

INAUGURAL PERFORMANCE OF "THE SEATS OF THE MIGHTY."

At seven o'clock yesterday morning two enthusiastic individuals, it is authoritatively reported, took up positions at the doors of Her Majesty's Theatre with the firm determination that, even at the cost of twelve hours' waiting, they would be among the first, if not the first, of the public to enter Mr. Tree's new playhouse. The circumstance is mentioned as typical of the extraordinary eagerness displayed by all kinds and classes of people to be present at a ceremony interesting not only in itself, but also as, so to speak, the harbinger of what is to follow. Rumour had, it is true, been busy regarding the merits or demerits of the play that Mr. Gilbert Parker had fashioned out of his popular novel "The Seats of the Mighty," received by New York and Washington with very little favour and by Boston with acclamation. But it is tolerably certain that although considerable curiosity was felt as to which of these cities had expressed the truer verdict, the real interest of the evening centred less in the play than in the playhouse. An audience possesses a limited power of receptivity, and when so much has to be marked, it is inevitable that something should be overlooked. Of the theatre itself we have already published copious details, and it is unnecessary therefore to return to the subject. Yet even the private view given on Saturday afternoon scarcely prepared one for the dazzling appearance of the house last night. Great as is the number of the seats at the disposal of the management, every place was occupied, while many held themselves happy in that they had secured an inch or two of standing room. The Prince of Wales, who with the Duke of Teck occupied the stage box, set an excellent example by arriving a few minutes before the time advertised for the rising of the curtain. Mr. Chamberlain was heartily cheered as he took his place in the stalls; and a similar compliment was paid to Sir Arthur Sullivan, looking well and sun-browned after his stay in the Riviera.

The overture ended, the tableau curtains parted and Mrs. Tree appeared in the costume of Madame Cournal. A tremendous burst of cheering greeted her. When at length silence was restored she proceeded to deliver, with charming expression, the prologue specially written for the occasion by the Poet Laureate. Appropriately enough, it began with a quotation from "Measure for Measure," containing the words "Very well met, and welcome." Considerations of space prevent us from giving the epilogue in full; but the following lines, which bring it to a conclusion, afford a sufficiently fair impression of its scope:—

For this we put on motley to the view,
And travesty ourselves, to comfort you.
Yet there is One, whose venerated name
We humbly borrow, and will never shame;
Who needs no tinsel, trappings, nor disguises
To shine a Monarch in the whole world's eyes;
Waits for no prompter for the timely word,
And, when 'tis uttered, everywhere is heard;
Plays, through sheer goodness, a commanding part,
Speaks from the soul, and acts but from the heart.
Long may she linger, loved, upon the scene,
And long resound the prayer, "God save our gracious Queen!"

Mrs. Tree having retired the curtain rose, revealing Miss Clara Butt surrounded by a large and efficient choir. The National Anthem was then sung with superb emphasis, the entire audience starting to its feet and joining in the chorus in the heartiest manner. And then, the preliminary part of the programme over, the house settled down more or less quietly to await the first performance in London of "The Seats of the Mighty."

The book itself is widely known and has achieved well-deserved popularity with a large section of the reading public. The very elements which serve to make a successful novel do not, however, always help to constitute a good play. But Mr. Gilbert Parker, although unfamiliar to metropolitan playgoers as a dramatist, is not altogether a novice in stage-work. He has gained experience elsewhere, and it was to be expected that the results of that experience would in the present instance make themselves manifest. Let it be said at once that in the construction and development of his piece he has displayed considerable dexterity and ingenuity. But that it is on a level with or even approaches the same level as the book from which it is drawn, cannot be declared. As a novelist Mr. Parker is precise almost to laboriousness. His style possesses a most polished nicety; he can be subtle without leaving any impression of vagueness; while the care with which he builds up and develops his characters leaves no opening for any charge of inconsistency. "The Seats of the Mighty" is a book which, with all its stirring scenes and notable adventures, could not honestly be accused of a tendency towards melodrama as the word is understood to-day. But when the story comes to be reduced by the author himself to its primary elements what is the result? A play so frankly and ostentatiously melodramatic that in thinking of it, and especially of the two last acts, one finds it difficult to clear one's mind of memories of the Adelphi Theatre. The commanding position held by Doltaire in the novel remains, it is true, a commanding one on the stage: by virtue of situation, however, rather than of mental vigour and intellectual force. Doltaire, to be frank, strikes the observer as being in the play somewhat of a clumsy villain whose good luck is, up to a certain point, more conspicuous than his ability. Incidents, moreover, that by the novelist are made to appear plausible and consistent fail somehow to seem so when presented by the playwright. Yet, accepting the new play as a melodrama set in a highly ornate frame, there is no denying its power to interest and to hold the attention. The action begins slowly; the prologue, although carefully written and presenting a graceful picture of the Court at Versailles in the time of Louis XV., is a trifle prolix and hardly grips the audience with the requisite force; while not until the end of the subsequent act is a really stimulating situation reached. But from that point onward there is no lack of incident; the climax being attained in the blowing-up of the Treasury Chamber in the Governor's Palace in Quebec and the death of Doltaire himself.

For these and other stirring episodes it would be unfair not to give Mr. Parker all credit. If we are unable to say that his play moves upon the highest

plane, it would be unjust not to recognize that it contains many conspicuous merits. The dialogue is written in good sound nervous English; and that the author knows how to get the most out of an exciting situation is evident again and again. In the drawing of his characters he is less fortunate. Even Doltaire can scarcely be pronounced a thoroughly satisfying and convincing personage. Mr. Parker, indeed, asks us in great measure to take his brilliancy for granted; for neither in speech nor action does Doltaire invariably play the part of the clever man he is represented to be. The remaining characters are all more or less shadowy; and it is not easy, consequently, to feel that deep interest one would desire to be in their adventures. Nevertheless, if the story as a whole fails to exercise a continuous influence upon the audience, many of the scenes unquestionably invite attention. Of these we may cite that at the end of the first act, when Moray at Doltaire's command is about to be shot and is saved at the last moment by the intervention of Alixe. Very animated also is the scene in the Governor's palace, where Doltaire and Moray measure swords and Moray is again rescued from death by the interposition of Alixe, who has taken Madame Cournal's place in the famous dance. Finally, we may point to the skillfully contrived incident of the explosion, and the period of extreme tension that precedes it during which Doltaire and Voban await the fate from which there is no escape. In his treatment of these various episodes Mr. Parker shows the dramatist's hand and reveals a genuine appreciation of stage effect. As Doltaire, Mr. Tree, considering the circumstances, did remarkably well. For ourselves, we do not think the rôle is entirely suited to his style, believing as we do that his strength lies in the portrayal of character parts rather than of those belonging to the declamatory school. His Doltaire is, nevertheless, a very striking and notable figure. Mr. Lewis Waller played Moray with superb fire and energy, securing for himself a hearty round of applause by his splendid delivery of a patriotic speech placed in the mouth of Moray. As Bigot, Mr. Murray Carson struck exactly the right note at the outset and maintained it to the end, acting with a firmness and decision of the most praiseworthy description. Mr. Lionel Brough made an excellent Gabord; and Mr. William Mollison, as Voban, proved himself to be an actor of rare vigour and intelligence. Mrs. Tree has seldom been seen to greater advantage than as Madame Cournal; while Miss Kate Rorke gave a most pathetic and womanly portrait of Alixe. Mention alone can be made of Mr. Charles Brookfield's Louis XV., Miss Janette Steer's Marquise de Pompadour, and Miss Edith Ostlere's Mathilde—all admirable performances. On the conclusion of the piece, which was very favourably received, Mr. Tree, although midnight was close at hand, was induced to speak a few words of thanks to the dispersing audience.