

After the Play

A Bill of Divorcement by Clemence Dane, now at the Times Square Theatre, is not "the greatest play of the year," but it is certainly one of those offering a leading challenge to the higher criticism of the drama. It is first of all a problem play in the old fashioned sense. A situation is created bristling with intellectual and moral implications; and the solution is proposed in answer to a double question, first of verisimilitude, What would the characters do? and second of ethical justification, Is what they do right? It is, in the second place a tight piece of dramatic construction, the action concentrated upon the situation and controlled by the plot. In both respects it offers a contrast to *Liliom*, which will be thought to dispute most successfully its claim to primacy.

The scene is laid in 1932, and the play represents the mind of that time toward the war. In consequence of war marriages and other social disturbances the English divorce laws have been modified. Margaret Fairfield, whose husband has been pronounced incurably insane from shell-shock eighteen years before, has obtained her divorce and is about to marry Gray Meredith. Margaret's character is definitely established. She is described by her daughter as a nineteenth century woman, one whose chief end in life is to do right, and whose chief means to that end is to do what she is told. She has never loved her husband, but married him at the age of seventeen because he wanted her to and because he was going into the war. She stands between her husband's aunt Hester, who upholds the ancient doctrine "Whom God hath joined," and her daughter Sydney who has heard of the war as an excuse which her elders invariably offer for everything that went awry with their generation, and who proposes for herself a forward-looking marriage with Kit, the rector's son. Into this family, on Christmas Day, comes the news that Hilary Fairfield has escaped from the asylum, and on its heels comes Hilary himself, clear in mind, but broken and aged in body and spirit, pathetically feeble in his effort to assert his lapsed rights, grievously muddled in his attempt to master the world that has slipped from his grasp. Enter two other forces, the Church represented by the rector of the village who, law or no law, will not marry a divorced person, and who hails Hilary's return as an interposition of Providence to prevent such sin; and Science in Dr. Alliot who tells Hilary bluntly that he is dead, and Margaret that she has the right of a living woman to love and give herself and live and bring forth life. The decision is made, however, by Sydney, who sacrifices her own love to stay with her father.

Granting that Sydney could not keep Kit and her father too, which is not quite certain, the solution is dramatically right. It belongs to life as well as to the theatre. Sydney is to her father the woman he desired and married before confusion fell upon him. When he first sees her he calls her Meg. All that he asks of Margaret, the sense of her nearness, the rustle of her dress as she passes, Sydney can give him. And Sydney realizes that she is all that remains to him, the only person who really belongs to him. It is father and daughter, not husband and wife, which is the real and surviving human relation. It is entirely conceivable that, sophisticated little realist that she is, Sydney should have revived the spirit of sacrifice which led her mother to marriage, that she should have felt called to pay with herself the debt which

her generation owed to its forerunner, and which presents itself so tragically in the person of her father. Unfortunately Miss Dane does not trust her audience to reach this result by the generous leap of the imagination which by itself would have carried Sydney to it. There is an alternative route provided, winding circuitously and painfully through the play, marked by hints and warnings. In the midst of the hurrying events and recurring crises Sydney discovers that her father had a sister who lost her mind and that insanity is transmissible by heredity; she learns that her boy-lover wants to be a father; she decides that it would be wrong to marry him. Thus another problem is introduced to solve the first, and the effect of it is to attenuate incredibly the human and dramatic force of the play. From the second point of view Sydney's staying with her father is no sacrifice. His recovery and escape from the mad-house are a fortunate coincidence, providing a young girl, whose biological conscience will not allow her to marry, with a release from her dilemma, a career, and the consolation of martyrdom. It is true that Miss Dane handles this secondary motive with a timidity and distrust which mark it an alternative for the timid and distrustful; but such people deserve no consideration at the theatre, and it is the vice of the problem play that it encourages them to demand and expect supporting arguments for a dramatic solution. We have never seen a case where double motives introduce so fatal an ambiguity. At all events the coincidence of insanity and shell-shock emphasizes the substance of the play as an extraordinarily special case, and diminishes its dramatic value as a universal appeal.

The acting, admirable in most respects, reflects the double aspect of the play as a piece of the theatre and of life. First there is Allan Pollock as Hilary Fairfield, a man who in himself has passed through the experience of death in battle, who, overlooked by the stretcher bearers, was wounded again and again as he lay between the lines. No suggestion is made of a personal application, and yet one cannot forget it. When Hilary Fairfield protests against the heartless law-making machine, his country, for which he fought and which desires only to forget him, the drama becomes a human document and a terribly painful one. Confronted by this accusing figure we recognize that he symbolizes that frustrate ghost, the war hero, who has given more than life at our bidding, and who even in 1921 has become to us at best an object of pity, and at worst a scandalous-nuisance. As Allan Pollock does more than play a character which he incarnates, so Janet Beecher coincides so perfectly with Margaret Fairfield that it is doubtful whether her impersonation is to be credited to art or life. Katharine Cornell as Sydney has the most complex and difficult rôle to play, carrying, as she must, the burden of the ambiguous solution. With Margaret and Hilary she is convincing and moving. With Hester Fairfield, who represents the older generation, she overplays her part of flippant protest and throws the sympathy of the audience to the persecuted survival. With Kit, her lover, she has a scene of tenderness which prepares us for her renunciation; and then one of theatrically competent rejection in which she drives him away forever. Charles Waldron as Gray Meredith supplies the best reason why Margaret should go with him. In Hester Fairfield, Ada King brings to life Mr. Fontaine Fox's Demon Chaperone, and Mr. Graham as the rector supports the note of burlesque.

ROBERT MORSS LOVETT.

Clarence Day

The Crow's Nest, by Clarence Day, Jr. Illustrations by the author. New York: A. A. Knopf. \$2.00.

CLARENCE DAY has a supreme quality among all the critics and essayists in America today—he thinks naturally, writes naturally, draws naturally. For this reason, of course, he is the enemy of his kind. What is the use of erudition and authority if Clarence Day can put all Maeterlinck in an eggshell? What is the use of going to Harvard and learning to be dove-colored if a blackleg like Clarence Day is to run loose? The profession of critic is gone, spurlos versenkt, if this creature is to be permitted to crow from his crow's nest like an ordinary bird living in direct relation with his feelings and his senses. We should rise against him, march to Riverside Drive and force the caitiff to confess that he is a disruptive influence in the pay of the Third Internationale.

Sometimes, I don't know why, he slips from his aware simplicity into a kind of bromidic simple-mindedness that is worthy of popular magazines. It comes, I think, when he feels it his duty to be light, judicious, sound and wise. At such times he writes like a sweet old gentleman leaning over the go-cart and trying to explain the choo-choos to a baby. He is capable of nodding his head and saying, "Ah, well, if we must romanticize something, it had best be the past." And, in another place, "Well, it's all very interesting. Will and Wisdom [capitalized by him] are both mighty leaders. Our times worship Will." He has an idea in this, though not very much of an idea, but the whole thing is in the style of the patient, benevolent teacher. I may whisper, too, that *Improving the Lives of the Rich* and *The Revolt of Capital* and *The Man Who Knew Gods* are also a little labored. Here the wingless critics have nothing to fear from C. D. Jr. The ideas are good enough. It's fairly funny to call Gary "President Albert H. Hairy," but the total effect is one of miscegenation, like a sermon turned sprightly or a library table that converts into a folding bed. If you felt that the author of the sermon (or the library table) couldn't help himself, it would be all right. But Clarence Day could have helped his *Revolt of Capital*. That essay was sapped from his brain, it did not spring from his spirit.

But when he teases old Fabre, the man who loved insects, and says, "you can see he has insect blood in him, if you look at his photograph,"—here he is really enjoying himself. And, like waiters or undertakers or dentists or kings, he does his work best when he is really enjoying himself. Mark Twain never wrote anything funnier than *The Enjoyment of Gloom*, the first four pages. But it isn't because Day is funny that this is so good. It is because he becomes all alive, personally incandescent and absorbed and wholly natural, in such a bit of narrative. He is equally natural a few pages later, writing of Conrad. Here he isn't trying to convert criticism into literary vaudeville for the gum-chewers. He is trying to condense all his own love of adventure, and fear of adventure, into a few luminous words. And how real, how secure, is the grip of Clarence Day's experience on our own inside experience which before had perhaps never met such an understanding: "There's one great man now living, however, who has almost too much of this sense: this cosmic adventure emotion. And that man's Joseph Conrad. Perhaps in his youth the sea came upon him too suddenly, or his boyhood sea dreams awed too deeply his then unformed mind.

At all events, the men in his stories are like lonely spirits, sailing, spellbound, through the immense forces surrounding the world. "There they are," one of them says, as he stands at the rail, 'stars, sun, sea, light, darkness, space, great waters; the formidable Work of the Seven Days, into which man seems to have blundered unbidden. Or else decoyed'. We all have that mood. But Conrad, he's given to brooding." Conrad is a Pole, after all, the kind of Pole that one of Lyman Abbott's ancestresses should have met up with, as Day suggests. Rev. Lyman, by the way, is handled very fairly.

Still, I like Clarence Day best when he takes things more in the wrong spirit. I like him about Kabir, about sex, about *The Turmoil*. Except that, as he gets weary, he gets wise and helpful. Then he peers into the reader's cradle and burbles, "So it goes, so it goes. And playing some game well is needful, to make a man of you. But once in a while you get thinking it's not quite enough."

These appealing homilies come from him when he is low-spirited. They never occur to him when he's writing of people or cockroaches, only when he is bravely trying to put an intellectual spit-ball across the plate, with every eye in the bleachers following him. In dealing with real people he becomes quite absorbed and absorbing, and this is when I like him best. Here his style is truly natural, informal, and to the point. If he is amusing here, it is not because he is afraid he won't hold his audience unless he is original and witty, but because he has really ripened and mellowed in the lovely perceptions and feelings out of which he speaks. *Portrait of a Lady* is superb, both as a likeness and as a painting. It is romantic, full of color, and true. *Grandfather's Three Lives* is a little ingenious but it is more to my taste than *Strachey*, and *Story of a Farmer* is a very pretty sketch, except for the last line. The last line has a kind of Hippodrome flourish, "His name was George Washington!!!" But the subject is one on which it would be enchanting to read fifty of Clarence Day's pages. And I hope some day he'll tackle Abraham Lincoln, the great American legend, and Alexander Hamilton, the great colonial legend, and Ulysses S. Grant. (What a name, Ulysses, especially for a babe in the cradle. And what a fine piece of old-fashioned human mahogany, or redwood, to be represented by a man who sees things for himself).

That, in the end, is what one means by saying that Clarence Day has so natural a style. He really convinces one that, without any stilts under him, he is able to see for himself. He sees very deeply. He sees more amusingly than our best fabulists. When he stands things on their heads, or reverses some customary viewpoint, I don't think he is seeing things for himself most naturally. He is best, I believe, in the straight portrait. But of course what one enjoys in these portraits, besides the rich play of sympathy, is the bright play of perception. "Whenever a parent feels blue, or is not making good, he immediately declares that his hopes are in his little son anyhow. Then he has a sad, comfortable glow at his own self-effacement." Such observations give one the delightful feeling of the living, unforced play of mind. The drawings add enormously to this result, being perfectly unstudied and personal in pattern. But "unstudied" is a poor word, suggesting that Clarence Day improvises. He does not improvise, he gropes around for a union between subject and spirit. When the subject comes right, then we see the spirit for what it is, in its serene wisdom, its honest simplicity, its even American temper, its gaiety, its beauty.

FRANCIS HACKETT.