

CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Beliefs of Children.—It is the habit of adults, arriving at the theoretical age of wisdom, to reflect with a mixture of sentiment and drollery upon the beliefs of their youngsterhood, upon the faiths, in retrospect so innocently imaginative, of the world of little children. There was, for instance, the belief in Santa Claus and the reindeers that carried him over the rooftops and the chimney he descended and the stocking his kindly bounty filled. There was the belief that babies were brought by the stork or found under cabbage leaves, and the belief that the lot of a fireman was the happiest on earth. There was the belief that all princesses were very beautiful and that the President of the United States was the wisest man in the United States, and that one's school-teacher represented the sum and substance of human knowledge, and that a hundred dollars was a great fortune. There was the belief, further, in witches and the bogey man and fairies; the belief in the heroic stature of baseball players and policemen; the belief that the blonde bareback rider in the circus was an angel; and the belief that one's father knew everything in the world that was worth knowing.

Meditating, with a pleasurable sadness, upon these fond convictions of the child age, the adult permits that pleasurable sadness gradually to transmute itself into a smile of superior and condescending sagacity. For all the tenderness of his remembrance, he cannot resist a certain self-congratulatory sense of his increased enlightenment and of his closer perception of the realistic truths. And so, no longer believing in Santa Claus, or in the stork that brings babies, or in fairies, he is brought by the higher adult philosophy to

believe that no one is ever really supposed to use the guest towels; that persons whose initials spell a word will be millionaires before they die; that it is bad luck for two people to look into a mirror at the same time; that nine-tenths of the murders committed today are the result of bad booze; that it is disastrous to kill a bee; that cross-eyed folk and hunchbacks are lucky people to have around; that a junta of small bubbles in one's *café au lait* is a sign of approaching wealth; that clothes inadvertently put on inside out indicate that a big surprise is coming to one; that a savage, because he knows nothing, is happier than a civilized man and that, as a consequence, Sitting Bull had it all over Socrates; that spaghetti loses much of its flavor if you cut it, instead of winding it around your fork and taking chances; that a dog knows when people are talking about him; that if you let the moon shine on your pillow, you will walk in your sleep; that drinking milk while standing up promotes a tendency to fat legs; that all painting and sculpture over two hundred years old is good art; that it is a sign of bad weather if smoke comes out of the chimney obliquely instead of straight up; that all the better Europeans always travel second-class, and that the only difference between first and second class is the plush upholstery in the first; that new shoes should be shined immediately after they are bought in order to preserve the leather; that street-car conductors are always short of nickels; that Indian girls are completely passionless; that miscegenation of the white and colored races produces a half-breed possessed of none of the virtues of either race and all the vices of both; that county loan associations are easier to

borrow from than banks; that the souls of the soldiers who got into the late brawl in France were seared by the horrors they encountered, that they are trying to forget the whole business, and that they can be got to talk about it only when in their cups; that women in the colleges are always better English students than the men; that every time the speeches of Hoover were broadcast during the late Presidential campaign, the Irish cops in New York went about disconnecting people's radio sets; that mixing drinks causes one to get spiffed very quickly on half the actual amount of alcohol it ordinarily takes to set one on one's ear; that Mexicans are very poor shots, and that one American division could conquer Mexico in a month; that Dutchmen always wear patches on the seats of their breeches; that if a rifle is fired into the air, the bullet always lands in the next county and kills a cow; that if it weren't for the annual American influx, Europe would be bankrupt; that it is considered advisable to make a wish after tasting the first fruit or first vegetable of the season; that it is the chief aim of caricaturists to make their sitters as hideous as possible; that if a girl falls going up stairs she will be married before the year is out; that if four people shake hands simultaneously with their arms crossing, it is a sign of approaching marriage; that the art of lithography consists of subway cards, advertising posters and art calendars; that a stolen kiss is always much better than the one got free; that it is bad luck to sleep with one's head at the foot of the bed; that a lady bug, on the other hand, is very lucky; that the chili consumed by Mexicans is a very effective germicide and that if they didn't eat great quantities of it, the race would be decimated by disease in a year; that it is a sign of extreme affection on the part of the sender to place a stamp upside down on the envelope; that killing a snake and turning it belly-up on a rail fence is sure to cause rain; that Spanish-American movie audiences always weep when an American

comedian gets crowned with a custard pie; (that Negro blood is extraordinarily potent and that one drop of it in the veins of a family will sooner or later show itself by the production of a genuine blackamoor as inky as the ace of spades); that swimming is good for the female figure; that Pullman porters are great lovers, and that they promptly lose their good-nature if they are called George; that every other building in Paris and Rome was once an old palace; that it is lucky to have a bird fly in at one's window; that an understudy always sits in the wings from the beginning of a performance to the final curtain, waiting impatiently for the star to drop dead; that when a railroad brakeman comes home from a run he always knocks at the front door and then runs to the back of the house with a pistol in his hand; that high-powered Spanish girls are all kept away from men until marriage, but that if they could be got at they would be very ump-ah; that all elderly unmarried women who were alive during the Civil War had soldier-lovers who were slaughtered on the field of battle; that fat people are generally light on their feet and consequently are good dancers; that syndicated news stories are less to be trusted than the articles written for home consumption by members of the local newspaper staffs; that an Englishman will never speak to one in a railway compartment or on a steamer unless one speaks to him first and that he will then reply in monosyllables; that, in war, enemy soldiers are more prurient than the soldiers in the home army; that external applications to the chest will cure pneumonia; that you can tell a college man by looking at him; and that small colored girls begin to contribute toward the rent before they have even learned their A. B. C.'s.

Gros Mots.—The cussing vocabulary of the American, brought face to face with the necessity of discharging itself against a person distasteful to the latter, almost invariably finds its most satisfying expres-

sion in words or phrases of a sexual cast. While it is obviously impossible for me to note these words and phrases in this place, it will take the reader only a moment's reflection to dredge up a comprehensive list of them, and he will recognize at once the truth of the contention. Beginning with the word *bastard*, the catalogue runs up and down the scale of canine genealogy, degeneracy, exotic biological practises and anatomical stock market quotations. And when it abandons terms of a precise sexual nature it will be found to augment itself with words and phrases of an indirect but none the less sufficient association, such as consist in allusions to certain neighborly portions of the anatomy of humans and animals and to certain of their achieved functions.

The Frenchman, on the other hand, finding it necessary to relieve his feelings in a similar situation, seldom finds in his own catalogue of oburgation words and phrases of a kind. A Frenchman and an American, passing fighting words to a third man at one and the same moment, will be observed to cast reflections on that man in terms that are essentially as different as black and white. The American's vituperation will be based upon a sexual allusion of one kind or another; the Frenchman's upon some such thing as the resemblance of the enemy to a blue pig. To call a man a blue pig in France, indeed, is akin to calling an American an exponent of one of the diversions of Encolpius.

Speculating on this dissimilarity in the respective arts of linguistic *casus belli*, it occurs to one that the sexual nature of the American's Eumenidean expression has doubtless developed out of his inborn belief in the evil and wickedness of all sex and his consequent conviction that there is something disgusting and shameful about it. From this inherent belief and conviction there naturally has proceeded the vocab-

ulary of detraction noted, far-fetched and exaggerated, true enough, in some of its departments, but nevertheless grounded patently upon the principle of sexual insult. The Frenchman, on the contrary, being at the opposite pole in his view of sex, has difficulty in thinking of the American's verbal pugnacities as other than funny, just as the American, in turn, has difficulty in seeing anything in the Frenchman's over which to get worked up about. If a Frenchman were to be called a ———, he would merely raise an eyebrow in idle curiosity and silently speculate as to why the American seemed so angry about the whole matter, just as the American, called a *cochon bleu*, would merely smile derisively at the Frenchman and order up two more rounds of corned beef and cabbage.

Pedestal-Pullers.—One of the things one never fails to notice in American criticism is the apparent glee with which the bulk of that criticism hops upon defective work on the part of an established American artist. It seems that the average American critic lies eagerly in wait for an artist not to do as good work as he has previously done or better, but for him to produce something inferior. And when he does, the critic betrays clearly his air of rejoicing. Dreiser, Cabell, Anderson, Hergesheimer, Lewis, O'Neill and a dozen other such men, falling now and then for the moment below the standards they have imposed upon themselves, have thus found themselves treated like knaves and impostors. Where the European critic always wishes for the best in his artists, the American critic gives one the feeling that he is always hoping for the worst. We have no clearer symptom than this of the fundamental self-uncertainty and shabbiness of American criticism and of its vain desire to raise itself to eminence by increasing the number of corpses to stand upon.

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

The American Dramatist

LET this chapter be devoted to a consideration of American dramatists and to an effort to ascertain what place, if any, they presently occupy in the theatrical sun.

That O'Neill is the outstanding figure in the catalogue under discussion is now denied only by such critics as employ the denial, against their honest and better judgment, to lend to their writings that share of fillip which always attaches to a marching out of step. Their insincerity is easily penetrable, for while they eloquently argue that O'Neill is not the outstanding force, they do not tell us who is. With the production this last season of "Dynamo," a very poor piece of work, the hostility toward its author and the skepticism over his hitherto loudly proclaimed talents took on full sail, and we were entertained by an over-night shifting of the critical course. Because he had written a bad play, O'Neill, his antecedent work forgotten, was denounced as an overestimated and even ridiculous dramatist, and it was argued that, since this one play was so bad, doubtless his previous good plays were not really so good as they had previously been thought to be. In this we engaged no novelty, for the tactic is a commonplace one in American criticism, whether literary or dramatic, and familiar to everyone who follows the critical art as it is manœuvred in God's country.

If O'Neill is not the leader among American playwrights, "Dynamo" or no "Dynamo," it is pretty difficult to make out who the leader is. While it is perfectly true that in one or two of his other plays as well as in "Dynamo" he has exposed at times a juvenile indignation, a specious profundity and a method of exaggeration that has

verged perilously on travesty, he has nevertheless written a number of plays of a very definite quality, a number of plays that outdistance any others thus far written by Americans and, whether in his better work or poorer, shown an attitude and an integrity—to say nothing of a body of technical resource—far beyond those of any of his American rivals. The truth about O'Neill is that he is the only American playwright who has what may be called "size." There is something relatively distinguished about even his failures; they sink not trivially but with a certain air of majesty, like a great ship, its flags flying, full of holes. He has no cheapness, even in his worst plays. "The First Man," "Welded" and "Dynamo," for example, are mediocre affairs as drama goes, but in them just the same there is that peculiar thing that marks off even the dismal efforts of a first-rate man from those of a second-rate.

II

With O'Neill in a category apart, we come to the others. Among these, we find actual achievement much less frequently than mere promise. Some of the writers have shown brilliant streaks and have even produced a single play here and there of authentic quality, but they are found to be flash dramatists rather than sustained and have further demonstrated so uneven a purpose that it is hard to deduce their basic dramatic motives. Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings started out, in "What Price Glory?", in fine color but their subsequent collaborations, while not without traces of merit, came nowhere near their first work. Stallings has apparently given up dramatic composition and Anderson,