

Modern American plays

MODERN AMERICAN PLAYS

COLLECTED WITH INTRODUCTION

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The plays here printed are not, of course, the only five which might have been selected. From the many possible American plays of the last ten years these five have been chosen because decided success has been theirs, and because today they are worthy of professional revival. There is, however, a third test which has excluded many plays otherwise desirable,—the selections made must show the greatest possible variety.

Romance, played very successfully in the United States for a season or two, was revived by Miss Doris Keane in London in War time. Its "run" was over a thousand nights, one of the longest on record. The central situation, an unsophisticated young man infatuated with an actress, is undeniably not new. We have seen it in *Nance Oldfield*, and more recently in Barrie's *Rosalind*, indeed, in a dozen other plays. What lifts *Romance* free of triteness is just what produced its unusual success, the characterization of Mme. Cavallini. So inseparably is the part associated with Miss Keane, who first acted it, that it is impossible exactly to distinguish the contributions of the author and the actress to the final effect of perfect characterization. After all, the drama is a collaborative art, and no rôle—even Hamlet or Lear—is seen at its best till an actor of such sensitiveness and matured technique plays it that not merely what the text obviously says, but its slightest implications are revealed. In Mme. Cavallini, as played, author and actress worked in perfect accord.

The heroine of *Romance* quickly wins, and thereafter holds, the sympathy of the audience. The fortunes of an

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unsympathetic heroine, observers of our stage have repeatedly told us, an American audience follows unwillingly. It always resents, according to the same wiseacres, an unhappy ending. To all this the success of *The Unchastened Woman* has been a positive and a very desirable denial. Certainly Mr. Anspacher's task was not easy—to make a woman essentially repugnant to audiences compel their attention. Nor was it enough to make Caroline Knollys interesting. The public must recognize her as a type numerous enough and dangerous enough to warrant making her the center of a play, which inevitably sets an audience thinking how women like her may be kept from the tragedies they create. *Romance*, then, depends for its appeal on the dramatic interest with which it tells its story, and especially on the complete understanding with which it draws its heroine. *The Unchastened Woman*, too, draws its central figure with perfect comprehension, but it seeks to do what *Romance* does not,—move an audience to serious thinking about the social significance of that figure. The success of *The Unchastened Woman* undoubtedly helped prepare our audiences for their recent hearty approval of Mr. Ervine's *Jane Clegg* and Mr. O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*.

The Return of Peter Grimm and *As a Man Thinks* prove that our drama of the past ten years has tried to keep pace with the public in some of their thinking. Mr. Thomas has given a thoroughly dramatic presentation of one of the conservative answers to the feminists who have urged complete emotional freedom for women. Mr. Belasco dramatizes the borderland between the seen and the unseen of which Sir Oliver Lodge has written so persuasively. *As a Man Thinks* deals not with people of the theater, but portraits from the life of the moment. How well Seelig is done! How good, because how clear yet restrained, is the

drawing of the Jewish side of his character! Again and again, too, the play solves the constantly recurring puzzle of the dramatist: How shall I translate this argument, this needed exposition of motives or central facts, into terms of absorbing drama? The seeming simplicity of the emphasis on the details which later make Clayton sure that it was his wife who went to De Lota's apartment proves its mastery. The central idea of *As a Man Thinks* may not be subtle, nor as difficult to convey in the theater as many others recently attempted by our dramatists, but it must be admitted that this play completely succeeds in translating its essential didacticism into genuine drama.

Anyone who saw Mr. Warfield in *The Return of Peter Grimm* as the dreamy idealist, the gentle but obstinate schemer, will be glad to hear that Mr. Belasco plans to revive the play. But there is more in the play to commend than central characterization. Deft touch after touch makes us swiftly feel that we are on the borderland between the real and the unreal: and the difficult atmosphere, once created, is perfectly sustained. Probably what is most remarkable in *Peter Grimm*, however, is the neatness and sureness of emphasis. By a well chosen phrase, by iteration, by illustration, by clever disguising of exposition as an emotional scene, Mr. Belasco puts into the minds of his audience the ideas as to the occult which are essential if the play is to develop with the emotional results he desires.

Plots and Playwrights, a decided success originally in The 47 Workshop and later with The Washington Square Players, is, of course, criticism made drama. So well has this been done that its three short scenes stir audiences emotionally, and its long burlesque moves to laughter or sympathetic tears according as an auditor has been well trained in the theater or has depended on more extravagant

motion pictures and melodrama. Revived in 1918 at one of the large War camps, the three short scenes went rather tamely, but the burlesque was followed absorbedly. More than one hearer turned aside to brush from his manly cheek the furtive tear of sympathy for the ever trustful mother and the erring daughter!

Plots and Playwrights, with its prologue, three one acts slightly connected, its long burlesque, and its epilogue, is, too, an interesting example of the constantly increasing attempts to break free from the time-honored division of a play into three, four, or five acts.

Primarily, of course, this book is intended to make its plays more accessible for readers. Yet it will be disappointing if there are not two other results. From all over the country comes the demand of amateur actors for plays of literary quality from the professional stage. Will not acquaintance with such books as this lead readers to apply to the dramatists represented for acting rights? It is far more worth while to attempt the giving of a significant play than to act a bad play better. Originally *Plots and Playwrights* was produced by The 47 Workshop.

Even, however, if reading these plays does not lead to amateur production of all of them, surely it will create a demand for frequent revivals by local stock companies. We do not see enough of some American plays of the past three decades. Many years ago everyone was talking of Bronson Howard's *The Banker's Daughter*. His farce, *Saratoga*, was one of the earlier plays to conquer London. How many of the generation which has come into the theater since 1910 have had any chance to see either of these plays? Why should Clyde Fitch be a man of whom young people hear today, but whose plays they see hardly at all? No history of the American drama can neglect his work as do the managers of the stock theaters. If any

American company would give them as well as the English actors at the Copley Theater, Boston, play the English pieces of his contemporaries, they would find a sufficient public to warrant the venture. There are people who still talk of James A. Herne's *Griffith Davenport* as notable among the first forerunners of the newer American drama. Even had the manuscript not been destroyed when Mr. Herne's house was burned, we should have seen few revivals of it. Surely books like this may do a little to overcome this foolish worship of the recent as the necessarily novel, this willingness to attend a poor play of the moment instead of a play of proved good quality from the nearer past. Of course, plays which seemed likely to have permanent attractiveness do become strange and uninteresting, but only by the sifting process of occasional revival shall we come to know which plays have for the public lasting significance.

Twenty years ago we had pretty well discarded adaptations from French and German farces which had been the great successes of an earlier period. We were just emerging from a time when the leading American managers relied principally on successes from London. Repetitions of plays by Henry Arthur Jones, Sir Arthur Pinero, Oscar Wilde, and G. B. Shaw were helping to shape the American drama in the first dozen years of the present century. The last ten years have shown that our public, while still enjoying many of the best plays from across the Atlantic, has welcomed most heartily the work of American dramatists. For some time it has been the custom to decry post-War conditions in the American theater. Nevertheless the recovery of the drama has been quicker in New York than in either London or Paris. The present American season has shown more really interesting plays, has brought forward more new writers of promise than has the

London season. A public which heartily welcomes *Beyond the Horizon* and *Jane Clegg* is not the old public. It seems now as if there really were in New York an audience large enough to make successful any kind of drama worthy attention. With that newer public created out of the War, with the probable greater effectiveness of the dramatists who have been writing successfully for us, with the promise shown by the newer writers, this is no time for pessimism. If the five plays chosen here from many other possibilities show the atmosphere, characterization, swift response to the interests of the public, and technique already remarked, surely we have the right to hope that the next decade will give us an American drama which, in its mirroring of American life, will be even more varied in form, even richer in content.

GEORGE P. BAKER.

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AS A MAN THINKS

A Play in Four Acts

By

AUGUSTUS THOMAS

AUGUSTUS THOMAS was born at St. Louis, January 8, 1859. He was educated in the St. Louis public schools and studied law for two years. He has been variously page boy for the 41st Congress, special writer and illustrator on the St. Louis, Kansas City, and New York papers, editor and proprietor of the *Kansas City Mirror*. His plays are *Alabama*, *In Missouri*, *Arizona*, *The Earl of Pawtucket*, *The Education of Mr. Pipp*, *Oliver Goldsmith*, *On the Quiet*, *Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots*, *The Other Girl*, *The Burglar*, *The Embassy Ball*, *The Witching Hour*, *The Harvest Moon*, *As a Man Thinks*, *Rio Grande*, *Indian Summer*, *The Copperhead*, *Palmy Days*.

As a Man Thinks was first presented at the 39th Street Theater, New York, March 13, 1911, with John Mason as Dr. Seelig.

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CHARACTERS

VEDAH

DR. SEELIG

HOLLAND, Seelig's footman

BUTLER

MRS. CLAYTON

JULIAN BURRILL

BENJAMIN DE LOTA

FRANK CLAYTON

MRS. SEELIG

SUTTON, Clayton's footman

MISS DOANE

JUDGE HOOVER

DICK

AS A MAN THINKS

ACT I

[*SCENE: Drawing Room of the residence of Doctor SEELIG. Two small sofas set at right angles to the fireplace form a kind of inglenook. At the outer ends of the sofas are two marble pedestals, each surmounted by an antique vase.*

Time: An afternoon in late September. VEDAH SEELIG, a young girl, is at the piano and playing. After a few bars there is the sound of a door closing. VEDAH listens, then speaks.]

VEDAH. Papa?

SEELIG. Yes.

VEDAH. Alone?

SEELIG. Alone. [*He enters from the hall. VEDAH meets and kisses him.*] Mother home?

VEDAH. She is lying down.

SEELIG. Is mother ill?

VEDAH. Only resting.

SEELIG. Ah—where is the tea?

VEDAH. It isn't time.

SEELIG. [*Regarding his watch.*] Quarter of five.

VEDAH. [*Laughing.*] But no company.

SEELIG. Company? My dear Vedah. Tea with me is not a function—it's a stimulant. [*He calls to a footman passing.*] Holland.

HOLLAND. [*Pausing at doorway.*] Yes, sir.

SEELIG. Tell the butler—some tea. [*HOLLAND goes.*]

VEDAH. Now, Papa.

SEELIG. [*Affectionately imitating her.*] "Now, Papa."
You want to drive me into dissipation.

VEDAH. But the others will think they're late.

SEELIG. I shan't grudge them that accuracy—they *are* late. I don't wonder at some of them, but I'm astonished at De Lota.

VEDAH. [*Pause.*] De Lota?

SEELIG. Yes.

VEDAH. Is Mr. De Lota coming?

SEELIG. I asked him to come.

VEDAH. Why?

SEELIG. Meet your artist—

VEDAH. But, Papa—

SEELIG. [*Playfully.*] Well, scold me.

VEDAH. But—Papa.

SEELIG. First to famish for a little tea—and then to be reprimanded for inviting a prospective son-in-law.

VEDAH. I don't want Mr. Burrill and Mr. De Lota to meet.

SEELIG. Not meet—?

VEDAH. Just yet.

SEELIG. Why not?

VEDAH. I haven't told anybody of my engagement to Mr. De Lota.

SEELIG. Well?

VEDAH. Well—he carries himself so—so—

SEELIG. Proudly?

VEDAH. So much like a proprietor that it's hard to explain to others—strangers especially.

SEELIG. By "strangers especially" you mean Mr. Burrill?

VEDAH. Yes.

SEELIG. Is Mr. Burrill's opinion important?

VEDAH. His refinement is important.

SEELIG. Refinement?

VEDAH. Yes—the quality that you admire in men—the quality that Mr. De Lota sometimes lacks.

SEELIG. When—for example?

VEDAH. I've just told you.

SEELIG. Well, tell me again.

VEDAH. When he gives the impression of—of—owning me.

SEELIG. [*Pause.*] But after all, isn't there a compliment in that?

VEDAH. There's considerable annoyance in it.

SEELIG. Oh—[*A butler enters, gets tea table, which he places center and goes out.*] If you and De Lota announced your engagement his manner might—seem more natural—to strangers especially.

VEDAH. I don't wish it announced.

SEELIG. It was to have been announced in September, wasn't it?

VEDAH. I know—but I'm waiting.

HOLLAND. [*Appearing in doorway and announcing.*]
Mrs. Clayton.

[*Mrs. ELINOR CLAYTON, a blonde and blue-eyed woman of delicate charm and distinction, enters.*]

VEDAH. Elinor! [*Kisses her.*] How good of you to come so early.

ELINOR. Doctor.

SEELIG. [*Shaking hands with Mrs. CLAYTON.*] Elinor.

ELINOR. [*Seeing the empty tea table.*] Am I the first?

VEDAH. The very first.

SEELIG. If I'm not—counted.

ELINOR. You're first in every situation, Doctor. [*To VEDAH.*] I hope to have a moment with your father before the others call.

VEDAH. Professionally?

ELINOR. Don't I look the invalid? How's your mother?

VEDAH. Fine, thank you.

ELINOR. And to see her on a matter about as unimportant as my medical errand.

VEDAH. I'll leave you together while I tell Mama.

[*She goes out.*]

ELINOR. [*Sitting.*] When I came to see you last time—?

SEELIG. Yes?

ELINOR. You told me the truth about myself?

SEELIG. My dear Mrs. Clayton.

ELINOR. Of course you did as far as you told me anything, but I thought you might be withholding something.

SEELIG. I don't know a woman in better physical condition. [*He takes a chair beside her.*]

ELINOR. Well, I want you to give me something to make me sleep.

SEELIG. Sleep!

ELINOR. I wake about four in the morning and—stay awake.

SEELIG. How often has this happened?

ELINOR. Ever since I came to see you—and a week before that.

SEELIG. 'M—[*Pause.*] Anything troubling you?

ELINOR. No.

SEELIG. Do you stay wide awake or—only partly so?

ELINOR. Awake.

SEELIG. Thinking?

ELINOR. Yes.

SEELIG. Of what?

ELINOR. Oh—everything.

SEELIG. But principally—?

ELINOR. Principally—[*Pause.*] That old trouble at Atlantic City.

SEELIG. Anything in Frank's conduct to revive that?

ELINOR. No—but—

SEELIG. What?

ELINOR. I think—sometimes that I felt that trouble more than any of us—even I thought I felt it.

SEELIG. You forgave Frank, didn't you?

ELINOR. Yes—but it was a good deal for a wife to overlook.

SEELIG. You mean you *didn't* forgive him?

ELINOR. I mean the hurt was deeper than I knew—deeper than I could know except as time taught me its depth.

SEELIG. Your thoughts on that are what wake you in the early morning?

ELINOR. And keep me awake.

SEELIG. Well, let's talk about it.

ELINOR. I don't wish to talk about it, Doctor.

[*She moves to a seat near the window.*]

SEELIG. In surgery we sometimes find a condition where a wound has healed too quickly and on the surface only. The treatment is to re-open it entirely. A mental trouble has its analogy. Better talk of it. [*He goes to a seat beside her.*] Frank was foolish. Under the law you might have abandoned him to his folly. In that case, with his temperament—[*Pause.*] Two years? He'd have been—well—"a failure" is too gentle a description. As it is, consider his advancement in the two years—his development—power. All due to your wisdom, my dear Elinor—to your wisdom and forbearance—to your love for him—[*Pause.*] That sums it up—you do love him.

ELINOR. [*Earnestly.*] Yes.

SEELIG. Frank is important—he influences public opinion