

NINETEENTH  
CENTURY  
PLAYS

EDITED  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

THE actor's business is, often, to make the incredible credible: a task in which he is regularly abetted by the playgoer. Audiences tend to be more interested in players than in plays and therefore to accept with little question what the players provide, while great actors have often preferred playwrights who gave them material they could shape to their own ends. Consequently, the nineteenth-century English theatre—the theatre of the two Keans, of Macready, Mathews, Phelps, and Irving—was dominated by melodrama and by melodramatized revivals of Shakespeare, in which the poet's text was trimmed, and sometimes mishandled without scruple, to spotlight the actor-manager's personality.

The purpose of the present volume is to assemble a representative selection of the plays which served as acceptable material in that century. However unremarkable they may seem to be as literature, for their designed purpose on the stage they created an illusion of life wholly satisfying in their own day. Moreover, the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the modern stage as we still understand it: a stage framed by the proscenium arch, lit by electricity, boxed in by canvas flats. The evolution of this stage cannot be followed without reference to the plays written for it.

Here then is basic material for English theatre history in an expansive period. Actors', authors', and managers' memoirs, prints, programmes, and other ephemera of the theatre, all these are accessible to the enthusiast; but the source of that material—the plays themselves—has long been difficult of access. The texts are to be found, if at all, in Acting Editions often poorly printed and some long out of print. Many of the plays, popular in their day, have not seen the light of publication at all, but lie like treasure trove in the vaults of the Lord Chamberlain's Office at St. James's Palace. Paradoxically, it is only those plays which failed to draw an audience—the chamber drama of the poets of the age—which are readily available today. On its attempt to

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restore this balance and make accessible some at least of the notable successes of the nineteenth-century stage this volume must rest its claim.

There need be no mystery about the literary shortcomings of the plays here collected. The nineteenth century saw and outlived a period of mob-rule in the English theatre, during which pit and gallery dictated terms to the stage. The theatres stretched their seating beyond the three thousand mark as they adjusted themselves to change; poetry and philosophy in the drama yielded to spectacle and sensation; the dramatist found himself subordinated to the actor and the scene-painter, and sometimes to the performing dog. As the unruly populace crowded back into the theatres, so polite Society neglected the drama for the opera and play-going for novel-reading.

Thus the aspiring dramatist of the day had, above all, to make his plays popular in appeal, and this condition Douglas Jerrold, the first playwright included here, amply fulfilled. Drawing on his youthful experiences as a midshipman, Jerrold evolved for the 'minor' theatres on Surrey-side a type of nautical melodrama which soon replaced the Gothic drama concocted by the previous generation to stimulate a more languid palate. To his nautical themes Jerrold rapidly added other cautionary tales: *The Rent Day*, *The Factory Girl*, *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life*, all of them loyally English in setting. But *Black-Ey'd Susan* remains the prototype of English melodrama and was one of the first English plays to run for a hundred consecutive performances.<sup>1</sup> Jerrold's subsequent attempts to write artificial comedy demonstrated only the shrewdness of his early approach.

With Dion Boucicault this process was reversed. At twenty-one Boucicault achieved success with *London Assurance*, a comedy of manners palely reminiscent of Congreve. His later plays, however, showed him increasingly alert to the demands of spectacular drama. Boucicault has an unrivalled claim to be considered the supreme

<sup>1</sup> Earlier claimants to this distinction were *Tom and Jerry* (1821) and *Casco Bay* (1827).

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exponent of the 'spectacular' play; no work of his was complete without its big scene, in which the rapidly expanding resources of the theatre were employed to their full. But Boucicault was more than a showman; his construction has a tautness and his dialogue an edge that later dramatists were to use for sterner purposes. Moreover, he knew precisely how to exploit the local colour of his native Ireland, or of America, his country of adoption. *The Colleen Bawn*,<sup>1</sup> though written comparatively late in his career, remains the most typical and best-known of his Irish plays.

With one exception, no major figure of English literature in the nineteenth century achieved lasting success as a dramatist. That exception was Edward Bulwer-Lytton, three of whose plays provided personal triumphs for Macready and remained in the repertory throughout the century. Two of them, *The Lady of Lyons* and *Richelieu*, show Lytton profiting by the example of the French Romantic poets, whose triumphs in the theatre contrast forcibly with the still-born drama of their English contemporaries. Both these plays have French settings and show Lytton unafraid to apply the methods of melodrama to themes more ambitious than Jerrold or Boucicault essayed. If they lacked the intoxication of a Victor Hugo, they provided a serviceable substitute. But *Money* belongs to a different, native tradition. Set in London and written entirely in prose, *Money* postulates a school of social drama which fifty years later was regarded as a daring innovation. Its affinities with Robertson's *Society* or Pinero's *The Times* are striking. The play's sentiment may be cloying and its humour clumsy, but the theme remains adult and two, at least, of its scenes (the will-reading and the Club scene) display stagecraft of a high order. It might still repay revival.

So, too, might *Masks and Faces*, the joint work of two prominent figures of the Victorian theatre: Charles Reade and Tom Taylor. Reade's career illustrates clearly the incompatibility of novelist and playwright. Just as Scott's and Dickens's works, when adapted for the stage, emerged as

Based on Gerald Griffin's novel, *The Collegians* (1829).

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crude melodrama, so Reade the novelist coarsened his style when writing for the theatre. He achieved success in both spheres, but, whereas *The Cloister and the Hearth* is still read, *Gold* and *Drink* have no place on the modern stage. Tom Taylor, on the other hand, combined a career of journalism and the Civil Service with the theatre, and his contribution to *Masks and Faces* seems to have supplied a delicacy of touch his collaborator notably lacked. The play stands outside the dramatic currents of the day. Looking back a century for its setting, it seems to look forward half a century in the gentle fantasy of its treatment. There is a strong suggestion of Barrie in its handling of Peg Woffington, the 'painted lady' with the generous heart.

Taylor is also represented in this volume by *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*,<sup>1</sup> a play whose French original exemplifies the popularity of the French drama at a time when the play of intrigue evolved by Scribe and Dumas *filis*, and later developed by Augier and Sardou, provided the pattern of playwriting throughout Europe. *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* may be classed with *Money* as one of the forerunners of modern social drama in England, though Taylor's play is an avowed melodrama, whilst Lytton's has pretensions to be a comedy of manners. Nevertheless, the mainspring of Taylor's plot—the persecution of a discharged prisoner—represents a shrewd piece of social criticism. Moreover, the vividness of its incidental detail marks the dramatist's attempt to match the degree of realistic staging already achieved by gas-jets, limelight, and cut cloths with some measure of realistic writing. *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* and Galsworthy's *Justice* are closer in spirit than in time.

That the exodus of polite Society from the theatre had been checked by the 1860s is indicated by the numerous adaptations of *Lady Audley's Secret* which reached the stage after the publication of Miss Braddon's novel in 1862. Like much of this prolific author's work, *Lady Audley's Secret* may be termed a 'Society melodrama'; and the sub-

<sup>1</sup> It is adapted from the story, *Le Retour de Melun* by Brisbarre and Nus, published in *Les Drame de la Vie* and later dramatized by the authors as *Léonard*.

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stitution of an aristocratic background for the humbler settings of *Black-Ey'd Susan* or *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* suggests a corresponding change in the composition of its audience. But apart from its historical interest, *Lady Audley's Secret* remains a well-made melodrama with a strong central situation, owing something to Boucicault's example, and still capable of holding an audience without the blandishments of burlesque. The best-known adaptation of the novel, by George Roberts, won fame for the actress and manageress of the St. James's Theatre, Miss Herbert, but has never been published and is not available. The version printed here, by C. H. Hazlewood, a prolific writer in a fertile age, has the virtues of brevity and directness.

Of the plays here collected, only *Caste* by T. W. Robertson retains a regular place in the modern repertory. It is easy to overestimate Robertson's importance in an anxiety to detect the dawn of the New Drama in England. In fact much of his work was as feeble as his colleagues', and even his best plays, those written for the Bancroft management at the Prince of Wales Theatre, are curiously compact of the trite and the tender. Robertson's upbringing had been in the rough school of the provincial theatre circuit. His father was a Lincolnshire actor-manager and his sister became Dame Madge Kendal. Understandably, this upbringing often allowed the dramatist to fall into the commonplaces of his age.

But when all these reservations have been made, the spark of inspiration in Robertson cannot be denied. It flickers in the titles of his plays: *Society, Progress, Birth, War*—here was a conscious attempt to discard the anecdote which served his colleagues for plots, and let into the theatre some of the broader issues which gripped a country in the throes of social transformation. In Robertson, too, there is a welcome rejection of ready-made material—all but one of his Prince of Wales plays are original. Finally there is his pride in craftsmanship. As a dramatist Robertson displayed a skill in the handling of stage business and stage dialogue to match the fastidious-

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ness with which he watched over the production of his plays, and which earned them the name of 'cup-and-saucer' comedies. It was this attention to detail which won him the title of 'Pre-Raphaelite of the theatre' from William Archer.

All these features of Robertson's work are present in *Caste*. The conclusion he reaches on the central issue, which he puts into the mouth of George D'Alroy, is suitably easy-going:

Oh, *Caste's* all right. *Caste* is a good thing if it's not carried too far. It shuts the door on the pretentious and the vulgar; but it should open the door very wide for exceptional merit. Let brains break through its barriers, and what brains can break through love may leap over.

Several of the characters are snatched from the theatrical stockpot—amongst them the hero and the heroine and the hero's mother, a last relic of the feudal system. But against these must be set Robertson's happiest creation, Sam Geridge, the good-hearted plumber; his sweetheart, lively Polly Eccles; and, perhaps most interesting of all, the incorrigible Father Eccles, whom not even the final curtain can reform. The final exchanges of the play open up a new vista for English dramatic writing:

*Hawtree*. Mr. Eccles, don't you think that, with your talent for liquor, if you had an allowance of about two pounds a week, and went to Jersey, where spirits are cheap, that you could drink yourself to death in a year?

*Eccles*. I think I could—I'm sure I'll try.

That Robertson's innovations should have been generally neglected until, twenty years after his death, Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero emerged as leading English dramatists, may be attributed in large measure to the continued popularity of French models in the English theatre. Sardou, not Robertson, was the inspiration of the next generation of dramatists. But one, at least, caught something of Robertson's native spirit, for James Albery's work, at its best, displays just that skill in stagecraft which distinguishes his master's style. *Two Roses* marked an early

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triumph for Henry Irving in the role of Digby Grant. Indeed, Grant's great moment, at the end of the first act, when, having inherited a fortune, he snubs each of his friends in turn by offering them 'a little cheque', provides the high-water mark of the play—and also of Albery's career. Although *Two Roses* was written at its outset, the rest of Albery's short life consisted of shiftless experiment and adaptations.

Henry Irving's name is also fixed to the role of Mathias in Leopold Lewis's adaptation of *The Bells*.<sup>1</sup> It was on his performance in this part that the foundation of his triumphant rule at the Lyceum was laid, for the success of *The Bells* encouraged his manager, Colonel Bateman, to extend Irving's engagement at the theatre. *The Bells* marks an interesting advance on earlier melodramas included in this volume. Here, instead of the clash of innocence and villainy, we have a hero who murders for motives by no means entirely villainous. Moreover, although the spectacular scenes which characterize *The Colleen Bawn* and *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* are also to be found in *The Bells*, they are not used for pure novelty's sake but to illustrate the hero's state of mind. The gauze behind which the scene of the murder is re-created and the phantom trial set show how the technical advances of the Victorian theatre could be put to uses subtle rather than sensational.

Sydney Grundy, the last dramatist in this selection, is entirely typical of the generation which succeeded Robertson's. Able and thorough in technique, Grundy lacked any power or originality of thought, and turned constantly to the French theatre for inspiration. When tackling a serious theme, his wholly conventional ideas produced results which are now merely embarrassing to read. But when applying himself to comedy, Grundy's crisp dialogue and honest craftsmanship can still please an audience. *A Pair of Spectacles*, although, like so much of Grundy's work, adapted from the French,<sup>2</sup> has acquired an undeniably English flavour in the process. Besides providing oppor-

<sup>1</sup> From *Le Juif Polonais* by Erckmann and Chatrian.

<sup>2</sup> From *Les Petits Oiseaux* by Labiche and Delacour.



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tunities for virtuoso playing in the role of Benjamin Goldfinch, it contrives to warm its audience's heart without offending their intelligence. Here is a 'well-made play' which occasions none of the sneers of that over-worked term.

Could a play be well-made and intelligent at the same time? This was the great issue facing dramatists in Grundy's day. Grundy himself was too poorly equipped to provide the answer. Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, and Oscar Wilde, each more generously equipped in his own way, provided an answer which fully satisfied their generation. Shaw, equipped with genius, provided an answer that enraged at first hearing and has delighted ever since. But the work of these dramatists belongs to another chapter.

The ten plays in the present volume represent such widely varied kinds as melodrama, sentimental comedy, comedy of manners, and social drama. But they have at least one bond between them: *craftsmanship*. Their authors made few pretences to intellectual or literary gifts, but they were craftsmen of the theatre who understood the tremendous changes taking place in their own limelited world and fashioned their plays accordingly. To this craftsmanship their work owed the acclaim of the audiences of their day, and to that acclaim their work owes its interest for lovers of the theatre in our day.

The texts here printed aim at reproducing the play as originally performed, though the conditions of play-printing in the nineteenth century must make the fulfilment of that aim uncertain. A collation of variant texts has been undertaken in several instances, particularly for *Black-Ey'd Susan*; while the text of *Money* used in this volume is a recension of three printed versions and the Lord Chamberlain's manuscript copy in the British Museum. It has been thought desirable to retain original stage-directions for their intrinsic interest, and to supplement them with a Glossary of Stage Terms. In view of the inconsistency with which these terms were used, however, a measure of eclecticism in the editing of the stage-directions may be judged pardonable.

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I am indebted to Mr. Richard Southern for his guidance in the preparation of the Glossary, to the late Mr. John Parker for assistance with the Biographical Notes which precede each play, and to Miss Ena Sheen for help in the preparation of the whole volume for the press.

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1952

## GLOSSARY OF STAGE TERMS

THE usage of Stage Terms in the nineteenth century paid little regard to consistency. Thus 'First Entrance Left' appears variously abbreviated as

L. 1  
L. 1 E.  
1 E.L.  
1 E.L.H.  
1 L.

In this volume it has been thought convenient to standardize the abbreviation as L. 1 E., and other abbreviations have been standardized as follows:

<i>Act Drop</i>	Canvas cloth lowered in between Acts. The front curtain was normally lowered only at the end of the play.
<i>backing</i>	Painted scene to be placed behind door, window or any opening in the scenery. Hence—
<i>backed</i>	Provided with a backing.
<i>batten</i>	Row of lights hanging above the stage.
<i>c.</i>	Centre.
<i>change</i>	Namely, of scenery; possibly to indicate a visual change, effected in full view of the audience.
<i>check</i>	Reduce power (of lights).
<i>close in</i>	Conceal by sliding on flats (q.v.) in grooves.
<i>down</i>	(1) Of movement: downstage—towards audience. (2) Of lights: reduce in power.
<i>drop</i>	Painted scene lowered from above (as opposed to flats which closed in from the side).
<i>flat</i>	One half of a 'pair of flats', which together formed the normal back scene, opening centrally and sliding to the sides. Later any framed piece of canvas scenery.
<i>grooves</i>	Slots above and in the floor of the stage to take pieces of scenery.
<i>1st grooves</i>	Grooves nearest audience.
<i>2nd grooves</i>	The next set of grooves farther upstage, &c.
<i>L.</i>	Left—from the actor's point of view.

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L.C.	Left centre—from the actor's point of view.
L. 1 E.	Left 1st entrance. The English system of grooves in which pieces of scenery moved established a standard position for entrances to the stage. Left 1st entrance was the entrance nearest the audience on the actor's left side, L. 2 E. the next entrance upstage, &c. Entrances were numbered consecutively up to L.U.E.—left upper entrance, the entrance farthest upstage.
L. 2 E.	
L.U.E.	
<i>practical</i>	
R.	Usable (as opposed to painted).
R.	Right—from the actor's point of view.
R.C.	Right centre—from the actor's point of view.
R. 1 E.	Right 1st entrance.
R. 2 E., &c.	Right 2nd entrance—up to
R.U.E.	Right upper entrance (cf. L. 1 E.)
<i>set</i>	A scene composed of backscene, ground rows, and other pieces, or of flats set at special angles, as opposed to a simple flat scene in grooves.
<i>up</i>	(1) Of movement: upstage—away from audience. (2) Of lights: brighter.
<i>wing</i>	Piece of scenery designed to fill in the sides of the stage.

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## BLACK-EY'D SUSAN

## DOUGLAS WILLIAM JERROLD

(1803-57)

Came of an acting family, his father, Samuel Jerrold, being an actor and sometime manager of the Sheerness Theatre. In childhood Jerrold himself is reputed to have been carried on by Edmund Kean as Rolla in a performance of *Pizarro*. Served in the navy 1813-15, in the company of James Stanfield, subsequently a marine artist and scene painter. Became resident-dramatist at the Coburg Theatre in 1825 and wrote for numerous 'minor' theatres until the success of *Black-Ey'd Susan* in 1829. After 1832 devoted himself mainly to journalism. Contributed to *Punch* from 1841 and edited a number of periodicals, including *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper* 1852-7.

Jerrold's plays include *More Frightened than Hurt* (1821); *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life* (1828); *Black-Ey'd Susan* (1829); *The Mutiny at the Nore* (1830); *Martha Willis, the Servant-Girl* (1831); *The Rent Day* (1832); *Bubbles of the Day* (1842); *Time Works Wonders* (1845).

His well-known series, *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures*, was reprinted from *Punch* in 1846.

(The dates given here and in the Biographical Notes which follow are of the play's first London performance.)



# **BLACK-EY'D SUSAN**

**OR**

**'ALL IN THE DOWNS'**

**A NAUTICAL AND DOMESTIC**

**DRAMA IN TWO ACTS**

**by**

**Douglas Jerrold**