

CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Democracy.—The failure of democracy is of a piece with the failure of marriage since the so-called emancipation of women. Where there is the theory of equality among persons living under the same roof or under the same flag there can be no sound and workable organization. National content, permanent prosperity, happiness and strength in unity are to be obtained only where there is an outstanding dictator, and such a dictator, like the successful husband, must be born not out of the hypothetically shrewd meditation of his people or, in the instance of the husband, of his wife, but out of their romance and willing subservience. A king was the father of Cinderella's prince. Men may follow, but they do not and never will lay down their lives, their intelligence and their derisory humor for a fellow citizen from a cow State in a Stein-Bloch three-piece suit, an Arrow collar and a Dunlap derby hat.

The Message of Art.—As ridiculous as the theory that great art exercises an ennobling influence upon man and inculcates in him a prompt and overwhelming passion for close psychic association with God, the angels and the League for the Enforcement of Prohibition, is the sister theory that great art must inevitably carry a message to man. Great art, in point of fact, carries no such thing; rather is it great art for the directly opposite reason. It carries with it, true enough, the message of its own technical beauty, but to call that a message, in the way the word is generally used, is like saying that sauerkraut carries with it its own taste and catharsis. Everything has its message,

if one wishes to put a fine point upon mundane phenomena and if one has a mind to make the language conceal the nonsense of one's reasoning; but art, precisely speaking, has no other actual message than its internal dignity and splendor. What, conceivably, is the nature of the "message" of "Huckleberry Finn," of the "Iliad," of Michelangelo's sculpture, of a Brahms trio, of Raphael's portrait of himself, or of the Grand Central Station? The message in each of these cases is simply, and nothing more, than this: that a great artist has achieved perfect form in his own particular domain of art. That is the only message that real art carries. The messages that certain critics speak of—these critics who conceive of art as a branch of the Western Union—are reserved for imitations of authentic art. Maeterlinck's "Blue Bird," Gounod's "Nazareth" and Longfellow's "Hiawatha" have messages and duly convey them to the boobs, but Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," a Beethoven fantasia and Chaucer's "The Assembly of Fowls" have no more of a message than so many brilliant stars in the heavens. There are certain exceptions, of course, as there are always exceptions. But, taking great art on the whole, we find it to be as devoid of evangelism as a perfect Spring day, a perfect flower or any other such analogous masterpiece of God's making.

Fortune-Tellers.—In the crusade of the ordained constabulary against clairvoyants, crystal-gazers, fortune-tellers, palmists and other such professors of the joys and sorrows of tomorrow, one detects the usual American official device of making a great show by hitting such members of

the community as have no power to strike back. The authorities are simply up to their now venerable trick of blinking conveniently when the bloodhounds go by and of displaying their strength against the helpless mutts. If there were so many as two millionaires or two men with political power who were to don black velvet peignoirs, smell up their back parlors with corner drugstore incense and begin to predict magnificent amours to fat women with double chins, the authorities would indulge in a second thought before proceeding against the professional seers either in part or as a whole. But as the prognosticating profession is made up entirely of nothing more impressive and dismaying than ex-dentists, gynecologists who have lost their licenses, Armenian rug dealers who have exhausted their easy pickings and Jewish traveling gents who have grown long moustaches and changed their names to Abdul, Yasim and Hamid, the gendarmerie has nothing to hold it back and accordingly lets moral nature take its course.

Yet what is the specific charge against these soothsayers? The charge against them is that they swindle the public by professing to do something that is not within their power. They take money on the theory that they are able to foretell events, on the presumption that they are privy to the secrets of the future, on the assurance that they can indicate cures, alleviate ills and suggest the means of future well-being. Well, so do the chiropractors and osteopaths; so do the gentlemen of the clergy; so do the stock and bond dealers of Wall Street; so do the Florida realtors; so do the advertisers who guarantee that they can grow hair on bald heads, teach the piano by mail in thirty days, and make a brilliant conversationalist and great social favorite out of a mill-hand. These persons, however, unlike the fortune-tellers, have, the most of them, organizations of their own kind to protect them or influence enough in one direction or another to keep the civic uhlans from

making raids upon them. Yet they are, in their several ways, equally dubious. If a fortune-teller predicts that a client will make a pot of money if he invests his hard-earned savings in this or that oil stock, the stockbroker does the same thing; and one's guess is as good as the other's. If a fortune-teller promises future happiness or future woe, so does a clergyman. And if a fortune-teller suggests to his client that a magnetized horseshoe carried in the rear pants pocket will cure his long-standing thrombolympangitis, a chiropractor tells his that a manipulation of one of his ribs will cure his long-standing gout, gall stones, dandruff, stammering and loss of hearing.

American Criticism.—"Elephants," wrote Swift, "are always drawn smaller than life, but a flea always larger." In the same way are the stature and bulk of the real artist amongst us relatively diminished by the magnification of the stature and bulk of the inferior artist. The chief fault of American criticism is its warm hospitality to second-rate striving. It often duly appreciates the authentic artist, but detracts from that appreciation by an overvaluation of the dubious artist. Everything that has been written in praise of Cabell has also at one time or another been written in praise of Donn Byrne. Everything that has been written in praise of Sherwood Anderson and Dreiser has at one time or another been written also of James Oliver Curwood.

Suggested Argument Against Prohibition by the Authors' League.—Charles Lamb was such a boozier that it required the combined efforts of Coleridge, Hazlitt and Wordsworth, his fellow tipplers, to stagger up the stairs with him and get him into bed. Anatole France, according to his secretary, Brousson, consumed a quart of cognac every time he composed a critique and stated that the only review he ever wrote for the *Temps* which got him the special commendation of his editor was a

feuilleton he wrote when he was so stewed that he hadn't the slightest notion he had ever written it and didn't recognize it when he saw it in print. Jules Lemaitre drank so much that his inamorata, Mme. de Loynes, always brushed his lips with rose water before allowing him to bestow upon her a loving smack. Ibsen was one of the greatest *Biersäufer* to whom the *Oberkellner* of the Café Luitpold ever vouchsafed a *Grüss Gott*, and Wagner was the delight of the *Wirte* at Bayreuth. Shakespeare, in his earlier years and when he was making the reputation that will never die from man's memory, drank regularly every night he had the money from ten o'clock until two the next morning. Lessing put the breweries of Hamburg on their feet and caused them to pay increased dividends to their stockholders. Stephen Crane knew intimately all the most conspicuous bartenders of his day, and Thomas Hardy, like Conrad before him, keeps a carafe of port handy on the sideboard. When Jack London gave up rum, his writing went to pot.

Swift loved his liquor, as did Chaucer. Rostand's favorite beverage was the white wine of Bordeaux, Château de Suiduiraud in particular, and Marcel Proust's is Château Climens. Congreve drank a quart of Burgundy every night at dinner, and washed it down with several ponies of brandy. Ambrose Bierce's taste was for straight whiskey, provided only the glasses were big enough, and Nathaniel

Hawthorne's penchant was for ale. Sterne was off the stuff only in his unproductive years; the moment he took to ethyl alcohol he produced "Tristram Shandy" and the "Sentimental Journey." William Schwenk Gilbert lived up to the traditions of his middle name, and Fielding wrote "Joseph Andrews" in a mildly pickled state. Sir Charles Napier wrote his one and only book, "War in Syria," after his physician had prescribed a moderate daily use of alcohol after a long and deleterious period of abstinence. Under the assumed name of Dr. Schmidt, Schiller enjoyed the malt of Oggersheim and later of Bauerbach to such a degree that for years afterward he was fretful if any other brew was passed over to him. Byron tried all the tipples of Portugal, Spain, Turkey and Greece, and apparently found them to his liking, and Swinburne's cast-iron stomach is known to history. Dickens was a magnificent stower-away of ale; old Sam Johnson's booze chair is familiar to all American Prohibitionists who have gone to London on Cook's tours; and Oscar Wilde could down six glasses of green Chartreuse or eight of bad brandy without turning a hair.

We come to the present American scene. Who are the outstanding writers in the country today? Dreiser, Cabell, Lewis, Anderson, Hergesheimer, Sandburg, O'Neill—and not one of them, from personal observation, would exactly faint in the presence of a bottle.

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Credo in Recollection

WHAT, after a protracted period of writing on art, criticism, drama, the theatre and acting, are some of the minor conclusions a commentator like myself comes to? Sifting the many pages I have covered with momentary reflections, I extract a number of more or less lingering convictions. These, I herewith recall in quotation.

Criticism

1. Criticism is the art of appraising others at one's own value.

2. One is a good critic in the degree that one is able to answer vacillating and quibbling doubt with determined and persuasively positive doubt. Criticism is the prevailing of intelligent skepticism over vague and befuddled prejudice and uncertainty. It answers no riddle; it merely poses an oppugnant and contradictory riddle.

3. Too much emphasis, it seems to me, is laid by critics upon form. Perfection of form is hardly the *sine qua non* of art. The old dime-novel had almost perfect form; James Joyce has none, or at best very little, in the currently accepted sense. Fine art is often as formless as inferior art is sleek in form.

4. In criticism of the drama and the theatre, the critic should always be mindful of the fact that drama is an art of the ages and the theatre the art of an age. The drama is to be criticized from the viewpoint of the centuries; the theatre is to be criticized only from the viewpoint of the present moment.

5. Criticism may be defined as an art within an art, since every work of art is the result of a struggle between the heart

that is the artist himself and his mind that is the critic. The wrangling that occurs at times between art and criticism is, at bottom, merely a fraternal discord, one in which Cain and Abel belabor each other with stuffed clubs.

6. Criticism of the arts consists in an intellectualization of emotionalism.

7. The critic who at forty believes the same things that he believed at twenty is either a genius or a jackass.

8. It is impossible for the true critic to be a gentleman. I use the word in its common meaning, to wit, a man who avoids offense against the punctilio, who is averse to an indulgence in personalities, who is ready to sacrifice honesty to good manners and good form, and who has respect and sympathy for the feelings of his inferiors. Criticism is intrinsically and inevitably a boorish art. Its practitioner takes color from it, and his gentlemanliness—if he has any—promptly becomes lost in its interpretative labyrinths. The critic who is a gentleman is no critic. He is merely a dancing-master among the arts.

9. Criticism is the art of appraising that which isn't in terms of what it should be, and that which should be in terms of what it isn't. The rest—is mere hand-shaking.

10. The best critics are the inconsistent critics. Show me a consistent critic, one who sets himself a critical credo and abides by it with never a side-step, never a doubt, and I'll show you a critic who is more often wrong than right. The theatre and drama are inconsistent and changeful; each contradicts itself with the passing of the years. Dramatic criticism, if definitively and invariably consistent, becomes therefore proportionately as unsound as a brief on cancer written two decades ago.