

**THE PROFLIGATE: A
PLAY IN
FOUR ACTS**

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ARTHUR W. PINERO

**THE PROFLIGATE: A
PLAY IN
FOUR ACTS**

THE PROFLIGATE

A PLAY

In Four Acts

By ARTHUR W. PINERO



*"It is a good and soothfast saw ;
Half-roasted never will be raw ;
No dough is dried once more to meal,
No crock new-shapen by the wheel ;
You can't turn curds to milk again,
Nor Now, by voishing back to Then ;
And having tasted stolen honey,
You can't buy innocence for money."*

LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN

MDCCCXCVIII

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

It is now more than four years since "The Profligate" was written, and in the interval we have seen many conflicting influences at work upon the theatre, many signs of progress; but in June 1887, although the dramatic atmosphere was full of agitation and uncertainty, and the clamorous complaints of the pessimists were loud, the bolt of Norwegian naturalism had not yet fallen upon our stage, Ibsen was still, as far as England was concerned, an exotic of the library. Mr. Pinero, however, appears to have been an unswerving optimist in the face of spreading pessimism; he evidently felt that the air was clearing, that the period was approaching when the British dramatist might begin to assert his artistic independence, and at least attempt to write plays which should, by means of simple and reasonable dramatic deduction, record actual experience flowing in the natural irregular rhythm of life, which should at the same time embody lofty ideals of conduct and of character. So he wrote "The Profligate," wrote it as he explained, to fit no particular theatrical company, fettered the free development of his ideas by no exigencies of managerial expediency.

As soon as the play was completed he sought the opinion of one whose attitude towards the drama has

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always been marked by keen artistic sympathy and generous devotion—that delightful comedian, that masterly manager, John Hare. Mr. Hare's opinion of "The Profligate" found expression in very practical form. He was at that time on the eve of becoming theatrically homeless, but explaining to the author his plans for the future, he begged Mr. Pinero to keep his play for him until such time as he should be in a position to produce it, a request to which Mr. Pinero gladly acceded.

Two years elapsed, during which period the battle of the *isms* had proceeded apace, realism clashing with conventionalism, naturalism with romanticism. And the time now seemed ripe to gauge the practical progress of the modern dramatic movement, as we may call it, to test how far theatrical audiences were really prepared to accept serious drama without "comic relief." The opportunity was at hand, the new Garrick Theatre was completed, and Mr. John Hare produced "The Profligate."

It must be admitted, however, that in doing this a question of managerial policy prompted a concession to popular taste or custom which Mr. Pinero had never anticipated in the composition of "The Profligate." He had ended his play with the suicide of the penitent profligate at the very moment that the wife is coming to him with pity and forgiveness in her heart, resolved to share his life again, to bear with him the burden of his past as well as his future—a grimly ironical trick of fate which the author considered to be the legitimate and logical conclusion of this domestic tragedy.

But authors propose, and the "gods" dispose. Mr. Hare, as he frankly admitted in a letter to the papers,

felt somewhat timorous of braving the popular prejudice in favour of theatrical happiness in the last act of new plays, and he suggested to Mr. Pinero that, as a matter of expediency, it would be well to alter his *dénouement*, so as to bring about a reconciliation between the reformed profligate and his innocent wife. Mr. Pinero fell in with the managerial views, determining at the same time that, while he allowed the hero of his story to live on with promise of future happiness upon the stage, when the play came to be printed the terrible finality of the tragedy should be restored exactly as it was first written.

Now, therefore, that it has become feasible to place "The Profligate" in the hands of the reader, the author's intention is adhered to, and the play appears in its original form. As a matter of record, however, and for the benefit of those readers who may possibly be interested in comparing the two versions, I think it advisable to append below that portion of the acted text which differs from the play as it is now published, especially since the matter has excited some critical discussion.

The Fourth Act, as generally performed, is entitled "On the Threshold," and the departure from the original occurs on p. 122, when Dunstan Renshaw is about to drink the poison. From that point it runs thus :—

DUNSTAN.

[*He is raising the glass to his lips when he recoils with a cry of horror.*] Ah! stop, stop! This is the deepest sin of all my life—blackier than that sin for which I suffer! No, I'll not! I'll not!
 [*He dashes the glass to the ground.*] God, take my wretched life when You will, but till You lay Your hand upon me, I will live on!

Help me! Give me strength to live on! Help me! Oh, help me!

[He falls on his knees, and buries his face in his hands.
 LESLIE enters softly, carrying a lamp which she places
 on the sideboard; she then goes to DUNSTAN.

LESLIE.

Dunstan! Dunstan!

DUNSTAN.

[Looking wildly at her.] You! You!

LESLIE.

I have remembered. When we stood together at our prayerless marriage, my heart made promises my lips were not allowed to utter. I will not part from you, Dunstan.

DUNSTAN.

Not—part—from me?

LESLIE.

No.

DUNSTAN

I don't understand you. You—will—not—relent? You cannot forget what I am!

LESLIE.

No. But the burden of the sin you have committed I will bear upon my shoulders, and the little good that is in me shall enter into your heart. We will start life anew—always seeking for the best that we can do, always trying to repair the worst that we have done. *[Stretching out her hand to him.]* Dunstan! *[He approaches her as in a dream.]* Don't fear me! I will be your wife, not your judge. Let us from this moment begin the new life you spoke of.

DUNSTAN.

[He tremblingly touches her hand as she bursts into tears.] Wife!
Ah, God bless you! God bless you, and forgive me!

[He kneels at her side, she bows her head down to his.]

LESLIE.

Oh, my husband!

This ending found many advocates, even Mr. Clement Scott and Mr. William Archer, who may be regarded as representing the opposite poles of dramatic criticism, agreeing in their decision that this was the only logical conclusion. "There can be but one end to such a play," wrote Mr. Scott, "and Mr. Pinero has chosen the right one. To make this wretched man whose sin has found him out a wanderer and an outcast is bad enough; to make him a suicide would be worse." Yet there were others who thought differently.

Wednesday, the 24th of April, 1889, saw the opening of the Garrick Theatre and the production of "The Profligate," the programme of which occasion is here appended.