

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Mr. Arlen

THE colossal admiration of the two great English-speaking nations of the earth for the literary genius of Mr. Michael Arlen, while immensely gratifying as an indication of improved taste over the erstwhile ichthyophagy of Nat Gould and the Rev. Thomas Dixon, would yet seem to indicate that the Anglo-American æsthetician has still some distance to go before he will be able duly to appreciate and prostrate himself before the even more remarkable literary genius of such fellows as Edward William Poel and Mr. Rupert Hughes. But the future is in the future's hands, and the present is Mr. Arlen's. One hears his eminence shouted from the housetops and the roofs of jazz palaces; one sees his volumes on the tables of ladies and ladies' maids; one reads of fêtes in the great man's honor at all the movie studios, supper clubs and breakfast flapjack houses. The splendor of the gentleman's waistcoats, the morsel of repartee with which he floored Mr. Adolph Zukor, the unbelievable amounts of mazuma he gets for writing so much as one choice paragraph, the Cloisonné monograms on his lingerie, the Chinese jade pant-button presented to him by the Marchioness X. as compensation for the one lost in the Daimler on the way home from the Metropole "Follies"—with such news are the literary prints aburst. It was only the unfortunate accident of the M. Anatole France's death, indeed, that compelled Mr. Smyth, of the *International Book Review Digest*, to kill one of Mr. Arlen's photographs at the last moment and thus bring out his intelligencer with but eleven likenesses of the great man instead of an in itself all too measly dozen.

The artistic success of Mr. Arlen is thus

hardly open to question. Wherever one finds persons open-mouthed before the Second Hungarian Rhapsody, the "William Tell" Overture and the performances of Ukulele Ike, or eating boiled bird-shot at two dollars and a half a portion under the impression that it is Beluga caviar, or thrilling to the masterful prose of Gertrude Atherton, or drinking California Sauterne with a Seidlitz powder in it in the belief that it is vintage champagne, or complaining that *Young's Magazine* isn't what it used to be—wherever one finds such persons one finds coincidently impassioned devotees of the Arlen art. Seldom, indeed, in the history of more recent æsthetic phenomena has a writer been so widely acclaimed by the jazz babies and coon shouters of literary criticism. And what, one asks, is the reason, the *risposta*, the *éclaircissement*, in a word, the *verdamnte Ursache*? Let me at this juncture introduce the amazing, aye, uncanny haruspice and seer, the M. G. J. Nathan.

The high favor in which Mr. Arlen is held by the Anglo-Saxon connoisseur is the high favor that is ever the reward of the purveyor of what, for want of a politer phrase, may be termed rented dress-suit literature. In other words, the species of literary composition that smacks internally of having been born on the backstairs but that has been cunningly disguised in evening clothes, given the title of Duke, instructed to allude periodically, with something of a bored drawl, to Lake Como, the bad manners of Mayfair and the passably fair quality of the host's Emparador sherry, and brought into the drawing-room. In the last forty years there is no record of the commercial failure of beautiful letters of this school. Where literature to the manor born may find a limited audience because

of a wider audience's discomfiture in its strange and to a degree alien and unintelligible presence, literature that apes literature to the manor born, that wears its lapel bloom and spats with a certain readily penetrable embarrassment and that betrays its unfamiliarity with the charming absurdity of his leet to the extent of taking it seriously, generally finds a brother Elk in the reading public. For that public, numbering into the hundreds of thousands, is itself like that literature. When a John Galsworthy speaks to it—or, even an Edith Wharton—it believes only the half of what is told it; but when a Robert W. Chambers or an Arlen speaks to it, it recognizes in the butler an old boyhood friend and grasps his hand warmly and inquires, albeit mannerfully under its breath, about the home folks. The world of Arlen's prose is the fashionable world of Mr. Cecil De Mille. And like the latter great artist he profits by its immediate recognizability on the part of the million elegants in mufti who sit in the pits of the Kingdom and of the Republic.

It was once remarked and it has since become a platitude that the average hero of the late Richard Harding Davis was the office boy's idea of a gentleman. The average heroine of Mr. Arlen is a couturier's idea of a romantic lady. But though Mr. Arlen, like Davis, never fails to wear a top hat to market, he lacks Davis' very real skill as a writer. His talent lies rather in the Chambers direction. Like Chambers, he knows how to tell a story; like Chambers, he is, as I have once before observed, privy to the trick of taking an ordinary sex story and making it seem romantically important to the modish yokels by laying it in tony surroundings, giving the characters such doggy names as Major General Sir Maurice Harpenden, Bart., and causing them to use a species of language that is a cross between the poetry of Cale Young Rice and the dinner-table conversation of an over-educated Negro; and, unlike Chambers, he has a measure of humor and even, indeed, an occasionally nice wit.

And so it is that he goes down the reading public's gullet like Epsom salts. To those in that public who have less taste and relish for romantic physics of this sort, Arlen's art is perhaps more readily appreciated for what it is: a simultaneous *reductio ad absurdum* of the manner of Arthur Wing Pinero and sublimation *ad absurdum* of that of the earlier Robert Hichens. It takes cleverness to achieve such a technic, and to that extent is Michael Arlen a very clever man.

"The Green Hat," Arlen's *magnum opus*, reaches the stage in his own dramatization. Like his published fiction, the play is inordinately successful—and for the same reason. The fine skill of Miss Katharine Cornell, that worthiest of our younger American actresses, is laid upon its sacred altar.

II

The American as Frenchman

The American actor can play the rôle of an Englishman, a German, an Italian, a Russian, a Greek or a Zulu, but it seems that one thing he cannot play is the rôle of a Frenchman. I have seen hundreds of American actors try to play Frenchmen, yet thus far I haven't been successful in laying eyes on one who got much further into his rôle than pronouncing Montmartre correctly and wearing a top hat in the mornings. Those American actors who, appearing in French drama or farce, have been most highly praised for the accuracy with which they have interpreted French characters are simply those who have interpreted the French characters not as French characters but rather as the French characters are customarily regarded by American eyes. The American theatregoer has definite and fixed ideas as to the way a Frenchman looks and comports himself, and the American actor has exactly the same ideas. To the American theatregoer and actor, all Frenchmen, from hack-drivers to members of the Academy, are cut from the same cloth. To them, the

Frenchman is not conceivable as a diversified human being susceptible of as many interpretations as, say, an Englishman, but only as a fixed pattern, and that pattern something of a freak. This point of view has gone so far and has become so set that when French actors come to America to interpret French characters in French plays, they invariably fail. The American, his mind made up as to French characters through long association with their American interpreters, actually feels that the French interpreters are faulty. And, as a consequence, the American generally comes to the conclusion that the French actor is a bad actor. Lucien Guitry, the best French actor of his time, is dead; but if he had come to America in French drama, I feel as certain that he would have failed as I feel certain that his talented son would fail were he to present himself to local audiences. Some of the critics would praise him, of course, but the audiences would not cotton to him. They would not understand his Frenchmen and they would not believe them. The characters in his plays they would understand and believe, but his interpretations of these characters would fail to make much of an impression on them. It would be the old case of the giraffe. The American, when it comes to giraffes—which is to say authentic French characterizations—has spent his entire life looking at mocking-birds.

It is not, however, that the American actor doesn't occasionally try to work himself into the soul and fibre of the French character he is called upon to interpret. It is, rather, that, try as he will, he is unable, for one reason or another, to penetrate it and, penetrating it, expound it convincingly in its various detail. The trick of dialect—I am speaking, plainly enough, of translated or adapted plays—he now and then masters; the Frenchman's dress he now and then similarly duplicates; the Frenchman's gestures and carriage he also now and then manages to get in hand. But he simply cannot get in hand the sense and feel of the Frenchman.

What we customarily engage, accordingly, is a French character more or less accurate in the matter of externals, but otherwise little more Gallic than the *Paris Herald* or the Ritz bar. It has been said that the reason for this is the ineradicable difference between the Anglo-Saxon and the Frenchman, a difference that makes impossible even an Anglo-Saxon mummer's interpretation of a Frenchman. But the argument does not convince me. Surely, there is an equal difference between, let us say, the Anglo-Saxon and the Spaniard, yet even so poor an American actor as Robert Edeson has, in the Maugham play called "The Noble Spaniard," done excellently by the rôle. On the other hand, were I to be threatened with a year in the calabozo if I didn't name an American actor who had performed the rôle of a Frenchman with moderate accuracy, I fear that I should have at once to put in an order with my tailor for black and white striped mufti.

But if the reasons usually assigned for the complete inability of American actors to play French characters are wrong, what are the reasons? I answer the question with the utmost ease: I don't know. I have thought up eight or nine reasons that have a superficial ring of truth to them, but none of them, duly meditated, holds water. I conclude, indeed, that it may not be the fault of the American actor at all. The burden perhaps lies with the French dramatist. The latter, particularly if he be a writer of comedy or farce, has his characters ready-made to his hand in the persons of French actors, who are 100 per cent Frenchmen and typical of the French as a nation from the crowns of their heads to the tips of their white spats. The French actor, in heart, in processes of mind and in general deportment, is the symbol of all Frenchmen, or at least of all Frenchmen who are material for the pen of a dramatic writer. He is an exaggerated symbol, true enough, but the stage is the home of exaggeration. Hence, the French dramatist—with obvious exceptions—may al-

most be said to have his characters written for him by whoever is the Chamberlain Brown of Paris. Such a playwright as Sacha Guitry, indeed, doesn't go to the trouble of creating characters at all; he simply writes himself and then plays it. And to ask an American subsequently to play the rôle, which is less a rôle than it is Sacha Guitry himself, is to ask not one actor to play another actor's rôle but to ask one man to *be* another man. Nor have I, for purposes of argument, hit on an unduly exaggerated case. We hear much in America of so-called type actors. In France, it is not a case of type actors but of type men. The French dramatist doesn't pick out an *actor* who is the type for a particular rôle; he picks out the *man* among the actors who *is* the rôle. Cataloguing is a sin for which I have received many a brick in the neck, so I shall refrain from persuading you in this direction with a lengthy list of names and dates. Let it therefore suffice to suggest the evidence merely by citing the instances of the casting of Edgar Becman during the heyday of the beauteous Lantelme, of Raymond Bernard cast by his father, Tristan, for the rôle of Bernhardt's *jeune premier*, of the casting by Bataille of the MM. Roger Vincent and Pierre Magnier in his "Vierge Folle," and of the original casting of Desjardins for the leading rôle in the light love symphony called "Petite Hollande." Now, obviously enough, when such rôles or rôles of a kind are imported by American producers and American actors bidden to interpret them, the latter must find themselves in sore straits. It is logical enough to request an American actor to play a rôle written for a French actor—though, as I have said, the request is factually ridiculous—but it is hardly logical to ask him to play a rôle written around and for a definite and peculiar Frenchman who happens to be an actor. If it be reasonable to ask him to do any such thing, then it is equally reasonable to ask and expect Firmin Gemièr to be a wow in "Is Zat So?"

These remarks are inspired by the acting

in three more or less recently divulged French adaptations and by the acting that we are certain to get in several similar exhibits due in the near future.

III

Contra Mundum

At the risk of supporting further the estimable Dr. Walkley's opinion of me, to wit, that I seem to have a fondness for the *contra mundum* attitude, I find myself liking the new Anderson-Stallings play, "First Flight." And this for all the circumstance that everything that has been said against it strikes me as being sound criticism. The play is, in fact, heavily conversational; it moves with disturbing slowness in an age of theatrical jazz; it shows the same disregard for compact form that the authors' antecedent plays, written singly or in collaboration, have shown. Yet there is in it, for the patient ear, a fine ring of brave beauty and the soft melody of an understanding tenderness, and these are surely something in a day when the hysteria that passes for criticism is reserved for such dramatic shooting-gallery practise as "The Vortex" and for such symbols of adultery as the millinery of Mr. Arlen. In this tale of young Andrew Jackson's first venture into the restless backwoods of the dawning nation and of his meeting there with blackleg treachery and white-frocked love, the men who wrote "What Price Glory?" and—one of them—"Outside Looking In"—have caught something with the fragrance of honest romance in it, a romance that, true enough, doesn't always catch and hold the glitter of the footlights and that frequently calls for printer's ink instead of canvas and rouge, but that withal captures now and again a trace of the mood of drama that holds in its heart a dream of glory. If it be a pose, an arbitrarily oppugnant attitude, to like that kind of drama above the more generally effective five-and-ten-cent store kind, then I am a poser and shall continue to be one until

the ambulance fails to arrive in time with the antidote for wood alcohol.

"First Flight," not a good play as good plays are bottled and labeled today, in point of fact periodically a poor play and one that doubtless will be in the storehouse long ere this, is still a play from the hands of men whose fancy is high and whose talents appear to be the most important—next to Eugene O'Neill's—in the present-day American theatre. Their last act of this particular play, denounced as tedious drivel, is to this mind the most charming instance of sound sentimental dramatic writing that the native stage has disclosed in some time.

I have mentioned "The Vortex," the Noel Coward importation which has been greeted locally as the greatest dramatic gem since the "Maidens of Trachis." No such scenes of excitement on an opening night have been witnessed since Rudolph Schildkraut lost his whiskers in "John Gabriel Borkman." The engaging author's friends and well-wishers crowded the theatre to the doors and began applauding the play before the first curtain went up. And by the time the last one came down the yelling and cheering were so loud that the cast of "Love's Call," playing six blocks away, came out and took ten bows. That Mr. Coward's play, even with a house full of such transparent thumb-pullers, should have been so ecstatically received is a matter for considerable surprise even on the part of those of us who are used to the monkeyshines of initial night audiences. That it is theatrically effective in certain of its phases, there is no denying, though that effectiveness is grounded vastly less upon sound, penetrating drama and character than upon the obvious emotional superficialities of actor-made entertainment. The theatrical effectiveness of "The Vortex," in a word, is simply the theatrical effectiveness of a sudden revolver shot, a tin-sheet thunder clap or a mechanical cloudburst. It no more stands analysis in the light of authentic drama than the exciting race climax of a Drury Lane

melodrama or the hand that steals around the door-jamb to extinguish the lights in a detective play. The author, an actor by profession and a skilful one, has gauged the stage kick of his manuscript with all the shrewdness of one experienced in jockeying artificially with a popular audience's sensibilities, and he has got the result he aimed for. But of reality—the reality, say, of some such not greatly dissimilar play as Maugham's "Our Betters"—he has got next to nothing. His "Vortex" is shiny and it glitters, but the shine and glitter are of polished brass. Yet a reading of at least one of his other plays, not yet produced in America, persuades one that there is promise in Coward's future. His present, the present of "The Vortex," is largely a fire-fly that has been mistaken for a new comet.

IV

Briefer Mention

"Outside Looking In" is a solo effort by Maxwell Anderson; its basis, Jim Tully's excellent hobo saga, "Beggars of Life." The play made from the book is a fresh and lively thing the amusement power of which doesn't quite obscure a structural weakness and a padding as obvious as that of the Raglan overcoats of the early nineties. More, though the hoboes presented to us in the dramatization are diverting fellows, they smell less of actuality than of the vaudeville stage. The impression is of a stageful of Joe Jacksons without bicycles rather than of actual hooligans. But back of the play there is a sense of life. Not even the movie melodrama plot upon which the exhibition is built can hide that.

"Cradle Snatchers," by Russell Medcraft and Norma Mitchell, is a funny farce-comedy adaptation of the French gigolo idea to a Long Island setting. Some tasty rough-and-tumble humor and some good comic acting go to constitute a commendably saucy evening. "Canary Dutch," by Willard Mack, is cheap sentimental crook

stuff. "The Jazz Singer," by Samson Raphaelson, is poorly written comedy-drama not without a periodic trace of sound emotional forthrightness, admirably acted in its leading rôle by the vaudeville boy, George Jessel, and, in a secondary rôle, by a Miss Dorothy Raymond. In "Harvest," by Kate Horton, and in "Courting," by A. Kenward Matthews, I can see nothing. The former is diluted Manchesterismus concerned with a yokel girl who succumbs to the slick ways of a city fellow and with the obvious reactions of her family to the fell catastrophe. The latter is a Scotch importation and plays the venerable Cinderella tune on a bagpipe plainly lacking enough wind. "The Pelican," by F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood, is a machine-made tear-squeezer, 1890 model.

"The Butter and Egg Man," by George S. Kaufman, is a thoroughly amusing farce-comedy dealing with the adventures of a provincial come-on who puts his money into the theatrical business. The author's humor is based upon observation and experience, and his play, for all the crudity of its plot mechanics, is a fetching example of the sort of theatrical entertainment launched in America by the late Charles H. Hoyt and developed by George M. Cohan. I observe that it has been said against the play that it deals with subject matter and interests too far removed from the lives and comprehension of the generality of people. The same devastating criticism may be made of "Oedipus Rex."

"Human Nature," by J. C. and Elliot Nugent, is an attempt at profundity by two gentlemen whose philosophical studies have been pursued chiefly on the vaudeville stage. The cogitations of the gentlemen in point revolve about the problem of sex and the deduction they finally arrive at, after much polysyllabic deliberation, is that if a very young girl marries a very old man she will soon or late feel stirring within her certain suppressed impulses. This amazing contribution to the philosophical knowledge of the world the gentlemen set into the framework of the kind of drama in which two young people, left alone in a room, are irresistibly drawn, after much visible trembling, into each other's embrace and in which the heroine conveys to the audience the fact that she is with child by looking steadily at her shoes. "The New Gallantry," by F. S. Merlin and Brian Marlow, both members of the acting profession, is an excessively windy recommendation of the sex-sedative for overly nervous and fretful young women. The heroine is a former worker in French war hospitals; the hero, a lusty hobo. The authors, during the course of the evening, deliver themselves of quotations from all their favorite authors in support of their thesis. At 10:30 p. m., when I made my departure, they had got to the P's and were still going strong.

The best of the new tune exhibits are "Sunny," with a score by Jerome Kern, and "The Vagabond King," with a score by Rudolph Friml.

THE LIBRARY

BY H. L. MENCKEN

Fiction Good and Bad

SUSPENSE, by Joseph Conrad. Garden City, L. I.: Doubleday, Page & Company.

DARK LAUGHTER, by Sherwood Anderson. New York: Boni & Liveright.

THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE, by Willa Cather. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

THE PERENNIAL BACHELOR, by Anne Parrish. New York: Harper & Brothers.

FIRE-CRACKERS, by Carl Van Vechten. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

PRAIRIE, by Walter J. Muilenberg. New York: The Viking Press.

THE WHITE OXEN AND OTHER STORIES, by Kenneth Burke. New York: Albert & Charles Boni.

THE GRACE OF LAMBS, by Manuel Komroff. New York: Boni & Liveright.

Conrad's Napoleonic novel, long in prospect and left unfinished at his death, will certainly not go into the first rank of his canon; nevertheless, it is a glowing and beautiful piece of work, and shows clearly that, even beyond sixty, he was still learning how to write. Such diligence and application reveal a humility that is rare among authors. Only too often the first half of their work is better than the second half. But Conrad was of a different sort. He labored immensely and indefatigably, shut in his room; he was never satisfied with his accomplishment. The fruits of that heroic endeavor show themselves in "Suspense." It begins clumsily, but after the first chapter it is a truly superb piece of writing. Napoleon is at Elba, preparing for the Hundred Days; Europe trembles like a Presbyterian in his cellar, with Prohibition officers afoot. One never actually sees the Corsican, but on every page one hears him, feels him, smells him. His shadow flits through every *salon*. He is present in every tap-room. No rumor flies that he is not part of. Conrad takes us to Genoa on the Ligurian Sea, with Elba it-

self just over the skyline. We are among ambassadors, princes, adventurers, thieves. Through all of them runs that baleful current of uneasiness, of foreboding, of alarm. It is a magnificent evocation of a mood. One admires it as one admires Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. It is a fragment, but that fragment is well-nigh perfect. Sheer virtuosity could go no further.

Sherwood Anderson, like Conrad, seems unable to stand still. His whole career has been a history of seeking, of experimentation, of hard effort. More than once, groping for ideas that somehow eluded him, he has come to grief. There was the early case of "Marching Men." There was the recent case of "Many Marriages." But in "Dark Laughter," it seems to me, he has at last found his method, and achieved his first wholly satisfying book. It is, in essence, extremely simple in plan, and even bald. A man and a woman, each married, meet by chance, and are presently in flight together. An obvious story? Its merit lies precisely in the fact that it is *not* obvious. What Anderson seeks to convey is the fundamental irrationality of the whole proceeding. He shows the two propelled into each other's arms by forces that are quite beyond them—not great cosmic currents, turned on by the angels, but a complex series of trivial impulses, arising out of the dullness of every day. John Stockton, a second-rate newspaper reporter, flees from life in two rooms with a banal wife, and goes to work, idiotically enough, in a wheel factory. It is in a small Ohio town, and the owner of the factory has a wife. She and John float together like leaves gliding down a stream. It is scarcely a love affair, as such things are understood. There is no grotesque Freudian machinery. John and Aline Grey simply collide in the void.