

YOUTH AND AGE IN THE DRAMA

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

THE best American play of the current season, and one of the most pleasing plays of recent years, is *Old Lady 31*, by Rachel Crothers. Miss Crothers, who has long been noted for her mastery of the delicate art of dialogue, has written many plays of promise in the past; but the present piece is easily the best of her productions. It is poignantly beautiful, for the simple reason that it is penetrantly true. Occasionally, in the past, Miss Crothers has shown a regrettable tendency to insist upon her own extremely feminine opinions about life,—as in *A Man's World* and *Ourselves*, to cite a couple of examples; but, in *Old Lady 31*, she shows us life itself, relieved from the intrusion of opinion—and we stand up and remove our hats, as is our custom in the shining presence of reality. It would be futile to deny the success of this remarkable production, either as a work of art or as a popular entertainment. The casual and careless theatre-goer has gone to see it—has wept and laughed, in the wonder-working mood of happy pathos, or pathetic happiness—and has come away from the performance a sadder and a wiser [and, in consequence, of course, a better] man. Yet the interesting fact remains to be discussed that Miss Crothers has succeeded with a subject-matter that, for many years, has been tabooed as dangerous by nearly all of our theatrical purveyors whose habit is to feel the pulse of the public; for the *milieu* of the story is an old ladies' home, and the theme of the play is the psychology of several superannuated people whose active lives have long been past and done with. The appeal of youth to youth—which most of our commercial managers insist upon as a necessary requisite to popularity—is singularly absent. The popular success of *Old Lady 31*—for, whatever be the fortune of the

play in our commercial theatre, there is no denying that everybody who has seen it likes it very much—reopens the entire controversy that concerns the question whether or not the dramatist can ever please the public with an essay in appreciation of old age.

The project of *Old Lady 31* was suggested to Miss Crothers by a novel that was written by the late Louise Forsslund. The story follows the declining fortunes of a pair of aged lovers whose affection for each other has grown "durable from the daily dust of life." Abe and Angie are very old; and they have been constrained to spend the little money they had scraped together, through the savings of a life-time, against "the years that gently bend us to the ground." But, by selling their little cottage and their furniture and nearly all their pitiful and dear belongings, they have raised the hundred dollars that is requisite to secure admittance for Angie to the Old Ladies' Home. Abe, on his part, will have to subsist on charity at the Poor Farm, five miles away. These simple facts are set forth in a prologue, which shows the two old people saying a sad last farewell to the little cottage which has been their home for many years.

The first act discloses the veranda of the Old Ladies' Home, and introduces us to several superannuated women who are gossiping in rocking-chairs concerning the expected arrival of Angie. These women, who no longer have anything to do in life, have all the more to think and feel and say. But something unforeseen attacks and overwhelms them when Angie arrives, accompanied by Abe, who is trundling along her poor belongings on a hand-cart. Abe tries to say good-bye to Angie and to set forth smilingly afoot for the Poor Farm five miles away; but this attempted parting

is more than the old women at the Home can bear to see. When Troy fell, the followers of Æneas emitted the immortal phrase, "We have been Trojans—Troy has been;" and of these faded wrecks in rocking-chairs it might be said, with equal pathos, "They have been women." In this moment, they remember; and—recalling the keen life they used to know—they insist that Abe shall not be parted from his Angie, but shall be received surreptitiously into the Home as Old Lady 31.

The unaccustomed presence of a man in the house stirs all the thirty women to a vivid recollection of those feelings which, in Wordsworth's phrase, may be described as "intimations of immortality." The memory of sex survives its function; and a woman is no less a woman though she may be seventy or eighty or ninety years of age. The immediate effect of the reception of Abe into the Old Ladies' Home is to accelerate the coursing of the blood in all the thirty inmates, so that they become again in spirit the mothers, sisters, wives, and sweethearts that they used to be. Like bees about a flower, they buzz and flutter around the old, old man who sits in an easy-chair among them; and, when he falls ill, they fight among themselves and scratch each other to win the privilege of nursing him. This unusual situation—for it is indeed amazingly uncommon on the stage—is studied by Miss Crothers with a very subtle sense of characterisation.

To Abe at last—who, despite the fact that he is very old, is still a man—there comes a sense that it is very irksome to be mothered by so many women. He is being killed with kindness; and—as men of any age will do at times—he grows extremely tired of the other sex. He desires to go forth and have his fling, afar from the sight of any women; and, to this end, he plans clandestinely to run away with an old crony to spend a glorious evening with the men—the real men—of the Life-Saving Station on the terrible and tingling coast that is besieged eternally by the insidious sea.

This is his idea of a single, great, and last "good time,"—to drink a draught of fellowship with men of mighty sinews whose business it is to fight against the forces of the brutal gods, and not to lose the struggle. He leaves behind a letter for his Angie, to tell her that he is going to the Poor Farm and will never again return to be an inmate of the Old Ladies' Home.

Angie reads that letter. It would perhaps have broken her old heart, if Angie had not known what every woman knows,—that men are merely children and must come home to their mothers before the sun goes down. Abe comes home, of course. He has had his little fling; and he is glad enough to be received again as the adopted son—more dear, indeed, because of his momentary waywardness—of the thirty mother-hearts that have never missed a beat for him in the Old Ladies' Home. Angie is there, among them, like a moon among the stars. She chides him, and scolds him, and puts him to bed,—as in the years that were; and we do not need to be told that "they lived happily forever after."

Two young people—and only two—appear in the fabric of this play:—an ambitious young workman who is poor, and the rich daughter of one of the directors of the Old Ladies' Home. They love each other ardently, and ultimately marry. Their story is adequately plausible, and, moreover, it is prettily told: but, somehow, it does not seem to matter. For once, the interest is focussed so tremendously on people who are ending life that the audience has no attention to devote to people who are merely starting out to test it. These two young lovers—though truthfully and sympathetically drawn—might be deleted from the story without detracting from its interest.

Here, then, we have a play that amuses and enchants the audience because it deals, in the ingratiating mood of sympathetic understanding, with the subject of old age. Yet this is a subject which most of our commercial man-

agers have always been afraid of. It has been their theory that youth must be served in the theatre, and that the heroine, in particular, must always be a young and pretty girl.

A year or more ago, when *The Boomerang* was settling down to its record-making run at the Belasco Theatre, the present writer happened to enjoy an interesting conversation with Mr. Belasco concerning the career of that very slight but delicately modulated comedy. In discussing the basic reasons for the quite extraordinary popularity of this play which he admitted to be fragile, Mr. Belasco said that the public flocked to see *The Boomerang* because it dealt with the emotions of young people, in terms that young people could easily appreciate. He then advanced the interesting theory that the average age of the theatre-going public is only twenty-two or twenty-three, and that, to attract a great deal of money to the box-office, it is necessary first of all to please the girl of twenty-two and the young gentleman whom she allures to take her to the play. If the young folks are satisfied, said Mr. Belasco, the success of any undertaking in the theatre is assured.

Whether or not this diagnosis of the case is justified from the standpoint of commercial calculation [and commercial calculation is a potent factor in dramatic art], it must be stated that the efforts of the dramatist would be extremely stultified if he should feel himself condemned to write forever for girls of twenty-two. There are many interesting and important things in life that an author cannot talk about to young girls, for the simple reason that young girls are not sufficiently experienced to understand them. The reach of the drama should be coextensive with the range of life; and any aspect of the life of man that may be made to seem interesting on the stage should be regarded as available for projection in a play. If a dramatist has created Romeo—whom any girl of twenty-two can understand—must he be forbidden, at some subsequent period of his own development, to create

King Lear? Must the drama deal eternally with youth, and never at all with age?

These questions recall to vivid recollection a conversation with Sir Arthur Pinero which took place in London in the spring of 1910. Two of the very greatest plays of this great master of the dramaturgic art—*The Thunderbolt* and *Mid-Channel*—had recently received a rather scant appreciation from the London public. The present writer suggested that one reason for their lack of popularity was the fact that neither play contained a character that the average frequenters of the theatre could easily and naturally love. "You make them hate the Blundells, you make them hate the Mortimores; and they go away confirmed in the uncritical opinion that you have made them hate the play. They hate the play all the harder because the characters are so real that they cannot get away from them or get around them. You make your auditors uncomfortable by telling them the truth about certain men and women who are very like themselves. They do not like to listen to uncomfortable truths; they decide, therefore, that they do not like to hear you talk; and they tell their friends to stay away." By some such argument, the critic sought to draw an answer from the dramatist.

Sir Arthur's answer may be recorded most clearly in a paraphrase that is freely recomposed from materials that are registered in memory. It ran, in the main, as follows:—"It takes me a year to make a play,—six months to get acquainted with the characters, and six months to build the plot and write the dialogue. All that time, I have to seclude myself from the companionship of friends and live only with the imaginary people of my story. Why should I do this—at my age? I don't need money; I don't desire—if you will pardon me for saying so—to increase the reputation that I have. *Sweet Lavender* made my fortune; *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* made my reputation; and for many years I have not needed to write

plays. Why, then, should I go on? Only because the task is interesting. But it would not be interesting to me unless I were interested personally in the people of my plays. You say the public hate the Blundells and the Mortimores. I do not care. I love those twisted and exacerbated people, because—you see—they interest me. I think I must have what the critics call 'a perverted mind.' [It should be noted that the wise and brilliant playwright said this with a smile.] The only characters that seem to interest me nowadays are people whose lives have somehow gone awry. I like to wonder at the difference between the thing they are and the thing they might have been. That, to me, is the essence of the mystery of life,—the difference between a man as he is and the same man as God intended and desired him to be. But to see this, you must catch your man in the maturity of years. Young people—sweet young people in particular—no longer seem to interest me: I would rather spend my evenings at the Garrick Club than go down to the country and live six months with an imaginary company of people like Sweet Lavender. She was a nice girl; but, after the first hour, there was nothing more to know about her. I now prefer the Mortimores; for there is always something more to find out about people such as they are. You cannot exhaust them in an hour, or six months. Young people are pretty to look at, and theatre-goers like them, as they liked my little Lavender, so many years ago; but, now that I have lived a little longer, I prefer people with a past. A future—that is nothing but a dream: but a past—there you have a soil to delve in."

These words—as has been stated—are merely paraphrased from memory; but the sense is fairly representative of the attitude of mind of our greatest living playwright toward his art. Sir Arthur Pinero might not disagree with Mr. Belasco in the managerial opinion that the safest path toward making money in the theatre is to write about young people for the young; but he him-

self—having made sufficient money with *Sweet Lavender* [the *Boomerang* of thirty years ago]—prefers, for his own pleasure, to write plays about people who have reached a maturity of years.

On the score of art alone—without regard to commerce—a great deal might be said in support of heroes and of heroines that are no longer young. A story of adventure or of love demands an atmosphere of youth; but there are many things in life more interesting to the adult mind than adolescent love or extravagant adventure. The greatest plays are plays of character; and character is nothing more nor less than the sum-total of experience. What a person is, at any moment, is merely a remembered record of all that he has been. To be alive, a person must have lived; and very few people have lived at all at twenty-two.

The greatest artists who have dealt with character have always preferred to depict people in the maturity of years instead of in the hey-day of that superficial beauty which is nothing but a passing bloom upon the face of youth. Consider Rembrandt, for example—the most searching and most deeply penetrant of all the portrait-painters of the world. A Rembrandt portrait is a record of all that life has written on the face of the sitter; and the portrait becomes meaningful almost precisely in proportion to the age of the person whom the artist looked at. Like Velasquez, Rembrandt painted what he saw: but with this difference,—he had to have something to see. The disinterested Spaniard could depict the vacant faces of the royal family with absolute fidelity to fact and yet achieve a triumph of the minor artistry of painting; but Rembrandt, to be interested, had to have a sitter who had lived. If the all but perfect artist of the Netherlands can be regarded ever to have failed at all, he failed in the depiction of young girls. There was nothing in their faces for such a man to see. He was most successful in his portraits of old women and old men; for in these he was allowed to wonder—to quote once more the meaning of Pinero

—at the difference between the thing they were and the thing they might have been. He depicted character as the sum-total of a life-time of experience.

Must the playwright be denied this privilege because the average theatre-goer is a girl of twenty-two? The success of *Old Lady 31* is a salutary fact to bolster up our wishes on the negative side of this contention. Abe and Angie, in this play, are more interesting at seventy or eighty than they ever could have been at twenty, before time and the mellowness of ripe experience had written genial wrinkles on their brows. Rembrandt would have loved to paint a portrait of these two; and Rembrandt, in the heaven of eternal artists, sits very high in the Celestial Rose.

Another point to be considered is that young people, when imagined by the dramatist, must be depicted by young people on the stage. Hence a premium is set on youth and beauty among our actors and, more especially, our actresses. A young girl endowed by nature with a pretty face and fluffy hair is made a star, while many older and less lovely women who know more—much more—about the art of acting are relegated to the ranks. The greatest artist in the world, Madame Yvette Guilbert, said recently in a public address that no woman could act well before she had attained the age of thirty-five. Twenty years of study of such technical details as those of diction and of gesture, and a maturity of personal experience, were absolutely necessary before an actress could be fitted to stand forth before the public as an interpreter of human nature. If this is true—and the solid fact

must be accepted that Madame Guilbert herself is now a finer and a greater artist than she seemed even capable of becoming twenty years ago—the premium that now is set upon the youthful charm of youthful actresses is seen to be a very shallow thing. What boots it, after all, to be a star at twenty-five, unless a woman can become, like Sarah Bernhardt, a central and essential sun at seventy?

Much, of course, might be said, conceivably, on either side. On the one hand, there is Keats, who died at twenty-five; and, on the other hand, there is Ibsen, who did not begin his greatest work till after he was fifty. Those whom the gods love die young or live long, as the chance may fall; and there is no mathematical solution of the mystery. But this much may be said with emphasis, in summing up:—that there is no valid reason why the dramatist should be denied the privilege of dealing with character at its maturity in terms that are intelligible to the adult mind. Youth may be served in the theatre; but old age is still of service, as a theme for the serener contemplation of a ripe intelligence. Despite the imperious and undeniable appeal of youth, there must always be a place upon the boards for the dramatist who says,—

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand

Who saith, "A whole I planned,

Youth shows but half; trust God; see all nor be afraid!"

A REPLY TO MR. HAMILTON

To the Editor of THE BOOKMAN:— May I ask THE BOOKMAN to give space to a brief comment on the strong language in regard to the New York Centre of the Drama League used by Mr. Clayton Hamilton in his article in your November issue entitled "The Public and the Theatre"? Mr. Hamilton says that the League is founded on a "big," a "perfect" idea—namely, that of delivering an audience "in support of any production in the American theatre worthy of the patronage of people of intelligence and taste," but that this idea has been "murdered" by the Play-going Committee of the New York Centre through its failure to choose the right plays for its bulletins. To quote further from Mr. Hamilton, "to destroy a big idea is worse than murdering a child," and for a man of Mr. Hamilton's standing to make so serious an accusation without being sure of his facts would seem to involve him as an accomplice in the crime he denounces.

His immediate charge against the New York Centre is that it did not bulletin *Pierrot the Prodigal*. As a member of the New York Centre, Mr. Hamilton must know that it is the rule of its Play-going Committee *not to notice revivals*, because the League pays for its tickets and cannot afford to do more than attend the new plays. The committee broke this rule, however, in the case of *Pierrot* and issued the following note:

Pierrot the Prodigal (L'Enfant Prodigue), at the Booth Theatre, affords an unusual opportunity to see interesting stage decoration, acting and music united in the service of the delicately artificial art of pantomime. In a cast of general excellence, Paul Clerget stands out as a consummate artist.

Produced by Winthrop Ames and Walter Knight.

Moreover the pantomime has been discussed this month at several of the free

Discussion Centres carried on by the League at branch libraries in different sections of the city, and Pierrot himself (Miss Marjorie Patterson) has graciously consented to speak at the next meeting of the New York Centre.

It is, alas, true that the Drama League has so far not been able to deliver an audience large enough to support a play that it recommends, but that, as Mr. Hamilton points out, is because part of that audience has been alienated from the theatre and must be gradually wooed back to it, and a still larger part has still to be won to it. These are the tasks of the educational activities of the League which constitute an important part of its work. This year, for example, the New York Centre is carrying on an active American Drama campaign. It has arranged an historical exhibition of American Drama at the New York Public Library which is being visited by an average of five hundred people a day. Its Bureau of Advice and Information for amateurs is crowded every Saturday morning. It has opened a Book Shop to encourage the reading and sale of printed plays. A calendar is issued monthly calling attention to interesting dramatic enterprises which do not come within the scope of the regular bulletins. Arrangements are in progress for a series of special matinees, to be produced by Arthur Hopkins and Robert Edmond Jones in December, at which single acts or scenes from typical American plays will be given in chronological sequence, each one in the manner and costumes of the period.

These are some of the activities which keep the office of the League as busy as that of a Broadway manager and which bring in new members daily by the score. If the League *has* been murdered, its dying throes at any rate are singularly violent.

GRACE R. ROBINSON,
Chairman, Play-going Committee.