

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Advance Report On a Different Play

THE plans of mice and producers (no comparative offense implied) gang aft agley, but if they do not gang too far agley you may expect the production of at least one play before the end of the season which should be considerably more stimulating than most of those you have engaged up to the time of writing.

The play in the cards, which should be around by next March, is J. B. Priestley's latest, *They Came To a City*. A group of assorted and bewildered English, so goes the theme, find themselves, they know not why or how, in a strange and distant land and on a walled elevation overlooking a town, the descent into which is barred by a gigantic door of steel and bronze. In the group are several members of the British nobility, a pair of middle-class business executives and the wife of one of them, a bedraggled old woman of the working class, and a bitter girl ditto. There is in the group also a young jack-of-all-trades, vaguely American, who has shipped the seas the world

'round. They are the most of them an aimless lot, their past contentfully routine, their future idly in the hands of fate. Only the girl and young scafarer feel that there should be something else, something better, in store for themselves and these others. The old work-woman sits quietly aside.

The city far below arouses their curiosity, but the great door is interposed. They take stock of one another and of one another's lives and philosophies, and in the stock-taking come to verbal blows. In the midst of their exacerbation, a fanfare is suddenly heard from the city. Peering over the lower wall, now that the light has begun to lift, they take in the view. The city reminds one of the Empire Exhibition at Wembley, which Lady Loxfield allows she found frightfully tiring. And so, variously, the doubtful others, save the young working girl who sees in it possibly something else. And, surprisingly, Lady Loxfield's young daughter too. The old work-woman still sits quietly aside.

The working girl Alice demands of the silent Joe, the seafarer, why he is skeptical. He replies that he has seen places before that looked just as good from a long way off and that made you think you were sailing into Heaven, "but when you got inside 'em — God, they stank!" Sir George and the middle-class executives speculate on the financial, political and other practical aspects of the city's life, their doubts increasing. After all, the world they know is, they agree, a good enough world for them. And then, as suddenly as the fanfare, the great door in the tower begins slowly to open. The light, as if from a new sun, gradually floods the scene. The group decides it may be well to explore and descends into the city, Joe still voicing his skepticism that, like all the other mirages of hope he has seen, it will turn out, for all its surface air of beauty, to be "all ribs and running sores."

II

The second act opens with the return of some of the explorers. The representatives of the nobility and the middle-class, save one, have not been impressed. The city looked all right, but the happiness of its inhabitants struck them as spurious.

And as for its social, political and economic theories — well, while they seemed to work all right and make the people smilingly contented and at peace with each other and the world, they simply couldn't work that way elsewhere. It would be ruinous to the existing order, which, they repeat, has been satisfactory enough for them. Such doctrines as social justice, the equal distribution of wealth, pleasures for one and all, public ownership, no condescending private charities and the like would never do. They wonder what the others will say.

One by one the stragglers return. Alice is enthusiastic; she has seen a vision come true. Joe, also, is deeply impressed; he has seen something, he says, that he never expected to see, something he'd given up all hope of seeing — a real city at last. Mrs. Batley, the old workwoman, steals in, finds the basket she had left behind, and as quietly descends into the city again, pausing only to remark that when she first saw "all them children comin' out o' them fine houses an' all their mothers lookin' so nice an' smilin' an' everything so clean an' pretty, I could 'ave cried," and to confide that "they've given me as nice a bedroom as ever you saw; all to me-self too; first I've ever 'ad all to meself." Stritton, the hesitant mid-

dle-class representative who had lingered behind, comes through the door; what he has seen, he allows, has moved him to some doubts about the old way of things, but his wife indignantly makes him follow her back into the world they came from. And all save Joe and Alice presently follow in their footsteps, glad to return to the life they know and are accustomed to. But where, demands Lady Loxfield, is her young daughter, and finds that the latter has decided to cast her lot with the people of the city.

Again the fanfare of distant trumpets. Joe looks around for Alice, not having observed her disappearance. She had eagerly slipped down into the city again. As he looks around, the great door, to his horror, begins slowly to close. He flings himself against it and, in the nick of time, Alice squeezes through. The door is now shut and the twain have lost all chance to see the city of mankind's dreams again, a city "where people don't work to keep themselves out of the gutter but work because they can see their life growing, where life isn't a dog fight around a dustbin," but something great and big and prideful and happy, where people aren't "passing the time waiting for the undertaker" but savoring of life every hour of the day.

But why, then, Alice wonders, did Joe remain on the tower; why didn't he move before the great door closed? Joe replies that once he had made up his mind and had come out he didn't dare go back. "Why shouldn't you have stayed?" demands Alice.

Joe looks at her, hard. Somebody, he says, has to go back and tell what they have seen and make the doubting world believe what otherwise it might not, though far and wide there are men who want to believe. Somebody, says Joe, *has* to tell it and all these men who hope that there should be not just one such city but ten thousand, where men and women are not slaves to greed, "where nobody carries a whip and nobody rattles a chain," where men may emerge from "the darkness of their caves and feel again the warmth of the sunlight, where they are out and free at last!"

Or, in the words of Whitman, "I dreamt in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole earth. I dreamt that was the new city of Friends."

"Come on, Joe," calls Alice, her hand in his, "let's get going."

And as night settles peacefully over the city below, the fanfare of its trumpets sounds again over the horizon.

III

It is easy to foresee some of the criticisms of the play. The chief one, here and there lodged against it when it was shown in London, will be that the characters merely speak about the city and that the audience should see it and not have to take the characters' word for it. This strikes me as fallacy. It is the argument of critics who do not want drama so much as they want a production. No question of *scène à faire* is involved, since the imagination supplies it very much more satisfactorily than the stage could show it and since, further, any actual presentation of the city would unavoidably minimize the effect of the succeeding act. The drama successfully offers numerous examples of similar refusals to show such scenes. To demand their showing is the province of movie, not drama, critics.

It will also probably be argued in deprecation that the induction to the play suggests that of *Outward Bound*. That it does so superficially is to be granted, but only superficially.

Moreover, the characters here are not dead, save perhaps figura-

tively, but alive. (Furthermore and purely incidentally, the idea of characters not realizing they are dead was not original to the Sutton Vane play but had been employed before in a play by Conan Doyle published many years earlier in the old *Smart Set* and in *The Phantom Legion*, produced in the Playhouse, as I recall, some twenty-five or so years ago.)

There will, too, undoubtedly from the Right Wing be the usual recriminations as to the play's communism. But there seems to me to be far less communism in Priestley's scheme than humanitarianism. His man with the red beard may as well be an implication of Christ as of a red Russian.

That the play may have certain faults, I do not gainsay. But above its faults it rings loud and clear and strong, and in its final passages boasts an eloquence such as has not lately been heard from our stage. It may easily be wrecked by careless casting and over-elaborate production, which Priestley himself cautions against. Yet if it is cast shrewdly and produced simply it should provide an interesting new dramatic evening in a theatre that at present certainly can stand one.

THE most lasting monuments are the paper monuments.

—THOMAS FULLER

DOWN TO EARTH

By ALAN DEVOE

The Beaver

To know how vividly one animal impressed itself upon the consciousness of pioneer America, it is necessary only to look in a gazetteer under "B." There, in row on row of place-names, are Beaver Dam and Beaver Creek and Beaver Falls and Beaver City, Beaver Lake, Beaverkill, Beaver Pond,

Beaver River, Beaver Springs . . . a list that could not be printed on a full page of this magazine.

From the earliest settlement of North America, the beaver fascinated and impressed his beholders. This gigantic gnawer, with an over-all length of nearly four feet and a weight running sometimes to



Beaver

Frank Utpatel