

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

The Feast of Noël

SINCE Mr. Noël Coward appears presently to be the figure occupying most greatly the attention of English and American Solons of the drama, the phenomenon may perhaps with a mild profit be made the subject of inquiry. In London, Mr. Coward has stirred up more profound critical excitement than even the latest American Charleston hooper at the Piccadilly cabaret. His plays have been praised in a few quarters in terms that the English critics customarily reserve for books of children's verses by contributors to *Punch* and denounced in many more in terms that the same gentlemen customarily reserve for the better American novels. He has been dubbed, on the one hand, the most talented writer of comedy that England has known since the already forgotten genius who was last year dubbed the most talented writer of comedy that England has known, and, on the other, he has been stigmatized, because of his themes, as the greatest smear on the fair name of the London stage since a translation of Wedekind was last shown on a Sunday up an alley. In America, Mr. Coward has for the most part fared better. Here, the critical gentry has seized him to its bosom with all the passion hitherto husbanded for Mr. Martin Flavin, John Barrymore and the Four Marx Brothers. Indeed, not since Duse, pitifully ill from a hemorrhage, gave what she confessed was the worst performance of her whole career in Gallarati-Scotti's "Cosi Sia" at the Century Theatre, has anyone been the recipient of such sweeping and abundant acclaim.

One of the things that seems especially to impress the commentators about Mr. Coward is his age. Is it not remarkable,

they say, that this young man of twenty-five or so should already actually have written and had produced four plays and a dozen music hall numbers? When one politely, if somewhat timidly, hazards the rejoinder that, for that matter, Mr. Coward's fellow English playwright, Mr. William Shakespeare, similarly had written certain of his little things in his twenties and that Mr. Coward's fellow composer, Mr. Wolfgang A. Mozart, had published six sonatas at the age of nine, one is dismissed as a fellow of deplorable wise-cracking proclivities. For we live in a critical age when a performance in the arts is rated according to its impresario's years, when the death of a second-rate poet at twenty-six is the occasion for more tears than the death of a first-rate poet at sixty, when the Nathalia Cranes steal the first pages of the literary reviews from the Robert Frosts and Carl Sandburgs, when the Philip Barrys are eulogized in proportion as the Pirandellos are gracefully let down, and when the *Bookman*, the *Dial* and the *International Book Review Digest* lead off with Stephen Vincent Benét, John Dos Passos and Johnny Weaver and bury Cabell and Dreiser somewhere in the back among the advertisements of unexpurgated editions of "The Adventures of the Marquis de Faublas."

Another thing that deeply moves the critics about Mr. Coward is what is described as his "keen dramatic sense and remarkable gift for theatrical effect." Analyzing this, in the light of his recently disclosed plays, what do we find? We find, first, that this keen dramatic sense of his consists for the major part in the old trick of reducing dialogue to monosyllables and that, secondly, this remarkable gift for theatrical effect consists for the same part

in pumping up the aforesaid monosyllabic dialogue in a violent staccato to a bursting point and then bringing it up with a sudden jerk by causing one of the speakers either (a) to grab a piece of bric-à-brac, hurl it to the floor and smash it to bits, or (b) to turn on the other speaker, the immediate subject of a crescendo denunciation involving every epithet known to longshoreman and fishwife, and with lightning-like abruptness to make a fervent protestation of undying love. The dialogue that Mr. Coward writes is nervous and terse, but its nervous terseness is less suggestive of that of life and actuality than of the nervous terseness of moving picture sub-titles. One detects, in one's mind's eye, the arbitrary and wholesale use of supposedly breath-taking dashes and exclamation points. One feels that the characters are speaking the language of human beings not so much as the language of a playwright grimly determined to make a record in the way of verbal economy. This sort of theatrical dodge is all very well in the kind of plays in which detectives snoop around in haunted houses with pocket flashlights looking for the spitzbub' who has been passing himself off as the ghost of the murdered banker, but it becomes travesty when an attempt is made to employ it in high comedy. This, surely, should be known to Mr. Coward by this time despite his youth, for the device has served as the basis of many a burlesque both in his own England and our America.

Mr. Coward's act climaxes, already alluded to, are quite as arbitrary in their ready-made effectiveness as his dialogue. Nor can one find in them much inventiveness or originality. Surely such a device as the smashing of a piece of pottery, which brings down the curtain on the second act of his "Easy Virtue," is quite as rococo as the theme of the play itself, both the theme and the act climax in point having been employed literally in the remote yesterday of the theatre by Pinero. The dramatic climax to the second act of another of Mr. Coward's plays, "The Vortex," and largely

responsible for the theatrical success of that play, to wit, a crescendo musical accompaniment to a scene of mounting dialogue, has similarly taken its place in the catalogue of stage tricks since Henry Irving and the day of "Waterloo." Passing from these phases of Mr. Coward's dramatic craftsmanship, we come to the matter of his atmosphere, as the word goes. While never for a moment suggesting the jewelry-salesman manner of his contemporary, Arlen, in his effort to inject "tone" into his plays, while, to the contrary, contriving his airs with entire ease, acquaintance and conviction, Mr. Coward nevertheless periodically gives one the impression of straining himself to overawe his more doodlish auditors with divers schnitzels of the *beau monde*. A slightly too nonchalant allusion to Marcel Proust, a condescending voucher for the Ritz, a tit-bit about this or that *recherché* interior decorator, a reference to jade bathtubs, such morsels as "she's giving a dreadful reception at her dreadful house for some dreadful Ambassador," with the rejoinder, "How dreadful!", casually inserted mentions of Debussy, Ravel, Gabriel Faure and Reynaldo Hahn, much to-do about "Cachet Faivre" and such like, references to fashionable Paris couturières and to Caron's "Narcisse Noir" and other currently smart smells, elaborate intimacy with various Continental salons and watering-places, passing mention of tennis, cricket, bridge, mah jong, bezique, Russian music, Claridge's, the Embassy Club and Monte Carlo, numerous calls on our old French friend, *chic*, information as to the vogue in Paris parlor games—these he rolls on his tongue with something of Arlen's relish. . . . We come, finally, to the meat of the Coward *opera*. Save in the case of "Fallen Angels," which has not yet been shown in America and which contains a fresh and amusing theme, Coward seems to go regularly to the attic for the ideas of his plays. Thus, we find "The Vortex" to be little more than a paraphrase of Maugham's "Our Betters," "Hay Fever" to be an echo

of St. John Ervine's "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," and "Easy Virtue" to be a readily recognizable grandchild of "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray" and the dozens of plays of similar theme that followed in its wake.

But if all this is true of the young man's plays, how are we to account for the attention that he has attracted on both sides of the Atlantic? Unless I am in error, this attention has been due to his stratagem of making old stuff seem lively and up-to-the-minute by the George M. Cohan dramatic and theatrical device of writing and playing it as if it were a cross between a special delivery letter and a hurry call for the police. One need only glance at the printed texts of his plays to catch the secret. Where the playwright of yesterday went at a Coward theme as if he didn't expect his audience to arrive at the theatre until the beginning of the second act, Coward rips off his shirt and begins pulling corks at once. He doesn't bother with preliminaries; he gets promptly to business. This, of course, is a procedure that generally brings the less meditative critic to believe that a playwright, however empty, has so much of importance to say that he can hardly wait to say it and that he feels he must begin to say it at once if he is to crowd all his vast fund of ideas into the meagre two hours at his disposal. I do not insinuate that Coward himself has any such foolish idea in his head when he writes his plays, for he gives no sign of posturing or pretense. What I say is that Coward's critics, hornswoggled by his cunning and practical knowledge of theatrical hocus-pocus, are brought very tidily to the view of Coward that Coward wishes them to have. Yet Coward, though I may seem to have indicated otherwise, is by no means to be confused with such currently prosperous dramatic charlatans as Arlen. Below his obvious parlor magic, his box-office delicatessen and his mummer card-sharpening there is discernible a talent of some real quality. Now and then he shows a gift for quick character analysis—

there are two excellent instances in "Easy Virtue"; now and then he fashions a scene instinct with life and reality; now and then he discloses an eye that has clearly and honestly appraised human beings in all the nakedness of their souls. More, he is without sentimentality, and there is courage of a sort in his make-up. If thus far he has written nothing of importance, there are yet in his unimportant plays indications that one of these days he may justify at least a measure of the commendation that has already been bestowed upon him by critics who have mistaken his merely effective theatre for sound drama.

"Easy Virtue," the most recently produced of Coward's plays, seems to me to show more promise than either of his two antecedent pieces. It has a simply written and convincing first act, and its second act, up to within twenty minutes of its curtain, has suggestions of merit. The play from that point on, however, is cheap stuff: the ancient whangdoodle wherein the somewhat blemished woman, her back to the wall, drives her irony against her persecutors and in the end packs up her bags and returns to the life their bigotry has driven her to. But, as I have said, certain characters are manoeuvred observantly and truly and through the intrinsic banality of the theme there peek out now and again hints of a sympathetic discernment of the human psyche. Miss Jane Cowl is admirable in the leading rôle.

II

O'Neill's Latest

Four years ago, Eugene O'Neill let me read a play of his called "The Fountain," a very beautiful play, centred in the legend of Ponce de Leon, that told of man's eternal quest for yesterday, only to find at the end of the troubled trail that yesterday is ever in the hands and hearts of the youth of tomorrow. Four weeks ago, I saw a play by Eugene O'Neill called "The Fountain"

acted on the stage of the Greenwich Village Theatre, but it was not the play I had read. This other play, though much of the beauty was still in it, had become a worn and tired thing out of apparently endless re-writing. Divers producers had in the four years considered it, had even gone so far as to promise its presentation—but always with a string attached. This one had that change to recommend; that one had another. And O'Neill, oddly enough for a man who is the most independently minded writer for the American theatre, had seemingly listened to each of them; and not only to each of these producers, but to the very producers who now at length have put his play on for him.

The changes that O'Neill was persuaded to make—these suggestions and hints from men who were no more competent to make meritorious suggestions to O'Neill than a beer-keg is competent to give Annette Kellerman swimming lessons—have done the play no end of damage. One can see plainly the confusion in which the dramatist found himself. Where originally there was simple loveliness and clarity, there is now a disconcerting repetitiousness and, in the concluding act of the play, an imagination become so helplessly tangled up in itself that what comes out of it, in its central vision scene, is little more than a John Murray Anderson Music Box Revue number played behind a sequin-embellished scrim. This last act of "The Fountain," even in its original draft, was not of the quality of the preceding acts, but surely, unless my memory has gone back on me, it was in no sense or degree the flat and uninspired piece of dramatic writing that is presently being played.

Of the original play, several of the earlier episodes have been left intact, and these are as rich in a poetic imagination crossed with a biting mockery as anything our American theatre has offered. In them the poet that is ever at the heart of O'Neill's bitterest god-damn takes wings. But in certain of the subsequent episodes the attempt at poetic expression takes

weak refuge in golden sunsets, azure heavens, trees laden with golden fruit, dreamlands, moons, flowers and all the similar stencils of the petty versifier. That this is to be attributed to a mind and fancy become sterile from the enervating task of ceaseless revision of the manuscript and that O'Neill simply became so worn-out that he was not himself is clearly apparent to one who has read his more recent and as yet unrepresented play, "Marco's Millions." In this latter, which comes from O'Neill's hands exactly as it was originally conceived and unimpaired by helpful advice from solicitous and kindly, if block-headed, mentors, we find all the hues and lights of imagery and invention that certain critics, unfamiliar with the tampering to which "The Fountain" was subjected, have argued the poet O'Neill incapable of.

Yet, though "The Fountain," as it comes eventually to us in the theatre, is a disappointment, it contains much to attest anew to the fact that in its author we have the first dramatist of high position that this country has produced. Against its shaky dramatic structure which ends up on a philosophic chord as banal and conventional as a Tin Pan Alley ballad's, we have that counterpoint of sentiment and irony which O'Neill alone of our American dramatists is master of. Against the leaky imagination of the concluding episodes of the play, we have such episodes as de Leon's challenge aboard the flagship of Columbus and the uncommonly lovely scene of meeting between the grown-old adventurer, his heart toughened to love, and the glamorous young daughter of the woman he forsook at Granada those years ago to follow the fortunes of a sword against Cathay. And against the periodic triteness with which the theme has been handled, we have such intermittent bravery of dramatic mind as has gone into the creation of the scene wherein the Indian Nano informs his people on the meanness of the Christian ethic and the scene wherein de Leon, now governor of Porto Rico, holds out against the Church in behalf of

a great and pragmatic mercy. Faults there are in the play, and many, but what virtues it has are virtues that one encounters nowhere else in the American drama save in that part of it which O'Neill writes.

Robert Edmond Jones has designed the settings and dress of the play with much fine feeling, but he has been less successful in producing it in a manner to quicken it into theatrical life.

Among the criticisms of the play, I note a dissatisfaction with the American Indian as O'Neill has presented him. O'Neill has seen fit to give his Indians a measure of intelligible discourse. This has come as a great shock to those of my colleagues who, since their Edward S. Ellis and "The Girl I Left Behind Me" days, have been firmly convinced that the only things American Indians were capable of saying to one another were either "Ugh!" or "Big Chief Bushwah has spoken!"

III

"Moral"

Many years ago, as the crow's feet fly, I wrote of Dr. Ludwig Thoma's "Moral" and hinted that it might be a good idea for the theatrical managers of the time to produce it instead of such creachy tripe as "Daddy Dufard," "Everywoman," "Maggie Pepper" and "Strongheart," to which they were then with a whole heart devoting themselves. But, being then quite as sagacious as they are today and appreciating that if they produced the kind of plays I like they wouldn't have enough money on Saturday night to pay off the scrub-woman, they wisely paid no attention to me and astutely went on rolling up a comfortable bank balance with gems like "The Governor's Lady," "The Bird of Paradise," "Stop Thief" and "Hawthorne of the U. S. A." With the passing of years, however, there came over the horizon a new order of producers. This new order shuddered at the very thought of making money. Rather than produce anything like "The

Lion and the Mouse," "Alias Jimmy Valentine," "Arsène Lupin" or even McIntyre and Heath in "The Ham Tree" and contaminate themselves with filthy and objectionable gold, they preferred to achieve a gravy of starvation, one collar a week and kudos with the sort of plays that were to the fancy of certain well-fed critics who had utterly nothing to lose and who very magnanimously allowed them to do all the dirty work and go hungry.

One set of these eminently worthy gentlemen, grouped under the name of the Actors' Theatre, lately dug back into my old files, saw therein mention of the Thoma play and proceeded to put it on. The production of the play was promptly made the occasion, on the part of a number of my colleagues, of considerable ironic comment at my expense. "What ho!" they observed, not without a measure of obvious self-satisfaction over their own sagacity in never having heard of the play; "Here is an opus highly recommended by the M. Nathan that yet plainly belongs to the theatre of yesterday and is now completely outdated." That the charge made by my friends is more or less sound, I do not presume to deny. But equally sound would be the charge that Della Fox, whose good-looks I recommended at the same time I recommended "Moral," has dated even more. When I wrote of Thoma's play, it was a fresh and kicking comedy with an original theme and with an original humor. In the years that have elapsed, a hundred and one playmakers have cabbaged not only its central idea, but most of its humor as well. In the last three months alone we have had two steals from it: first, in certain of the comedy details which Molnar plus the Theatre Guild pilfered from its second act in order to brace up the scanty third act of "The Glass Slipper," and, secondly, in the theme and various embroideries of Lynn Starling's paraphrase called "Weak Sisters." And so it is that what was once a comedy that would have delighted the American theatre was, after these many years of neglect, properly found to be a

somewhat wilted affair. I privilege myself to believe, however, that a more careful treatment of the casting, direction and manuscript by the Actors' Theatre would have made the play seem infinitely less dated than it did seem. Read the original manuscript and you'll still find considerable fun in it. That fun did not come out of the recent presentation.

IV

Merchants of Foreign Glory

The Theatre Guild is still hard at it in an attempt to prove left-handedly that there is no such thing as an American drama. It rejects Eugene O'Neill's "The Fountain" and lets the Greenwich Village directorate do it. It makes no effort to find "A Man's Man" and leaves the job to the Stagers. It allows a young woman producer, Miss Rosalie Stewart, who came upon the scene a year or two ago, to bring out George Kelly's "Craig's Wife"; it lets a so-called commercial manager find the merit of the vaudeville dancer, Harry Delf's, "The Family Upstairs"; it doesn't exert itself, save in the direction of giving out frequent statements that there are no new American plays worth producing, to unearth such things as "What Price Glory?" or "Sun-Up," or "Desire Under the Elms," or "Close Harmony," or anything like them. Instead, it contents itself with having in the past put on a couple of second-rate box-office successes by Americans and with the further reassurance that it is all very well for the critics to point to certain plays of O'Neill's, Stallings', Anderson's and Kearney's but that these particular plays were tied up elsewhere and so were not available to the Guild even if the Guild had wanted them. That the Guild's endeavor to get out of an embarrassing situation in this wise is not as graceful as the Guild may believe it to be is apparent to those of us who know that the Guild has rejected two of O'Neill's plays, that O'Neill is so little bound hand and foot to the Guild's rivals

in Greenwich Village that his next play is to be produced by Belasco, that the same rivals have Stallings' newest play, and that, if the Guild wants advance information, it may be informed that the author of "A Man's Man" is currently busy on a play that may be worth at least a careful reading.

The latest exhibit of the Guild's is yet another importation, the work of the French Pagnol and Nivoix, called "Merchants of Glory." It is an indifferent composition that, for all a pleasingly ironic approach to a contemplation of war, fails to come off. The aim of the authors is to show, in terms of the species of derision so skilfully employed by George Birmingham, the manner in which war is capitalized to their own political, financial and psychical advantage by men cunning enough to entrust its fighting to others. This aim is not realized for two reasons. In the first place, the authors lack the sharp wit necessary to drive their idea home in sufficiently persuasive theatrical terms and, in the second place, like any number of contemporary French playwrights, they vitiate the force of their play by emotionalizing it into a disturbing sentiment at the very moment when ironic shrapnel is, out of its intrinsic nature, the thing it most obviously and loudly calls for. Just as the interested auditor, by virtue of what has directly gone before, properly expects the theme to burst in the heavens with the fire of a hundred hissing, sardonic rockets, the authors drop everything with a thud by introducing a lachrymose scene out of the old front-parlor drama between the long-lost soldier-son and his gray-haired mother. And just as the spectator, prepared for an explosion of sublime ridicule, sits on edge to watch the authors blow up self-seeking and hypocrisy in the name of patriotism, he is dumped back into his seat by a perfectly conventional scene out of the Enoch Arden mush in which the returned soldier confronts his wife and, after the usual histrionics, learns that she has become the wife of another man.

THE LIBRARY

BY H. L. MENCKEN

Fides Ante Intellectum

A SCIENTIFIC MAN AND THE BIBLE, by Howard A. Kelly. Philadelphia: *The Sunday-School Times Company*.

THE author of this astounding book is emeritus professor of gynecological surgery at the Johns Hopkins, and one of the most celebrated surgeons now alive in the United States. This is what his own university says of him in an official document:

His contribution to the development of genito-urinary surgery for women has been unparalleled. Step by step he unravelled the diseases of the bladder, ureter and kidney. . . . His methods of examination revolutionized gynecological diagnosis.

And much more to the same effect. In brief, a medical man of the first calibre: when he speaks of himself as a scientist, as he does very often in his book, he has every right to use the word. His life has been devoted to exact observation, and that observation has been made so competently and interpreted so logically that the result has been a series of immensely valuable improvements in the healing art and craft. And yet—and yet—But how am I to make you believe that such a man has actually written such a volume as this one? How am I to convince you that one of the four men who laid the foundations of the Johns Hopkins Medical School—the daily associate and peer of Osler, Welch and Halsted—is here on exhibition as a Fundamentalist of the most extreme wing, compared to whom Judge Raulston, of Dayton, Tenn., seems almost an atheist?

Yet it is so—and I go, for the depressing proof, behind the book and to the man himself. I have known Dr. Kelly for twenty years, and at different times have seen a great deal of him. Hours on end I have discussed his theological ideas with him, and heard his reasons for cherishing them.

They seem to me now, as they seemed when I first heard them, to be completely insane—yet Kelly himself is surely not insane. Nor is there the remotest suspicion of insincerity about him. It would be of vast benefit to him professionally to throw over his great cargo of supernatural rubbish, and trim his course as his colleagues trim theirs. If he did so, the Johns Hopkins would be illuminated with Roman candles, star shells and incandescent bock beer signs, and the very cadavers in the dead-house would have their backs slapped. But he will not budge. He believes that God created the world in six calendar days, and rested on the seventh. He believes that God caused forty-two little children to be devoured by she-bears because they made fun of Elijah's bald head. He believes that Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*), and then came out alive. *Medicinae doctor* though he be, he believes that the hallucinations of John on the island of Patmos were real. An LL.D. of Aberdeen, he believes (Exodus xxii, 18) that witches exist and should be put to death. (An honorary member of learned societies in Paris, Vienna, Rome, Berlin, Leipzig, Bucharest and Moscow, he believes in both the Virgin Birth (Matthew i, 18-25), and in the descent of Jesus from David through Joseph (Matthew i, 1-17).) All this, and much more, he believes absolutely without reservation, as a Tennessee hind believes it. "I accept the *whole* Bible," he says, "as God's Word." And he adds something that even the hind balks at: he believes in the Second Coming—"at any moment"!

In his book Dr. Kelly offers powerful argument for his amazing credo, but I can only report that, in cold type as *viva voce*,