CLASSICS TO GO

THE BEGGAR'S OPERA

TO WHICH IS PREFIXED THE MUSICK TO EACH SONG

JOHN GAY

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LIST OF THE PLATES

I.	THE BEGGAR	*Frontispiece*	
II.	MRS. PEACHUM	*To face page*	6
III.	POLLY PEACHUM	„	18
IV.	SCENE: A TAVERN NEAR NEWGATE	„	28
V.	CAPTAIN MACHEATH	„	40
VI.	LUCY LOCKIT	„	56
VII.	PEACHUM	„	70
VIII.	LOCKIT	„	82

CLAUD LOVAT FRASER

That when I die this word may stand for me—
He had a heart to praise, an eye to see,
And beauty was his king.

Dead at the age of thirty-one after a sudden operation, Claud Lovat Fraser was as surely a victim of the war as though he had fallen in action. He was full of vigour for his work, but shell-shock had left him with a heart that could not stand a strain of this kind, and all his own fine courage could not help the surgeons in a losing fight. We are not sorry for him—we learn that, not to be sorry for the dead. But for ourselves? This terror is always so fresh, so unexampled. I had telephoned to him to ask whether he would help me in a certain theatrical enterprise. I was told by his servant that he was ill, but one hears these things so often that one gave but little thought to it beyond sending a telegram asking for news; and now this. Personal griefs are of no public interest, but here is as sad a public loss as has befallen us, if the world can measure truly, in our generation.

But it is not, I think, of our loss that we should speak now. These desolations, strangely, have a way of bringing their own fortitude. A few hours after hearing, without any warning, of Lovat Fraser's death, I was walking among the English landscape that he loved so well, and I felt there how poor and inadequate a thing death really was, how little to be feared. This apparent intention to destroy a life and genius so young, so admirable, and so rich in promise, seemed, for all the hurt, in some way wholly to have failed. We all knew that, given health, the next ten years would show a splendid volume of work from the new power and understanding to which he had been coming in these later

days. But just as it seems to me not the occasion to lament our own loss, so does it seem idle to speculate with regret upon what art may have lost by this sudden stroke. It is, rather, well to be glad that so few years have borne so abundantly. Not only is the work that Lovat Fraser has left full in volume, it is decisive in character beyond all likelihood in one of his years. Greatly as he would have added to our delight, and wider as his influence would have grown, nothing he might have done could have added to our knowledge of the kind of distinction that was his and that will always mark his fame.

The man himself had a charm of unusual definition. One might go to his studio at five o'clock and find him lumbering with his great frame among a chaos of the rare and curious books that he loved, stacked pell-mell on to the shelves, littered on tables and the floor, his clothes and face and fingers streaked with paint. And then an hour or two later he would come dressed ready for the theatre, an immaculate beau of the 'fifties, his top coat with waist and skirts, his opera hat made to special order by a Bond Street expert on an 1850 last. And then, before setting off, he would talk of some fellow-artist who was a little down and out, and wonder whether some of his drawings might not be bought at a few guineas apiece. Then to book, as it were, such an order gave salt to his evening, and if the evening meant contact with some of his own exquisite work, a word of admiration was taken with that wistful gratitude that it is now almost unbearable to remember.

The theatre is a complex, co-operative affair, and it is idle to inquire who gives more than another to it. But on one side of its effort nobody in these later years has fought for light and beauty more surely and courageously than Claud Lovat Fraser. Like every fine artist, he was sometimes a little puzzled, a little hurt, that the critics could not see the clear motives inspiring his work. But the purpose never faltered.

As You Like It, *The Beggar's Opera*, *If*, the exquisite designs for Madame Karsavina's later ballets—these made it plain enough that a new genius of extraordinary power and fertility was at work on the stage. With a knowledge of tradition that combined the widest learning with profound intuition, Lovat Fraser in his design touched the life of five hundred years with the English spirit of our own time, with a certainty that every one of his colleagues, I know, will be proud to allow was beyond them all. The fertility of which I speak was perhaps his peculiar distinction, and it had no touch of common facility. He could not draw a line that was not hard with thought and rooted in imaginative decision. But he could invent with immense rapidity. It was the old, though rare, story. Alike in his theatre design and his tender landscape, beauty of spirit flowed in everything he did into beauty of execution. He was a man in whose presence everything mean or slipshod withered.

But perhaps it is most fitting at this time that we should think of our dead friend in yet another way. We are governed by two influences, our own character, and example. For each man his own character is for his meditation apart, but of example we may sometimes speak together in the open with profit. Those of us who live always striving towards creative effort believe passionately that the thing towards which we aim makes for all that is most chivalrous and most intelligent in life, that it is indeed the one true honesty in the world. And yet we know how easily that effort is beset by fears and jealousies and failure in generosity, how lightly we who should together give all our energy to the service of our art, waste it in little concerns of spite and self-interest. And it is in just such ways as this that great example may serve us nobly, and there has surely never lived an artist in whom such example more clearly shone. Art, which for him embraced and crystallised all that was brave and adventurous and tender, was the worship of

Lovat Fraser's life, a worship which he kept with an absolute loyalty.

It is my privilege to know most of the best artists, in all kinds, of my age. One has this distinction, another that. But I think that he had the loveliest of them all. I have known nobody who brought to his art a devotion so pure and utterly removed from self-interest. If he could serve the beauty that he loved, he was eager always to do so with perfect indifference to his own reward. Nobody could be with him for ten minutes without feeling that art was a thing far greater than any artist. He had the lovely, humorous humility that is the one sure sign of greatness. One felt always that if he should think that another might do given work better than he, there could be for him nothing but distress if the best was not done, even though it meant the loss of personal opportunity. But it is one of the happy things of genius that this exquisite humility can only live with great creative gifts, so that Lovat Fraser knew from day to day the supreme joy of mastery. The humility, however, is our example, and the thought that seems most worthy to-day is that he stands at this moment, for all he was younger than most of us, as a challenging leader to us all. It will, I think, always be impossible to remember him without feeling that anything mean or grudging in the spirit in which we do our work is a betrayal and an intolerable thing. With all his gaiety, his fun, his simplicities, and his powers, he showed us not only what a fine artist can do but what a fine artist can be. And under his leadership at this moment may we not go back to our work in the world with renewed courage and faith,

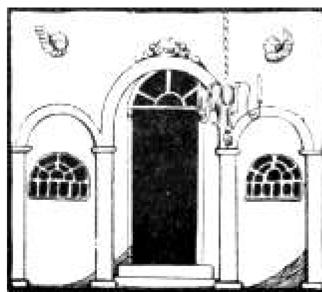
> "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers."

For his fame none of us have any fear. There is in his public achievement and his portfolios a solid body of work that more and more must establish itself. However futile prophecy in these things must be, one is confident that a

hundred years hence his name will be highly honoured among the little band who helped to bring back some life and truth to the English theatre of this age. He would wish for nothing better than that. And idle though it is to ask what his death, at little more than youth, may mean in the way of loss to the art that he lived for, his friends know that as dear a life as any of our time has gone suddenly, inexplicably, taking with it the tenderest love of every one who knew him. And he leaves with us an example without any stain.

JOHN DRINKWATER.

London,
Midsummer 1921.



THE BEGGAR'S OPERA

NOTE ON THE SCENE AND COSTUMES AT THE LYRIC THEATRE, HAMMERSMITH

Superficially the task of staging *The Beggar's Opera* was one of supreme ease. Indeed, so easy was it that it became a matter of some embarrassment to prune and select the required amount of data. Here was Hogarth and his actual scene of Newgate with Macheath in chains; here was Laroon's *Cries of London* falling, in its edition of 1733, pat into the period; here was the National Portrait Gallery and, added to these, here was the benefit of all Mr. Charles E. Pearce's research.[1] After a month or two of work in designing, the ease became so marked and apparent that it engendered in me the beginnings of mistrust. Still, I persevered in scene and costume with historically accurate reproduction and, until three weeks before the actual work was due to be carried out at the costumier's and in the painting shops, I felt comparatively cheerful. Then I reviewed my forces—the little scale models of the scenes, the characters in painted cardboard—all exact and accurate. Something was wrong and the result was, I confess, appalling. I had not made allowances either for my theatre or for my audience. I had forgotten that it required a spacious Georgian theatre, the intimacy of the side-boxes, the great personages sitting on the stage. The Duke of Bolton, Major Pauncefoot and Sir Robert Fagg were not in their places as in Hogarth's painting; the pit would not be filled with tye-wigs and hoops and there would be a sharper line of division between the actors and the spectators than ever existed in 1728. Something else had to be done. As reproduction was a failure one would try to give an impression of the same thing. Impressionism proved even

worse than accuracy. It was neither one thing nor the other. It merged into “making a picture of it”—a crime that is without parallel in the staging of a play. To make a pretty picture at the expense of drama is merely to pander to the voracity of the costumier and scene-painter.

What was then to be done? Added to all these objections was the important fact that I had designed scenes that would have seriously hampered the resources at Hammersmith. The theatre would have required more space for storage than could possibly have been given and, in addition, an army of stage hands would be wanted for whom there was not in this little theatre the accommodation.

The solution was, of course, to forget one’s past work, to scrap the models, and to start feverishly afresh. The only method left untried was the symbolic. That is to say, to hint at the eighteenth century and to suggest that through the doors on the stage existed the London of 1728. The scene demanded to be simple and one which, with slight modifications in doors and windows, remained before the audience for the whole action of the play. It was, therefore, to be a scene of which people did not easily tire and that remained interesting, unobtrusive and formally neat. To find such a scene it is necessary to refer back to days when the Comic and the Tragic scenes were architectural and permanent. This I did and, taking Palladio’s magnificent scene at Vicenza, by a shameless process of *reductio ad absurdum*, evolved the scene that is now in use at Hammersmith. Palladio and Gay have much to forgive.

So far the scene, but it called for a corresponding treatment in the dresses. In *The Beggar’s Opera* no one is in the height of fashion. Macheath and certain Ladies of the Town alone “keep Company with Lords and Gentlemen,” and even then there must have been apparent a distinction. Macheath is unaltered. Here it was essential to keep to tradition.

Macheath in a blue coat is unthinkable. The rest of the characters are frankly in the neighbourhood of Newgate. The clothes of Peachum and Lockit would be as equally unfashionable and just as possible thirty years before as thirty years after 1728, whilst the footpads are clad in whatever Georgian rags that happened to come their way. With the women I have taken greater licence. I have kept faithfully to the outlines of the age, the close-fitting bodice, the flat hoops, the square-toed shoes, but I have taken considerable liberties in the manner in which I have shorn them of ribbons and laces and—for the sake of dramatic simplicity, be it remembered—I have eliminated yards of trimming.

Just so much explanation is, I consider, due to the public, but whether I have been justified by results or whether, under the sacred mask of Drama, I have erred unpardonably, are points which, so long as this revival draws attention to a forgotten masterpiece, can be of no very great importance.

C. Lovat Fraser.

Chelsea,
February 1921.

1. *Polly Peachum and The Beggar's Opera*, by Charles E. Pearce. Messrs. Stanley Paul & Company, 1913.