

NEW YORKERS CRYING OVER

JEROME K. JEROME'S PLAY

Forbes-Robertson's Hit in "The Passing of the Third Floor Back" — A London Success Transplanted — James O'Donnell Bennett Tells How It Touches the Heart and Makes People Feel Gentler.

James O'Donnell Bennett, the celebrated dramatic critic of the Chicago Record-Herald, writes that paper from New York, as follows:

"The spectators at 'The Passing of the Third Floor Back' laugh while their eyes are full of tears and pity the erring while they themselves aspire. It is a play that makes people laugh by making them gentler. They leave the theatre a little sadder, a little subdued, and as it is when a thing is hurrying from a playhouse that what Dr. Johnson called the anfractuosity of human nature are very apt to be revealed, so when the audience is leaving Maxine Elliott's Theatre, it may be observed that men and women are more than a shade solicitous for one another's comfort, that they go out decorously, and that the unfortunate being who steps on a lady's train is usually the writer of these lines is not withheld with a glare, but amiably forgiven."

They tell a story about a woman who unmercifully scolded a maid in the cloakroom of the beautiful playhouse on Thirty-ninth street for some inadvertent few evenings ago, was, in truth, so virulent that she made the girl cry. Having thus avenged her wrongs, she hurried in to see the play, to return at the close of the last act in a much chastened mood, the depth of which was indicated by the womanly apology she made to the attendant."

As this story does not emanate from the press agent it is worth all the space required to tell it, and even if it were not absolutely true, which it is, it affords the best possible commentary on Mr. Jerome's drama.

The mechanism of "The Passing of the Third Floor Back" is the mechanism of "The Servant in the House." A mysterious passerby enters a household where back-biting and tale-bearing and bulldozing and lying and swindling and all the other vices of the human race are in full swing. The scene is a London boarding-house in that Bloomsbury region which is not unknown to Americans spending a summer in London, and the reproduction of the living-room of one of these desolate mansions is so exact that only the odor of "roast and boiled" is lacking to a perfect illusion; that the imagination of the American can supply. It is all there, from the grim steel engraving of Cromwell's interview with Charles I. to the sideboard that looks like a hearse, mounted from its wheels. Present, too, is the poor, overworked, bemuddled slavey who has done her bit of time in the industrial school, who is earning now three or four a year, and making nothing of the couch which they all have and which ultimately will kill her. The landlady is watering the milk with a lavish hand and substituting cold tea for the stinky in the private stock of the boarder whose custom it is to come home drunk at a late hour and take a comical nap without thought to the taste or color of the beverage, he having by that time passed the stage where consciousness is possible.

It is a sordid, God-forgotten place and the inmates of it are petty, aggressive and deceitful, but they are intensely human and very plausible, and they thoroughly understand each other.

Once in the course of the afternoon the sun peeps in at the long windows, and the weary little maid cries, "Gor blime me, if it ain't the sun! I'd almost forgotten him!"

Her remarks concerning those whom she serves are candid. "The tricks and the dodges they're up to—is like lying in a den of lions. Cat and dog from the time they gets up in the morning till they goes to bed at night."

The hour of tea is approaching when the play opens and it is in the course of that function that the lodgers are made known. On the playbill they are indicated for the purposes of the first act, which is called "The Prologue," thus:

A Cheat A Bully A Hussy A Painted Lady A Satyr A Shrew A Coward A Snob A Rascal

The Cheat is the landlord, the Shrew the maid, the Painted Lady a spiteful spinster of 40, who substitutes the half-burnt candles from her room for the fresh ones on the piano-table down stairs, and tells the landlady she has

no doubt the maid did it; the rest are all boarders. All of them love money and some of them get it in devious ways. The Hussy is about to marry herself to the Satyr, who is a dissolute, voiceless, old retired bookmaker, and she bitterly imparts her determination to accept "Joseph Wright's" claimy and generally not over-clean hand." The Rogue and the Cad slip into the room while it is empty and steal the tea which has been placed in the whisky decanter. When it has passed their lips the Rogue gives utterance to one of the gems of the play: "I say, it makes you lose your faith in human nature, don't it?"

A similar estimate of life is voiced by the Painted Lady, who confides to the Shrew that it is in truth "a wicked world. Ah, you may well say that, and it doesn't get any better. That's the saddest part of it."

There is a knocking at the door. It is heavy, slow, insistent, and it is thrice repeated. The maid and the landlady have been talking, and the maid has just said, "What's the good of us? What's the use of us?"

That is her recapitulation of life. Against the landlady's orders she has hung in the window a placard stating that the little room on the third floor at the rear is to let. "Some ragtag and bobtail, no doubt," says the landlady, and is not willing that the maid should answer the door.

The knocking continues—like a command, like a pleading.

"Might be the very one you're waiting for," ventures the servant, and hurries from the room.

And so it comes to pass that it is the humblest in that household that admits the Passerby, and it is to the meanest room beneath that mean roof that the play opens.

The slavey comes back from the entrance hall with a strange light shining in her face, a kind of awe and a peace in her eyes. A tall man follows her, and as he greets the landlady he bends upon her a grave, kind, searching gaze that flusters her a little. But she begins to bargain with herself and with lies. Two pounds ten is the price of the third floor back, she says. She has had more, but to him it will be two pounds ten. The kind and good of her to treat him so generously. He asks a few friendly, chivalrous questions that please her and touch her self-respect. The room suddenly has a glow with a cleaner light when he entered, and it lingers. It seems a cheerful enough place now, and the landlady's aggressiveness has gone away from her like an ugly outer garment meant for show, whether she begins to falter and affects of the room on the third floor back. It is, she says, one pound ten; it will cost him only the stinky in the

He then protests and trusts she is not treating herself unfairly, but she is insistent.

At last, she sighs, "women are so willful and kind-hearted women are the worst of all."

The maid shows him to his room and the landlady is standing alone in the centre of the stage as the curtain descends. On that stage, the light of peace and happiness and a kind of awe that comes in the servant's eyes when she ushered in the Passerby.

The second act is called "The Play" and the characters, though they are the same, are thus identified:

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trying to lure the Passerby into investing in a bogus silver mine, but his proposition is received with such quiet courtesy and with such simple gratitude that he would be willing to share his good fortune with his fellow men that the swindler is abashed. Earlier in the conversation he has denied his race, but the Passerby has said, "Some of our best men, I have loved most dearly were Jews," and he has, in a way that seemed quite casual and altogether unpatronizing, caused the ancient and noble pride of race to spring up again in that degenerate breast.

And the upshot of the matter is that the Jew withdraws his offer to let the Passerby invest his money in the worthless mine.

"If anything should happen to go wrong," he says, "well, I should feel as if I'd been selling the whole of the Jewish race for a couple of hundred pounds. It ain't worth it!"

And so the godlike hand works in the mass, and the heaven sweetens it, and it rises above the meanest of service, and becomes because it is service, and caste becomes hateful because it is cruel. Confession, abnegation and high resolution are drawn from each door, and the house by the exercise of a politic nobility and a sweet tactfulness, and in the last act, it is called "The Epilogue," we find the characters thus disposed:

An Old Bachelor A Maiden Lady Two Lovers A Rich Aunt A Husband And The Servant A Wife The Lady of the House An Entertaining A Friend A Person

We are not told how long the Passerby tarries, but when he departs his work in that house is done. He has discovered even to the slavey the secret of her inheritance of gentle birth, not in the conventional sense, but in a sense that both humbles and exalts her when she grasps the glory of it in her tired arms—and she can proclaim herself to herself, and to him as "worth of a lady, who nobody knows about—like you're a gentleman, sir."

He passes from them as he came—like sunlight and soft music. They want him to stay, but he declines. He only smiles and says, "You shall give me as a promise that through all things you love one another."

And he will not say good-by, but "as friends at eventide we will merely say good-night."

One cries out for him to stay. "I'm a servant," he replies, "I have my work."

The little maid sobs, "It was so kind of you to come."

"I came because you wanted me," he says, and goes, and a light and a smile attend his passing into the street, and the playhouse is very still as the curtain slowly falls.

This simple allegory by Jerome K. Jerome is the one solid dramatic success of the New York season. Nightly the house is crowded, and the play will remain here until New Year's. It could stay until spring.

Even if "The Passing of the Third Floor Back" were not acted with the exquisite perfection Mr. Forbes-Robertson has put into it, it would be a masterpiece of the most case-hardened reviewer to say so. It would seem like seedling. As a matter of fact, the performance is flawless. It is Sir John Hare who on the first night of the play in London said to Mr. Forbes-Robertson that he and his associates had acted like inspired beings.

And so they do not. They present a beautiful work in a beautiful way, and in all the writer's memories of acting there is no more remarkable impression—no more technical perfection—than the impression produced by the marvellous clearing of the discontented, dissolute, greedy, evil countenance of the Passerby, who, in the last act, is called "The Epilogue," we find the characters thus disposed:

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Titled Women Write Books

Lady St. Helier, Lady Cardigan and Lady Wilson Publish Memoirs — Racy Reading.

Three English women have recently launched upon a critical world volume of memoirs. They are the Countess of Cardigan, Lady St. Helier and Lady Sarah Wilson.

The first volume to appear was the Countess of Cardigan's "Recollections," which astonished society about two weeks ago. Lady Cardigan has reached the ripe age of 82, and apparently all she has been able to recollect sufficiently to write about has been scandals, spiteful tales of long dead friends and much that pertains to her own beauty, intelligence and charms in her early womanhood.

Following closely upon Lady Cardigan's work has come Lady St. Helier's "Memoirs of Fifty Years." Here we have Victorian society in quite a different light and so quietly and carefully described as to render the book somewhat dull in parts. Yet Lady St. Helier is a skilful if not a brilliant writer, and she presents with sympathy and tact the people she has met and the events she has witnessed. Apparently she knew every one of note in her own country and many in other lands.

The daughter of an ancient Scottish house, Lady St. Helier was related to many people of mark. To begin with, Lady Ashburton was her aunt, which was a link connecting her with Carlyle, Brookfield, Browning and a host of others. Dolane and Sydney Brooks stayed at her father's house. As a girl she was taken to see Patti's debut, and she met Palmerston, Disraeli and Mrs. Norton at the same time.

Her first marriage was to Col. Stanley, with whom she travelled all over America. Her second husband was Mr. Jean, a brilliant lawyer, afterwards Lord St. Helier. Every one worth knowing came to her receptions, and she tells many anecdotes of interest concerning the great men of her day.

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