

# BROADWAY, OUR LITERARY SIGNPOST

By Kenneth Andrews

*With Sketches by the Author*

ONE day recently at lunch we were fortunate enough to secure a window table at the Waldorf. Outside the sun fell across Fifth Avenue in great splashes of gold. It was a clear, fresh day. The traffic tower at Thirty-fourth Street rose gleaming white out of the shadow which stained its base, like a lighthouse in a purple bay. The windshields of the passing motor cars flashed brightly like marching whitecaps in the sun. The straw hats of the loitering garment workers from below Thirty-second Street were touched with magic and looked like drifting water lilies.

Inside the dining room everything was subdued and dim in contrast with the brightness outside. Our eye traveled about the room and alighted upon a dazzling creature at a corner table. Serene and beautiful in her black summer gown and her luxurious summer furs, she seemed the happy embodiment of the early summer day. Bursting with gratitude to our Maker for placing us on such a lovely earth, craving utterance for the song in our heart, we leaned across to our companion and, nodding toward the exquisite creature at the corner table, we said, "That's a swell looking girl over there."

Our companion leveled calm eyes at the corner table for (it seemed) but an instant. "Yes," she said; "isn't she attractive? I think black is so nice. Becoming to almost any coloring. I wish I had the courage to wear it, but

of course if you do everyone takes you for a shoppirl. Furs are a blessing, too, about one's chin; they hide just the right things if your neck isn't nice. And her hat is really almost perfect. It's copied from a model in Bendel's window, but very cleverly done. Some girls are so clever. Just a little wire frame and some things you can pick up anywhere, and they can make a hat that looks as though it had cost at least a hundred dollars. She has just a little too much color on, but then she probably didn't know she was going to sit near a window. That's the trouble with depending on make up of course. And jewelry like that is getting to be quite a fad. It is really. Even the best dressed women in Paris wear artificial jewelry, they say. I suppose they have to do it there, because of the war and everything. But it's nice to have it fashionable if you can't afford the real thing, though I suppose one would be tempted to put too awful much of it on. I wonder how old she is. It's so hard to tell sometimes. . . ."

We looked again at the corner table and found that our admiration had given way to sympathy. Quite a pathetic old creature after all, she was. Probably at least thirty-eight, clinging forlornly to the last traces of a misspent youth. However, the unfortunate thing was that, before we had been given the correct and informing analysis of her, she had been beautiful to us.

We have had poems spoiled for us

in just that way; and pictures, and music. A little technical knowledge of things meant to be beautiful is a



LOUIS CALVERT

*The stage directions which describe the Chief in "What the Public Wants" read, "in brief he is Mr. Louis Calvert". In the Theatre Guild production of the play Mr. Calvert is, in brief, the Chief.*

dangerous thing, too much is a crime. When one presumes to tell another what is wrong—or even what is right—about a work of art he should tread very gently. The ideal critic, no doubt, is a blend of the old family physician and the priest. Criticism when addressed to the uninitiate (and especially when practised by the uninitiate), should be designed to deepen appreciation rather than to disillusionize. A botanist knows a lot about flowers, but he is the last person in the world to tell you why a rose is beautiful. The first thing he would do would be to pull it to pieces for you, and then it would not be beautiful at all.

Sometimes on Thursday afternoons one thinks, with a shudder, of the thousands of Thanatopsis Clubs meeting in thousands of towns throughout the land. Those honest ladies have come together for the purpose of

studying the drama. They really want to acquire a more intelligent attitude toward the theatre. But the mind reels at the thought of what happens to the plays brought before those inquisitorial sessions. The fate of the plays is disturbing enough, but the worst of it is, of course, that the members themselves, in their zeal, may cripple for life their faculty of appreciation. That is, they may systematically tear down the very thing they are devoting their afternoons to building up. There is no reason why this should be true; and it is not always true; it depends altogether on the attitude adopted. But it is easier to pull to pieces the dramatist's conception than it is to piece together our own conception of what he has succeeded in accomplishing; and any deliberate study of the drama, to be worth while, must surely depend on the latter process.

So often, it would seem, the drama societies lose sight of this. The tendency is to resort to rule and catchphrase, to lapse into the easy, vitiating ways of the classroom. Suppose, for example, after a play has been "taken up" in the usual way the secretary of the club should be instructed to prepare for the printer the text of the play, so that the members might have in printed form the results of their labors. It would be a tome loaded with footnotes, an exhaustive index, a complete biography of the author. The footnotes would be merely distracting. The biography would be at best irrelevant, at worst an indictment of the author's morals. The play itself would be lost forever, so far as the members were concerned.

But if the purpose of the club had been to understand and appreciate, rather than document, we can picture a different volume coming from the

printer. It would be a book containing merely the lines of the play in large, clear type; and there would be a frontispiece and a half dozen illustrations by Maxfield Parrish. In other words the illusions the dramatist had sought to create would simply be magnified and visualized, and clarified. Whether or not one comes to the consideration of the drama formally, as an earnest club member, surely the only sensible aim is to accomplish just this. It can be accomplished, of course. Whether it is, to repeat, depends entirely on the point of view.

After which we turn to a consideration of Arnold Bennett's "What the Public Wants", and address ourself to the pleasant business of pointing out its technical faults.

Bennett is astonishingly inept as a playwright; and his deficiencies are, for the most part, due to his lack of theatre technique. He is always the novelist: his plays, really, are novels condensed into descriptive dialogue; they are not dramatizations of his plots. The lines he puts into the mouths of his characters are, despite all the trained human voice can do for them, speeches rather than talk. They do not create the illusion of reality; they do not establish atmosphere; they do not reveal character. They have a bookish tinge about them which keeps obtruding. They keep reminding one that behind the glittering lights and pleasant people on the stage there is a literary gentleman who is, for a change, expressing his ideas through a set of actors. It is surprising. No one has a keener sense of character than Bennett, the novelist. But Bennett, the playwright, seems to talk about his characters rather than

cause his characters to talk for themselves.

Sir Charles Worgan, in the cold glare of the stage lights, is not a big business man; he is a writer's idea of what a big business man is like. Bennett wants us to regard him as a bluff, blunt fingered, square headed Caliban of the newspaper world. So when Sir Charles proposes marriage to the woman of his choice, he says, "Now that world 'love'—I can't use that word . . .", and then he proceeds to psychoanalyze himself with rare understanding. What he says about himself is true—about his type of man; but while this talk is going on the audience in the theatre is getting a definite impression of Sir Charles Worgan. We see a man who, despite his physical bulk and despite what the others say about his obtuseness, is as



GRANT MITCHELL

*Playing a most unusual star rôle in "Kempy", an amusing late-season play which takes its name from the character played by one of the young actors in Mr. Mitchell's support.*

subtly introspective and as clever at talking about his reactions as a poet of the Younger Generation.

This is a weakness in Bennett noticeable in all his plays, but in "What the Public Wants" his lack of the theatre sense gets him into more serious difficulties. His very method of presentation forces our sympathy toward Sir Charles, which is just where it should not be. For one thing Sir Charles is playing rather a lone hand against the rest of the cast. That, in itself, is enough to win over to him the last eight rows of the orchestra and practically the entire balcony. Also the wary theatregoer eyes with suspicion anyone on the stage who complacently gives utterance to the things all rightminded people are expected to believe. He has been taught that, at such lines, he must show his sophistication and his grasp of the playwright's real meaning by laughing harshly. In "What the Public Wants" he is expected to applaud the very sentiments he himself might utter about William Randolph Hearst; and that is befuddling. Everyone in the play, save Sir Charles himself, rather assumes that he or she is on winking terms with the audience; which makes Sir Charles the unanimous favorite. That is the author's fault. In constructing his play as he does, Bennett gives the impression that Sir Charles is opposing the compact majority, whereas the real point is that he, with his power and his millions, is the creature of the compact majority.

As a comment on big journalism and its evils it is not very effective in the theatre. It all seems a curious miscalculation on the author's part, and it is interesting for that very reason. The net effect is, in a sense, the antithesis of what Bennett expected. Because of the methods he adopts we, as the audience, are driven to find excuses for the man we should despise. We

#### THE DRAMA SHELF

"*A Family Man*" by John Galsworthy (Scribner). Showing what happens in afterwar England when the dominant male tries to be dominant. It might almost be regarded as a "reply" to the same author's earlier play, "*The Fugitive*".

"*The Love Match*" by Arnold Bennett (Doran). Delightful reading. Another reminder that the author is most successful as a victrola playwright. He can bring the theatre into your own home. In the library he is decidedly theatrical; in the theatre he is decidedly literary.

"*Ambush*" by Arthur Richman (Duffield). Another play that gives you a better evening at home than it does in the theatre. On the printed page it is quite a remarkable Portrait of a Tenth-Rate Man; and an important contribution to the growing body of flapper literature as well.

"*The Social Plays of Arthur Wing Pinero*" edited by Clayton Hamilton, volume IV (Dutton). The text of "*The Thunderbolt*" and "*Mid-Channel*" with a thoughtful critical preface for each by Mr. Hamilton. A book which can scarcely be covered in, as you might say, the space at our disposal.

"*Franklin*" by Constance D'Arcy Mackay (Holt). In the course of which a hard-boiled printer grouches about the long hours and low pay. Another hard-boiled printer bangs him on the shoulder, shifts his quid of tobacco, makes a flat-handed gesture, and says out of the corner of his mouth, "Come, lad. Remember night and the joys of the tavern!"

ask who this public is, and why it should be protected. Isn't it better, we ask, for it to read about Peggy Hopkins than to read nothing? If Emily Vernon, in the play, felt so strongly about giving the public what it ought to want, why did she not sacrifice herself and marry Sir Charles, since he had proved quite docile under her caresses?

The play was mounted with the Theatre Guild's usual care, and it was excellently directed by Louis Calvert; but why it was revived at all is something of a mystery.

"Fanny Hawthorn", the play which was erroneously called "Hindle Wakes" by its deceased author, is unquestionably a model of its kind. Here we have a mind at work which is most sensitively attuned to the theatre's exacting demands. Fundamentally the story is as old as the theatre itself. The prince seduces the peasant girl and there is the devil to pay. In the long series of plays written on this scenario the devil has been paid in various ways. In "Fanny Hawthorn" the final settlement is novel; but, until the very end, it is the old, old story. Yet, even today, ten years after it was written, it seems fresh and new, a daring departure in modern realism. For these people, as we see them on the stage, are real. Houghton knew how to make allowances for the deceptive glare of the footlights; he was able to write as sincerely for the stage as Bennett writes for the library.

Houghton had, too, the rare ability to transmute into emotion conflict which is, in essence, intellectual. Fanny Hawthorn, in refusing to marry the man who had wronged her, was expressing (when she first expressed it) an intellectual point of view, and an original one. Here was a chance for rhetoric that few authors would have had the courage to pass by. But in this play there is no rhetoric. Fanny, who has been doing a lot of thinking, merely says fumblingly and a bit curtly, that she does not see why young Jeffcote would be less a black-guard after marrying her than he was when they went away together.

It might be said that each of the

characters is expressing a social point of view. They might be regarded as types. Their opinions, as expressed,



BARNEY BERNARD

*In "Partners Again" he and Alexander Carr return to their life work: the portrayal of the famous serial biography of Abe and Mawruss. Only the press agent knows how many laughs per minute there are in the current chapter.*

partake of satire. But never once do we lose sight of the struggling, unhappy human soul behind the opinions. The story, in brief, is dramatized. The author submerges himself in his characters, submerges his ideas in their emotions.

That is one way to write a play: to take real people and make them theatre-proof. Another way is to take theatre-proof, stock figures and make them seem real. Two distinct methods of writing, and one is inclined to say that the successful playwright must follow one or the other.

Potash and Perlmutter for example are, superficially, sure-fire, theatre-proof, stock figures. At first glance they seem to be blood relatives of all the Jewish comedians in all the burlesque shows from "The Black Crook" down to "Chuckles of 1922". Perhaps they are. But in "Partners Again" they seem warm, living portraits of real people. The play is devised with

superb skill. It succeeds in being just what the authors meant it to be: tremendously amusing in the theatre. Montague Glass and Jules Eckert Goodman were concerned only with the task of writing a play that would register one hundred per cent. in the theatre. But the finished product, simply because it is so sound theatrically, is really as eloquent a revelation of the Jewish character as we could expect to have on the stage. At least you may read that into it afterward, if you like; while it is going on, it is just a funny play; and that is enough.

"Chains of Dew" by Susan Glaspell, on the other hand, represents a lamentable failure to get into stage terms a story which is in itself rather admirable. Miss Glaspell, as a playwright, seems to fall between two stools. She is too earnest a student of life to write merely stage plays; and she is too inexperienced a craftswoman to give stage effectiveness to her convictions. "Kempy" by J. C.

Nugent and Elliott Nugent is, despite the handicap of its title and despite the hoary vaudeville gags which occasionally jump out and bite at you, one of the funniest plays of the season. "The Bronx Express", done over from the Yiddish by Owen Davis, seems just to miss being something quite fine. "The Red Geranium", produced independently by the author, reminds one that the professional managers know their business.

Why anyone should try to make a play of Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot" we do not know. John Cowper Powys and Reginald Pole did try it, and a strange, crippled thing their play was. Imagine "Les Misérables" in eight short scenes! After the inevitable murder and the mad scenes of the last act, one thanked God again for Balieff. In view of what the world has known of Russian literature heretofore Lenin's Committee on Public Information should endow "La Chauve Souris" for the next twenty-five years.

## THE POEMS OF THE MONTH

Selected by Leonora Speyer

"THE Poems of the Month"—and the month, April; which means that many of the poems are *about* April but emphatically does *not* mean that the calendar influence has scored a victory. There is an April poem of Stephen Vincent Benét in

"The New Republic" which lingers in the memory, it is so engagingly and charmingly a honeymoon poem of a honeymoon April. I quote only the first stanza as I must be wary of the length of this little review, having chosen too many poems perhaps to do