

## **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I beg to present for your kind approval three plays one about a woman who was unmoral, one about a man who had no morals at all, and the third about a woman who was obsessed with morals, and I daresay that all three of them lived and died in very much the same way as you and I will live and die. But we leave the two women at a moment of their lives when they were quite unrepentant and ready to start all over again – while the man only needed one cocktail for him to sit up and say “Oh Hell!”, and so we shall never know what were the results of their lack or surfeit of morals, except that I have noticed sometimes that when a man or woman in his or her youth has been well known for gallantry, their old age will bring a slightly censorious attitude towards the misdemeanours of younger members of Society – and in the same way that those who have regretted the drabness of their youth take on in their later years a looser mode of life, and dance all night, and drink all night, and gamble all night no doubt to make up for the measure they never tripped when they were young. But I only said “Sometimes,” for some of us will never trip any measure at all, and others of us will always trip everything, which proves exactly nothing. Do morals matter very much? Are they not to a great extent a question of environment and taste? But what does matter is, what is at the back of those morals. In the same way, the story of a play does not matter very much, but what lies at the back of the story is of great importance, because that is the bone that the author has to pick, or the moral or immoral that he has to point. But how few people will ever realize that today in England we are a theatregoing crowd, rather than a play going one. And we do not care sufficiently to notice what a play means, even if it is put under our very noses. All that we want to do is to laugh and be amused. And why not? We pay a big price for our seat, and so why on earth should we be made to think, or to contribute anything towards the evening's entertainment. And yet that is exactly what is wrong with the theatre. If there is anything wrong with the theatre it is the audience. They do not demand enough of their plays to bother to go and see them. And if they do go, they do not contribute enough, either in attention or intelligence. If we are to have interesting plays, we must have a more interested audience, and then we should find that whatever the theme, Old or New, Pleasant or Unpleasant, Moral or Unmoral, the point of view of the author would be appreciated, for after all what I find very just and fitting, you may find unconscionable, and a third may find not a question of morals at all, but merely one of ethics. And who is to tell which is right? The answer of course is each man for himself. But this requires a discriminating audience, and therefore I must write to please myself, and, in the same way, I must not mind if you like it or not. If you do not like it I am sorry that you have paid for your stall, or bought the book, and no doubt I ought to give you back your money. But unfortunately for you authors are only conscientious, most of them have no consciences.

It is the work of the dramatist to write of modes and manners of his own day, and in so doing, he is almost bound to incur the anger of his critics, for, if he is truthful, he will make the characters say and do things that he may personally heartily disapprove of, but which these characters would do and say if they were living. If he is honest, and is seriously trying to portray life as it is lived for such a restricted medium as the theatre, he must not mind the fury of his audience, but must go right ahead with his play. Such was

the case with “The Way You Look At It.” I took the theme of a man who was kept by a woman who loved him – an offensive theme, but true, because it happens not once but hundreds of times, and in every grade of life. The nursemaid pays for her guardsman, and the cook will bribe the policeman with her cooking. Today women are emancipated. Surely they have equal rights in the matter of keeping? Personally I find it no more immoral for a woman to keep a man than it is for a man to keep a woman. I could have made the woman a great deal older than she was and turned the play into a comedy, for nothing is so ludicrous – or so distasteful – as an old woman paying for a young lover. Because of the incongruity, perhaps the audience would have laughed, and then I should have been forgiven, but I preferred to tell my story on natural lines. Every author has a right to his story, and my story had to be told that way. I tried to tell it simply, and to bring it to a logical end. The audience with a few exceptions would have none of it. They were shocked, dismayed, horrified at the whole business. They saw no poetic justice in the ending. They only discredited what I had written, and said I must be a man of immoral character. Now my morals, which we agreed did not matter very much, are so pure that it had not entered my head that something which can, and does happen, and happen repeatedly, however reprehensible, could shock people when they were confronted with it, unless they were humbugs. But I must be wrong, and I am forced to the conclusion that to hear said out loud something one has always known to be true, but has seldom heard spoken about, is undoubtedly shocking. And, there again, we are brought back to what is wrong with the theatre – the inability of the audience to dissociate the actor from his part, and the part from the author. Now in my own plays, I very rarely say what I think. I try to make my characters say what they are thinking, or still better, say one thing and by it show that they are thinking another, and if, by any chance, my personal beliefs should become apparent, it will only be noticed by someone who has listened very carefully, and not gone to sleep – and if noticed, can be discounted at once, because anyway, I am liable to change my opinion from day to day, as most of us are, and I am only trying to write of life as I see it at a given moment, and then only from the same number of aspects as there are characters in the play.

“Wet Paint” was received very kindly on a Sunday night, and I may be pardoned if I went to bed a happy man. But my awakening was rude. I was interviewed the next morning at an unduly early hour, as it seemed to me by three separate gentlemen who wished to know how I had taken my failure. This play was frankly meant to amuse – and not to shock – as some people seemed to think. The use of certain words in it was objected to on the grounds of taste. These words, I maintain, are used frequently, not only in the Bible and by Shakespeare, but also in some of the greatest houses in the land, as well as in the humblest homes. Later, an unfortunate chain of circumstances led Miss Iris Hoey's brilliant performance in the part of Florence to go unappreciated in America. The fact that this play was not allowed to be performed publicly in London had led America to expect that they were going to see something that really would make them sit up, instead of which they found it was one of the mildest comedies they had seen for years.

“Tuppence Coloured” was most beautifully and sympathetically played by Miss Marie Löhr, Mr. Norman McKinnel, and the rest of the company. For myself, I do not care for the play, and the fault that it did not succeed was entirely in the writing, as I failed to

bring through the story what I had at the back of my mind, and I can only apologize to Miss Lühr and the company, who were so patient and loyal to me, for my stupidity. This play is only now published as a contrast to the other two, and having written it, I must stand by it.

It is easy enough to try and write plays. It is easy enough to try and act or direct plays. It is easier still to criticize them, when they are put before the public. But what it is not easy to be, is the Censor. The Censor is the unfortunate gentleman who, with his colleagues, has to read every play that is due to be produced, and has to decide, on reading them, whether they will make the public blush or not. Very often, when he decides that a play will not be good for an audience, the author and the would-be producer rush into print and say exactly what they think of him - that is far as the editor will allow them. This, the Lord Chamberlain, who is the gentleman in question, has to bear smilingly and blandly. But then he is an Olympian. His word is final. And so he can afford to be serene. Unluckily for myself, on two occasions so far I have come up against him. And on each occasion, he has refused either to see me or discuss the play, or any possible alteration in the play. Immediately, managers, the press, agents and friends have all rushed to my side and said, "How disgraceful," ... "How badly you have been treated," "He ought to be done away with," and I have been supposed to have said this about him and that about him, and to have called aloud in the name of my Grandfather. As a matter of fact, I did none of these things. What I said in the privacy of my own house, does not concern anybody else. But even what I said in that privacy was exceedingly mild. I could find a great many reasons against an institution that, in the last few years, has turned down some of the most go-ahead and interesting plays of our time, plays which really would have advanced the cause of drama, and helped towards the development of dramatic writing, but none of my arguments would hold water, for, as I have said, the Censor is an Olympian and impervious to attack, and there is trouble ahead for anyone who attempts to write what is called a sex play with any approach to realism. They will be prevented from producing it at once, unless the play is so unreal that it does not matter or unless it can be presented in the manner of a farce, in which case more licence is given than to a serious theme. Because the author will find that he is supposed to have written his play for one of three or four reasons. One. The author likes writing them, which is obviously an unworthy motive. Two. That he is trying to shock a body of grown up people who, if they do not wish to, need not go near the theatre, and this, of course, must be stopped because it might put ideas into their heads which were not there before. Three. Because human nature is so frail that people like to be shocked, and the author will make a lot of money out of it, which cannot possibly be allowed. And Four, worse still they are written for all three reasons. But I wish to point out that an author is not concerned with whether his writing shocks the public or not. He is only concerned with writing what he thinks to be true to life. Every author knows the risks he runs, if he writes that kind of play, and it is for him to make up his mind whether the play is of sufficient artistic value to be worth while writing - and also worth the risk of being turned down.

The Censor is only doing what he is paid to do, the fee is a modest two guineas, and it is not his personal taste - I am quite sure that he has a very nice taste in these matters - but he is answerable to the people, and that is a big responsibility. If occasionally something

leaks through that he has not noticed, or quite appreciated, as sometimes happens, it is very bad luck on him, because at once he is inundated with a storm of protest, which surely must be irritating. But the playing of a ballet, or a play in a foreign language is a great relief, because, Of course, the audience can make a ballet mean anything they like, and the Privileged will be amused, and the rest only puzzled, so the fault lies within themselves; whereas with a play in a foreign language, the English are not supposed to understand, since they are such bad linguists, and therefore it is out of court at once. But however much the Censor is raved at by the shocked, and laughed at by the intelligent, at least he is beloved of the managers, and with reason, for once he has decreed a play is pure, that play is playable, and can be performed without fear of interruption from either the Bishop of London or Mrs. Hornibrook, and this is some sort of guarantee to the manager, for without the Censor, we should surely have something in his place, probably a form of police censorship, as I understand they are now undergoing in American which a play is produced, and if the police, for some reasons best known to themselves, take a dislike to this play, it can be stopped at a moment's notice, the actors imprisoned, and even the licence of the theatre taken away, which, naturally, results in a great financial loss. Therefore the managers love the Lord Chamberlain. If I were Censor - a post which requires position, intimacy with the non-conformist conscience of today, complete lack of humour, and unadulterated equanimity, for which I realize with great humility that I have no qualifications - my loyalty to my task would make me turn down every play' however interesting, if I thought that there was any question about its purity, and not only that, I would insist upon reading the full stage directions as well as the script, for, in a great many instances, there lies the trouble.

I shall certainly be under the cloud of the Censor's displeasure again, because in writing today one has all sorts of unpleasant truths to tackle. This is true, though, of every generation. "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray" produced a storm of protest, and the public performance of Shaw's "Mrs. Warren's Profession" was forbidden for twenty years. To-day, however, the problems in these plays seem to us to be extremely mild - in fact hardly problems at all. The different conditions that prevail have produced different problems, and doubtless in further twenty years, our problems will also cease to count. if an author does not write of what he sees and knows, of what then can he write? Therefore, when I am so unfortunate as to incur his displeasure again, I shall bow to superior knowledge and go away and publish the play, advice which I believe he has given to aggrieved authors on more than one occasion.

In my childhood, after seeing my first play, I used to be fond of telling long unending stories to any wretched child I could find younger than myself, or less strong, who would listen to me, and in telling these tales, I used to preface them, not with the usual "Once Upon a Time," but with, to me, the far more romantic start, "Ding - And The Curtain Goes Up," and from that age onwards - I think I must have been five years old when I saw "Sweet Nell of Old Drury" so romantically played by Miss Julia Nielson and Mr. Fred Terry at the Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool, to both of whom I owe a personal debt of gratitude for making me love the theatre - from that age on, I promised myself that I would write for the theatre, and here I am still promising myself that I will write for the theatre, as far as I am able. The difficulties are many, but they are purely personal

ones, and whether I am produced or not will not alter my determination to write for the theatre. I am grateful indeed to the Venturers Society, who were the first to believe in me, and who staged so admirably “Wet Paint” and “Tuppence Coloured.” I am grateful to the artists who appeared in these plays and were unfailing in their work, and their sense of humour with regard to the results. Their sense of humour indeed was necessary. I am grateful to the producers and managers of the three productions, and to the audiences who apparently enjoyed them, and even took the trouble to write and tell me so. And lastly I am grateful to Mr. Martin Secker for publishing the three plays, though privately I think he is a mug to do so.

Your humble and obedient servant,

Lathom