wycherley, one of the first of the countless playwrights who have adapted French plots to English manners, and it was not wholly his fault that the manners were bad. Match him against Françoise Villon and there you have the history of the vice of two nations in a nutshell; Villon at his worst was picturesque, Wycherley at his best was disgusting. A pot-house brawler, the rival of a dissolute woman, a scholar who gave himself over to folly, a poet who shrivelled his fancy at unhallowed fires, a genius who poured out his treasure into the filth of a London street and trampled upon it, calling for the world to look and laugh, forever strangling with bloody hands the creative spirit that would not die. He ended on a dung-heap—a better playwright, constructively, than *Monsieurs Paul Potter & Co.*, will ever be.

In New York I went to see Modjeska in "Mary Stuart." I had not seen her for six years and I was almost afraid to go—afraid that she might

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