

A BARNYARD CHEF-D'OEUVRE*

BY EDWARD CLARK MARSH



OET and pedant, idealist and cynical *boulevardier*, fakir and genius in one—Rostand has fairly won the race for sensational notoriety in the literary sweepstakes. Even D'Annunzio is distanced by the Parisian's latest effort. "The best advertised play in the entire history of the stage"—such is the distinction of *Chantecler*, in spite of memories of Hugo's *Hernani*. No play was ever more widely, more vociferously heralded. No play was ever prepared for production with more cunning, prolonged care. No play was ever talked about by so many persons at once. That in spite of all this *réclame* the actual production was practically a failure only adds to the interest of the case. What is it in the personality of this man, already author of one play of huge popularity and questionable artistic value and of a few other mediocre works, that stimulates in such unique degree the curiosity of the world? Or is there some intrinsic quality in *Chantecler* that justifies, in spite of its failure, the interest it has aroused?

Some part of the truth must be sought in each direction. Rostand himself, with his stained-glass romanticism, his elegance of the "æsthete," his egomania, is a *poseur* of admirably finished technique. A certain amount of cleverness may always be predicated of the *poseur*, since a dull man would never think of attempting to win success by that method, easy as it apparently is. Apparently; for it is not easy to maintain an attitude persistently. But even positive genius for posturing would not account for the attention Rostand has been able to attract to his latest play. It *has* intrinsic qualities which ren-

der it in high degree interesting to the observer of currents in the dramatic stream. Whatever else it has or has not—wit, or fancy, or dramatic action—*Chantecler* has at least a tendency. It is a weather-cock to show which way the wind sets. Realism at last is moribund—that Realism which for so many years has held art in its iron grip. It is just possible that Realism may still come to life once more; but for the present he is dead: witness, in the drama, *Peter Pan* and *The Blue Bird* and *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*, in music the Debussy craze, in the novel Mr. Robert Herrick's latest promulgation, in painting our friends the Marins and Matissees.

So M. Rostand, who to do him justice was never a realist, turns naturally in *Chantecler* to the symbolism which is the latest artistic mode. *Chantecler* is a dramatisation of a La Fontaine fable—but such a fable, and such a dramatisation! La Fontaine, with all his rich worldly wisdom, would be aghast at finding the creatures of his animal world representing, not the fundamental human passions and instincts, but the extreme types of an up-to-date French salon. Our modern fablist satirises, not the universal, but a highly specialised corner of the world. The cleverness and point of the satire within its own narrow limits will be appreciated only by those who have at least an imaginary acquaintance with the *vie de Bohème*. Chantecler himself is the true artist, a creature of innate grandeur of soul, proud, vain, obstinate, but capable of heroic endeavour and a more than heroic devotion to his ideal. Rostand has met successfully the hardest test in the creation of a truly imposing character: his hero is great above all in his weaknesses. The Turkey is a solemnly pretentious philosopher of abysmal density. Capital are the delineations of the doting old hen, Chantecler's foster-mother, with her shreds of proverbial barnyard wisdom; the Pigeon with his *naïf* hero-worship; the flock of empty-headed hens with their chatter; the tuft-

*Chantecler. Par Edmond Rostand. New York: Brentano's.

Chantecler. Authorized translation by Gertrude Hall. New York: Duffield and Company.

The Story of Chantecler. By Marco F. Liberma. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.

hunting Guinea-hen and her troupe of celebrities, the strange cocks who invade Chantecler's yard to challenge his supremacy. But the triumph of character-drawing is the Blackbird: cynical, impudent, smart, the product of an over-refined and over-conscious civilisation. Wholly without illusions, he sees more clearly than any one else the absurdities of the society in which he is placed. He it is who delivers some of the sharpest strokes of the author's Gallic wit, yet he is himself the object of the keenest satire in the play. Of all the crowd of principal characters, the Pheasant-hen is the least interesting. She is no more than the usual pretty, insignificant heroine, in spite of the author's attempt to lift her to a higher plane of individuality.

One may fancy the bewilderment of the "average" audience, the theatre crowd, even of Paris, in the face of this delicately barbed satire on a society about which the plain citizen quite rightly knows next to nothing and cares less. If a second reason for the failure of the play must be sought, it is to be found in its character as drama. There is, to be sure, the spectacle, which must be gorgeous and alluring; but a theatre audience does not live by spectacle alone. Beyond this, there is plenty of talk, and a minimum of action in the downright, theatrical sense. There are in certain scenes, notably that of the Guinea-hen's five-o'clock, much movement and bustle, but the progress of the piece is intellectual, its climax psychic. In vain Rostand shakes out on the stage his whole bag of tricks (and a trickier craftsman the theatre has not known in years). Human as the characters are, the play is artificial. The keynote of artificiality is struck in the very first scene: the theatrical manager rushing out as the curtain begins to rise, stopping it, and painting the scene in a few words of commentary on the sounds that come from the stage. The choruses of bees, of cicadas, of night-birds, of toads, afford lyric opportunities, but clog the drama. The piece is indeed a lyric with an accompaniment of pantomime and intervals of drama.

Rostand's most voluminous American commentator regards it with evident awe as a work of imperishable genius. Mr.

Liberma, who is a professor in Cincinnati University, has written a small book to tell the story of the play (which is of little consequence) and subjects it to the kind of critical analysis that Shakespeare suffers continually at the hands of sophomores. By all odds the most interesting portion of Mr. Liberma's book is that devoted to retelling the eight years' history of the inception, incubation and hatching of this barnyard *chef-d'œuvre*. He recounts all the difficulties to be surmounted in the production, and exonerates Rostand and his co-labourers from the charge of yielding to a sordid motive. The obvious symbolism of the play is explained at length, and some entertaining fragments of criticism are thrown off by the way. For Rostand's poetic gift this friendly commentator has a profound admiration. "Rostand's verse does indeed sway and toss and lull and sing in a way that was never attempted before in the drama of France or elsewhere." He cites Shakespeare to prove that "direct contemporary social satire is well-nigh out of the question in the poetic drama." For the moment he conveniently forgets Molière. An ingenious argument is made to justify Rostand in hampering his actors by depriving them of the use of gesture on a large scale. "The Greek method of presentation of the drama, and the method Rostand would have adopted and in part did adopt, ridiculous as it may seem, has its justification, and this justification lies in the very nature of the workings of the mind. We cannot take in at the same time two things equally well . . . the poetic drama must be presented in a manner to appeal mainly to the ear." That the argument, pressed to its conclusion, would do away with the drama itself seems not to have entered his mind. No, Mr. Liberma is not one to whom the reader will wisely turn for æsthetic guidance, nor will the drama conquer in America through the kind offices of this well-intentioned interpreter.

It will, nevertheless, be well worth seeing, if only for its magnificent scenic possibilities. And for those who enjoy wit with the true Gallic flavour, it is abundantly worth reading. Even to read it, however, in the original is a pleasure reserved for the few. Rostand has written

his play in the dialect of the little, compact society that boasts itself the most cosmopolitan in the world. To follow him with understanding one must be a bit of a philosopher, a reader of history (for his allusions range far afield), and above all a Parisian—not merely a Frenchman, but a *boulevardier* of the moment. The comedies of Aristophanes were, we know, topical enough; the modern Aristophanes descends at times to the intense contemporaneity of one of our own Broadway reviews. His average is, perhaps, somewhere near a just medium between Molière and George M. Cohan.

The task of translation is, it may be guessed, not an easy one, and it is high praise of Miss Gertrude Hall, the author of the English version, to say that she has not altogether failed. She is not of that most select of all literary circles, the translators of positive genius; but she is experienced and capable, she has the right idea of a translator's business, and she is tirelessly patient in seeking out the precise word. The verse-form she has wisely eschewed, save in the lyrical outbursts, where she more than once discovers effects quite as telling as the original. In dealing with the constant word-play, the innumerable puns, she has adopted the only practicable expedient open to the translator, that of abandoning the literal meaning and preserving the spirit of the jest in a free paraphrase. When a butterfly appears in the barnyard, the Turkey remarks with a great show of wisdom:

Ce papillon s'appelle un Mars.

LA POULE BLANCHE: Un Mars! Pourquoi?

LE MERLE: Mais parce qu'il vient en juillet!

Miss Hall ingeniously translates this as follows:

THE TURKEY: That kind is called an Admiral.

THE WHITE HEN: An Admiral, wherefore?

THE BLACKBIRD: Obviously because he is neither a seaman nor a soldier.

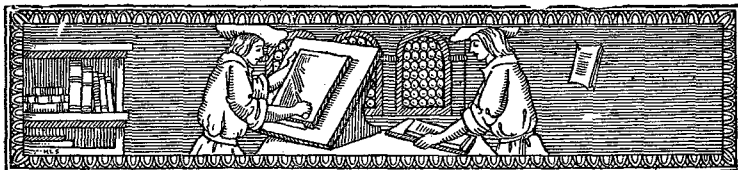
At times her effort to make the meaning perfectly clear leads her into a clumsy redundancy of expression which is itself a partial mistranslation. Thus, the Turkey's rejoinder to one of the Blackbird's sallies,

Comme il sait indiquer que les haines de races
Ne sont jamais, au fond, que des haines de
places!

becomes in the English version

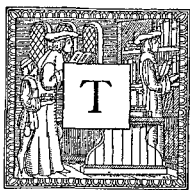
How aptly he conveys that the hatred of peoples is at bottom a question of wanting the other's territory.

There are one or two passages so fantastically twisted that Miss Hall seems fairly to have given up in despair and left them out of her version, and more than once she has been compelled to abandon a pun to its fate. To even the score, there are passages in which the English is even more spirited and amusing than the French. The bustle and confusion of the third act, the eccentricities of the troupe of strange cocks and the mad infatuation of the Guinea-hen, are admirably denoted. Something less than perfect the best translation must always be; but Miss Hall's is emphatically to be recommended as a medium for the reader whose French has a single rusty joint. Through it he will get practically all of the substance and no little of the spirit of a most interesting play.



THE ETERNAL MASCULINE*

BY GRACE ISABEL COLBRON



HE reproach is lifted from us! Not so very far back, as years count in literary evolution, critics of other nations were prone to make what they called the feminisation of American fiction a reason for dealing slightly with us. We were not to be considered seriously, they averred, in that our fiction dealt solely with petty themes which had no relation to the truths of life. And the reason for this, they claimed, was that our novelists looked for money results and found their reading public mainly among the women of the sheltered class, or among mentally undeveloped women in any class.

Some of our own critics, too, with standards sharpened by comparison, thought the same thing, with regret that it should be so. Be it from what cause it may, the change has come. It came gradually, as all real changes must come. The first attempts to give American fiction some relation with Life were made timidly along the line of the sex-problem novel. This has not, never will, perhaps, become sufficiently a point of view of the Anglo-Saxon mind to let such fiction, even at its very best, appeal to more than a limited circle of readers. But the novels of the slowly developing school, which for want of a better term we may call the masculine school in fiction, seem to have struck a note out of which true harmony will grow. It is one-sided as yet, this fiction, touching parts of our national life only, but touching them strongly and really, giving a picture of pulsing humanity that has Truth for chief motive. Masculinity is the hall-mark of this school—masculine interests in the theme, virile masculinity in the author's angle of vi-

**Burning Daylight*. By Jack London. New York: The Macmillan Company.

The Hard Rock Man. By Frederick R. Bechdolt. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.

The Pools of Silence. By H. De Vere Stacpoole. New York: Duffield and Company.

sion. Its excrescences, the dreadful pseudo-Dumas historical novel and the story of adventure that is nothing else, will not be considered when a later estimate of this fiction is made. They will be fortunately forgotten when the better works live.

Something of the force of this class of fiction, something of its popularity too, we owe to the influence of Rudyard Kipling. He taught the American reading public to like a certain candour of narrative, above all to like subjects which had been almost *taboo* before. But his American successors have shown that they can touch the live spots of life without the glamour of imperialistic dreams to help them, without the clash of arms and sway of crowned power. They have seen the conflict in man's life to-day, right here in our own country; the combat with wild nature, her wild beasts and wild men, and the more deadly combat of the cities that we call civilisation. Also the best of this school are now aiming for the development of character as the theme that colours and makes reasonable the capacity to tell a strong story in a strong and vivid way.

Three novels among the newer books, chosen at random from the reviewer's table, show so clearly the good points of this school, also its one-sidedness, that they give an excellent illustration for the foregoing remarks. All three show raw slices of life, unbeautified, unvarnished, seen as part of the life struggles of a strong man among men, seen from the intensely masculine point of view, sincere, straight out from the shoulder. In each the masculine interests predominate. The woman element comes in only at the end, as solace and reward for hard struggle; reward for the man who has shown himself to *be* a man. Sincerity and strength all three have in common. In their widely different backgrounds the central theme is the same, "a man's a man for a' that."

When one writes or speaks of masculinity in American fiction, Jack Lon-