

THE POOR FOOL—BAHR'S LATEST DRAMA

This latest work of Hermann Bahr, the celebrated author of "The Apostle," is a one-act problem play. The problem is: Which is the superior kind of life—that of the respectable but selfish type, of one who lives in a conventionally moral way, is esteemed by society and never comes into conflict with its established customs and laws; or that of a restless, rebellious spirit, which is impatient of conventional restraints, breaks through all social barriers to assert its own individuality? This comparison is accentuated in the drama by the contrasted lives of two brothers. Vincenz Haisst is imperial councillor and the sole proprietor of the old and rich business of the family. He is a man reputable in every respect; but he has crushed out of him all finer emotion and is hard and selfish. His two brothers have gone astray. One, Edward, has led a fast life, and has been imprisoned by Vincenz's business manager for embezzlement of money belonging to the house. For fifteen years he has been living in disgrace with his eldest brother, Vincenz, who has treated him with the utmost severity and contempt. Another brother, Hugo, a musician, a "genius" as his business brother sarcastically calls him, has also led a life of excess and has finally landed in an insane asylum.

We have thus the representatives of two extreme systems of philosophy—the Puritanic and the Nietzschean. And the triumph falls to the representative of the latter philosophy, who, though mad through his excesses, still maintains a sort of spiritual ascendancy over his conventional brother, and forces the latter, on the eve of death, to question the worth of his own life and the wisdom of his long self-restraint. The play is another of many evidences of the omnious extent to which Nietzsche's anti-Christian views figure in the current thought and literary product of Europe.

The opening scene reveals Vincenz as extremely ill and expecting death. He has an only daughter, Sophie, seventeen years old. By willing his property to Huster, his head manager, he sees a way of putting the old house in safe and able hands; and at the same time, to retain it within the family, he has provided for the marriage of his daughter with Huster. But Huster is a man fifty years of age, and Sophie has nothing in common with him. She has always been attracted by the adventurous and bold career of her two wayward uncles, and detests Huster for his harsh treatment of Edward. Hard as Vincenz is, he cannot but entertain some scruples as to the terms of the intended will, which prac-

tically forces upon Sophie the marriage with Huster, or leaves her with nothing but the small share of property to which she is entitled by law; and to appease his conscience he tries to justify his conduct in a conversation with the notary. In this conversation he reveals a feeling of bitterness against his two brothers, mingled with envy because of the general admiration for the genius of Hugo, and a feeling of latent doubt as to the preference of a career such as his own. To the notary's remark that Hugo is said to be a real genius he answers:

"Yes, since he is mad everybody finds it so. Of course I cannot tell. This is a thing that these lofty gentlemen settle among each other, and we have to keep silent. But my child I want to guard. You cannot blame me for that. I think we have had enough of that in our family. The other one, Edward, has also been a sort of little genius all the time—the thief. I think we have had our full of it now." And when the notary remarks that Edward was a mere child when he committed his indiscretion, Vincenz flares up. "You are so considerate!" he says. "Only decent people get no consideration from anybody. We toil and moil and keep ourselves constantly in restraint, and no one asks us the price we pay for it. . . . My father was a good man, but he also thought that a young man must have his fling. No, Mr. Regel, the evil only sinks in the deeper. You don't know men. There is only one way: Starve it out! It is hard, I know; I have been through it myself. But it does the work. I am glad that I have never yielded to myself, never. And now it shows, now we have the result. Here am I, and there are they. Starve it out; starve out the evil that is in man, in every man. Our nature is evil, we cannot change it. There is only one way: starve it out."

When Sophie intercedes for Edward, whose misdeeds she thinks have been expiated, he replies: "That sort of thing, my child, is never expiated. With musicians it is perhaps otherwise (*sneeringly*). But we plain working people who are nothing but respectable—we, my child, never forget and never excuse it. We cannot. Otherwise who would be so foolish as to be respectable? It is no pleasure. (*After a pause, calmly*) Mark that, and think of it a little. You have a drop of that kind in your blood also, the evil drop. (*Softly*) God protect you!"

Sophie leaves and he again remains alone with the notary:

Vincenz: When one lies awake in his bed the

whole black night and knows that in the corner stands Death, a strange feeling comes over one, and he passes everything over in his mind again—how it all was, and how it should have been, *should* have been. And who is right? Who is right in the end? When death is staring you in the face you want to know it: Who is right? Because at such a time it is a matter of great importance to you. And I know it now (*vigorously*): I am right, I. Because I can die peacefully, without regret. That is the beautiful thing about it. (*In a whisper*) I, too, have often been lured: "Forth, do not question; you are a fool; see how they enjoy themselves." I, too, wanted to enjoy myself once. And what would I have for it now? Where would all that have come to long ago? Look at Hugo. What has he? It all passes and one is left a miserable wretch. No, Mr. Regel, I am right. That will be my last word in my last hour: I am right. Abstinence and toil is man's, and he who takes it on him is proof against death. I would not die like a man of pleasure. No, I am right, it is only now that I know it.

Regel: I thought that a man might be permitted a little beauty now and then.

Vincenz (shouting triumphantly): But you see the end! You see it! Ruined, a miserable wreck, scarcely forty, and nothing more is left of this brilliant, dazzling man, nothing but a poor fool, a poor whining fool. (*Looks up stealthily at the notary, then in a husky voice*) I want to tell you something. You thought when I asked you to try to get the physician to bring Hugo here that perhaps I did it out of pity? No, no, it was not that. I am not sentimental. Life has weaned me from anything of that kind. No, you might as well know it. Why should I be ashamed? It is my right. (*Slowly in an undertone, slyly*) I want my proof. Do you understand? I want to see them standing side by side, his life and mine. Now, at last, put them side by side and measure them. Let it come out, I want my proof. Here let him stand, the luminous one, right before me who always stunted myself. Then we shall see it plain. I want the proof. (*Smiling*) He was so proud of his beautiful life. But the main point is a beautiful death. It is I who can have *that!* There is where it shows. We shall see. That's why, Mr. Regel.

Dr. Halma comes in, giving instructions as to the manner in which Hugo is to be received. Vincenz and Sophie remain in the room, Sophie sitting at the sewing-machine as if at work, in accordance with the order of the physician not to appear to notice Hugo, as the presence of several persons disturbs him. Enter Hugo. The room is the same as he had known before, but with a slight change in furniture.

(*Hugo enters, small, slender, delicate; with luxurious blond hair, large beaming blue eyes; at first shy and uneasy, but later beaming forth as if with the radiance of the sun; walks in hesitatingly without raising his eyes.*)

Dr. Halma: Go ahead, friend.

(*Hugo walks on obediently, then remains standing, still keeping his eyes down.*)

Dr. Halma: Will you wait for me here until I come back?

(*Hugo nods.*)

Dr. Halma: Take your hat and coat off.

(*Hugo nods but does not move.*)

Dr. Halma (takes off his hat and coat): So. It is very pleasant here, is it not?

(*Hugo nods mechanically.*)

Dr. Halma: Don't you like it here? Look around you.

Hugo (still hesitates a moment, then raises his large, beaming eyes, looks first in front of him, then on the right, sees a zither, but then immediately turns to the physician, against whom he threateningly points his right index finger, smiling lightly): No, no.

Dr. Halma: What is it?

Hugo (smiling): I know. But— Oh, no. (*The smile dies off, he covers his eyes with his hand; in a tone of infinite sorrow*) Oh, no.

Dr. Halma: What do you mean?

Hugo (taking his hand from his eyes and turning to the doctor in a tone of bitter hatred): No, you won't succeed. You cannot impose on me. No, my friend. (*Laughing contemptuously*) It is a capital imitation. The resemblance is close. (*Looks around the room.*) So close one could almost be duped. But— (*heaves a heavy breath with infinite melancholy*)—but in reality it was different. (*Changing his tone to a mild reproach*) What is the use, doctor? You are forever wanting to try me. (*Contemptuously*) H'm, it is time that you knew it. (*Sits down.*) H'm, how many times more? You travel about with me, and I am to believe, but I notice at once, h'm, that it is all an imitation (*Violently, knocking his hand on the table*) And bad! False streets, false houses, everything changed. I remember perfectly. Don't you think I can remember? You will not destroy my beautiful world with your cheap and bad imitations. Imitations! Nothing but counterfeit. (*In a tone of infinite melancholy*) My beautiful world! The beautiful, beaming world! (*Suddenly tearing at his collar*) You always give me such heavy things that it almost chokes me. Why is everything so heavy? (*Unbuttons his coat.*)

Dr. Halma: Now you will calmly wait for me, won't you? (*Exit, carefully locking the door behind him.*)

Hugo (pressing his hand against his forehead): What now? What was I going to say? Something is in my mind. I seem to— But now I can no longer think of it. I seem to think— (*pointing with two fingers at his forehead*) something must be torn there. It is just exactly as if something were torn. (*Breaks out into a sudden laughter, while his face brightens*) H'm. (*Rocking to and fro and as if listening, half singing*) "Autumn looks down the slope," h'm! Said the keeper (*very slowly*) "Autumn looks down the slope." (*Nods, beats time with his hand to his inner melody, then, as if concluding rhythmically, in spirit, with deep voice*) "Adown the slope— Slope." (*Stares before him with half-closed eyes, smiling, then suddenly opens them wide, looks with astonishment at the wall across the room, which he now recognizes; rises, turns around slowly, and finally beholds Vincenz, toward whom he bends, nodding softly; smiling*) H'm. How is that?

Vincenz (who has sat motionless all the time, fairly devouring Hugo with his eyes): Hugo!

Hugo (in a strange, clear and childish tone, as if coming from a far distance): Vincenz, see. (Involuntarily putting out his hand, which he suddenly withdraws in terror) How is that? Come, help me! (Shouting, while he clings to the arm of his brother) Help me, Vincenz, do you not see? (Sobbing) Do you not see how— (Releases his grasp of Vincenz's arm and points at himself) Look at me! Is it not so? Is it not so? Something must be torn there. Think. I implore you, Vincenz, help me. Be good and— and— Are you still angry?

Vincenz (who has hitherto stared at him rigidly, suddenly bursts forth in tears): My poor—my poor—Hugo! (Sinks on the sofa.)

Hugo (drawing back and shouting): No, no! I do not want to. I do not want to. Why don't you let me go? It is all over now. (Drops on the couch. After a long pause) "Autumn looks adown the slope" (pause). "adown the slope." No. And yet it is there, after all. (Shrewdly) Just wait— It is gone again. Yes— Say, Vincenz.

Vincenz: Well, Hugo?

Hugo: I am gone. Quite empty. They have taken everything away from me. Can't be helped. Gone! (With ecstasy) Do you remember? That famous picture? The luminous one— And Marie was quite mad about the hat. (Seriously) 'Tis no use. Does not illuminate any more. (In an indifferent tone, as if he was going to say something of no account) "Autumn looks adown the slope." (Contemptuously) Bah!— (With a merry laugh) Yes, now we are here again. That's funny. Here it began, here it will end. And you are not angry any more, are you?

Vincenz (greatly moved): Why, no.

Hugo (in a reminiscent, satisfied tone): Because I always shocked you. (Proudly) I was a bad fellow, all right. You know a man can't help himself. He has to. And you couldn't understand that, you see; you were always good. (Laughs) H'm. (With good-natured mockery) So good! But I had no respect. (With great zest) Oh, my, but didn't you get mad, though, sometimes! I was a rogue, that's true. I knew exactly how to take father, while you— (Suddenly, in astonishment) Say, where is Edward?

Vincenz: Do you want to see him?

Hugo: No, no. I and Edward! We will cause each other too much pain. You are much more clever. Perhaps—perhaps if I had followed you, who knows? But see, one really cannot help it, he must. (Jovially, regarding him with a sincere open expression) You are no longer angry?

Vincenz (still greatly moved): Why, Hugo!

Hugo: It is not so, now? Let me be here. Here it began.

Vincenz: If you want to.

Hugo: There it is so horrible. (Stretches himself and leans back, then pulls down his hat.) You were always so mad when I had my hat cocked on one side. And because I said (imitating the boastful voice of a child), 'A genius must do it!' And father laughed. (Softly, with great affection) He loved me so dearly. (In a changed, almost angry and contemptuous tone) And the women, too. A lot of them. But that was different. That wasn't the right thing any more. Beautiful women! (Sighing) Beautiful! (With a

soft, affectionate voice) But this dear, good old face of father— (Rises slowly, recalls something and walks up to where the picture of his father is hanging. He looks at it and strokes it, half kneeling on the sofa.) I believe I get everything from him (slowly passing his hand through his hair)—all this beauty and wonderful greatness. From him, most assuredly. God! why, he never said anything, he was so remarkable in his ways—so that we should not guess how much he loved us! And yet he acted as if it was a terrible thing to him when I took up music, and sometimes it seemed to me as if he was afraid and glad at the same time, as if when he was young he had wanted it himself, but did not trust himself. Hence this strange feeling toward me, half anxious and yet proud. For instance, do you recollect? At my first concert here? (Laughs.) God! I have achieved the greatest successes everywhere, but really, that was the first time in my life when I would rather have been away at the last moment, out of fear. Then when the applause was still roaring outside, father came very quietly into my room as I was changing my clothes. And he only pressed my hand. Not a word did he say. He could not have done it. And then we went home and—that had never yet happened—then he himself fetched grandfather's old birthday wine from the cellar. I see it yet before me—four stout bottles of superior Franconian. Why, that was a sacred relic—the last four bottles! We drank three. (Laughs softly.) H'm!

Vincenz: There is still one left.

Hugo (joyously): Oh!

Vincenz: There is still one down in the cellar. (Looks inquiringly at Hugo.)

Hugo: That would really be a—

Vincenz: Fetch the wine, Sophie.

Sophie: Yes, father. (Goes to the door.)

(Hugo looks up, and now for the first time sees Sophie; walks up to her and looks at her curiously, at first with a very serious expression, then growing more and more bright and cheerful, as if he had looked into and recognized her very soul; he strokes her hair gently from her forehead, and then kisses it tenderly; then he looks affectionately at her again and beckons her to go. Sophie walks out through the door.)

Vincenz: We will drink it together.

Hugo (who had followed Sophie with his eyes): Is it not so? Now it shows in the end. (his gestures become freer, his voice grows clearer and his whole being radiates.)

Vincenz (noticing the change in him with anxious astonishment): Hugo!

Hugo (buried in thought and reminiscences, beaming and smiling): Yes.

Vincenz: What is it you feel all of a sudden?

Hugo: Glad. And do you know—soaring! Everything soars upward again now. And the other part, everything—human suffering, human conflict—lies deep down underneath me. It sinks and sinks away. But I, soaring and ever soaring, keep ascending in glorious felicity. (Softly, childishly) Now I am there again. (Bows his head as if in devout prayer, with exaltation.) I.

Vincenz (in terror): Hugo!

Hugo (with the same exalted air): I. (Sophie enters, bringing the wine.)

Vincenz (hastily to Sophie): Give it to me.

(Pours the glasses full with a trembling hand; to Sophie) Go.

(Hugo notices her again as she is about to go, smiles kindly at her, takes her softly by the hand, and leads her mysteriously to a chair at a table, into which he presses her gently and sits down opposite her.)

Vincenz (suddenly noticing her again): What are you doing here still? Have I not told you—

Hugo (putting his hand on his brother's arm): Leave her.

Vincenz (flying into a rage): She—

Hugo (with gentle force, bending mysteriously toward his brother's ear, smiling strangely): Leave her, for she belongs to me.

Vincenz: No, no!

Hugo: Leave her, I say. Poor Vincenz! There are many things yet you do not know. (Inclines mysteriously toward him, with an air of haughtiness and cunning.) "Autumn looks adown the slope." Take your glass and (enclosing the glass in both his hands)—and let us praise God the Lord! (Raises the glass and empties it with one draft.) Let us praise God the Lord! Brother, he who cannot do that— (In ecstasy) I can! Yes, I!

Vincenz: We must yield humbly.

Hugo: No! Proudly! It is with pride he wants to be praised. Proudly, boldly, rush into life so that it spurts and splashes, and sink, ay, sink and drown—underneath is the dear God, at the bottom of the sea. Dive, dive, deep below— (more slowly) I have dived down to God's depth. (With mysterious fear) From this a cold shiver sometimes passes through me. Life's depth, the deep, hidden depth of God. Thence I have hauled up the light for man. But if you do not drown first you can know nothing. Poor Vincenz! (Filling his glass again.) I want to praise a little more. (Drinks quickly.)

Vincenz: Why do you call me poor?

Hugo (giving the glass from which he had drunk to Sophie): Dear, dear girl, drink. (Sophie takes the glass, and looks shyly at her father.) Drink and drown! This is what you must learn, dear girl. Drown. Then you shall be blessed.

Vincenz (who had been buried in deep meditation): Why "poor"? Tell me.

Hugo: Poor Vincenz!

Vincenz (pained, as if abjuring him): Why do you say that?

Hugo: Because you have no autumn. You see?

Vincenz: Autumn?

Hugo: "Autumn looks adown the slope." As we were riding here in the carriage through the large garden where the old trees are, the leaves were already worn; the keeper said—he is a Tyrolean, a merry fellow who always has those sayings, you know, and he pointed at a yellow tree—it was all ablaze—and he said: "Autumn looks adown the slope!" He said it merrily. And, you see, it is not so with you. You have no autumn. Because you— (Laughs.) Of course.

Vincenz: Because what?

Hugo: Because you were afraid. But I was not. I rushed in with both my feet. Into the fire and burned myself. And smoke. And out of the smoke I emerged a new man. And again I walked in and again was burned. Burning without end. And that is why I am so yellow now

with blessedness. Like the burning trees, everything burns. Burning is life. Burn and get burned. And I am so heavy with fruit; all over me I am so laden with the ripe, blessed, blue hours, and then everything opens. Everything opens and is bestowed as a gift on the good sinner. Everything then lays itself bare and dances before me—all beings and all creations. And it is only since then that I have known it. I know it. I know since I have died that I cannot die. It only turns around. Death and life, it is the same wheel; now it is on top, now it is at the bottom, now it ascends and now it descends again. You die every day, you live forever. And everything is as you are, everywhere, upon all the suns. (Turns suddenly to Sophie.) You, dear girl, on you I bestow this as a gift: Live yourself to death, it is thus you praise God the Lord! Then you shall be able to do it. I praise Him because He has blessed me. I praise Him. (Sophie looks up eagerly, drinking in his words with avidity.)

Vincenz (throws himself violently forward, and extends his right arm across the table as if to protect Sophie): No! Leave her! Do not destroy my child!

Sophie: Father!

(Hugo rises, stretches himself to his full height, and looks domineeringly at Vincenz.)

Hugo: What is it you want?

Vincenz (unable to bear his look): My child! (Stretches out his hand again for her involuntarily.)

Hugo (with unspeakable contempt): You poor fool!

Vincenz (clenches his fists, panting): I? I?

Hugo: You sink off to your death! You—

Vincenz: No.

Hugo: You poor fool!

Vincenz (collecting all his power in a last effort, shouting and rushing at his brother): Get out! Away with you! Get out!

Sophie: Father, father!

(Dr. Halma enters quickly.)

(Vincenz tumbles back in fright on seeing the doctor, still gazing with intense hatred at Hugo.)

Hugo (unmoved, with extreme calmness): And yet I shall stay. Wherever I am I remain with you henceforth. I stand before you. For now it has been shown. You and I. And henceforth it shall stand forever before you. And it is now for the first time that you have cause for your envy! Now more than ever.

Vincenz (breaks down and sinks on a chair): And a whole life of duty and renunciation!

Hugo: Yes, you see, all this that you think, all this is worth nothing. Your worth is only an illusion; only in illusion is truth (raising his index finger warningly). Upon life's depth, the profound depth of God. (Goes slowly toward the doctor, his finger still raised in warning.)

Vincenz: No, no!

Hugo (to the doctor in quite a different, timid voice, like a baby afraid of punishment): Yes, doctor, directly. (Turning to Sophie again, beaming and with great tenderness.) You dear girl! I bless you—from my blessed loneliness, allness, and I wish it to you. Do not question. Live! Live! Thus you praise God the Lord. (Blesses her.)

Vincenz (moaning): But wherefore, then? Wherefore?