Hobson's choice, a three-act comedy

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HOBSON'S CHOICE

A THREE-ACT COMEDY

BY

HAROLD BRIGHOUSE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
B. IDEN PAYNE

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INTRODUCTION

Doubtless because the majority of his earlier plays were produced at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, and, perhaps more particularly, because *Hobson’s Choice*, his first long play to be given in America, is a study of Lancashire life, the work of Harold Brighouse seems to be too closely identified with that of Miss Horniman’s Repertory Company. This is regrettable only insofar as it tends to give the impression that all his plays have a local character. Actually the sixteen plays, long and short, which have already been performed cover a wide range in setting and subject, and out of this number only five have a Lancashire background, and only six have been played by Miss Horniman’s company. Again, it is a mistake to imagine that the Manchester Theatre in any way specializes in local plays. On the contrary, catholicity has always been its watchword. At its inauguration it had one prime object, the production of *good plays* irrespective of any kind or class

[ v ]
INTRODUCTION

into which they might be grouped. There was no special axe to be ground, no particular theory of production or playwriting to be exploited.

While it is necessary to bring this point forward, one would not seek to minimize the value and importance of the local drama. Harold Brighouse is a Manchester man, and those of his plays which deal with Lancashire life are the most richly individualized. So, too, the most far-reaching result of Miss Horniman’s Theatre has been the growth of a Lancashire drama which has made Lancashire live for thousands where before it was no more than an empty name.

It was the establishment in their midst of a theatre mainly devoted to the production of new plays which gave Manchester writers an impetus toward the drama. That their output took the form, to a great extent, of local plays is probably largely due to the fortunate chance that the theatre opened its doors at the time when the Irish Players, who gave the great stimulus to the Folk Drama, were in the meridian of their success. In any case, there can be no question that Lancashire life is so rich in individual traits and its verbal expression is rendered so colorful by its uncompromising dialect that the dramatist found in it a rich-veined mine.

[ vi ]
INTRODUCTION

One of the first to explore this mine and quite the most successful, with the possible exception of Stanley Houghton, whose work was so tragically cut short by his early death, was Harold Brighouse. His first long play, *Dealing in Futures* (produced originally by the Glasgow Repertory Theatre), is a study of industrial conditions and the century-long contest between capital and labor. The external facts would apply with almost equal exactitude to any manufacturing community, but the characters are unmistakable Lancashire types. It is not a plea for any particular solution of the social problem, nor, though the author's sympathy with the workers is clear enough, does it display anything of the fervor of the reformer. For an early play it shows a remarkable sense of dramatic construction, and it is characteristic of the author's subsequent work in that it is a play of character rather than of situation.

The first example of the author's work to be given in Manchester was a short one-act sketch, *The Doorway*. This is little more than a dialogue between two outcasts, a man and a woman, strangers to each other, who meet by chance in the shelter of a factory door and find mutual comfort in telling over their
misfortunes and their past adventures as they huddle together in the biting cold of the small hours of a winter's morning. This play, too, is indicative of the author's development; the characterization is markedly individual, clear-cut, and sympathetic, and the dialogue is full of a quaint humor which is essentially of the theatre. In all Harold Brighouse's plays there is in the acting more laughter than one would expect from the reading. The actors invariably experience a sense of surprise and pleasure when they discover in performance that the public finds far more humor in their parts than they themselves were aware of during the period of preparation.

Harold Brighouse is a prolific writer. He has been particularly successful in the field of the one-act drama, a field almost entirely neglected in America, and in England too often regarded solely as the despised "curtain-raiser," useful to keep the gallery quiet whilst the late diners dribble into the stalls.

His most noteworthy examples of the one-act form are, perhaps, *Spring in Bloomsbury*, a realistic picture of the hopeless struggle of mediocrity as exemplified in a conscientious but ungifted young London clerk; it is a successful example of what has been defined as the drama of revolt; *The Price of
INTRODUCTION

Coal, a swift little play depicting in bold colors the uncertainties and hazards of the miner’s life; it was originally written in Lancashire dialect, but for its first performance by the Glasgow Repertory Company it was transposed into the Scotch idiom, in which form it was played several hundred times in Great Britain as a curtain-raiser to Bunty Pulls the Strings, and, especially, Lonesome Like, which belongs to the same genre as Hobson’s Choice and in which the author reaches a very high development of the one-act form. The theme is simple. A shy young engineer, his sensitive and unconsciously poetic nature stunted intellectually by the rough atmosphere of factory life, is suffering from loneliness since the death of his mother a year before. Failing in his all too clumsy love affair, he turns to an old woman, disabled by rheumatism and about to be taken to the poorhouse, and “adopts her as his mother.” This is all, but the story is told so winningly, the dialogue is so vibrant with natural humor, and the dénouement—the old woman’s release from the shame of pauperism and the boy’s rapture at the solution of his problem—is so neatly turned that the play is a masterpiece in miniature.

Of the several long plays which Harold Brighouse