

# CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

*England and the American Language.*—One of the things that impresses itself most forcibly about England in late years is the spread of the so-called American language there and the extent to which it has usurped the English of the English. Ten years back it was often as difficult for the American to understand what an Englishman was driving at as it was for the latter to understand what the American was trying to say. Today, little such trouble exists. With American books flooding the book-stalls, American magazines—sometimes published under other names, *e.g.*, *Nash's*, *et cetera*—on every hand, American plays occupying seventy-five per cent. of the English theatres, American movies with their American sub-titles on every other street, Americans figuring prominently in the English horse world and so on, the American language has filtered through British life to a remarkable degree, and it is today a rare Englishman who is not as familiar with the cat's pajamas, banana oil and the condition of one's old man as any native of Eighth avenue.

When George Ade's "The College Widow" was produced in London some years ago, it was a flat failure. The English couldn't make head or tail of its language, even though a glossary was handed out to each member of the audience. Today, "Is Zat So?", which would have been completely unintelligible to an Englishman ten years ago, is a huge success. Anita Loos' "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," which is full of presumably exotic Americanisms, is the best selling book in England. Cabell, who writes the English of the English, attracts little notice, whereas Sinclair Lewis, who is as American in speech as

Babe Ruth, is quoted wherever one goes. The Englishman of today knows exactly what the American means when he says elevator instead of lift, when he orders a Hamburger instead of a Salisbury, when he alludes to a sight-seer instead of a charabanc, when he shouts Bronx, Manhattan or Alexander, when he orders a derby instead of a bowler or a sailor instead of a boating-straw, when he refers to tin lizzies or whisper-joints, when he says "Step on it," "Beat it," "sap," "simp," "eyewash" and even "the bum's rush." American speech, together with its custom, has taken so great a hold on England, indeed, that certain of the old English taboos are no longer operative, as, for example, in the case of such words as "stomach" and "bloody," both of which are now used commonly in polite society. The most generally employed exclamation in England today is "gosh," borrowed from the American corn-belt. The expression is no longer "top hole" nor "ripping," but "great" or "dandy." As an experiment in London one day not long ago I tried speaking absolutely un-American English of the vintage of some years back to an English friend of mine. He didn't know what I was talking about.

*A Sea-View of Prohibition.*—A study of the smoke-rooms on the trans-Atlantic liners these days offers an illuminating insight into the state of Prohibition currently on tap in the Republic. Crossing back and forth not many weeks ago on two of the largest and most popular of the steamers, the *Mauretania* and the *Olympic*, I noticed that the amount of drinking not only in the smoking-room but also in the

dining saloon and restaurant was so small as to be almost indiscernible. Inquiry elicited the news that this lamentable condition of affairs was by no means unusual, that, in point of fact, all the liners were falling off badly in the alcoholic department. The reason, I was told, was a simple one. The American of any means at all, after these half dozen and more years of Volsteadism, has his drinking affairs now so well arranged at home that, where once he booked passage on a steamer to Europe as he would have taken a six days' lease on a brewery, he presently views a ship much in the light of a water-wagon, that is, as a place to get a respite from bibbing, to fill his lungs with salt air, and to ease up the strain on his kidneys.

A few years ago, as everyone knows, the smoke-room of an ocean liner was indistinguishable from a Kentucky distillery. On certain of the smaller ships, indeed, things often got to such a pass, what with the briskness of trade, that the stewards were unable to handle the situation singlehanded and the captain himself had to come down off the bridge to help pull corks. Today, a single steward is amply competent to handle the smoke-room on one of the smaller passenger vessels, and on such larger boats as the *Mauretania* and *Olympic* a couple are able to manage things with the utmost ease. Even in the Ritz restaurant and veranda café on the latter ship, where erstwhile the popping of corks sounded like the battle of Mons, the wine steward on my voyage had to move about so little in answer to orders that he confided to me, on the third day out, that he was going down to the ship's surgeon to get a liniment to rub on his feet, which were constantly going to sleep.

The revenue from liquor sales on the trans-Atlantic boats has fallen at least fifty per cent. in the last three years. The American with enough money in his jeans to travel even at the minimum rate of \$250 or \$300 now has just as much to drink at home, and almost as good stuff,

as he had before Prohibition. He has at last found a satisfactory bootlegger; he no longer has to pay the high prices for stuff that he had to hand out in the early days of Prohibition before bootlegging had become well systematized and proficient; he is no longer tempted to let loose and get delirium tremens on the high seas simply because a highball costs sixpence less on board ship than it does in his own house or across the street at the speak-easy. The perceptible increase of traffic on the ships of the American Line, where no liquor is officially sold, shows which way the wind is blowing. If things continue to keep on going as they are, I confidently predict that within another few years all the boats that cater to the American trade will be driven to make up their liquor deficit by converting their smoking-rooms into moving-picture halls and charging the boat-load of temporary teetotalers a stiff admission fee.

*Monogamy.*—The success of the monogamic institution of marriage in these later days of Caucasian civilization must be looked for very largely outside the cities and in the small towns, villages, farms and other such places where life is relatively drab and uneventful. Where life is thus drab and uneventful, monogamy flourishes, as the cactus flourishes best in a desert. Its very irritations, annoyances, disgusts, plate-throwings and even fist-fights are the things that perpetuate it, since they, distasteful as they are, yet offer themselves as compensatory fillips in the miserable humdrum of life immediately beyond the household walls. It is impossible to imagine the failure of a marriage on a deserted island; it is almost as difficult to imagine the failure of a marriage in a settlement of five hundred or a thousand people where there isn't even a movie parlor, where the railroad-crossing man's mother-in-law is the only suspect houri within twenty miles—and where the roads are bad, and where any person who doesn't go to bed with the

cows is given a hard look by the pastor on Sunday morning. It is obvious that a marriage disintegrates less frequently from internal than from external causes. Thousands of married couples who hate the sight of each other and would give their last nickel to mash the breakfast grapefruit against each other's noses stay married nevertheless, and so contribute their mite to the delusion, shared by the less reflective statistician, that monogamy is a success. But the moment a husband lays an eye on a woman who coddles his fancy and causes him to lament the fact that his wife's hair is black instead of yellow, or the moment a wife begins to take too great an interest in football or quotes at the dinner table the charming remark passed to her by her osteopath, that moment does a shyster lawyer somewhere begin figuring on buying a new body for his Ford. In the cities, these deplorable external critiques of monogamous marriage are plenteous; in the rural regions, they hardly exist.

The married yokel looks about him and sees that his married lot is no worse than that of his neighbor's. If his wife needs a good shampoo and garters to keep her cotton stockings from looking like exhausted accordions, so does this neighbor's wife and that neighbor's wife in turn. If the corned beef and cabbage his own wife cooks for him tastes like a valise boiled in wall-paper, the corned beef and cabbage that wafts into his window from the house across the mule path smells as if it would taste the same. If the physical appeal of his spouse is approximately as strong as that of a campaign poster of Ma Ferguson's, so is that of every other squaw in the reservation. So he simply sits back, heaves a sigh and waits patiently for a blonde angel in a white nightie in the hereafter. The city man, on the other hand, suffers a matrimonial doubt almost every time he looks out of the window or walks down the street on a windy day. And so, also, does his wife. For every marriage that is dissolved for statutory

reasons there are ten that begin to wobble toward disintegration simply because a husband quite innocently, but unforgettably, likes the way in which his secretary smiles good-morning at him or because a wife admires the way in which some other fellow of her acquaintance keeps his trousers up without suspenders.

*A Vanished Institution.*—Thirty years ago, there was hardly a well-to-do American home whose parlor was not embellished, in one of its corners, with a glass-front piece of furniture known as a curio cabinet. It usually rested on ten-inch legs and contained three or four shelves whereon reposed, presumably for the edification of the family and its more favored guests, a variety of small articles collected at considerable pains and expense, and theoretically of rare value. One beheld small ivory elephants, little Dresden china shepherdesses, dimes with the Lord's Prayer engraved upon them, Columbian half dollars, Chinese lucky stones, miniature clocks set into walnuts, tiny thermometers affixed to china apricots, small chips of Lookout Mountain, samples of coral, pieces of polished granite, the usual bogus autographs of Abraham Lincoln, silk programmes of the Philadelphia Centennial, cloisonné tea-cups, grandfathers' watch-fobs, miniature ivory skulls, small fourteen-karat gold cats' heads with rhinestone eyes, medals won by mythical great-uncles and an assortment of similar odds and ends ranging all the way from hand-painted medallions of Napoleon Bonaparte to letters from William McKinley, discreetly left in their envelopes, declining invitations to serve as godfather to the families' babies. What has become of these cabinets, and of the opulent treasures they once contained? Not one is visible in the land today. Their place, I venture to guess, has been taken over by phonographs, Dr. Eliot's five-foot shelves, cellarettes, radio sets, Japanese growing-gardens and the complete works of Michael Arlen. Thus has the country gone to hell!

# THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

## *The London Season*

IN Sean O'Casey's "The Plough and the Stars," the British theatre offered its only reason for being during the months commonly known in London as "the season." Aside from this single play, its stage was reduced to the lowest level it has known in years. Omitting a consideration of American plays, as plentiful in the English theatres as sour notes in the Paris opera company, and disregarding Sacha Guitry's "Mozart," there was nothing else of native or colonial confection that showed the slightest quality.

In "The Plough and the Stars," the former Irish plumber has produced a piece of work not less full of defective detail than his "Juno and the Paycock" but, for all that, a drama excellent in its characterizations, rich in an irony that reaches the heights of cruelty, and remarkably powerful in lasting impression. Three or four of the episodes have the stamp of unmistakable dramatic genius; quietly as a cannon on rubber tires O'Casey rolls them toward the footlights and suddenly thunders them into the startled consciousness of his audience. As a surgical picture of the Irish, I know of nothing in drama or literature that comes anywhere near this play. That the Irish merely gave vent to catcalls and missiles when it was shown in Dublin is surprising; that they didn't bomb the theatre is even more surprising. O'Casey takes his people, themselves, their ambitions, their dreams, their pretences and their innermost philosophies, and doesn't leave a green thread in their undershirts when he gets through. His clinical portrait is the most vicious thing in modern dramatic literature, but the viciousness is that of a deep understanding, a profoundly

critical love and a prophylactic hair-brush swatting a turned-up child. His play is long, too long. As in "Juno and the Paycock," he doesn't seem to know exactly when to let go. The technic in both plays is much the same, although it is doubly exaggerated in the one under immediate discussion. O'Casey busies himself leisurely with character for the first thirty-five minutes of each act, and then suddenly in the last five minutes recalls that, after all, a drama should have at least a little drama in it and belatedly dramatizes in a few moments the ambling antecedent business. The break is not too well dovetailed. The effect is of a Dutch concert disconcertingly interrupted by a pistol shot. Again, as in "Juno and the Paycock," the dramatist piles on the final woe to such an extent that a measure of persuasiveness is deleted from his work. His wholesale murder, sudden death and general desolation are Shakespearean in every way but the compensatory one of great poetry. The stage at the conclusion of his tragedy resembles nothing so much as the floor of a slaughterhouse. Those characters who haven't been shot and killed are either dead of tuberculosis, insane, in the last stages of delirium tremens or being led off the stage for no good purpose. Still again, as in the previously produced play, "The Plough and the Stars" overdoes to the point of irritation the vaudeville trick of repeating a word or phrase for humorous ends. It was Pinero, I believe, who once pointed out the limit to which this device could prosperously be used, and then topped it by one. O'Casey tries to top it by ten or fifteen, and fails. He also goes in once again for the mispronunciation of words by way of getting a cheap laugh, as in the instance of *chaos* in "Juno"—and he repeats and