

## Mainly Paralysis

*The Shadow, a play in three acts, by Dario Niccodemi and Michael Morton, first presented at the Empire Theatre, New York, January 25, 1915.*

WHY, the humane reader sometimes inquires, does the critic dwell on things he dislikes and aim so venomously to be destructive? If a play is weak or clumsy or dull, why does not the critic ignore it? What is to be gained by destructive criticism? If it is impossible to praise a play, why say anything at all?

After witnessing "The Shadow," I repeat that query, why say anything at all? Clumsy and dull, it is one of those plays which not only should not but probably cannot survive. Why not leave it alone, and find something else more worthy of a noble and receptive spirit?

For an answer to this puzzle one may go to the body itself. Sad would be the body in which the fratricidal germs were victorious, but equally sad would it be if it had no destructive agents at all. The destroying agent may not inspire the loftiest feelings, but in spite of his humble character he is an indispensable servant of progress. It is characteristic of the pawky Scotch that they identify their urban civilization with their phagocytic activities. In that laconic masterpiece, the Scotch census report, the people are divided into two groups, those who live in the area that is scavenged and those who live in the area that isn't. Nature does the work in the rural area, but in the urban area the work devolves on man. In the region of drama, so short is life and so limited the human faculties, it would be impossible to thrive if selection were merely left to nature. If the critic acts as a phagocyte, it is in the pious interests of an organism that would otherwise be poisonously crammed.

On Miss Ethel Barrymore's account, "The Shadow" excites curiosity. It may be unfair to suppose that because Miss Barrymore has been charming in previous plays she will also be charming in "The Shadow." It may be unreasonable to expect that because she has so often played in attractive dramas this drama will be attractive as well. But unfair and unreasonable though it be, the fact that Miss Barrymore is presented in "The Shadow" creates a curiosity which nothing but a personal impression can satisfy. To derive that impression from the play itself is the natural impulse of the curious. But in the case of "The Shadow" it is an impulse hardly worth gratifying. Personally, I should not have been happy till I saw it. But having seen it, I could no more recommend it to a friend than I could sell to a trustful widow my beautifully printed share in Western Rands.

Partly in deed, partly in word, "The Shadow" is unfit for consumption. Given that the characters live in the beautiful but decadent capital of France, we are willing to admit that the situation is credible. The establishment to which we are introduced is that of a childless married couple, Gerard and Berthe Tregnier. When Gerard married Berthe, fifteen years before we meet them, he was starting on his career as a painter and authority on art. In those fifteen years he had attained reputation and success. Devoting ten years to a work on the renaissance, he also developed as a painter, and stood in line to become general curator of the museums of France. A pundit in the world of art, his home life had been perfectly happy until, after nine

valid. At first spending endless time and money in trying to have her cured, Tregnier eventually came to realize that, so far as love was concerned, he had left the land of honey and was setting out with her on an endless journey through a tedious and profitless desert. Deny it as he would, the creature whom he had loved sexually was dead. On that side he had become a widower. To the creature who survived he felt and gave continuous devotion, but after a time the emotions that she had ceased to employ began once more to be active, and found for their object a friend known to both, Mme. Helene Preville.

It is here that the drama begins to puzzle one. If the lines mean anything, there is nothing in Mme. Tregnier's situation to justify her husband's assuming that she had ceased to exist as a mate. It is true that she had lost the use of her arms and legs, but, sitting in her invalid chair, the one desire that consumed her was the desire to be restored to health in order to satisfy her husband. That this confidence should be imparted to the audience rather than to the husband is characteristic of the theatre, but it rather damages our faith in the necessary supposition that Berthe and Gerard had ever been really at one. That physical paralysis in the woman could cause emotional paralysis in the man is certainly conceivable, but it is a point that the dramatist assumes too easily. There is an unflattering contrast between the death of Gerard's affections and the extreme liveliness of his wife's. It suggests that Gerard liquidated rather too readily a relation which was mortgaged by disease.

But if the dramatist failed to provide excuses for the unfaithful husband, Miss Barrymore came nobly to his rescue. Unable to demonstrate for us the whole course of Berthe's disease, she confined herself to a summary of its results, and these were certainly colossal. If her behavior under our observation was typical, it may be roughly computed that in six years Berthe wept for 35,040 solid hours, producing on an average five lachrymal tons a year. She spoke and acted as if she were "paralyzed" in a sense irreverently colloquial. Piningly querulous and shrilly hysterical, she forced one to believe that between paralysis and chronic alcoholism there is very little to choose.

Intelligent as Miss Barrymore is, I cannot believe that the dramatist wished Berthe to be the neurotic monstrosity that she so gratingly portrays. Judging by the lines and by the sound performance of Mr. Bruce McRae as the husband, it seems far more likely that the dramatist intended Berthe to be a pathetic invalid, and that it was not in hysteria but in high emotion that she invited the Lord to give her back her disease when she found her husband's baby by the other woman in her husband's studio. Certainly it is with the idea of affecting us sentimentally that Berthe ends with the melting words, "In life true happiness often lies in tears." It was perhaps a genuine attempt to give validity to the drama that led Miss Barrymore to make the paralytic so grotesquely emotional. But the grotesqueness rather than the emotion is what comes through. It is, in its way, impressive, but it is impressive in the same way that the noise of a nail scratched on glass is impressive. It makes our flesh creep, but our flesh creeps because our nerves are unpleasantly jarred, not because our blood runs cold. "The Shadow" is strong only in the sense that an odor is strong. We wince, but for the wrong reasons. And our sympathy is not won by Miss Barrymore's copious weep-

## Books and Things

DUMAS fils seemed shockingly naturalistic to some of his contemporaries. The trivial lifelikeness of his dialogue revolted them. Remembering this, nowadays, we smile. Listen to Montaignin, in the last act of "Monsieur Alphonse": "O cœur humain, changeant comme la mer, profond comme le ciel, mystérieux comme l'infini! (Tendant la main à madame Montaignin.) Ma femme! (A madame Guichard.) Mon amie!" Contrast this with an act-ending from Galsworthy's "Eldest Son," written in 1909. Freda, the game-keeper's daughter, has been telling Bill Cheshire, the baronet's son, that they are going to have a child. Bill walks to the fireplace and grips the mantelpiece. Then he says, "By Jove! This is —!" and the curtain falls. Such a contrast measures the change in our notions of naturalistic dialogue. Dumas outrages these notions in other ways, by the prevalence of his wit, by the brilliant, orderly, declamatory speeches—the most famous being the *pêches à quinze sous* tirade in "Le Demi-Monde"—in which his *raisonneurs* deliver their lectures upon what Dumas means.

Perhaps no very great wit could have self-denial enough to achieve what we nowadays understand by naturalistic technique. It is certain, however, that if he did succeed in becoming a naturalistic dramatist he would let only a little wit into his plays. He would be as shy of it as he is of coincidences, eavesdroppings, asides and soliloquies. Augier is not afraid of asides. Maître Guérin, in a scene with Cécile, says all this to himself: "Diantre, son premier mot va donner l'éveil à mademoiselle Francine, qui, une fois au courant de l'affaire, lui vendra Valtaneuse cent cinquante ou deux cent mille francs, et remboursera Brenu. J'en ai trop dit . . . ou pas assez." He was right the first time, from the 1915 point of view. In Ibsen's later prose plays there are no asides. How many soliloquies are there in Ibsen? Very few. Hedda Gabler, while she is burning Lövborg's manuscript, says only a few words: "I am burning your child, Thea, your child and Ejlert Lövborg's.—Now I am burning the child." In "Ghosts," after Regina has bedeviled Pastor Manders, and then left him alone, he goes to the window, puts his hands behind his back, looks into the garden, turns, walks to the table, and reads to himself the titles of a few of Mrs. Alving's free-thinking books. All he says is, "Hm—so!"

These rules are all negative. Mere obedience to them wins as much lifelikeness as can be won by avoidances, and no more. A play might be written which observed them all, dealt with life on another planet, and sounded here below like fantastic nonsense. A play which disregards them all, which is full of asides and soliloquies and witty lectures, may have a profound meaning immediately applicable to your life and mine. In practice, however, we find that many moderns do follow these rules pretty closely. The greatest modern playwright, Ibsen, took no end of pains to make his speech sound everydayish. He even tried to differentiate the tone of dialogue supposed to be spoken in the morning from the tone of dialogue supposed to be spoken at night. A nicer ear than mine is needed to estimate the degree of his success, and also some knowledge of Norwegian. Ibsen took great pains, too, to keep himself and his opinions from expressing themselves directly in his plays. "There is not in the whole book," he wrote of "Ghosts," "a single opinion, a single utterance,

reader that he was witnessing something real. Now, nothing would more effectually prevent such an impression than the insertion of the author's private opinions in the dialogue."

Ibsen sought everyday lifelikeness. That is why part of his technique is naturalistic. But it has other parts which are not naturalistic at all. In everyday life people don't keep talking, like Nora, of "the miracle"; or like Hedda, of "vine-leaves" in somebody's hair; or like Alfred Allmers, of Rita's "gold, and green forests," of going "up to the peaks and the great waste places." Such refrains or *leitmotifs* do not sound through real life. As for symbols, people with eyes to see do see them now and then, but they don't see such symbols-of-all-work as the wounded wild duck which does so much adumbrating in the play. An action in everyday life is seldom illuminated by a symmetrically contrasting minor action, as the action of "A Doll's House" is illuminated by the Krogstadt-Mrs. Linden story, or the action of "The Wild Duck" by the story of old Werle and Frau Sörby. In "The Wild Duck" again, as Alfred Kerr has pointed out, the function of each character is assigned to him with mathematical exactness. Hjalmar is the self-deceiver, Gina the naïve liar, Gregers the lie-destroyer, Relling the lie-preserver, Frau Sörby the woman who makes truth-telling pay.

In at least one other respect Ibsen's technique is not naturalistic. He takes a long stretch of the past, as I have read somewhere, or perhaps written, and folds it over into the present. He does not bring us acquainted with this past by expository recitals. His characters let it out bit by bit. Ibsen is so cunning a contriver that these disclosures seem quite natural and casual, although in fact each bit of disclosure is timed to the exact moment when it matters most, makes most difference, changes most significantly our attitude toward his characters or their relation to one another. Nothing of the sort happens in everyday life, where observation, if it is to be so richly rewarded, requires weeks or months, sometimes years. What we learn so quickly about other people, in everyday life, we mostly learn by being told. Yet on Ibsen's stage, he being the most inordinately skilful technician among great dramatists, the bit-by-bit self-revelations into which he betrays his characters seem far more natural than Paul Hervieu's concentrated explanations, although we hear such things every day.

This last consideration leads me to wonder whether some of these rules are not a good deal too absolute. Words that actual men and women use, sentences they might actually frame, these are the naturalistic dramatist's medium. Life suggests scenes to him. Conceivably he may find in life, once in a long while, scenes he can put unaltered on the stage. Yet nothing would sound less lifelike as a whole than a play which reproduced the irrelevancies, the incoherencies, the lack of order, of suspense and of progress, which mark any two real hours. Only part of a naturalistic dramatist's technique is explained by his desire to give his plays as close a likeness as he can to everyday life. His technique has other parts, due to the necessity he is under of stopping short of phonography. He may start with a determination to change everyday life no more than he must if his work is to be recognizable as a play. But why mayn't he equally well start with the determination to change everyday life as much as he can without