

The Book Table

A Noted Player's Reminiscences

A Review by JAMES L. FORD

THE actor's recollections of his career are usually concerned only with what happened in the space that lies between the footlights and the back drop. To read one of the thick volumes in which he has set down the history of his life is to marvel at his complete disregard of all that was taking place elsewhere. Of the cities he has visited, of the men and women he has been privileged to meet, he has little to say; but of the parts he has played, of the favorable comments received from critics and private citizens, he says overmuch. It is difficult to imagine a more self-centered life than that of the actor as recorded by himself in pages liberally besprinkled with his own portraits.

That is why I entered upon the task of reading Otis Skinner's "Footlights and Spotlights"¹ with a mind darkened by gloomy apprehensions; and it was because I found something very different from my anticipations that the task soon became a pleasure.

The volume resembles others of its kind in that it is primarily a history of the author's professional career, of the many parts he has played and the dramas in which he has appeared, the whole illustrated with too many pictures of himself and too few of the lovely Mrs. Skinner. But it contains also much that is unusual and of far greater value in the shape of stage history and shrewd comments on the art of acting. Of the many distinguished persons, professional and otherwise, with whom he came in contact he speaks with fairness and discrimination. To him they were more than mere casual acquaintances.

As a history of Mr. Skinner's professional career the book will have a certain interest for the dramatic profession, in which he is deservedly popular. But it contains other material as well, including scenes and episodes in which he had no part, and these pages give his work a value that entitles it to a place in the library of every one intelligently interested in the American theater.

Fortunately for himself, and the readers of his book, Mr. Skinner began his career at the moment when the old-time stock and star system had gone into eclipse and the so-called "commercialization" of the theater was soon to take its

¹Footlights and Spotlights. By Otis Skinner. Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis. \$5.



Courtesy Bobbs-Merrill Co.

Otis Skinner in "The Honor of the Family"

Portrait by George Luks, in the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

place. In his earlier chapters he has given us a striking picture of theatrical conditions in the late seventies when he was serving his novitiate as a member of the Philadelphia Museum stock company managed by William Davidge (destined to later fame as Dick Deadeye in "Pinafore"). The company was one of those family affairs so common in those days, all the best parts going to blood kin of the management, with Davidge ready to swoop down on and appropriate to himself any rôle that gave promise of "fat." The leading man was Mark Bates, whose wife, Marie Bates, is not unknown to the present generation of playgoers; and there was another member of the company who could hark back to a still more remote era, for he had been a member of the strolling English company which Charles Dickens joined for purposes of study, and later made immortal in "Nicholas Nickleby."

It is my personal belief that all forms of art flourish better under the hard conditions of poverty than on the soft cushions made possible by wealth, and the period which aged mummery are fond of terming the "palmy days of the drama" was one in which salaries were uncertain and constant changes of bill the rule. It is true that the player of those days found much variety in his work, but he did not have time to develop a part and give full force to every line before he was called on to study a new one. I may add that the joke of the actor walking home along the railway ties enjoyed frequent repetition during these "palmy days."

During the years of his apprenticeship Mr. Skinner played in support of many of the most distinguished artists of the day, including Madame Janauschek, John T. Raymond, Lotta, Chanfrau, Mary Anderson, and others, and he

profited by association with nearly all of them—and that is more than every actor can boast.

No theater of my time has left behind it such a wealth of delightful memories as that controlled by Augustin Daly, of whose company Mr. Skinner was a member for five years; and no pages in his book are more interesting and vital than those which record that fortunate association. That he understood the complex character of the man who raised stage representation to heights previously unknown in this country, developed talent and assembled a matchless group of performers, will be evident to those who read the chapters devoted to him. That he appreciates to the full the supreme advantage of such an association Mr. Skinner makes evident in the sentence with which he brings his account of that association to a close: "Greater than to any one man I have ever known is my debt to Augustin Daly."

With equally just appreciation the author describes Edwin Booth, with whom he played when that great actor had passed the zenith of his powers. To my mind the most graphically impressive passage in his book is that in which is told the manner in which the actor

descended one night to the furnace room of Booth's Theater, in the upper floor of which was situated his apartment, and took from a trunk the stage costumes of his brother Wilkes, and consigned every one of them to the flames, even breaking up and destroying the trunk in which they had lain concealed since the Washington tragedy.

The passage descriptive of the career of Margaret Mather is marked by discreet restraint, and the same may be said of the brief one that tells of the decline of Ada Rehan after Daly's death. I commend both to those young women who view the stage through rose-tinted spectacles.

Mr. Skinner deserves a word of praise for his rare discrimination in the use of commendation. His pages are entirely free from the insincere and mendacious praise of such undeserving ones as the hangers-on of the profession, and newspaper men who may be expected to return the compliment. The esteem in which he holds the men and women whom he honestly admired is not belittled by genial encomiums of the least worthy.

A book to read and keep is "Footlights and Spotlights."

having assigned to Diana this meaningless and unexplained masculine nickname, apparently for no other purpose than to provide a catching title. The first part of the book, in presenting facts preparatory to the later mystery, keeps the reader a little too long in the company of people who are no more than disagreeable and antipathetic until they become enmeshed in actual crime. After that point is reached the remainder is satisfactorily enlivened by the doings of a super-villainess, whose little tricks with arsenic are daring and diabolical. She is interesting, if untrue.

HISTORY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

BRITISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS. By J. D. Whelpley. Little, Brown & Co., Boston. \$3.50.

James Davenport Whelpley is an American publicist, traveler, and diplomat of considerable standing who of late years has made his home in England. He is thoroughly versed in international matters, having in most cases obtained his knowledge, not by reading merely, but by personal observations on the spot. The thesis of his book, for which our recent Ambassador to the Court of St. James's has written an appreciatory preface, is that "there are but two nations in the world which offer the requisite material for building a foundation for an *entente* between them which will endure under the stress of storm or the enervating effects of peace," and these are the British Empire and the United States. Of such an *entente*, "equivalent to a partnership in all external matters of mutual interest," Mr. Whelpley is an ardent but far from blind advocate. The only obstacles in the way of such a move he finds to be largely self-created—"nationalism, fear, prejudices, largely obsolete impressions, traditions and reservations, and a modicum of mutual jealousy." And his book is written to help both us and the British to get rid of all such sundering factors. With this in mind, he takes up and explains both the real and the supposed differences of character, institutions, and interests which tend toward mutual misunderstanding and distrust. He realizes that the community of language is in some respects a danger, because it enables the average man within both nations to learn quickly of any derogatory utterance by the other side against his own. On the other hand, Mr. Whelpley holds that, in the long run, the advantages of a common language far outweigh its drawbacks, and that, in fact, an *entente* such as he proposes and hopes for is almost unthinkable without a tie of this kind. His book suffers from a certain redundancy, a going over of the same factors and data again and again,

The New Books

FICTION

HONOURABLE JIM (THE). By Baroness Orczy. The George H. Doran Company, New York. \$2.

Baroness Orczy dedicates this latest and not least romantic of her novels to Lord and Lady Say and Sele of Broughton Castle, terming it a faithful chronicle of the true adventures of their ancestor, James Fiennes. One would like to get a peep at the family documents; freed of expansion, addition, and saccharinity, they must have been interesting. The Baroness, unfortunately, never outgrows a literary schoolgirlishness of attitude which makes her fall in love with her own heroes and revel emotionally in the emotions of her heroines. She dearly loves back-drops with painted castles; she delights in plumes and swords and farthingales, in kings and traitors, plots and counter-plots, and all the flourish and frippery of a costume piece; she stages—very badly—revolutions and battles (this time it is Naseby), but she is always most preoccupied with her lovers and their love affair, and expends upon them ungrudgingly her choicest and most exalted language. Any one who, having persevered through the the concluding chapters of "The Honourable Jim," is still able to endure hearing the words "Heart o' mine" clearly pronounced, has doubtless been a devoted admirer of the

Baroness Orczy ever since the appearance of "The Scarlet Pimpernel."

OFF THE HIGH ROAD. By Annette Reid. D. Appleton & Co., New York. \$2.

This is a collection of short stories describing English village life in the leisurely, lovable spirit of "Cranford." They are frightfully slow for readers accustomed to the breakneck speed of American stories. They are a little too deliberate and roundabout even for one more accustomed to European ways in matters of this kind. But they give true and charming pictures of life in those quaint little English villages which, it is to be feared, are now well on their way to the realm of memory. And they have in rich measure what too many of our own story-tellers lack or slight—a genuine sympathy with the life they portray. The best of these ten stories are probably "A War Hero," which tells about an old worker who would not accept an old-age pension as long as he thought his country needed the money, and "The Beacon," which tells about the mysterious light burning nightly in the window of a long-deserted cottage.

WHO KILLED COCK ROBIN? By Harrington Hext. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$2.

Why "Cock Robin" for a girl? One is a trifle annoyed with Mr. Hext for