NOTE

One may have a lively general mistrust of the preface to a work of fiction and the explanation of a work of art, and yet recognise that an unacted play stands in a certain need of introduction. A play is normally introduced the night it is performed, and if it has not been performed at all the conditions there was a question of its meeting remain inconveniently obscure. These conditions have been those very personal factors a manager and his company. Of a published play, however, it cannot exactly be said that it has not been performed at all; for the disconcerted author at least—if, as he has wrought, the thing has arrived at adequate vividness—the printed book itself grows mildly theatrical, the frustrated effort approximately positive. Anything he may make use of his margin to superadd becomes therefore simply a substitute for the representation originally aimed at, the particular representation which, in its meagreness or its merit, would, for better or worse, have spoken for itself. In just the degree indeed in which his confidence had been qualified by that prospect, in just that degree may the naked text of the piece, dragged ashore only to stand shivering, appear to him to plead for some argued equivalent of the merciful curtain that was never either to rise or to fall.

Of both of these little experiments in theatrical brevity it is as true as of a pair of others lately preceding them that if they had not been conceived in a given emergency they would never have been conceived at all. Their brevity was what the occasion demanded, and there were pressing reasons why the author should fix his eyes on lively simplicity and deadly directness. If it was an hour for doing anything at all it was an hour for doing something elaborately plain. Again, of course, as with the other pieces to which I have alluded, the question, in the face of overestimated chances, ultimately came up of whether the dread of superstition had not weighed too much. It is a question that matters little now, but let none of the more, or even of the less, initiated blame him for this fine scruple, or rather for this overmastering terror, in any case in which such a censor may not personally have learnt the lesson of that bitter humiliation, that unrecorded anguish of the novice, the inexorable, the managerial “cut.” Into the soul of this particular novice, nourished in the faith that brevity is intelligible only when organic, that iron had entered deep, and the consequent desire to make in advance, in a new hazard, every sacrifice that might propitiate the god was naturally not a stranger to this anxious cultivation of limits. The greater danger is really doubtless that when one is under such a discipline one may, in one’s trepidation, transport the cultivation of limits too much to the plane of subject. To treat a “big” subject in the intensely sum-

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2 Theatricals: Two Comedies. 1894.
married fashion demanded by an evening's traffic of the stage when the evening, freely clipped at each end, is reduced to two hours and a half, is a feat of which the difficulty looms large to a writer accustomed to tell his story in another form. The only writer who can regard, and can treat, such a difficulty as small is the writer whose early practice as well as his later has been in the theatrical strait-jacket.

Let me not indeed speak of the difficulty of meeting the requirements of the stage as if for a writer, of whatever antecedents, having any business at all dans cette galère it could be anything less than a fascination. I know not whether for the effective playwright the fascination be less than for the perverted man of letters freshly trying his hand at an art of which, in opposition to his familiar art, every rule is an infraction, every luxury a privation and every privilege a forfeiture, so that he has if possible even more to unlearn than to learn: certain it is such a desperate adventurer promptly perceives that if the job were easy it would not be worth undertaking. It has need at every step of the dignity of its difficulty, and its difficulty, at every step, is of a sort that the innumerable undismayed are destined complacently never to discover. One's first practical demonstrations of this attachment have inevitably something of the quality of the "exercise," a statement particularly exact when they have not been happy to the end, that end, I mean, of which the beginning is the tuning of the fiddles. On the one hand, doubtless, one should not publish one's exercises; yet on the other it is the very fact of publication that is required so to label them. If the unacted play, in England, be not quite hopelessly unacted till it is printed, so this sealing of its doom constitutes precisely the ground for an obituary notice.

Any composition, for that matter, is an exercise when there has been in connection with it a meek and lowly review of the right ways to keep on the right side of a body of people collected together at a particular hour and having paid money—really a good round sum—to be amused. This speculative study of what the public, as the phrase is, may in the good-humour of that ferocious love of a bargain by which it is so healthily animated possibly "like," gives the taint of the perfunctory even to the cleverest play—and still more of course to any that is not the cleverest. The author's tact goes above all to feeling for the particular pound of flesh that the Shylock of the box-office may happen for the hour to pronounce best weight; considerations coloured equally by the circumstances imposed, the circumstances in which the author exerts himself. Those under which both the entertainments comprised in this volume were projected, and under which the first was partly and the second fully elucidated, carried with them a particular economy of production. This is indeed more or less the prospect which every dramatist has to face; the situation differs, however, with the rigour of the economy—a term I am far from applying in any invidious sense. In other words the question immediately comes up of the amount of interpretation a piece may depend on receiving, a question the answer to which can hardly fail to regulate the experiment from the germ. These things—the formula prescribed, the adjustments required, the direction imposed, the quantity of act
NOTE TO THEATRICALS: SECOND SERIES

quantity of acting supplied—are, taken together, the star under which it is born.

It may help at any rate to account for what would otherwise be inexplicable in The Album and The Reprobate to say that the act of propitiation on their behalf seemed most securely to lie in the uttermost regions of dramatic amiability, the bland air of the little domestic fairy-tale, a species of which we had recently enough welcomed, with wonderment and envy, sundry successful specimens. It becameperforce a part of that fascination of which I spoke just now (in connection with the question of difficulty) to try and

see with eye serene

The very pulse of the machine,

discover in other words the secret, master the specific type. The different fairies had to be summoned to the cradle, from the fairy Genial to the fairy Coincidence, and one was not to feel the omens propitious till the scheme bristled with as many of these old friends as a nursery-tale. And yet the nursery-tale had to be rigorously a comedy—unless it should have the good fortune to prove rigorously a farce. If indeed it should find itself striking for freedom in that quarter it would encounter on the path, with warning finger raised, the incorruptible fairy Sentiment. The fairy Sentiment in turn had to mind what she was about under the eye of the foul fiend Excision, “the blind Fury with th' abhorred shears,” from under whose feet every inch of ground was if possible to be cut in advance. Then the mixture was to be stirred to the tune of perpetual motion and served, under pain of being rejected with disgust, with the time-honoured bread-sauce of the happy ending. Perpetual motion would be the tide floating the boat off the sands of the superficial, and the happy ending, staring out of the funny round eyes of the type itself, was as much designated as a necessity as it was supposedly little foreseen as a result. Add to this that, as a door must be either open or shut and a play be either one thing or the other, conformity to the tone of the particular variety had to be kept well in view.

Authors, I fancy, differ on the point greatly from managers, but it is difficult to enter into the ethics of an author who is not clear about the duty resting on a drama, large or small, to make up its mind about itself and decide definitely what it shall pretend to pass for. A comedy only, and nothing else but a comedy, is a comedy; likewise, as it can only arrive at its distinguishing form if the idea at its root be a comedy-idea, so the possession of this idea commits it from the first to the responsibility of congruity. It must be pitched in the key of its nature—for its nature has a key. If it forfeits its harmony with its type it forfeits everything. But that is all rudimentary. Last not least these compositions were to have met the pressure of easy and early production. In the case of The Reprobate this requirement was particularly operative, and the whole experiment was intensely submissive to it. I hasten to parenthesize, in connection with the title of the piece, which recalls so nearly that of a conspicuous contemporary drama, that I have ventured to retain it because it is worn in the first place by a thing of mere drollery—so far as the miscarried intention goes, and in the
second by a thing unacted. If the play had been performed it would certainly have been performed under a name less usurped. The author of *The Profilgate,* as the case stands, will view with indulgence an usurpation of so little practical import. The convenience the piece had to square with was the idea of a short comedy, the broader the better, intensely "pleasant," affording a liberal chance to a young sympathetic comedian, calling for as little acting as possible besides, skirting the fairy-tale, straining any and every point for that agreeable falsity, entailing no expense in mounting, and supremely susceptible of being played to audiences unaccustomed to beat about the bush for their amusement—audiences, to be perfectly honest, in country towns. This last condition was rigorous for both pieces, and the one the author took most into account.

But his calculation to this particular end, as well as to others, proved wide of the mark: which means accordingly that—like their predecessors and like every other dramatic bid made by the neophyte and not taken up—they do, in an intenser degree, practically confess themselves exercises. (It is impossible to doubt, by the way, that if more such rejected addresses were only given to the light, with some history of their adventures, they would end by constituting themselves a suggestive, almost a legitimate, literature and adding greatly to the lively interest taken, in our day, in the concerns of the English theatre.) There would be nothing more to say about this volume were it not that the fascination I mentioned above clings almost as much to the theory of the matter as to the practice; so that in regard to any given collapse it may never be quite idle to glance at the influence that has made the exercise irrevocably hollow. Shall it have been mainly that terror of excision to which I have alluded and which engenders precautions that vitiate a scheme by making it abound, so to speak, in the sense of its meagreness? The hard meagreness inherent in the theatrical form, committed to think after all so much more of the clock than of the subject—the subject which runs so breathless, so fearfully flogged a race with the galloping dial-hands—this danger of death by starvation tends too much to undermine the faith of the neophyte, tends to make him give up, as lost in advance to his idea, the advantage of development. From such a renunciation to choosing the ideas that require least to be developed is, one must fear, but a short and specious step. The most important ideas, he reflects, are those that require most looking after—the least important are those that require least. "You can't feed a big stomach," he says to himself, "on a gobble between trains"; and the solution accordingly seems to lie in the region of small receptacles. "Give me an hour more, just an hour," he pleads; "Dumas and Augier never lacked it, and it makes all the difference; and with its aid I shan't fear to tackle the infinite." He does not get his hour, and he will probably begin by missing his subject. He takes, in his dread of complication, a minor one, and it's heavy odds that the minor one, with the habit of small natures, will prove thankless.

*Arthur Pinero*
The only beauty of this consummation lurks probably in the private generalisation it leads our gentleman to make. Heaven forbid we should too rashly drop in upon his private generalisations: those that have gathered about the kindled fire of our hypothetical inquirer will surely constitute a family party whose secrets it were best not to overhear. They are not prepared for company, they are not dressed to go out, and some of them will certainly startle us in their abandonment of the manners of society. We must give him, however, all the benefit of the presumption that they swarm about his hearth. These are the associations that attach him to the insufferable little art with which he is so justly infatuated: ties of infinite reflection and irritation, relations of lively intimacy and of endless discovery. The consistent pursuit of it comprehends, I think, more private generalisations, more stores of technical experience, than any other aesthetic errand; and these secret hoards may not unreasonably be expected to supply sooner or later, in most cases, the ringing metal with which the adventurer shall pay his way. It is an expensive journey—it costs ever so much a mile. But the nature of the infatuation, as I have called it, enlivens, if it does not shorten, the road. The man who pretends to the drama has more to learn, in fine, than any other pretender, and his dog's-eared comedy comes at last to have the remarkable peculiarity of seeming a revelation he himself shall have made.

The lesson consists for the most part, as the author of these remarks has somewhere else ventured to express the matter, in the periodical throwing overboard of the cargo to save the ship. The ship is always in danger—the most successful play has come within an ace of sinking; and the peril recurs every night; so that universal sacrifice is always in the air. The fright, the fittings, the ballast, the passengers, the provisions, the luggage, the crew, the whole thing must inexorably "go," and the vessel is not in proper trim till she is despoiled of everything that might have appeared to make her worth saving; till the last survivor in the last rag of the rigging has been consigned to the fishes, uttering that shriek of despair which lives on in the playwright's ear and becomes eventually the sweetest music he knows. The scientific name of this ferocious salvage is selection—selection made perfect, so that effect, the final residuum, shall become intense—intense with that sole intensity which the theatre can produce and for the sake of which much perhaps will be forgiven it. There is no room in a play for the play itself until everything (including the play, the distracted neophyte pantingly ascertains) has been completely eliminated. Then the fun, as the vulgar phrase is, begins. That it will be found to have begun in the present very simplified studies is much more than shall be here predicted: but the moral of my observations is that, if there have been many occasions when it was recognised as fast and furious, these have been conspicuously occasions when the dramatist himself has alone known (as he has doubtless alone cared) why. His privilege, his duty rather, is to cultivate that mystery. His still more distinguishing function, I hasten to add, is of course to bring it about.

3 In his short story *Nora Vincent*. 