

# The Tendency of the Modern Stage

## A Talk with Sir W.S. Gilbert, on things Theatrical. by Bram Stoker.



Ellis & Walery.]

Sir William Schwenck Gilbert.

"IN the recent 'Honour List,' said Sir William Gilbert, 'I found myself politely described by some Court functionary as 'Mr. Gilbert, playwright.' Nine times out of ten, when a dramatic author is referred to by a newspaper man, he is described as a 'playwright.' The term 'wright' is properly applied to one who follows a mechanical calling, such as a wheelwright, a millwright, a cartwright, or a shipwright. We never hear of novel-writers, or poem-writers, or essay-writers: why, then, of play-wrights? There is a convenient word, 'dramatist,' that seems to describe fitly one who devotes his time to writing dramas, taking the word 'drama' in the broadest sense."

My conversation with Sir William Schwenck Gilbert—the first knight on whom the honour was conferred purely as a dramatist—was held partly in the study of his beautiful house, and partly as we walked about the grounds of his charming estate, Grim's Dyke, at the edge of the great common some twelve miles to the north-west of London, known as Harrow Weald, part of the ancient Forest of Middlesex.

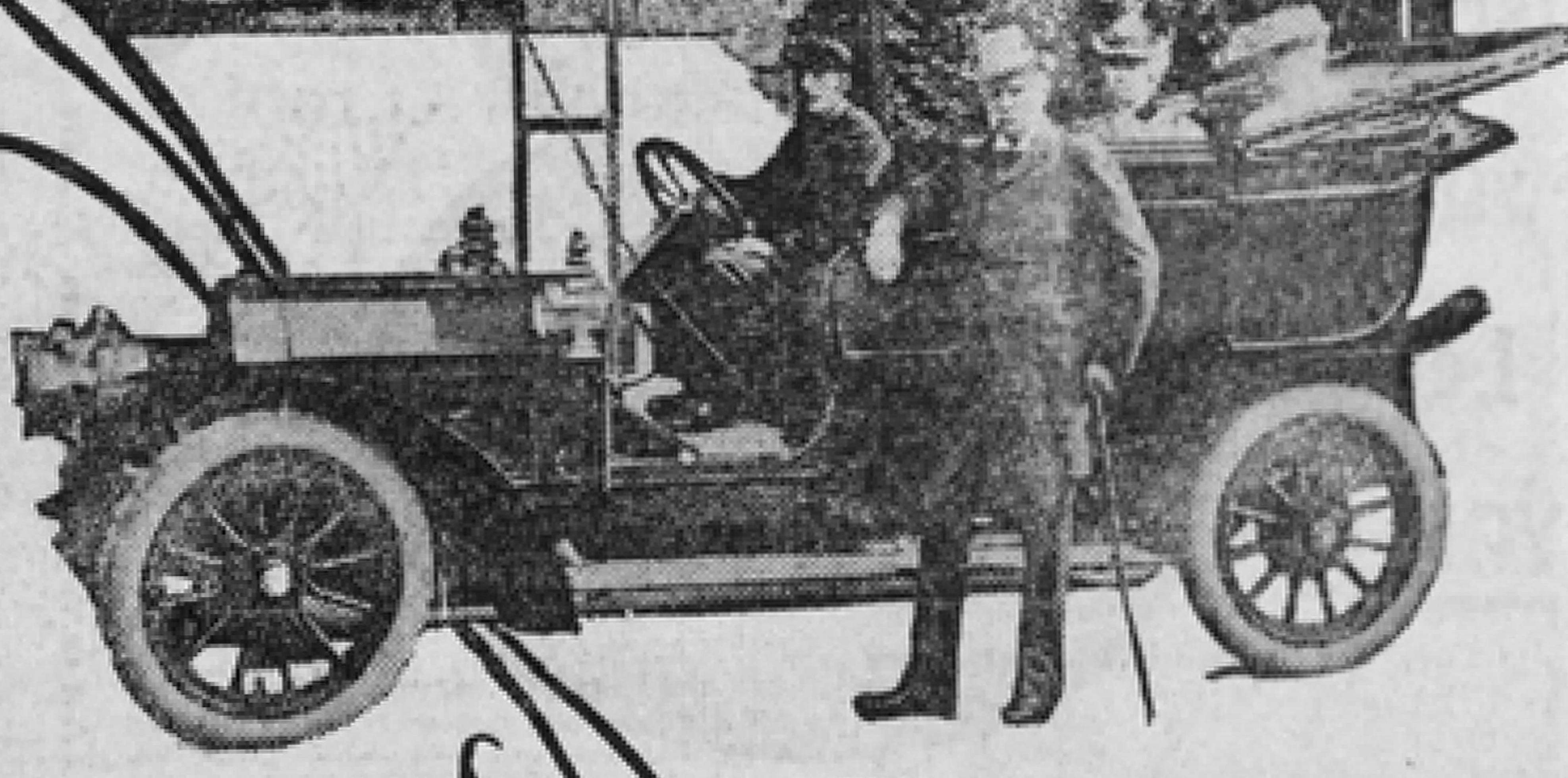
The house was built some forty-odd years ago for Frederick Goodall, the painter, from the designs of Norman Shaw, the architect, who built so many fine houses in England. Mr. Gilbert—as he then was—purchased the estate in 1890. As it stands on the top of the hill, the view from it are fine. Bushey Heath marks the sky-line some three miles away to the north-west, and adjacent to Grim's Dyke is Bentley Priory, the last home of Queen Abelaide, widow of William IV.

Sir William Gilbert has made many improvements to the property, chiefly in the way of adding to its picturesque effects. Among these is a pretty lake of an acre and a half in extent. Here in the summer time Sir William and his friends swim daily, sometimes two or three times in the day. The forming of the lake was a matter of some difficulty, for, as the hill is of gravel, it was necessary to "puddle" the excavation with clay in order to make it water-tight.

Sir William supervised the doing of this himself, with the result of so severe a rheumatic attack that he had to spend some six months in Helouan before he regained his powers of movement.

Everywhere are beautiful trees—oak, ash, chestnut, pine—with deep undergrowth of laurel and rhododendron, and many lovely dells, where the bracken rises waist high.

The house is large, and has many large and handsome rooms, all of which are stored with objects of interest and beauty. The great drawing-room, which was formerly the painter's studio, and has the dimensions and windows of a chapel, is a storehouse of works of art. The fireplace, a massive carving in Derbyshire spar, some fifteen feet high, was designed by Sir William himself. On the opposite wall hangs, among many others, his portrait by the late Frank Holl, R.A. Scattered



He Enjoys Automobiling.

through the room are some lovely cabinets; one of great beauty, Italian of the XIV. Century; another, Japanese, three hundred years old, wrought in lacquer, tortoiseshell, cedar, ivory, and agate. On one table is a great ivory goblet, German, of the XVI. Century; the tusk from which it was carved must have been enormous. On another table is an exquisite piece of carving in marble of a cat and kittens by the sculptor Freminet, 1863. Elsewhere in the house, scattered among works of art and curios of all kinds, are interesting souvenirs of the dramatist's own plays. For instance, in the billiard room is the block and axe used so long in "The Yeomen of the Guard." Here, too, are hung round the walls frames containing the original drawings, done by the author, for the "Bab Ballads"; there are some two hundred and fifty of them in all. In the hall—wherein is a fine suit of steel armour—is a huge model of a full-rigged ship. It rests on a sea of green glass, and is fourteen feet long. It is a fac-simile of one of the old three-deckers of a hundred and ten guns sent to the Black Sea at the time of the Crimean War—the Queen, in which Sir Evelyn Wood was a midshipman before he forsook maritime for land warfare. From this model, whose rigging is perfect in every detail, the scene from "Pinafore" was taken.

"W. S. Gilbert"—by which name, rather than by his new title, he is best known—is a big-made man of just under six feet high. As he is now in his seventy-first year, it is not to be expected that he should have retained all the hairiness of his more youthful days. But the same dominant nature remains, and is expressed as of old by his masterful and militant appearance. Hair and moustache have grown white, but the face maintains its ruddy warmth. His humour is as trenchant and as quick as it has always been. Nothing is too big or too small for its mordant



A Statue in the "Grim's Dyke" Gardens.

characters; paint his own scenery; suggest his own changes of feeling; describe effects and emotions in general terms. In fact, he appeals directly to his readers. But the dramatist cannot appeal to his audience directly; his work can only appeal through the distorting medium of many prisms. That is where we writers of plays are handicapped. We are not always masters in our houses."

"Not even when you control the stage absolutely?"

"Not even then, though that gives us a chance. I attribute our success in our particular craft to the fact that Arthur Sullivan and I were in a commanding position. We controlled the stage altogether, and were able to do as we wished—to carry out our ideas in our own way, so far as the limitations of actors would allow of it."

"During the years we were running new operas at the Savoy I generally had royalties on my librettos to an average of about £3,000 a year. In all, I have had somewhere about £25,000 or £30,000 on this account."

"Roughly speaking, how many copies would that mean?"

"Well, I will leave you to work that out. I had sixpence halfpenny on each copy in London and fourpence halfpenny in the country. I suppose it averaged up about fivepence or fivepence



View of Drawing Room at Gilbert House.

force. His readiness and quickness are wonderful; the occasion which another would miss is seized with lightning rapidity.

"And your own plays?" I asked. "How many of these have you written?"

"I think the exact number is sixty-three."

"How do you regard their respective work of the dramatist and the novelist, one against the other?"

"Their method of work is, and must be, quite different. The novelist can make his own milieu as he goes along. He can create and alter his own

farthing for each copy. At fivepence each this would show a sale of one million four hundred and forty thousand copies. As, however, the total amount is approximate and the royalties vary, we may, I think, call the output a million and a half."

"What," I asked, "is the tendency of the modern stage?"

"Forward! Distinctly forward. In fact, from the very first, from the days of Theopis there has been a continual development of a better class of play. There have, of course, been periods of set-back; times when all seemed to be on the down

grade. But such variations occur in the development of every art. For instance, we used here in England to be largely if not wholly dependent on French plays. Indeed, in the past many of our great plays took their inspiration from foreign sources. For instance, I remember John Oxenford, the famous critic of the 'Times,' telling me that 'She Stoops to Conquer' was taken from a German one-act play; and that the screen scene in 'The School for Scandal' was adapted from a scene in one of the plays of Calderon."

"How about the modern French plays?"

"The French players are better than the plays. I do not care for the spirit which seems to animate the modern French dramatists—most of them, at all events. Their work is almost invariably founded on breaches of the Seventh Commandment. But the players are superb."

"What in your opinion is the coming vogue of plays—tragedy, drama, comedy, or what?"

"Tragedy is hopeless; drama has better prospects; comedy better still; farce best of all. I speak, of course, of the comparative probability of success, not of actual merit. The different forms of comedy are easier of fulfilment. We have at present a considerable number of fine comedians, but few, if any, tragedians."

"How do you account for that?"

"Supply and demand. Everybody wants comedy, but no one wants tragedy. They go to see Shakespeare's tragedies because a certain knowledge of his work is properly held to be essential to people of education. People like to be on a sort of nodding acquaintance with his plays; and so they go to see them, because to witness a performance of his plays is the easiest and the pleasantest way of acquiring a superficial knowledge of them. But in reality in tragedy it is the actor who draws. But as the world wants comedy it has it, and fairly good comedy, too. Pinero and such men have done an infinity of good in raising comedy higher."

"How about musical comedy?"

"That is two things. As we have writers of comedy and good comedians the prospects of comedy are bright enough. But I fear there is no composer now before the public whose work is being taken seriously by connoisseurs—if I except Mr. German, whose work is of a higher order than that of his rivals. I think this is a great pity, for the modern musical comedies serve to amuse people, even if they cannot claim to be art of a high order. They please a very large class—those who don't want to think: the shop-girl, the typewriter, the gentleman from Aldershot, and the people who make theatre parties and merely want to be amused."

"What is your opinion about the American stage?"

"I don't care much for the class of plays that appeal at present to the American audience. As a rule they are on the side of exaggeration, and their construction is generally inartistic. Their actors are better than their authors. That gives the play a chance, for good actors can often pull poor plays through. Authors should be grateful to players who can make their work vivid to the audience. For my own part I have always attached immense importance to the actor's art."

"How do you think the stage—the dramatic stage—is and is to be affected by the great popularity of the music-hall?"

"That is a rivalry in which the theatre is very heavily handicapped. The work in a music-hall is carried on under conditions which would be absolutely fatal to good work in a theatre. And then, again, the performers are different. Every performer in a music-hall is more or less a master in his craft. Not the actors only, but all who take part—conjurers, trick bicyclists, dancers, and so forth. In that world it is not sufficient to be a specialist in ignorance or incompetence. A man does not go on the music-hall stage merely because he has been spun for a clerkship in a bank or has failed in the Guards! The strong point about the music-hall commercially is that it only tries to amuse. There its ambition is satisfied; it does not try to elevate. My impression is that people go to places of amusement to be amused; and somehow the music-hall often fits better into the social structure than does the theatre. You need not give up a whole evening to it. It is more facile in its ways; at whatever hour you go in you can take up at once whatever is going on."

"Do you think the theatre has a function beyond mere amusement?"

"It should have, but it rarely pays to attempt anything beyond mere entertainment. My own experience is that the higher the literary quality of the play the greater is its chance of failure."

"Can you illustrate that—if not by the failure then by any of the things that make for failure?"

"When 'The Wicked World' was produced I had to bring a libel action against the 'Pall Mall Gazette.' In his summing up Mr. Justice Brett, who for the purposes of the trial had read the book of the play, said that there were some passages that would rank with any to be found in poetical drama. As illustration he read the speech from the first act beginning 'Thou hast seen black and angry thunder clouds.' Now this very passage was the only one cut out after the first performance because the lines dragged."

"There are," I suggested, "those who say that the public won't allow literary merit to be exercised in play writing." He smiled—a grim sort of smile—as he answered:

"If plays with a strong pretension to literary merit fail they do so not on account of that literary merit, but in spite of it. In a play the public want the story, and any departure from its strict course, introduced because the author is of opinion that the literary excellence of the departure justifies its introduction, simply adds to its chances of failure. Some authors make the same mistake with what they call 'comic relief.' Literature belongs to the structure of a play, and not merely to its incidents. I sometimes think it would be a good thing if when a dramatist had completed his play he would read it carefully from beginning to end, and cut out all the passages with which, on account of their literary excellence, he is best pleased."

Then with a grim smile all his own he added: "I have not always done it myself!"

Copyright in United States of America, 1907. Press Publishing Company, "New York World."

