

**THE MODERN DRAMA SERIES;
THE VULTURES; THE WOMAN
OF PARIS; THE MERRY-GO-
ROUND; THREE PLAYS**

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The Modern Drama Series; The Vultures; The Woman of Paris; The Merry-Go-Round; Three Plays by Henry Becque & Freeman Tilden

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HENRY BECQUE & FREEMAN TILDEN

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THE MODERN DRAMA SERIES
EDITED BY EDWIN BJÖRKMAN

THE VULTURES • THE WOMAN OF PARIS
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND • BY HENRY BECQUE

THE VULTURES
THE WOMAN OF PARIS
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

THREE PLAYS BY
HENRY BECQUE

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
FREEMAN TILDEN



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INTRODUCTION

HENRY BECQUE (1837-1899) was one of those men of letters to whom falls the ungrateful lot of giving the public what it does not want. In the very heyday of romanticism, Becque had the effrontery to hawk an entirely different line of wares in the Parisian theatrical markets. He boldly trespassed against the most sacred traditions built up and sustained under the guidance of Sardou. He flouted the "happy ending"; he questioned the infallibility of M. Sarcy; he even thought it possible to write a drama in five acts, when everybody knew that four acts must be the limit. Becque was a revolutionist.

Yet even revolutionists have friends and admirers. Becque had comparatively few, but those few were powerful enough to force the production of plays which, lacking this propulsion of friendship, could never have seen the light. One of these friends was Edouard Thierry, one-time director of the Comédie Française. Another, strange to say, was Sardou — that very Sardou against whose dramatic precepts Becque carried on a merciless warfare.

This man might have been popular. He was Parisian born. He had all the cleverness and knack and sophistication necessary to make him a brilliant transient on the stage of Paris. But he had a big dream, and the dream

was to make the stage represent the marvellous dramatic commonplaces of every-day life. He saw that the sentimental nonsense with which the public was being regaled — high-class nonsense though some of it might be — represented a very small corner of Life, if it represented Life at all. The reaction of Becque's mind against the glorification of sentimental impossibilities was terrific. He conceived the idea of a "cruel theatre," in which truth should go defiantly bare; in which the characters should act like human beings instead of wire-worked puppets; in which the action should be the logical course of workday events, without the introduction of spurious material to keep the audience mystified or good-humored. In our day this is an old story. The tide turned against old-school romanticism long ago, and we have our realism so refined that it often has less dramatic action than Life itself. If Becque had fallen into this trap — of being dull — that would have been the end of him. But he happened to be a master of stagecraft; and he knew how to manipulate the surprises of every-day existence, how to reproduce them with telling effect, how to tell a precise story so that the narration would be clear without being obvious. He had also an almost incredible persistence and faith in himself. He was a tireless worker. And he had some good friends. So he was permitted to drive the wedge that opened the way for realism. Becque's followers were many. More than one of them excelled the master in certain details, as was to be expected. They were not pioneering. They had a trail already blazed. It required a brutal strength like Becque's to knock over the idols of romance.

When Henry Becque first came knocking at the stage door, it was with an opera in three acts, "Sardanapale," an avowed imitation of Lord Byron. With music by Victorin Joncières, a composer of merit, it was presented for the first time at the Théâtre Lyrique early in 1867. It enjoyed some success.

Following the opera came "L'Enfant Prodigue," produced in 1868 at the Vaudeville. The freshness of this piece, with its unconventionality, its deliberately wicked and sometimes savage thrusts, combined with real wit and sprightliness, puzzled the critics a little. The dean of the profession, M. Sarcey, permitted himself to welcome the new dramatic author, and to praise him for his pleasant frivolity. M. Sarcey wrote rather gingerly, however. He evidently wanted to be in a position to beat a quick retreat. "The Prodigal Son" is certainly not great, but as a reading play it is good for the blues. And besides its wit, it contains at least one unexpectedly striking and powerful scene, that of the dinner of the *concierges*. In this scene *Clarisse* sings a curious street-girl song, "Les Pauvr's P'tit's Femmes," of exquisite humanness and pathos.

Following "The Prodigal Son," it was to be expected that Becque, taking advantage of the foothold his vaudeville had given him, should come back with some joyous comedy. He appeared with a five-act drama, "Michel Pauper," a play almost barbarous in its brutality. The wonder now is, not that it was not a success, but that it was ever presented at all. It must have seemed mad as a hatter in 1870. It does, indeed, at this distance, seem to have a touch of madness. It did demonstrate one thing, however: that