

X - THE MODERN DRAMA IN CORNWALL.

Our walk from Botallack Mine to St. Ives, led us almost invariably between moors and hills on one side, and cliffs and sea on the other; and displayed some of the dreariest views that we had yet beheld in Cornwall. About nightfall, we halted for a short time at a place which was certainly not calculated to cheer the traveller along his onward way.

Imagine three or four large, square, comfortless-looking, shut-up houses, all apparently uninhabited; add some half-dozen miserable little cottages standing near the houses, with the nasal notes of a Methodist hymn pouring disastrously through the open door of one of them; let the largest of the large buildings be called an inn, but let it make up no beds, because nobody ever stops to sleep there: place in the kitchen of this inn a sickly little girl, and a middle-aged, melancholy woman, the first staring despondently on a wasting fire, the second offering to the stranger a piece of bread, three eggs, and some sour porter corked down in an earthenware jar, as all that her larder and cellar can afford; fancy next an old, grim, dark church, with two or three lads leaning against the churchyard wall, looking out together in gloomy silence on a solitary high road; conceive a thin, slow rain falling, a cold twilight just changing into darkness, a surrounding landscape wild, barren, and shelterless--imagine all this, and you will have the picture before you which presented itself to me and my companion, when we found ourselves in the village of Morvah.

Late that night, we got to the large sea-port town of St. Ives; and stayed there two or three days to look at the pilchard fishery, which was then proceeding with all the bustle and activity denoting the commencement of a good season. Leaving St. Ives, on our way up the northern coast, we now passed through the central part of the mining districts of Cornwall. Chimneys and engine-houses chequered the surface of the landscape; the roads glittered with metallic particles; the walls at their sides were built with crystallized stones; towns showed a sudden increase in importance; villages grew large and populous; inns disappeared, and hotels arose in their stead; people became less curious to know who we were, stared at us less, gossiped with us less; gave us information, but gave us nothing more--no long stories, no invitations to stop and smoke a pipe, no hospitable offers of bed and board. All that we saw and heard tended to convince us that we had left the picturesque and the primitive, with the streets of Looe and the fishermen at the Land's End; and had got into the commercial part of the county, among sharp, prosperous, business like people--it was like walking out of a

painter's studio into a merchant's counting-house!

As we were travelling, like the renowned Doctor Syntax, in search of the picturesque, we hurried through this populous and highly-civilized region of Cornwall as rapidly as possible. I doubt much whether we should not have passed as unceremoniously through the large town of Redruth--the capital city of the mining districts--as we passed through several towns and villages before it, had not our attention been attracted and our departure delayed by a public notice, printed on rainbow-coloured paper, and pasted up in the most conspicuous part of the market-place.

The notice set forth, that "the beautiful drama of *The Curate's Daughter*" was to be performed at night, in the "unrivalled Sans Pareil Theatre," by "the most talented company in England," before "the most discerning audience in the world." As far as we were individually concerned, this theatrical announcement was remarkably tempting and well-timed. We were now within one day's journey of Piran Round, the famous amphitheatre where the old Cornish Miracle Plays used to be performed. Anything connected with the stage was, therefore, a subject of particular interest in our eyes. The bill before us seemed to offer a curious opportunity of studying the dramatic tastes of the modern Cornish, on the very day before we were about to speculate on the dramatic tastes of the ancient Cornish, among the remains of their public theatre. Such an occasion was too favourable to be neglected; we ordered our beds at Redruth, and joined the "discerning audience" assembled to sit in judgment on "*The Curate's Daughter*."

The Sans Pareil Theatre was not of that order of architecture in which outward ornament is studied. There was nothing "florid" about it; canvas, ropes, scaffolding-poles, and old boards, threw an air of Saxon simplicity over the whole structure. Admitted within, we turned instinctively towards the stage. On each side of the proscenium boards was painted a knight in full armour, with powerful calves, weak knees, and an immense spear. Tallow candles, stuck round two hoops, threw a mysterious light on the green curtain, in front of which sat an orchestra of four musicians, playing on a trombone, an ophicleide, a clarionet, and a fiddle, as loudly as they could--the artist on the trombone, especially, performing prodigies of blowing, though he had not room enough to develop the whole length of his instrument. Every now and then great excitement was created among the expectant audience by the vehement ringing of a bell behind the scenes, and by the occasional appearance of a youth who gravely snuffed the candles all round, with a skill and composure highly creditable to him, considering the pertinacity with which he was stared at by everybody while he pursued his occupation.

At last, the bell was rung furiously for the twentieth time; the curtain drew up, and the drama of "The Curate's Daughter" began.

Our sympathies were excited at the outset. We beheld a lady-like woman who answered to the name of "Grace;" and an old gentleman, dressed in dingy black, who personated her father, the Curate; and who was, on this occasion (I presume through unavoidable circumstances), neither more nor less than--drunk. There was no mistaking the cause of the fixed leer in the reverend gentleman's eye; of the slow swaying in his gait; of the gruff huskiness in his elocution. It appeared, from the opening dialogue, that a pending law-suit, and the absence of his daughter Fanny in London, combined to make him uneasy in his mind just at present. But he was by no means so clear on this subject as could be desired--in fact, he spoke through his nose, put in and left out his hs in the wrong places, and involved his dialogue in a long labyrinth of parentheses whenever he expressed himself at any length. It was not until the entrance of his daughter Fanny (just arrived from London: nobody knew why or wherefore), that he grew more emphatic and intelligible. We now observed with pleasure that he gave his children his blessing and embraced them both at once; and we were additionally gratified by hearing from his own lips, that his "daughters were the h'all on which his h'all depended--that they would watch h'over his 'ale autumn; and that whatever happened the whole party must invariably trust in heabben's obdipotent power!"

Grateful for this clerical advice, Fanny retired into the garden to gather her parent some flowers; but immediately returned shrieking. She was followed by a Highwayman with a cocked hat, mustachios, bandit's ringlets, a scarlet hunting-coat, and buff boots. This gentleman had shown his extraordinary politeness--although a perfect stranger--by giving Miss Fanny a kiss in the garden; conduct for which the Curate very properly cursed him, in the strongest language. Apparently a quiet and orderly character, the Highwayman replied by beginning a handsome apology, when he was interrupted by the abrupt entrance of another personage, who ordered him (rather late in the day, as we ventured to think) to "let go his holt, and beware how he laid his brutal touch on the form of innocence!" This newcomer, the parson informed us, was "good h'Adam Marle, the teacher of the village school." We found "h'Adam," in respect of his outward appearance, to be a very short man, dressed in a high-crowned modern hat, with a fringed vandyck collar drooping over his back and shoulders, a modern frock-coat, buttoned tight at the waist, and a pair of jack-boots of the period of James the Second. Aided by his advantages of costume, this character naturally interested us; and we regretted seeing but little of him in

the first scene, from which he retired, following the penitent Highwayman out, and lecturing him as he went. No sooner were their backs turned, than a waggoner, in a clean smock-frock and high-lows, entered with an offer of a situation in London for Fanny, which the unsuspecting Curate accepted immediately. As soon as he had committed himself, it was confided to the audience that the waggoner was a depraved villain, in the employ of that notorious profligate, Colonel Chartress, who had commissioned a second myrmidon (of the female sex) to lure Fanny from virtue and the country, to vice and the metropolis. By the time the plot had "thickened" thus far, the scene changed, and we got to London at once.

We now beheld the Curate, Chartress's female accomplice, Fanny, and the vicious waggoner, all standing in a row, across the stage. The Curate, in a burst of amiability, had just lifted up his hands to bless the company, when Colonel Chartress (dressed in an old naval uniform, with an opera-hat of the year 1800), suddenly rushed in, followed by the Highwayman, who having relapsed from penitence to guilt, had, as a necessary consequence, determined to supplant Chartress in the favour of Miss Fanny. These two promptly seized each other by the throat; vehement shouting, scuffling, and screaming ensued; and the Curate, clasping his daughter round the waist, frantically elevated his walking-stick in the air. Was he about to inflict personal chastisement on his innocent child? Who could say? Before there was time to ask the question, the curtain fell with a bang, on the crisis of the first act.

In act the second, the first scene was described in the bills as Temple Bar by moonlight. Neither Bar nor moonlight appeared when the curtain rose--so we took both for granted, and fixed our minds on the story. The first person who now confronted us, was "good h'Adam Marle." The paint was all washed off his face; his immense spread of collar looked grievously in want of washing; and he leaned languidly on an oaken stick. He had been walking--he informed us--through the streets of London for six consecutive days and nights, without sustenance, in search of Miss Fanny, who had disappeared since the skirmish at the end of act the first, and had never been heard of since. Poor dear Marle! how eloquent he was with his white handkerchief, when he fairly opened his heart, and confided to us that he was madly attached to Fanny; that he knew he "was nothink" to her; and that, under existing circumstances, he felt inclined to rest himself on a door step! Just as he had comfortably settled down, the valet of the profligate Chartress entered, in the communicative stage of intoxication; and immediately mentioned all his master's private affairs to "h'Adam." It appeared that the Colonel had carried off Miss Fanny, had then got tired of her, and had coolly handed her over to a Jew, in part payment of "a little bill." Having

ascertained the Jew's address, the indefatigable Marle left us (still without sustenance) to rescue the Curate's daughter, or die in the attempt.

The next scene disclosed Fanny, sitting conscience-stricken and inconsolable, in a red polka jacket and white muslin slip. Mr. Marle, having discovered her place of refuge, now stepped in to lecture and reclaim. Vain proceeding! The Curate's daughter looked at him with a scream, exclaimed, "Cuss me, h'Adam! cuss me!" and rushed out. "H'Adam," after a despondent soliloquy, followed with his eloquent handkerchief to his eyes; but, while he had been talking to himself, our old friend the Highwayman had been on the alert, and had picked Fanny up, fainting in the street. And what did he do with her after that? He handed her over to his "comrades in villany." And who were his comrades in villany? They were the trombone and ophicleide players from the orchestra, and the "Miss Grace," of act first, disguised as a bad character, in a cloak, with a red pocket-handkerchief over her head. And what happened next? A series of events happened next. Miss Fanny recovered on a sudden, perceived what sort of company she had about her, rushed out a second time into the street, fell fainting a second time on the pavement, and was picked up on this occasion by Colonel Chartress--in the interests, it is to be presumed, of his friend, the Jew money-lender. Before, however, he could get clear off with his prize, the indefatigably vicious Highwayman, and the indefatigably virtuous Marle, precipitated themselves on the stage, assaulting Chartress, assaulting each other, assaulting everybody. Fanny fell fainting a third time in the street; and before we could find out who was the third person who picked her up, down came the curtain in the midst of the catastrophe.

Act the third was opened by the heroine, still injured, still inconsolable, and still clad in the polka jacket and white slip. We thought her a very nice little woman, with a melodious, genteel-comedy-voice, trim ankles, and a habit of catching her breath in the most pathetic manner, at least a dozen times in the course of one soliloquy. While she was still assuring us that she felt the most forlorn creature on the face of the earth, she was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of no less a person than the Curate himself. We had seen nothing of the reverend gentleman throughout the second act; but "h'Adam" had casually informed us that his time had been passed at his parsonage, "sittun with his 'ed between his knees, sobbun!" Having now wearied of this gymnastic method of indulging in parental grief, he had set forth to seek his lost daughter, and had accidentally stopped at the very inn where she had taken refuge. Nothing could be more piteous than his present appearance; he was infinitely more tipsy, infinitely more dignified, and infinitely more parenthetical in his mode of expressing himself, than when we last beheld him. A streak of burnt cork running down each side of his venerable nose,

showed us how deeply grief had increased the wrinkles of age; and our pity for him reached its climax when he cast his clerical hat on the floor, sank drowsily into a chair, and began to pray in these words: "Oh heabben! hear a solemn and a solid prayer--hear a solemn heart who wants to embrace his darling Fanny!"

All this time, the lost daughter was hiding behind the forlorn father's chair; an awful and convenient darkness being thrown on the stage by the introduction of a plank between the actors and the tallow candles. In this striking situation, Miss Fanny told her sad story, and pleaded her own cause as a stranger, under disguise of the darkness. Useless--quite useless! The reverend gentleman, having never turned round to see who it was that was speaking to him, and having therefore no idea that it was his own daughter, received in dignified silence the advances of a young person unknown to him. What course was now left to the unhappy Fanny? The old course--a rush off the stage, and a swoon in the street. As soon as her back was turned, the Parson, forgetting to take away his hat with him, staggered out at the opposite side to continue his journey. He uttered as he went the following moral observation:--"No soul so lost to Nature, but must be lost eternally--my 'art is broken!"

The next moment, we were startled by a long and elaborate trampling of feet behind the scenes, and the villain Chartress, ran panic-stricken across the stage, hotly pursued by "good h'Adam Marle." In the eloquent language of virtue, thus did Adam address him:--"Stay, ruffian, stay! Inquiring for Chartress at the bar of this inn, I found indeed that you was the very identical. You foul, venomous, treacherous, voluptuous liar, where is the un'appy Fanny? where is the victim of your prey?--Ha! 'oary-'edded ruffian, I have yer!" (Collars Chartress.) "But no! I will not strike yer; I will drag yer!" It was interesting to see Adam exemplify the peculiar distinction in the science of assault implied in his last words, by hauling Chartress all round the stage. It was awful to observe that the Colonel lost his temper at the second round, murderously snapped a pistol in "h'Adam's" face, and rushed off in hot homicidal triumph. We waited breathless for the fall of Marle. Nothing of the sort happened. He started, frowned, paused, laughed fiercely, exclaimed,--"The villain 'as missed!" and followed in pursuit.

In the interim, Miss Fanny had been picked up in the street, for the fourth time, by a benevolent "washerwoman," who happened to be passing by at the moment; had been conveyed to the said washerwoman's lodgings; and now appeared before us, despoiled, at last, of all the glories of the red polka, enveloped from head to foot in clouds of white muslin, and dying with frightful rapidity in an armchair. In the next and last scene, all that

remained to represent the unhappy heroine was a coffin decently covered with a white sheet. With slow and funereal steps, the Curate, Miss Grace, "h'Adam," the Highwayman, and the "venomous and voluptuous liar," Chartress, approached to weep over it. The Curate had gone raving mad since we saw him last. His wig was set on wrong side foremost; the ends of his clerical cravat floated wildly, a yard long at least over his shoulders; his eyes rolled in frenzy; he swooned at the sight of the coffin; recovered convulsively; placed Marle's hand in the hand of Miss Grace (telling him that now one daughter was dead, nothing was left for him but to marry the other); and then fell flat on his back, with a thump that shook the stage and made the audience start unanimously. Marle--well-bred to the last--politely offered his arm to Grace; and pointing to the coffin, asked Chartress, reproachfully, whether that was not his work. The Colonel took off his opera-hat, raised his hand to his eyes, and doggedly answered, "Indeed, it is!" The Tableau thus formed, was completed by the Highwayman, the coffin, and the defunct Curate; and the curtain fell to slow music.

Such was the plot of this remarkable dramatic work, exactly as I took it down in the theatre, between the acts; noting also in my pocket-book such scraps of dialogue as I have presented to the reader, while they fell from the actors' lips. There were plenty of comic scenes in the play which I leave unmentioned; for their humour was of the dreariest, and their morality of the lowest order that can possibly be conceived. I can only say, as the result of my own experience at Redruth, that if the dramatic reforms which are now being attempted in the theatrical by-ways of the metropolis succeed, there would be no harm in extending the experiment as far as the locomotive stage of Cornwall. Good plays are good missionaries; and, like missionaries, let them travel to teach.

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And now, having seen enough of the modern drama in Cornwall, without waiting for the songs, the dances, and the farces which are to follow the "Curate's Daughter," let us go on to Piranzabuloe, and look at the theatre in which the Cornish of former days assembled; endeavouring to discover, at the same time, by what sort of performances the people were instructed or amused some two hundred and fifty years ago.