



BY HECTOR CHARLESWORTH.

SOME years ago critics used to say that a play dramatized from a novel was foredoomed to failure. The reasons adduced were chiefly to the effect that as it is impossible to comprise all the incidents of a popular book in dramatic form, and as every reader forms his own ideals of the characters in the work, a play founded on the same theme was sure to disappoint the public. For these very reasons, which are undoubtedly logical, the practice which thirty years ago was very general, was for some years dropped altogether. The critics had their justification in the fact that about the worst plays in the English language are those adapted from Dicken's novels, from Washington Irving's sketches and from other standard works. Within the last season or two, however, the practice of dramatizing novels has been revived with amazing financial success, and the critics have been given the lie. The list includes Du Maurier's amazingly successful fiction, "Trilby," which, having been read in nearly every home, was put upon the stage and made a tremendous financial hit. Then there was the "Prisoner of Zenda," a sentimental satire which made a fortune for its author as a book, and is now bringing in thousands as a play. The latest essay in this direction is a dramatization of Stanley J. Weyman's romance, "Under the Red Robe," which recently took in \$11,000 in one week at the Empire Theatre in New York. Mr. Gilbert Parker's latest novel, "The Seats of the Mighty," has likewise been put into dramatic form for Mr. Beerbohm Tree, and though it has not been a success in New York, the actor has not yet decided to drop it. Maurice Barrymore in his present venture as a star is using a play founded on one of Besant and Rice's early successes, "Ready Money Mortiboy," and the piece is said to be successful. This is only a partial list of the dramatized novels of the day. "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" is also soon to be seen on the stage.

The fact of the matter is that it is all a question of art. If a play is a well constructed, interesting piece, it does not matter whether it is founded on a novel or not, or whether it expresses all the popular elements of the book. The reason critics were prejudiced against the practice was because no English dramatist thought it worth his while to observe any rules of technique in making a play. He thought that because Shakespeare's dramas were loosely built it was a mark of genius in a dramatist to pay no attention whatever to the unities of time and place. Therefore, in dramatizing a novel he would simply hash up a few sections of it in various scenes and trust to Providence and a few soliloquies to enable his audience to follow the story. In truth, taking into consideration the stage resources of the Elizabethan period, and the early ideals of the English drama, Shakespeare was a thorough modernizer in the matter of construction. If he had written in the nineteenth century, he would have been as careful in his methods as Henrik Ibsen or any of the multitude of French technical

efforts. He was never guilty of using a soliloquy—that much abused resource of English playwrights to cover and hitch in the story. Shakespeare's soliloquies never are used to develop his plots, but simply to express the moods of his characters. In the theatre of his time the public asked not so much for a complete drama as for striking scenes, loosely connected by interludes of an unimportant nature. This fashion was born of the early miracle plays and moralities, which the monks invented for the edification of the masses in the middle ages.

Shakespeare was the first to definitely conceive a drama unified by a continuous development of character. The individual scenes were constructed with marvellous dramatic insight, and the interludes that joined them were illumined with such poetic utterances as the world has never equalled. He sent the drama leaping onward with mighty bounds, but his successors failed to appreciate the progressive spirit of the man, and continued for centuries to hark back to the archaic defects which Shakespeare inherited, and which he strove, so far as his environment would let him, to abolish. At last, however, within the past decade or two, the artistic spirit has triumphed and now the English dramatist no longer considers it a mark of superiority to ignore the unities. The French, always in the van in artistic matters, have taught us our lesson, and there is, therefore, no reason why a dramatization of a novel should not be sane and logical in its action.

As a matter of fact a great many of the most celebrated plays of the century have either been dramatized from novels, or had novels written from them. "Camillo" is the most notable instance, but most of the elder Dumas' best romances are still played in acceptable dramatic form. Alphonse Daudet's works are usually written both as plays and as novels, and the list is very vast. If the English dramatists had been as painstaking and artistic as the French playwrights, we would have most of Dicken's characters, obviously fine for dramatic treatment, on the stage to-day, just as are "D'Artagnan" and the "Count of Monte Christo." The novels which have been chosen for theatrical treatment of late years, have not in every instance been the best of the day, but a careful technical treatment has made them noted stage successes. Another reason why they have succeeded, is because, with the exception of A. W. Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, most of the brilliant romancers of to-day prefer to work in the literary field. The stage has therefore become at a loss for new ideas. The average of playwrights treat the old dramatic themes over and over again, and therefore the world of fiction is a rich source of new ideas to the writer for the stage, and managers are realizing the fact. It is worthy of note that most of Shakespeare's plays are dramatized from the imaginative literature of his day. Tales, ballads, histories, old biographies, native and in translation, furnished the themes which his pen made immortal.

If it cannot plume itself on many great modern plays in our language—either of English or American origin—the stage of to-day can boast of a great deal of exquisite acting in unpretentious quarters. I have lately seen several instances of delightfully artistic work among the travelling companies that follow their vagabond course through the provinces. As charming a company of comedians as it has ever been my pleasure to see paid Toronto a Christmas visit. Mr. Arthur

Bourchier, who stands at the head of the organization, got part of his schooling with Mr. Austin Daly and acquired something of the celebrated manager's ability to present a comedy in a spirit of rippling mirth, absolutely refined and sunshiny. "The Queen's Proctor" an adaptation of Sardou's ever graceful and charming "Divorcens" and "The Chili Widow" a less important adaptation from a farce by a minor Parisian dramatist were the two plays, and never wore slender themes more deliciously treated by actors and actresses. Both would have been dull in the hands of inartistic actors, but with the assistance of Mr. Bourchier's company they became exquisite. The magnetism, aplomb, and humor of Mr. Arthur Bouchie; combined with absolute and unpretentious gentility, gave rare grace to the piece; while his wife Miss Violet Vanbrugh has a romantic force in her acting combined with an abundance of humor and grace. Then there was her sister Miss Irene Vanbrugh, a girl with a roguish mobile face and laughing eyes, that cast a little spell over the light things she attempts. The company also included three comedians, who possessed the art of impressing one with the absolute truthfulness of the portrayals of ordinary humanity, and at the same time of rousing more fun than any ordinary individuals could. Such humor is something of a marvel,—the humor that plays upon humanity like sunlight and never seems to distort it. These men were Mr. Win. Blakely, who in "The Chili Widow," represented a doddering, tattling plump old Englishman; Mr. W. G. Elliott, who plays a spare conscientious and almost ridiculously proud young clerk in the same piece, and a chattering little Italian fop in "The Queen's Proctor"; and Mr. Mark Kinghorne, who played a solemn and canny Scotchman in both pieces. The latter could have walked out of Stevenson's or Barrie's pages, so uspeakably droll and human was he, while Mr. Blakely is a man with a voice more humorous and resourceful than John Hare's. Mr. Elliott also has methods in utterance strangely like Mr. Hare's, with an original comic genius of his own. Taken altogether, Mr. Bourchier's organization presented the finest variety of humorous talent ever seen on a Toronto stage. Playgoers may well regret having missed a taste of them.

Mr. Jas. A. Herne, whose "Shore Acres" has met with a marvellous success on a second visit, presents his play in precisely the same manner as Mr. Bourchier. Nothing could be more dissimilar from English social and official life than the atmosphere of rural New England, so that resemblances in detail would be impossible, but in spirit the artistic aim is identical. The absolute humanity that characterizes the acting and the dialogue of "Shore Acres," the manner in which Herne instils into his actors the necessity of preserving the atmosphere of the play, the sympathy and grace with which they do it, men, women and children altogether—are responsible for the great artistic and popular success of the piece. Rural life has been tackled in a common and maudlin spirit by other authors and managers, but Mr. Herne was the first man to realize that subtlety and a refined spirit could be applied to a rural drama. To mention "Shore Acres" as akin to "The Old Homestead" would be ridiculous. It is life, whereas the earlier piece is an unimaginative and commonplace bit of pathos. Mr. Herne's actors are not essentially brilliant, but they are inspired by a brilliant man. Mr. Herne is a graceful and sympathetic comedian, but he is more eminent as a skillful teacher. To my mind the most difficult task and the best executed one is that accomplished by Robert Fischer as the hardened bitter, yet very human, old farmer Martin Berry, and Miss Grace Gayler Clark is a picture of motherliness, cheer and humor.

