

***BRONSON
HOWARD***



SHENANDOAH

Bronson Howard

Shenandoah

**A Military Comedy. Representative Plays by American
Dramatists: 1856-1911**

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[Illustration: BRONSON HOWARD]

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(1842-1908)

The present Editor has just read through some of the vivacious correspondence of Bronson Howard—a sheaf of letters sent by him to Brander Matthews during a long intercourse. The time thus spent brings sharply to mind the salient qualities of the man—his nobility of character, his soundness of mind, his graciousness of manner, and his thorough understanding of the dramatic tools of his day and generation. To know Bronson Howard was to be treated to just that human quality which he put into even his hastily penned notes—and, as in conversation with him, so in his letters there are repeated flashes of sage comment and of good native wit. Not too often can we make the plea for the gathering and preserving of such material. Autobiography, after all, is what biography ought to be—it is the live portrait

by the side of which a mere appreciative sketch fades. I have looked through the "Memorial" volume to Bronson Howard, issued by the American Dramatists Club (1910), and read the well-tempered estimates, the random reminiscences. But these do not recall the Bronson Howard known to me, as to so many others—who gleams so charmingly in this correspondence. Bronson Howard's plays may not last—"Fantine," "Saratoga," "Diamonds," "Moorcraft," "Lillian's Last Love"—these are mere names in theatre history, and they are very out of date on the printed page. "The Banker's Daughter," "Old Love Letters" and "Hurricanes" would scarcely revive, so changed our comedy treatment, so differently psychologized our emotion. Not many years ago the managerial expedient was resorted to of re-vamping "The Henrietta"—but its spirit would not behave in new-fangled style, and the magic of Robson and Crane was broken. In the American drama's groping for "society" comedy, one might put "Saratoga," and even "Aristocracy," in advance of Mrs. Mowatt's "Fashion" and Mrs. Bateman's "Self;" in the evolution of domestic problems, "Young Mrs. Winthrop" is interesting as an early breaker of American soil. But one can hardly say that, either for the theatre or for the library, Bronson Howard is a permanent factor. Yet his influence on the theatre is permanent; his moral force is something that should be perpetuated. Whatever he said on subjects pertaining to his craft—his comments on play-making most especially,—was illuminating and judicious. I have been privileged to read the comments sent by him to Professor Matthews during the period of their collaboration together over "Peter

Stuyvesant;" they are practical suggestions, revealing the peculiar way in which a dramatist's mind shapes material for a three hours' traffic of the stage—the willingness to sacrifice situation, expression—any detail, in fact, that clogs the action. Through the years of their acquaintance, Howard and Matthews were continually wrangling good-naturedly about the relation of drama to literature. Apropos of an article by Matthews in *The Forum*, Howard once wrote:

I note that you regard the 'divorce' of the drama from literature as unfortunate. I think the divorce should be made absolute and final; that the Drama should no more be wedded to literature, on one hand, than it is to the art of painting on the other, or to music or mechanical science. Rather, perhaps, I should say, we should recognize poligamy for the Drama; and all the arts, with literature, its Harem. Literature may be Chief Sultana—but not too jealous. She is always claiming too large a share of her master's attention, and turning up her nose at the rest. I have felt this so strongly, at times, as to warmly deny that I was a 'literary man', insisting on being a 'dramatist'.

Then, in the same note, he adds in pencil: "Saw 'Ghosts' last night.

Great work of art! Ibsen a brute, personally, for writing it."

In one of the "Stuyvesant" communications, Howard is calculating on the cumulative value of interest; and he analyzes it in this mathematical way:

So far as the important act is concerned, I have felt that this part of it was the hardest part of the problem

before us. We were certain of a good beginning of the act and a good, rapid, dramatic end; but the middle and body of it I felt needed much attention to make the act substantial and satisfactory. To tell the truth, I was quietly worrying a bit over this part of the play, while you were expressing your anxiety about the 2nd act—which never bothered me. There *must* be 2nd acts and there *must* be last acts—audiences resign themselves to them; but 3rd acts—in 4 and 5 act plays—they insist on, and *will* have them good. The only exception is where you astonish them with a good 2nd act—then they'll take their siesta in the 3rd—and wake up for the 4th.

This psychological time-table shows how calculating the dramatist has to be, how precise in his framework, how sparing of his number of words. In another note, Howard says:

This would leave the acts squeezed "dry", about as follows:—Act 1, 35 minutes; Act 2, 30; Act 3, 45; Act 4, 20—total, 130—2 hrs., 10 min., curtain up: entr'acts, 25 min. Total—2 hrs., 35 min.—8:20 to 10:55.

There are a thousand extraneous considerations bothering a play that never enter into the evolution of any other form of art. After seeing W.H. Crane, who played "Peter Stuyvesant" when it was given, Howard writes Matthews of the wisdom shown by the actor in his criticism of "points" to be changed and strengthened in the manuscript.

"A good actor," he declares, "whom I always regard as an original creator in art—beginning at the point where the

dramatist's pen stops—approaches a subject from such a radically different direction that we writers cannot study his impressions too carefully in revising our work." Sometimes, conventions seized the humourous side of Howard. From England, around 1883, he wrote, "Methinks there is danger in the feeling expressed about 'local colouring.' English managers would put the Garden of Eden in Devonshire, if you adapted Paradise Lost for them—and insist on giving Adam an eye-glass and a title."

Howard was above all an American; he was always emphasizing his nationality; and this largely because the English managers changed "Saratoga" to "Brighton," and "The Banker's Daughter" to "The Old Love and the New." I doubt whether he relished William Archer's inclusion of him in a volume of "English Dramatists of To-day," even though that critic's excuse was that he "may be said to occupy a place among English dramatists somewhat similar to that occupied by Mr. Henry James among English novelists." Howard was quick to assert his Americanism, and to his home town he wrote a letter from London, in 1884, disclaiming the accusation that he was hiding his local inheritance behind a French technique and a protracted stay abroad on business. He married an English woman—the sister of the late Sir Charles Wyndham—and it was due to the latter that several of his plays were transplanted and that Howard planned collaboration with Sir Charles Young. But Howard was part of American life—born of the middle West, and shouldering a gun during the Civil War to guard the Canadian border near Detroit against a possible sympathetic uprising for the Confederacy. Besides which—a

fact which makes the title of "Dean of the American Drama" a legitimate insignia,—when, in 1870, he stood firm against the prejudices of A.M. Palmer and Lester Wallack, shown toward "home industry," he was maintaining the right of the American dramatist. He was always preaching the American spirit, always analyzing American character, always watching and encouraging American thought.

Howard was a scholar, with a sense of the fitness of things, as a dramatist should have. Evidently, during the collaboration with Professor Matthews on "Stuyvesant," discussion must have arisen as to the form of English "New Amsterdammers," under Knickerbocker rule, would use. For it called forth one of Howard's breezy but exact comments, as follows:

A few more words about the "English" question: As I said, it seems to me, academical correctness, among the higher characters, will give a prim, old-fashioned tone: and *you* can look after this, as all my own work has been in the opposite direction in art. I have given it no thought in writing this piece, so far.

I would suggest the following special points to be on the alert for, even in the *best* present-day use of English:—some words are absolutely correct, now, yet based on events or movements in history since 1660. An evident illustration is the word "boulevard" for a wide street or road; so "avenue," in same sense, is New Yorkese and London imitation—even imitated from us, I imagine, in Paris: this would give a nineteenth century tone; while an "avenue lined with trees in a bowery" would not. Don't understand that I

am telling you things. I'm only illustrating—to let you know what especial things in language I hope you will keep your eye on. Of course *Anneke* couldn't be "electrified"—but you may find many less evident blunders than that would be. She might be shocked, but couldn't "receive a shock." We need free colloquial slang and common expressions; but while "get out" seems all right from *Stuyvesant* to *Bogardus*, for *Barry* to say "Skedadle" would put him in the 87th New York Vols., 1861-64. Yet I doubt whether we have any more classic and revered slang than that word.

The evident ease, yet thoroughness, with which Mr. Howard prepared for his many tasks, is seen in his extended reading among Civil War records, before writing "Shenandoah." The same "knowledge" sense must have been a constant incentive to Professor Matthews, in the preparation of "Peter Stuyvesant."

"The manual of arms," Howard declares, "is simply *great*. I think we can get the muskets pointed at *Barket* in about 4 or 5 orders, however; taking the more picturesque ones, so far as may be possible. I went over the [State] librarian's letter with a nephew with the most modern of military training: and as I was at a military school in 1860—just two centuries after our period—we had fun together. Even with an old muzzle loader—Scott's Tactics—it was "Load and fire in ten motions," *now* antiquated with the breech-loaders of to-day. The same operation, in 1662, required 28 motions, as we counted. By the bye, did I tell you that I found the flint-lock invented (in Spain)

in 1625—and it "soon" spread over Europe? I felt, however, that the intervening 37 years would hardly have carried it to New Amsterdam; especially as the colony was neglected in such matters."

From these excerpts it is apparent that Howard had no delusions regarding the "work" side of the theatre; he was continually insisting that dramatic art was dependent upon the *artisan* aspects which underlay it. This he maintained, especially in contradiction to fictional theories upheld by the adherents of W.D. Howells.

One often asks why a man, thus so serious and thorough in his approach toward life, should have been so transitorily mannered in his plays, and the reason may be in the very *artisan* character of his work. Mr. Howard delivered a lecture before the Shakespeare Society of Harvard University, at Sanders Theatre, in 1886 (later given, 1889, before the Nineteenth Century Club, in New York), and he called it "The Autobiography of a Play." In the course of it, he illustrated how, in his own play, called "Lillian's Last Love," in 1873, which one year later became "The Banker's Daughter," he had to obey certain unfailing laws of dramatic construction during the alterations and re-writing. He never stated a requirement he was not himself willing to abide by. When he instructed the Harvard students, he was merely elucidating his own theatre education. "Submit yourselves truly and unconditionally," he admonished, "to the laws of dramatic truth, so far as you can discover them by honest mental exertion and observation. Do not mistake any mere defiance of these laws for originality. You might as well show your originality by defying the law of gravitation." Mr. Howard

was not one to pose as the oracle of a new technique; in this essay he merely stated sincerely his experience in a craft, as a clinical lecturer demonstrates certain established methods of treatment.

In his plays, vivacity and quick humour are the distinguishing characteristics. Like his contemporary workers, he was alive to topics of the hour, but, unlike them, he looked ahead, and so, as I have stated in my "The American Dramatist," one can find profit in contrasting his "Baron Rudolph" with Charles Klein's "Daughters of Men," his "The Henrietta" with Klein's "The Lion and Mouse," and his "The Young Mrs. Winthrop" with Alfred Sutro's "The Walls of Jericho." He was an ardent reader of plays, as his library—bequeathed to the American Dramatists Club, which he founded—bears witness. The fact is, he studied Restoration drama as closely as he did the modern French stage. How often he had to defend himself in the press from the accusation of plagiarism, merely because he was complying with the stage conventions of the moment!

It is unfortunate that his note-books are not available. But luckily he wrote an article at one time which shows his method of thrashing out the moral matrix of a scenario himself. It is called "Old Dry Ink." Howard's irony slayed the vulgar, but, because in some quarters his irony was not liked, he was criticized for his vulgarities. Archer, for example, early laid this defect to the influence of the Wyndham policy, in London, of courting blatant immorality in plays for the stage.

Howard's femininity, in comparison with Fitch's, was equally as observant; it was not as literarily brilliant in its

"small talk." But though the effervescent chatter, handled with increasing dexterity by him, is now old-fashioned, "Old Dry Ink" shows that the scenes in his plays were not merely cleverly arrived at, but were philosophically digested. How different the dialogue from the notes!

This article was written in 1906; it conveys many impressions of early feminine struggles for political independence. The fact is, Mr. Howard often expressed his disappointment over the showing women made in the creative arts, and that he was not willing to let the bars down in his own profession is indicated by the fact that, during his life-time, women dramatists were not admitted as members into the club he founded.

The reader is referred to two other articles by Mr. Howard—one, "Trash on the Stage," included in the "Memorial" volume; the other, on "The American Drama," which is reproduced here, because, written in 1906, and published in a now obsolete newspaper magazine, it is difficult of procuring, and stands, possibly, for Mr. Howard's final perspective of a native drama he did so much to make known as native.

The most national of Howard's plays is "Shenandoah;" it is chosen for the present volume as representative of the military drama, of which there are not many examples, considering the Civil War possibilities for stage effect. Clyde Fitch's "Barbara Frietchie," James A. Herne's "Griffith Davenport," Fyles and Belasco's "The Girl I Left Behind Me," Gillette's "Secret Service," and William DeMille's "The Warrens of Virginia"—a mere sheaf beside the Revolutionary list which might be compiled.