

Actors and Repertory

IN the current number of the *Century Magazine* Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske is credited by Mr. Alexander Woolcott with a series of vehement assertions concerning the value of the repertory system. They will seem curiously perverse to most students of stage art and history, and doubly strange as proceeding from an actress of her repute and long experience. Were they ascribed to a performer less prominent in the public eye they might well be allowed to pass unheeded and unchallenged; but since, in a purely restricted sense, they express an only too self-evident truth, they may be worth a few minutes' consideration. The repertory idea, she says, is "outworn, needless, impossible, and harmful." To assert this is not proof. In connection with some of her later remarks this array of impetuous adjectives is peculiarly unfortunate. She goes on to argue that this is an age of specialization, and that under the present system—if we understand her aright—actors may attain perfection in the special line to which they are adapted. So it was in the old repertory system, with the significant addition that the player learned to be proficient in several lines instead of one. In other words, he became versatile, an artist, who was a specialist in a dozen different ways. Granville Barker, she is made to declare, showed "the essence and the evil of the repertory theatre when he produced plays for which his company was utterly unfitted." But Mr. Barker's company was a scratch, not a repertory company, as was abundantly proved by the results. In "Androcles" it did well enough, but in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" it failed egregiously, because it could not embody the spirit or voice the music of the text. Neither Mr. Barker nor his players had been properly schooled.

Does Mrs. Fiske really suppose that a repertory theatre can, in these days, be formed on the instant? At the stroke of a millionaire's wand? There was a time when this could have been done, when it would have been possible to collect a body of trained actors, with mastery of cultivated speech and varied illustrative action, from every point of the compass, but that ended a quarter of a century ago. She seems to think that the New Theatre Company was a repertory company just because it proposed to become one. That enterprise, so rich in promise, collapsed mainly for the reason that the idea of the true stock company, which means a coöperative body of players trained in all the requirements of miscellaneous drama, was, unhappily, ignored. The company ought to have been selected and set to work on the proposed programme for two or three years before the theatre was opened.

Nothing could be unluckier, for Mrs. Fiske's argument, than the reference to Irving's famous London Lyceum Company, which, she says, was composed of specialists. Here the fact is true, but the implication disingenuous. Specialists, in various directions, many of them, including Irving himself, they undoubtedly were, but how did they become such? All of them were the products of the thorough schooling they had received in these same needless, impossible, and harmful stock companies. Where are their equals to be found to-day? And why are they non-existent? "Janaushek," she cries, "was the last of a race of giants." Why are there no more of them? Whence did they spring, if not from the competitive stock companies, the only practical schools of acting? A. M. Palmer and Augustin

Daly, she avers, often approached the ideal. That is true. Palmer triumphed because he never ventured out of the field in which his players were skilled workers. Daly put his "specialists" into poetic drama and demonstrated their utter inadequacy. Out of their narrow boundaries, transferred into realms of imagination from those of mimetic realism, they were impotent in speech and action. "No single company," says Mrs. Fiske, "even though it had years and years in which to prepare, could give five entirely different plays and give them all properly." Has she ever heard of Sadler's Wells? Even now, she says truly, good modern plays are often ruined by bad acting.

She suggests that the repertory system seeks to "educate the actor at the expense of the public and dramatic literature." That can only refer to the endowed theatre. Otherwise it would imply an extraordinary misconception of the real functions of the theatre. What profit to the public, or to literature, can there be in uneducated actors, without a glimmering of the higher beauties of the art which they profess? The number of our educated actors, except in a few special lines of purely contemporary and comparatively small artistic interest, is diminishing. Because of this condition the great mass of literary drama upon which the chief artistic claims of the theatre are dependent, is banished from the stage. In modern plays the best work is by actors who had their early training in repertory. The theatre must inevitably be progressive, catholic, and comprehensive. It must have a body of skilled professional artists, in the fullest meaning of the phrase, such as the competitive repertory system, embracing every class of drama, once provided. If there is any other way, it has not yet been discovered.

A Symbol of Belgium

EMILE VERHAEREN'S tragic death is symbolic of his country's agony. While the German trains were carrying tens of thousands of Belgian workers into slavery, sapping the nation of its last fund of strength, another train, somewhere in France, crushed under its wheels the life and the song of its greatest poet, who, Fleming by birth and temperament and Walloon by the language of his verse, stood for the unity of the Belgian nation. "Les Ailes Rouges de la Guerre" is the title of his latest book of poetry, poems inspired by the war and the passions it had stirred in this fiery soul, and it seems as if, by his sudden death, his people had lost its voice to cry out to the world the unutterable woe of serfdom. He was, all his life, the voice of the oppressed. There is among "Les Flambeaux noirs," published twenty years ago, a poem called "La Révolte," describing the lurid spectacle of a town aflame with riot and rebellion:

Towards a far off town of revolt and tolling bells,
Where shines the naked blade of the guillotine,
My heart goes out, in a sudden mad desire.

The dull drums of many days
Of silenced rage and of tempest,
Beat the charge in the people's heads.

Those to whom is left
No other hope than is their despair
Have descended out of their silence.

It is the hour in which the mad,
The beggars and the deracinated
Uplift their pride in life.

Thus he imagined the uprising of the disinherited, the pariahs, the oppressed against their oppressors, of the slaves of labor against their masters. And now that the hour has come for his voice to utter a whole nation's despair, for his verse to beat the charge against the powers of despotism, death has silenced him and robbed his people of expression—

Ceux qui ne peuvent plus avoir
D'espoir que dans leur désespoir.

To utter that unspeakable woe requires a poet's impassioned voice. For a hundred times more horrible than the sad fate of workers exploited by a merciless sweating system is this wholesale enslavement of a brave and harmless nation, whose only crime was the defence of its integrity.

The Dutch feel personally concerned in this disgusting affair, as they let thousands of these men who are now deported to Germany return to their Belgian homes, trusting to the official promise of the German authorities in Brussels and Antwerp that "there would be no question of Belgians being deported to Germany or compelled to serve in the German army." The Dutch press has published, in facsimile, the "Bekanntmachung" of October 18, 1914, in which this promise is made by the municipal authorities of Antwerp, "mit Genehmigung der deutschen Militärbehörden." And on the previous day, the Burgomaster of Rotterdam informed the Belgian refugees that "the Netherlands Government and the German military authorities have come to a satisfactory agreement as to the return of Belgian refugees to their homesteads, whether in Antwerp or in any other part of Belgium. The Burgomaster invites all refugees to return to their country, whose interest will be served by a speedy resumption of the normal state of affairs." And on that same day, October 17, 1914, the Netherlands Consul-General at Antwerp was authorized by the Imperial Governor of the city of Antwerp, Freiherr von Huene, to publish "the very assuring declaration that His Excellency will strictly conform to the Hague Convention," and "that the German authorities have no intention to carry any one to Germany who returns to his home." A week later *Het Handelsblad*, of Amsterdam, contained an article by Professor De Louter, one of our best authorities on international law, reminding the Dutch of the danger the Netherlands neutrality would run if they thwarted or balked the attempts of the German Government at urging the Belgian population to return to their homes.

Thus assured by German promises, and reminded of their duty as neutrals by their own jurists, the Hollanders encouraged their Belgian guests to follow the official call. Their return was the prelude to the tragedy whose final act is now performed before the horror-stricken audience of the world. Its first act was the compulsion of factory labor for military purposes. On October 12, 1915, punishments were inflicted on those factories that refused to obey. Still later, the corporations were forbidden to give relief to the poor who did not work in the factories for the German army. And now those victims of Kultur, who, serfs though they were, had still the comfort left to them of living in their own homes, are driven in large herds to unknown destinies of slavery. The poet who went to his mystic destiny from which there is no return left us the question and the prophecy which, in these lines of "La Révolte," sound like a terrible judgment upon the doers of this gigantic crime:

Dites, quoi donc s'entend venir
Sur les chemins de l'avenir
De si tranquillement terrible?

La haine du monde est dans l'air
Et des poings pour saisir l'éclair
Sont tendus vers les nuées.

A. J. BARNOUW.

The Hague, December 10.

The Liberal Leader

THAT a Coalition Government should collapse in the second year of its existence is not a matter for marvel. Coalition governments are born with the seeds of a fatal disease in their constitution. That the latest should have lived so long is an added tribute to the adroit management of its chief. The wonder is that in process of reconstruction it is he who is left out in the cold. Less than a month ago, Mr. Asquith appeared impregnable in the possession of power and office. Personal experience extending over nearly half a century testifies that none of his predecessors in the leadership of the House of Commons attained the full measure of his ascendancy. Gladstone, Disraeli, Stafford Northcote, Harcourt, Campbell-Bannerman, and Arthur Balfour were in degree supported by the loyal action of their party. Mr. Asquith gradually won, and till near the end maintained the good will of the Opposition. He captured even the Irish Nationalist members who over a period of thirty years systematically obstructed public business and stubbornly fought the Government of the day under whatsoever colors it was mustered. For the last ten years, so far as the Irish Nationalists are concerned, peace has reigned at Westminster.

This abnormal state of things was due to inbred courtesy, tireless patience, and singular dexterity in getting out of tight places. During two years of the war, Mr. Asquith tightened his hold upon the admiration and esteem of the House, its feeling bordering upon personal affection, by a series of speeches which in point of moving eloquence will stand comparison with any in the long record of Parliament. When he first undertook the Premiership, his manner was marked by a certain reserve, mistaken at the time for constitutional frigidity. It was really shyness, gradually overcome as he more firmly felt his feet in the position to which he had been called. Disclosure of his real nature was made before a surprised audience when, in one passage of his speech lamenting the death of his friend and predecessor, Campbell-Bannerman, a faltering voice and tear-dimmed eyes threatened breakdown. His speeches on the war, whether delivered in Parliament or in the country—opening with the clarion note of declaration of war against Germany when, trampling on solemn treaties, her armies marched over the body of Belgium on their way to Paris—reached the highest range of eloquence modelled on the supreme types of simplicity and sincerity.

One charm of his Parliamentary speeches was their comparative brevity. Rarely did they exceed twenty minutes in delivery. When completed, it was felt no word or sentence that might have added to their cogency was omitted.

This habit of verbal condensation was brightly displayed at Question Time. It frequently happened that a score of questions on the paper were addressed to the Prime Minister chiefly by the class of member awake to the certainty