

Hazel Kirke — BBB, Page 383, Button 20

by Gil Biggie



HAZEL KIRKE on black glass

Heroine of the Victorian melodrama, HAZEL KIRKE by Steele MacKaye, was first performed at the Madison Square Theatre in New York City in 1880 (National Button Bulletin, September 1956, page 299).

Hazel is standing in a vine-covered doorway, holding a pair of lorgnettes to her nose. Molded black glass, finished part bright and part mellow; loop shank and plate. Scarce. \$25 in BBB.

Hazel is elegantly dressed, appearing as a figure in relief against a recessed doorway.

But, who is Hazel Kirke? In 1885, New Yorkers would have been quick to answer for they had been seeing her on the stage for more than six years. No, she was not an actress, she was the heroine of a melodrama. The thoroughly Victorian plot told of a daughter who was turned out of her father's house when she rejected the suitor chosen for her and picked her own husband.

The melodrama concludes after four acts of misfortune heaped upon misfortune with the discovery that her husband is a nobleman and that their marriage is legal, whereupon she finds happiness and forgiveness.

The play was written by Steel MacKaye, a most remarkable showman who designed theatres, produced plays, acted, and wrote. In 1880, he set about to make the Madison Square Theatre the finest ever seen in America. For a long period of time it was grand, and talked about across the country. Its "exquisite interior" was highlighted by a magnificent drop curtain made in the studio of Louis Tiffany.

Hazel Kirke was the play MacKaye wrote specifically for the opening of the new theatre. The play opened on February 4, 1880, and at first the building received better press coverage than the entertainment presented therein. Soon, the play caught on and became a smash hit. Before the play closed, it broke all American records by running for 486 continuous performances.

During the years following, the play was presented many times by professional and amateur companies in and out of the City. In 1893 it was still being presented and included three of the original 1880 cast.

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