

"THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL."

One hundred years ago, on the 8th of May, 1777, at Drury Lane Theatre, as we are informed by J. Brander Matthews, in the June number of that excellent periodical, *Appleton's Journal*, occurred the first performance of "The School for Scandal," a comedy in five acts. A few words may not now be out of place about its time, its author, its first performance, its success in England, in America, and in other than English-speaking lands, its construction, its character, and its wit.

I.

The time was most propitious for the appearance of a new comic writer. The works of Wycherley, Vanbrugh, Farquhar, and Congreve, were falling, or had already fallen, out of the list of acting plays. Eveline blushed at the dialogue of Congreve's "Love for Love," and was ashamed at the plot. Not even Sheridan himself could make Vanbrugh's "Relapse" presentable. Farquhar and Wycherley fared but little better, though "The Country Wife" of the latter, deodorized into something like decency by the skillful touch of Garrick, retained sufficient vitality to linger on the stage, under the name of "The Country Girl," until the end of the century. Few of the dramatists of the day were formidable rivals. The one man who might have been a competitor to be feared, a fellow-Irishman—for, as Latin comedy was imitated from the Greek, and as French comedy was modeled upon the Italian, so English comedy has in great part been written by Irishmen. The author of "The Good-natured Man," Oliver Goldsmith, had died in 1774. "She Stoops to Conquer," produced the year before, had scotched sentimental comedy, an imported French fashion, which was slowly strangling the life out of the comic muse; and although Sheridan in "The Rivals," had done obeisance to this passing fancy by the introduction of those two most tedious persons, *Falkland* and *Julia*, he had already repented of his sins, and in "The School for Scandal" dealt it a final and fatal blow. Cumberland, the sole survivor of the school, had but little life left in him after the appearance of "The Critic," two years later; and no life is now left in his plays, which have hardly seen the light of the lamps these fifty years. Better luck has attended the more worthy work of George Colman, the elder, the author of "Jealous Wife," and of David Garrick, the author of "High Life below Stairs," both of whom had also collaborated in "The Clandestine Marriage;" these three plays keep the stage to this day. But in 1777 both Colman and Garrick had ceased to write for the theatre. The coarse, vigorous, life-like satires of Samuel Foote, and the namby-pamby tragedies and wishy-washy comedies—"not translations only, taken from the French"—of Arthur Murphy, were alike beginning to pall upon playgoers. Among all these, and greater than any, appeared the author of "The School for Scandal."

II.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was then a young man of twenty-five. Four years earlier he had borne away from a throng of rivals the beautiful Miss Linley, the belle of Bath. Shortly before his marriage he had entered the Middle Temple, and therefore he was at least, nominally, a lawyer, like many another dramatists of his day and ours. In January, 1775, he had put forth his first effort as a dramatic author; Covent Garden had brought out his comedy of "The Rivals;" it met with a most stormy reception; but a little more, and it had been incontinently damned. Hastily revised, lightened and relieved by a change in the actor who played *Sir Lucius O'Trigger*, it was reproduced with immediate success. Sheridan is often spoken of as an insolent man, even by his intimate associates. Moore quotes an amusing "Dedication to Idleness," written by Tickell, in his copy of this very play of "The Rivals." Perhaps he was naturally idle, but the spur of necessity could always force him to a high speed of work. In the two and a half years which elapsed between the appearance of his first play and the production of "The School for Scandal," he brought out three other dramatic works. "St. Patrick's Day" was a farce, written for the benefit of Clinch, the successful performer of *Sir Lucius*. In November, 1775, "The Duenna" was produced, with music mostly by Linley, his father-in-law. Lord Byron considered this the best English opera, "far superior to that St. Giles lampoon, 'The Beggar's Opera.'" Gay's play had been performed sixty-three nights in its first winter, a run until then unprecedented, but Sheridan's "Duenna" was acted seventy-five times during the season. It drew such houses to Covent Garden as to suggest to Garrick the revival at Drury Lane, as a counter-attraction, of "Discovery," a comedy, by Mrs. Francis Sheridan; this pitting of the mother against the son seemed in such bad taste to the elder Sheridan that he would not allow his daughters to see their mother's play.

Before the run of "The Duenna" was ended its author was negotiating with Garrick for the purchase, in conjunction with Linley and Dr. Ford, of his half of Drury Lane Theatre. Early in 1776 the sale was closed, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan succeeded David Garrick as the manager of old Drury. Much was anticipated from the first play of the author turned manager, but "The School for Scandal" was not ready, and could not be hurried; the new play was therefore only a hasty amendment of Vanbrugh's

"Relapse" under the name of "The Trip to Scarborough." It was indeed but fair that Vanbrugh should have his turn, for the plot of "The Duenna" was suggested by an incident in "The Country Wife" of his fellow-dramatist of the Restoration period, Wycherley. Like "The Rivals," "The Trip to Scarborough" was at first a failure, although it afterward became more popular. At last the "School for Scandal" was announced, even before the whole play was in the hands of the actors. At the end of the hurriedly finished rough draft of the fifth act, Moore found a "curious specimen of doxology, written hastily, in the handwriting of the respective parties."

"Finished at last, Thank God!"

"R. B. SHERIDAN."

"Amen."

W. HOPKINS (the prompter).

III.

GARRICK had read the play, and he thought even more highly of it than, many years before, he had thought of Mrs. Sheridan's "Discovery." He aided the author with much practical advice, and volunteered to write the prologue, a form of composition for which his lively fancy and neat versification were particularly suited. Great expectations had been elicited about the play, and they barely escaped disappointment—for on the night before the first performance, as Sheridan told the House of Commons many years later, "he was informed that it could not be performed, as a license was refused. It happened at this time there was the famous city contest for the office of chamberlain, between Wilkes and Hopkins. The latter had been charged with some practices similar to those of Moses, the Jew, in lending money to young men under age, and it was supposed that the character of the play was levelled at him, in order to injure him in his contest, in which he was supported by the ministerial interest. In the warmth of a contested election, the piece was represented as a factious and seditious opposition to a court candidate. He, however, went to Lord Hertford, then lord chamberlain, who laughed at the affair and gave him the license." Sheridan told Lord Byron that the next night, after the grand success of "The School for Scandal," he was knocked down and taken to the watch-house, for making a row in the street, and being found intoxicated by the watchman.

Perhaps this was only a bit of Hibernian hyperbole, though a man's head might well reel under a triumph so overwhelming. There seems to have been hardly a dissenting voice. Merry—Della-Cruscan Merry, the future husband of Miss Brunton, who, under his name, was afterward the leading actress of America—did, it is true, object to the great scandal-scene. "Why do not the *dramatis personae*," he said, "stop talking, and let the play go on?" The comedy was a success from the rising of the curtain, but it was the falling of the screen—although Garrick thought the actors stood a little too long without moving—which raised the audience to the highest degree of enthusiasm. Reynolds, the dramatist, relates that as he was passing about nine on this evening through the pit-passage "I heard such a tremendous noise over my head that, fearing the theatre was proceeding to fall about it, I ran for my life: but found the next morning that the noise did not arise from the falling of the house, but from the falling of the screen in the fourth act, so violent and tumultuous were the applause and laughter."

The singular success of the comedy seems to have been greatly aided by the unusual excellence of the acting. Charles Lamb says, "No piece was ever so completely cast in all its parts as this manager's comedy." The characters fitted the actors as though they had been measured for them; as, indeed, they had. Sheridan chose his performers, and modified his play, if needed, to suit their peculiarities, with the same shrewdness that he showed in all such matters. When reproached with not having written a love-scene for *Charles* and *Maria*, he said it was because neither Mr. Smith nor Miss P. Hopkins (who played the parts) was an adept at stage love-making. King, the original *Lord Ogleby* in "Clandestine Marriage"—a part written by Garrick for himself—was *Sir Peter*, and Mrs. Abington was *Lady Teazle*. No one was better suited than John Palmer, from whom Sheridan may well have derived some hints of *Joseph Surface*: Boaden relates a characteristic interview between him and the manager, when he returned to the theatre after an escapade. "My dear Mr. Sheridan," began the actor, with clasped hands and penitent humility, "if you could but know what I feel at this moment here!" laying one hand upon his heart. Sheridan, with his usual quickness, stopped him at once: "Why, Jack, you forgot I wrote it!" Palmer declared that the manager's wit cost him something, "for I made him add three pounds per week to the salary I had before my desertion." The other actors were hardly inferior to King and Palmer. Parsons, afterward the original *Sir Fretful Plagiary*, was *Crabtree*; and Dodd, who has been called "The Prince of Pink Heels and Soul of Empty Eminence," was *Sir Benjamin Backbite*. The various characters fitted the actors who played them with the most exact not only; and the result was a varied and harmonious performance of the whole comedy. The acting showed the smoothness, and the symmetry, and the due subordination of the parts to the whole, which is the highest, and, alas! the rarest of dramatic excellences. Walpole has noted that there were more parts better played in "The School for Scandal" than he

almost ever remembered to have seen in any other play; and Charles Lamb thought it "some compensation for growing old, to have seen 'The School for Scandal' in its glory."

IV.

THE success thus achieved at the first performance has never failed to attend the comedy in England wherever and whenever it may have been played any time these hundred years. And yet it had to undergo trials, and submit to tribulations, which a play less robust and less sure of its own merits might well be willing to avoid. It has survived the whim of John Kemble—the great Kemble, "the noblest Roman of them all," "Black Jack," as George Frederick Cooke used to call him—it has survived his whim of playing the airy and careless *Charles*. It has survived the mangling wrought upon it by another tragedian, Macready, who, early accustomed to enact the heavy villains of the stage, took a fancy to the part of *Joseph*, and, not finding it as prominent as he liked, sought to rectify this effect by boldly cutting down the other characters; and thus with the excision of the scandal-scene, the picture-scene and several other scenes, "The School for Scandal" reduced to three acts, was played as an after-piece, with Macready, very imperfect in the words of the part, as *Joseph*, dressed in the black coat and trousers of the nineteenth century. It has survived being bedecked and bedizened out of all reason at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London. And, above all, it has survived a long run at the Vaudeville Theatre, where, for four hundred and four consecutive performances, it was most abominably acted.

And yet, in the midst of the mediocrity of these last two performances, two parts were well played—*Backbite* at the Prince of Wales, and *Joseph* at the Vaudeville. So many are the good parts of the play, that adequate acting of the whole is hardly to be looked for, but there have been many fine performances of individual parts. Miss Follen—afterward the Countess of Derby—succeeded Mrs. Abington as *Lady Teazle*, and was in turn replaced by Miss Pope. For years, Follen in England, and Placide in America, were the representative *Sir Peters*. Placide's clear-cut, chiselled, intaglio-like portrait was followed by the less vigorous and perhaps even a little vague, tapestry-like outline of Blake; and to both of these Mr. John Gilbert is a worthy successor, although his *Sir Peter* is hardly the equal of his highly-colored *Sir Anthony Absolute*. In Lewis, in Charles Kemble, in Elliston, and in Mr. Lester Wallack, *Charles* has found excellent representatives. But, taken as a whole, no subsequent cast has probably equalled the first.

The original success of "The School for Scandal" was beyond all question. It was done twenty times till the end of the season, and next year sixty-five. It drew better houses than any other piece; indeed, it killed all competition. Dr. Johnson recommended Sheridan for membership in the club, as the author of the best modern comedy. Lord Byron in like manner called it the best comedy. Garrick's opinion of it has been noted; he was proud of the success of his successor both as an author and manager; and when one of his many flatterers said that, though this piece was very good, still it was but one piece, and asked what would become of the theatre, now the Atlas that propped the stage had left his station, Garrick retorted quickly that, if that were the case, he had found another Hercules to succeed to the office. Cumberland was the only one dissatisfied. It is related that he took his children to see it, and when they screamed with delight their irritable father pinched them, exclaiming: "What are you laughing at, my dear little folks? You should not laugh, my angels, there is nothing to laugh at;" adding in an undertone, "Keep still, you little dunces!" When this was reported to Sheridan, he said: "It was ungrateful of Cumberland to have been displeased with his children for laughing at my comedy, for, when I went to see his tragedy, I laughed from beginning to end." But even Cumberland, in his memoirs, when defending his own use of a screen in "The West Indian," took occasion to praise "The School for Scandal." "I could name one now living," said he, who has made such happy use of his screen in a comedy of the very first merit, that if Aristotle himself had written a whole chapter professedly against screens, and Jerry Collier had edited it, with notes and illustrations, I would not have placed *Lady Teazle* out of earshot to have saved their ears from the pillory." Sir Walter Scott found in "The School for Scandal" the gentlemanlike ease of Farquhar united to the wit of Congreve. Hazlitt held it to be "the most finished and faultless comedy we have." The verdict of the public had not changed as Scott and Hazlitt had come to the front, and Garrick and Johnson had slowly faded away; it did not change when Scott and Hazlitt in their turn departed; it has not changed since. But a few months ago, a critic of an unusual breadth of culture, and gifted with great liking for the stage—Mr. Henry James, Jr.—referred to the "old comedies," so called, only to declare that, "for real intellectual effort, the literary atmosphere and tone of society, there has long been nothing like 'The School for Scandal.'" It has been played in every English quarter of the globe, and helped English wit and taste to make a figure where they would otherwise, perhaps, have failed to excite observation."

V.

After its first great success, "The School for Scandal" was not long in crossing to America;

and its usual luck followed it to these shores. Mr. Ireland, in his "Records of the New York Stage," notes what was probably its first performance in this city, on the evening of December 16, 1785, and on that occasion the comedy was cast to the full strength of the best company which had been then seen in America. Its success was instant and emphatic, and from that day to this it has never ceased to hold a first place among acting plays. It became at once the standard by which other successful plays were to be measured. Comedies were announced as "equal to 'The School for Scandal,'" or to any play of the century, 'The School for Scandal,' not excepted." This sort of odorous comparison continued to obtain well into this century, and when some indiscreet admirer likened Mrs. Mowatt's "Fashion" to Sheridan's comedy, Edgar Poe took occasion to point out that the general tone of "Fashion" was adopted from "The School for Scandal," to which, however, it bore, he said, just such affinity as the shell of the locust to the locust that tenants it, "as the spectrum of a Congreve rocket to the Congreve rocket itself." It does not, however, need a cruel critic to show us how unfair it was to compare Mrs. Mowatt's pretty but pretentious play with the Congreve rockets and the Congreve wit of Sheridan's masterpiece. That "The School for Scandal" was the favorite play of Washington, who was fond of the theatre, has been recorded by Mrs. Whitlock, the sister of Sarah Siddons and of John Kemble, and for a time the leading tragic actress of America. And in one point in particular are these last-century performances in this country of especial interest to the student of American dramatic literature. On April 16, 1851, was first acted in this city "The Contrast," a comedy in five acts, by Royal Tyler, afterward (Chief-Justice of Vermont. It was the first American play performed on the public stage by professional comedians. It contained in *Jonathan*, acted by Wignell, the first of stage Yankees, and the precursor, therefore, of *Asa Trenchard*, *Colonel Mulberry Sellers*, and *Judge Bardwell Stole*. Perhaps a short extract from the play, which was published in 1790, will show its connection with "The School for Scandal." *Jonathan*, green and innocent, and holding the theatre to be the "devil's drawing-room," gets into it, however, in the belief that he is going to see a conjurer:

Jenny. Did you see the man with his tricks?

Jonathan. Why, I vow, as I was looking out for him, they lifted up a great green cloth and let us look right into the next neighbor's house. Have you a good many houses in New York made in that 'ere way?

Jenny. Not many. But did you see the family?

Jonathan. Yes, swamp it, I seed the family.

Jenny. Well, and how did you like them?

Jonathan. Why, I vow, they were pretty much like other families; there was a poor, good-natured curse of a husband, and a sad rattle-pole of a wife.

Jenny. But did you see no other folks?

Jonathan. Yes; there was one youngster, they called him Mr. Joseph; he talked as sober and as pious as a minister; but like some ministers that I know, he was a sly tike in his heart for all that; he was going to ask a young woman to spark it with him, and—the Lord have mercy on my soul—she was another man's wife!

VI.

Nor has the success of "The School for Scandal" been confined to English-speaking lands. It rapidly crossed the Channel, capturing the stage and captivating the critics of France. Its texture was quite strong enough to bear betraying into a foreign tongue. Its solidity of situation, its compact and easily comprehensible plot, and its ceaseless play of wit—"a sort of *El Dorado* of wit," as Moore calls it, "where the precious metal is thrown about by all classes as carelessly as if they had not the least idea of its value"—these were all qualities sure to commend it to the Parisian public. In 1788 the auction and screen scenes were introduced into a little piece called "Les Deux Neveux." The next year a translation in French by M. Delille, with the permission, apparently, of Sheridan himself, was published in London. Besides the utilization of certain episodes in "Les Portraits de Famille," "Les Deux Cousins," and "Valsein et Florville"—all mentioned by Moore—a stage adaptation of the whole play by Cheron was produced at the Théâtre Français; it was called "Le Tartuffe des Mœurs." Fifty years ago, another version, "L'Ecole du Scandale," by two melodramatic writers, Crosnier and Jouslin de la Salle, was acted at the Porte St. Martin Theatre, with the pathetic Madame Dorval as *Milady Tizle*. Another adaptation, somewhat condensed, has been brought out this year at the same theatre, the Porte St. Martin. A series of international *matinées* was given there, and "The School for Scandal," with a few scenes from "Macbeth," upheld the honor of our dramatic literature. This latest performance gave M. Sarcey—the critic of the *Temps*, and the foremost writer in France on theatrical subjects—an opportunity for a most interesting appreciation of the play. He considers it one of the best of the second class, which, as in his view the first class would contain few plays but those of Shakespeare and Molière, is high praise. He ranks "The School for Scandal" with "Le Mariage de Figaro," and institutes the comparison of Sheridan with Beaumarchais, which M. Taine had already attempted. But M. Sarcey holds a more just as well as a more favorable