

# CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

*L'ère Majesté.*—It is a characteristic of the American that, try as he will, he can never quite entirely get over the monarchical influences and traditions which persist in his blood from the blood of his forefathers. It is this fact that indubitably causes him to look askance at any one of his various rulers who conducts himself somewhat too democratically, and to view the fellow, however estimable his gifts, as being not all that he should be. The American in his heart, for all his no-saying, likes his governmental magnificoes to be of at least a deceptively aristocratic air and metaphorically to abjure checkered suits for broadcloth and felt hats for topers. A glance at those public office-holders whom he holds in greatest esteem illustrates clearly that that esteem is founded much less upon their competence and merit than upon their approximation to so many stuffed shirts. It is thus that, in his deepest innards, he admires a McKinley above a Grover Cleveland, a Henry Cabot Lodge above a James A. Reed, and a George B. McClellan above a Jimmy Walker.

The aforementioned Jimmy provides us with an excellent clinical example of the case in point. While he is enthusiastically endorsed in all his charming idiosyncrasies and eccentricities by the New York Irish, Jews and other such congenital Dantons and Robespierres, the maniple of Americans still left in his bailiwick have difficulty in digesting him. To them, the circumstance that he is an honest, conscientious and very meritorious mayor is lost sight of in the circumstance that he is an expert at the Black Bottom, a booster of Texas Guinan and a gent who can't be

fooled by charged cider. That a man born with a natural, unaffected, go-to-hell manner who, once elected to office, still conducts himself as simply and humanly as he previously conducted himself, can be so sound a public official as one who comports himself like a Park avenue undertaker is unbelievable to them. A Coolidge who promptly settles a Boston police strike with the manner of a schoolmaster is regarded as a statesman and a diplomat, but a Walker who equally promptly settles a New York subway strike with the manner of a fellow tossing off a cocktail is a dubious politician, and one to be watched closely.

The American snob does not cotton to the Jimmy Walkers because, as I have observed, they are at opposite pole to his notion of what wearers of symbolic purple and ermine are and should be. I say his notion, for the snob's notions are generally second-hand and twice removed from the truth. The truth is that the Jimmy Walkers, strange as it may seem, conduct themselves very much more like actual kings and princes than the semi-callipygan posturers and affected mountebanks in our public offices for whom the American snob reserves his admiration and respect. If Jimmy Walker likes musical shows with pretty girls in them, the King of England likes them no less and hasn't the slightest hesitancy in sitting right down front at them in preference to Ibsen, Strindberg and Granville Barker. If Jimmy Walker likes to stay up at night and shake a leg on the dance floors of cabarets, the Prince of Wales likes to do the same thing. If Jimmy Walker would rather go to the races than to a Y. M. C. A. lecture, so would King

Alfonso. If Jimmy Walker prefers loud clothes to staid apparel, so do Crown Prince Carol of Rumania and Prince Christopher of Greece. If Jimmy Walker knows a lot of actresses and dancers, and is a patron of sport, and once in a while pulls a saucy nifty, and is occasionally exaggeratedly democratic, so was Edward VII. If Jimmy Walker likes his licker when he likes it, so has almost every King, Kaiser, Emperor or Czar who ever lived. If Jimmy Walker once wrote a popular song called "Will You Love Me in December As You Did in May?"—and it was a terrible one—, Frederick the Great wrote one called "Blue Eyes, Fair Eyes" that was just as god-awful. And if too many people familiarly call Jimmy Walker by his first name, too many, it seems to me, do the same thing with Jesus Christ.

*The Spread of Slang.*—The decline of formal speech begins to be evident all over the world. Language appears gradually to be divesting itself of its boiled shirt and spats and to be lounging into *négligé* and *pantoufles*. In the United States, as Polichinelle knows, slang has usurped so great a part of the King's tongue that the use of the latter is today confined chiefly to justices of the Supreme Court, headwaiters, the reverend clergy and professors in those colleges that can't afford good football teams. In England, slang, some of it of American derivation and much more of it home-brew, has worked its wicked will upon high and low, until presently about the only Englishmen who employ scrupulously meticulous discourse are the pushing ex-tradesmen and war profiteers recently elevated to knighthood. Germany, too, has come under the spell, to such an extent, indeed, that the visiting Berlitz graduate who so much as tries to order a simple *Eisbein mit Erbsenpurée und Sauerkohl* or even a *Rehkeule in Sahne mit Apfelmus* has something of a time about it. But even more than England and Germany does France show signs of the new linguistic dispensation, so many signs, in point of fact, that

the French currently find it necessary to get out numerous handbooks explaining the meanings of the countless new incursions into the language, that the nation as a whole may keep abreast of them.

Slang has reached such a degree of popularity in France that one finds it bulking large not only in drama, literature and daily journalism, but in State papers, official proclamations and the utterances of the Republic's high dignitaries, both civil and military. General Pétain's slang, much of it born in the trenches, has been widely quoted and has passed into *l'argot parisien*. Ex-Premier Caillaux often freely translated American slang expressions, such as "a poke in the slats," into his public and private colloquies, and Clemenceau on occasion went in for slang of so Rabelaisian a flavor that it shocked the neighbors. Charles M. Marchand, author of "Modern French Grammar" and "Five Thousand French Idioms," and the compiler of one of the latest dictionaries of modern French slang, including the new *argot des tranchées*, not only calls attention to the spread of slang among the Republic's governmental and military leaders, but also to its spread in literary circles during the last ten and fifteen years. In Anatole France's "L'Anneau d'Améthyste," he points out, there are more than thirty slang expressions; in Paul Bourget's "La Barricade," no less than eighty; in Bernstein's drama, "Israel," more than thirty; and so on. And he observes that philologists may find in the Bibliothèque Nationale many papers, books and pamphlets—among them works by the MM. Sainéan and Galopin, and such journals as *Le Diable au Cor*, *L'Echo des Marmites* and *Le Pépère*—rich in clinical argot value.

The influence of American slang on the French vernacular is unmistakable. "You've got a nerve!," "boob," "goat," "cop," "bonehead," "bum," "hotsie-totsie," "cockeyed," "mug," "a come-on," "lock-up," "topper," "a souse," "dumb-bell," "nag" (for scrubby horse), "coon," "cheese," "nut," (for crazy

person), "simp," "Get the hell out of here!," "kid," "gold-digger," "piker," "mushhead," "wise-cracker," "gab," "boozer," "a clam," "a joiner," "peanut gallery," "it's a pipe," "tightwad," "falseface" (for homely woman), "a licking" (for physical beating), and "stove-pipe" (for silk hat), are a few of the hundreds of American slang words and expressions that have been lifted over more or less bodily into French. Even in the direction of *la langue verte*, or what may be termed sewage slang, the French are accumulating a vocabulary that begins to challenge that of the Americans in stunning virtuosity.

*Sport.*—In the English idea of sport for sport's sake, I take little stock. If I play a game, I play it to win. A man may be a good sportsman if he does not mind losing all the time, but, by the same mark, he is worthless at the sport he enters into and, if he had any sense, would abandon it. The correlated notion that a very bad player gets just as much physical benefit out of a sport as a very good one is also something that I cannot fathom. The very fact that he is a bad player proves that he does not; it shows, in the instance of the average game, that something is physically wrong with him, whether in the way of mind, muscle, heart or what not. The theory that if he keeps on being a bad player his physical ensemble will be automatically and mysteriously bettered is somewhat more soothing than true. The bad player, if he persists at sport, is generally found in due time moaning and

groaning at some rest cure. The best sportsman is the man who plays an honorable game and plays it to the limit. He is out to demonstrate his superior skill and to lick his opponent. Any other view is sheer sentimental buncombe.

*The Q's Have It.*—Back of men's indignation over Prohibition and the closing of the corner saloon, there is a deeper motive than that customarily associated with resentment over the Eighteenth Amendment's invasion of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. This motive has its springs far removed from the mere cerebral centres and is imbedded in the inexorable biological nature of the human race. For with the closing of the corner saloon there came the coincidental closing, to the agony of millions of normal Americans, of readily available *châlets de nécessité*, without which life, for the immediate time being, must be unbearable and death's sting a dispensation welcome. It is thus but natural that, under the existing daily circumstances, with the tortures of Torquemada as naught in comparison, the American still in possession of all his faculties should squirm under the Methodist heel, and should attribute his acute physical suffering to the Methodist hostility to sex in even its most innocent and boyish aspects. What are we to think of a country whose every street corner, due to the enterprise of electric-light, postal and telegraph companies, is consecrated to the comfort of dogs, while American citizens—taxpayers, husbands and fathers—are allowed to shift as best they can?

# THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

## *Sardou with an Umlaut*

ALFRED NEUMANN, with Bruno Frank, Max Brod, Oskar Maria Graf, René Schickele, Frank Thiess, Fritz von Unruh and the more widely known Spengler, is one of the figures in the German literary troupe which has come into conspicuous notice since the outbreak of the late war. His novel, "The Devil," has made him a much discussed personage not only in the malty halls of Herr Kempinski and company, but far across the somewhat drier borders. As in the instance of his colleagues Frank and von Unruh, though less than the last named, the theatre tickles his fancy, and that tickle has taken the form of a play called "The Patriot," about to be revealed to American audiences as I set down these lines. With some of von Unruh's plays, I presume you are familiar. During the war, he turned out at least one that, because of its bass-drum and bugle racket over militarism, worked its way into the cable dispatches. Another, "Bonaparte," is shortly to be published here in an English translation, and a third and earlier one, "Opfergang," will probably not be long in reaching some ambitious little *Lusthaus* up an alley. Frank's play, "Twelve Thousand," a tale of the mercenaries in the American War of the Revolution seen through German eyes, and in my opinion the best of the lot, will also be published in an English translation in a few weeks in "The Theatre of Today" series, into which, plied with voluptuous *Schnapps* by the machiavellian Knopf and craftily persuaded that I was wrong in imagining I was already worked to death, I have found myself injected as editor.

"The Patriot" reaches America in a shipshape translation by Ashley Dukes,

one of the best jobs, in point of fact, that has come to my attention in some time. This Dukes, as any of you who know his comedy, "The Man with a Load of Mischief," are aware, handles the King's tongue with an uncommon facility and grace, and in the present instance, with all due apologies to Neumann, he has actually succeeded in periodically giving the German author's work a measure of the air that it does not quite achieve in the original. That work seeks to reconstruct the scene in Petersburg in 1801, with its conspiracy against the violent weakling, Paul I, that led to his assassination and the placing upon the Czarist throne of Alexander, his son. The enterprise makes for fairish drama of venerable cut and from it emerges, in the character of Pahlen, Governor of Petersburg and the confederacy's brains, a portrait alive and pumping with grease-paint blood. It is in the picture of this Pahlen that Neumann, as the French say, earns his theatrical beefsteak. As a dramatic rôle, it is constituted of the sort of stuff that must make poor Mansfield roll around enviously in his grave, but—more important—as a suave and sure piece of hokum writing it so lifts itself above the rest of the manuscript that all that one remembers of the latter, once its leaves and its stage course are turned, are the march of soldiers' feet below the windows and a couple of pistol shots.

That manuscript, despite or perhaps because of its surface theatrical effectiveness, recalcitrantly suggests our venerable friend, Sardou, though Neumann writes so much better than the late lamented that the comparison may justifiably be a bit odious to him. Yet the ghost of "Diplomacy" lighted by the candelabra of "Tosca" and "Fédora" discernibly moseys in and out