

only. But the final explanation of his success lies in the sympathy which he gave to all his figures.

"The artist should be free from everything like moral prepossession," he wrote once.

This principle may be seen at work throughout his books. There is no judging or sorting of good and bad. Each character is allowed to stand on its merits. The author states facts but does not condemn. Harvey Rolfe in *The Whirlpool*—one of the most attractive figures drawn by Gissing and one of the finest specimens of true manhood that ever captured a reader's heart and fancy—is not treated with more consideration or forbearance than the wretched Harriet Castle in *The Unclassed* or *Our Friend the Charlatan*, the slick Mr. Dyce Lashmar.

Love and art are regarded by this alleged pessimist as the moving principles of life, and only by their pursuit does life get meaning. "Beauty is the solace of

life, and love is the end of being," he says in one place. Humour of the conventional kind he never essayed. Yet he is not incapable of comprehending and appreciating the humour that springs spontaneously out of life, as may be seen in *The Unclassed* when O'Gree and his Sally meet and make love in the mummy room of the British Museum for want of a more appropriate trysting-place.

The day will come, I think, and soon enough, when Gissing will be read and treasured according to his desert. In the meantime the admirers of his art—a growing host—will have to bear in mind the manly words he used in *The Private Papers* in reference to himself:

"The world has done me no injustice. Why should any man who writes, even if he write things immortal, nurse anger at the world's neglect? For the work of man's mind there is one test, and one alone, the judgment of generations yet unborn. If you have written a great book, the world to come will know of it."

Edwin Bjorkman.

DOUBTS OF A DRAMATIC CRITIC.

AFTER reading many pages of dramatic criticism, some of it quite serious and bearing a good French stamp, we are still harassed by doubts as to the limits of the personal equation. Why that air of more than personal certainty, as if taste had a constitution and by-laws, and where is the table of weights and measures by which plays and players are so surely gauged? Many a critic is so sure of his ground that he seems more like a committee framing resolutions than a man writing down what he thinks, and he usually wishes to save or elevate the public, direct, sanctify, and govern it, or hold it on his knee. One of them recently remarked that after labouring in the vineyard for fifteen years without effecting the least improvement in other people's tastes, he had abandoned his didactic mission with a sinking heart. A trained and technical public taster, and yet without a single convert, he now lives as a private person, lonesome but correct. Most critics believe that tech-

nical experience gives them a certain authority, and the worst of their worries is the presumption of discordant and haphazard persons like you and me, who feel that there is a broad zone of dramatic matters where it is unsafe for a minute to take the word of another unless we know his birth, breeding, family history, associations in early life, the books he reads, his manners at table, and the sort of wife he enjoys. What is the foot-pound of gentility and where is the trigonometry of grace, and why take a man's word for the charm of the leading lady unless we know the man? It is delightful to express one's views on these points but preposterous for others to accept them. It is pleasant to argue but hideous to convince, and for our part we should loathe a convert the moment we had made him, as a mere tedious duplicate when one of us was enough. There is no authority on life, and if we find a certain play lifelike, it is due mainly to the way we have been brought up. Our great-grandmother has had more to

do with our criticism than our studious endeavours to be right, and it would be as shocking to find our tastes repeated in an amiable reader as to see our own nose transplanted on the face of some harmless friend.

Current criticism is mainly an effort to speak impersonally on purely personal affairs. In a region of licensed disorder people still ask for a rule. So the stage critic becomes a priest of prejudice, a little Moses on a Sinai of whim, absolute where everything is relative, sure of a right way and a wrong way where either way will send you fast asleep, a specialist in things that do not matter, and a moral guide through nonsense where the deadly sins seem silly and the devil feels too depressed to tempt. Nothing on the stage is so far removed from human nature as the things we read about it, and the world is not a whit more pompous behind footlights than it is when it takes up its pen. That is why we pause here again in a paroxysm of humility to repeat that any commentary of ours is not true for any other person under the sun but reports things as they seem exclusively to our round and artless eyes, that we mean to be a mother to no man, that *sic vos non vobis* is no motto for us but for sheep, bees, pedagogues, and preachers, the Emperor William, the evening newspaper, and the United States Supreme Court.

Principles may be had for the asking, but in spite of the large population of this planet men and women remain to-day the most inaccessible things on it. Plays may be true to every dramatic principle, run like clockwork, have a good idea behind them, fit the audience like an old coat, lack nothing in short that you could give a name to. The playwright may be so clever that you can suggest in him no possible improvement except that he be born again. There are dozens of negatively admirable plays and irreproachable playwrights. They lack only the qualities for which there is no formula to make them Shakespeares, every one. It cannot even be explained what makes the difference between *Whitewashing Julia* by Mr. Jones, and *The Admirable Crichton* by Mr. Barrie. Were we writing its prospectus we could make *Whitewashing Julia* look the better of the two, or at

least the more novel. Mr. Jones takes the proverb, The pot calls the kettle black, and by means of it saves Julia from her enemies, but he departs from dramatic usage by leaving us certain that the pot told the truth. The fact that Julia is not whitewashed and that he lets us see her to a final triumph over worse sinners, who are also less attractive, than herself makes the play essentially plausible and new. Besides that, it is as the critics say "well-built," which means that the playwright has graciously supplied every effect with a cause, believing that the human reason in a debased form may still perdure even in a playgoer.

Therein also the play is unusual. Contrast it for instance with Mr. Carton's *Clean Slate*, an excellent example of good, every-day dramatic merchandise, where the main point is whether the situations are amusing and not how they came about. A nice woman divorces a worthless husband and a nice man divorces a worthless wife. It would be cheerful, thinks Mr. Carton, to make the two good ones pair off, so in comes coincidence like a fairy godmother, and the thing is done. Though at present unaware of each other's identity it seems that they have known and loved each other long ago—coincidence No. 1. It seems also that the worthless husband of the one has been misconducting himself with the worthless wife of the other—coincidence No. 2. And so from many minor surprises, assumed names, and mistaken identities, there results the typical "comedy of manners," derived from nothing ever seen outside the theatre, but shrewdly based on long acquaintance with the audience within. No one can say whether it is comedy half-drunk or farce half-sober, and nobody cares, except the clever people who are always waking up at the wrong time. Several critics fretted because the worthless husband shammed fits which they called a low trick for the benefit of the gallery. But there is a gallery, is there not? And it has just as good a right to its fits as the orchestra stalls to their jovial divorces. Something for everybody is the kindly democratic motto of a good market play. If by chance an idiot boy should stray into the family circle, even he must not be coldly ignored. On this plane let us make no

class distinctions, and above all let us not be invidiously thoughtful. It is the typical comedy; and the typical comedy is the blindman's buff of the understanding, and the clever people are the horrid little wretches who peek. If we join in the game let us regard the rules. If we stand apart as public enlighteners, then let us be consistently vigilant. Up-root the platitude wherever found. Crucify the comic weekly papers. Perish the political speech and the afternoon tea and the latest novel and the woman's hat. Let there be a total silence to be broken only by brilliant remarks. "The existing popular drama of the day," says Mr. Bernard Shaw, "is quite out of the question for cultivated people who are accustomed to use their brains." The existing popular anything is also out of the question. In fact, the population itself is no fit company for the clever people. If they ever saw things in their actual relations, what a lot there would be for them to do!

But *Whitewashing Julia* belongs to another class of plays, because it bears traces of the author's effort to set down what is in his own head instead of what he finds ready-made in the heads of his audience. Mr. Jones meant to be artistic. He wished to handle an old theme in a light, graceful, and novel manner. There is, however, no recipe for that manner, and though the dialogue was strewn with his good intentions we did not see any sign of fulfillment. It is as good a play in outline as any presented this season, and as well acted. Its construction is undeniably good, and the construction of some of Shakespeare's plays is as critics have often proven undeniably bad. But Mr. Jones has a heavy English middle-class way with him and if he steps lightly his joints crack. He has no special pleasure in living, but he is grimly determined that you shall think he knows life. He never knew an individual but he can gather types. Like

the blind man in the Bible, he sees men as trees walking; and he has learned their botanical names. With a good point he is a little too emphatic. His amusing things are a little too prolonged. He is the sort of man about whom you feel instinctively, How like he is to everybody else. It is a deep internal little trouble—no one to blame but Mother Nature—a private matter, a mere accident of birth. For any artistic enterprise to prosper it must receive a subsidy from on high, and Mr. Barrie starts with an unfair advantage. With him "the little gods" coöperated, and so he "found a way." That is the thing that makes the difference—the only thing that really matters—and we defy any man to explain.

These considerations (and a dozen other concrete instances would serve as well or better) should impel critics now and again to lay aside judicial airs and paternal manners and confess that they are quite ignorant of other people's truth, that the best things are always the least definable, that art fails in proportion as we can state its formulas and that the world is a play that would not be worth the seeing if we knew the plot. And when it comes to the conventional drama, the cheese and garlic in the windmill, mere social peanuts and popcorn, his emotions are not very important. They are for the most part harmless little circus feelings which no words in the critical vocabulary seem to fit. And this, as we take it, is a good safe rule for any critic: no matter how many the swans were in his youth, if he would grow old decently he must cultivate a friendly willingness toward a widening circle of geese. Otherwise he will become that saddest of barnyard reformers, the crusader against commonplace, and the world will squeak as it turns on its axis, and he may find himself too serious a person even for the angels when he dies.

Frank Moore Colby.



THE CONSOLATIONS OF A MINOR QUILL DRIVER.

NOTE.—Being the impressions of a magazine contributor who disagrees in many respects with the point of view of Mr. Didier's article, published in the October BOOKMAN. The Editors of the Bookman.

IN his "Confessions of a Literary Quill Driver" (October BOOKMAN) Mr. Didier has added yet another telling item to already existing impeachments of that tyrannical, capricious and indiscriminating middle-man, our enemy the Editor.

Of course I am on Mr. Didier's side. What child of light would be so mean-spirited as to put in a word for an autocratic foe who sits entrenched behind a cohort of malevolent beings known to mythology as Readers, with no more responsible and taxing occupation than to transform your birds of Paradise into homing pigeons? At the same time it does strike me, the least among minor quill drivers, that for a thoroughly unfair man, one only to be moved by personal considerations, the Editor-at-large is singularly willing to let the worm state its case (or perhaps this very willingness is just a cynical display of omnipotence). Nor have I so far received conclusive proof that my many rejected manuscripts are returned unread. To begin with, they often smell of cigarettes; then, although starting with as little pull as any one well could have, by dint of pegging away, I seem to be gaining a modest foothold through the same gradual process by which a beginner creeps up in law, medicine, illustration, every profession, in fact, but marriage or the Church.

In the beginning I knew one editor, and he quite properly felt free to reject whatever I sent him (and habitually did so) until such time as my work suited the pages of his magazine. The strange editors pursued exactly the same course.

The writer's whole position is of its very essence anomalous. He plies a craft which, except with a few rare geniuses, has to be acquired, yet cannot be taught. There is no possible school at which he can graduate and then set out his shingle and practise. He may study English,

literature, syntax, rhetoric—every detail, and still, quite apart from the personal matter of ideas and style, there will be much for him to learn. Consequently he proceeds to learn—on the Editor, and feels badly aggrieved, too, if his teacher does not pay roundly for the privilege.

This may perhaps account for a certain inaccessibility, even irritation in the angle from which magazine people sometimes view beginners. The patience of an editorial staff may be frayed thin by such would-be contributors as a gifted young lady, who bitterly arraigned the entire literary world of North America for despising her *Sonnets*. These, she felt confident far excelled many poems occupying places of honour. She had a book full of them—morocco bound, gilt edged, varying in length from *ten* to *forty-two* lines! This was an extreme case, but the same lack of finish may be found to a less degree in the majority of manuscripts from any green hand. It is not the Editor's function to coach the writer. A piece of goods is offered to him, he sees flaws and refuses it. Not seldom he grows so hostile to mere mechanical blunders as to welcome an academically correct story or poem, merely because it breaks no rules. The possession of this negative merit, I'm convinced, explains the acceptance of many more inferior articles than any theory of personal pull or favouritism.

Indeed, a ticklish state besets the Editor, and every newcomer presents a difficult problem. Whether to risk taking unknown stuff which may not prove popular, or to let a promising young writer be snapped up and annexed by a rival magazine. He remembers the legend that Harpers' once damaged its circulation through printing a certain number of *Trilby*. On the other hand, he is unnerved by the recollection that a short-sighted publisher rejected *David*