

Sweetness Without Light

Daddy Long-Legs, a comedy in four acts, by Jean Webster. Presented at the Gaiety Theatre, New York, September 14, 1914.

AMONG the managerial triumphs of 1914-15, "Daddy Long-Legs" is conspicuous. People do not precisely rave over it, nor is the run on it so great that you cannot procure a seat without resorting to corrupt practices. But there is no doubt that public response to it is ample, genuine and free. It began by succeeding as a serial. It has had two hundred performances in New York alone. Its audiences give every sign that they enjoy it. Men weep at it, and the number of laughs must tickle the managerial gizzard. The star, Miss Ruth Chatterton, provokes exclamatory praise. It is, in brief, a representative popular comedy.

In government the voice of the people is the voice of God. In the interest of the critical, it is worth inquiring how godlike is that same voice in the theatre. How does "Daddy Long-Legs" satisfy the critical, and if it fails to satisfy them, are they wise in their own conceit? Is it out of priggishness that the critical pronounce the popular to be the inferior? Are they like Antoinette, lifting supercilious eyebrows and languidly marveling why the populace does not subsist on cake, or are they simply perceptive, seeing through a fraud that deludes a public more susceptible than themselves? The inquiry is important, for while it may be unwelcome to be identified with the groundling, it is no less unwelcome to be identified with the snob.

"Daddy Long-Legs" is a variation on the theme of Cinderella. It is the romance of an orphan in blue gingham to whom an elderly bachelor plays angel. For her the night is dark and drear and she is far from happiness, but he, the benign one who hides his benefactions under the name of John Smith, leads her on with kindly light, and after she follows the road courageously, he reveals himself to her, and their grateful hearts unite in love.

"Daddy Long-Legs" starts by making the plight of Cinderella quite adequately dark and drear. The first scene has actuality. It introduces us to a cheerless orphan asylum of which the matron is odious—sweet and ingratiating with the unimaginative trustees, but arbitrary, mean and cruel with the children. The oldest of these unfortunates is Judy, our heroine. The little mother of her wistful, pallid juniors, she is a William Tell in the face of tyrant authority; and when the shrewish matron reproves her before the angry trustees whose monthly lunch has been spoiled by the mixture of salt with their sugar, she flames out against the whole institution, winning the disapproval of the rigid visitants, but the silent sympathy of one Jervis Pendleton, the grey-haired bachelor trustee.

Prompted by his colleague, the good Miss Pritchard, Jervis provides Judy with enough money to send her to college. She does not know her anonymous savior, but christens him Daddy Long-Legs from his shadow in the lights of the motor that take him away. We next see her, a year later, a transformed undergraduate in a fashionable pink frock, rooming with Jervis's niece. She is the happiest girl in the world, except for memories of the orphan asylum, and when the good Miss Pritchard and the unsuspected Jervis come to see her, he is deeply attracted by her insouciance, her wit and her worth. Incidentally, good elderly soul, he is jealous of the bright young Princetonian who whisks Judy away to the "prom."

of Jervis Pendleton, she still speaks lovingly of the mysterious fatherly Daddy Long-Legs. But her soul is troubled. Everyone imagines her to be a lady, she has concealed her orphan past. And when Jervis Pendleton confesses his love for her, she is unable to reveal the gnawing truth. He goes away, believing it is the brash Princetonian who has won Judy. Judy knows better, and so do the audience, but the tragedy would have been final if Judy had not decided to take her trouble to Daddy Long-Legs in person. Guided by the good Miss Pritchard to the home of Jervis Pendleton, now laid low with a gunshot wound, Judy discovers that the benefactor she has adored and the man she loves are one. The truth at first is blinding. The audience trembles lest another slip occur, but wide arms clasp yielding Judy, and the heart plays Home, Sweet Home.

Admirably Mr. Charles Waldron manages his part as the benevolent Daddy, and Mrs. Jacques Martin is delightfully creative as his old nurse. But the chief object of the play is to feed up Judy as the emotional Strassburg goose, and for that reason the performance of Miss Ruth Chatterton is the index both to its worth and its popularity. If the public is right, Miss Chatterton must be appealing, and if she isn't appealing there is a flaw in popular taste. The general verdict, on the whole, is that she is adorable, a "sweet, peachy actress." Her mournfulness, her soulful tones, her rolled eyes and crooked smile give the majority what they want. What they want, therefore, is not a real orphan working out a real destiny, but a fiction-fed actress posing for fiction-fed minds. They really like sentimentalism sentimentally interpreted, turnip smothered in sugar offered as an apple of life.

Where the critic diverges from the public is on this notion of sentiment. It is a natural human longing to see worth rewarded and aching comforted and starvation fed. But where the public is willing to see real hardships solaced adventitiously, the critic is only ironically amused. Both agree that after a rough journey it is pleasant to slip into a warm bath. But in "Daddy Long-Legs" the bath is introduced too automatically. It can only appeal to those chafed pilgrims who grasp at any vision of relaxation, or to those magnanimous auditors whose hearts are tubs for the tired.

In the critical view, Judy is never a personality. She is a devotional fly embraced by a benevolent Daddy Long-Legs. But it is exactly this picture of voluptuous dependence that seems romantic to the uncritical many. They know in their hearts that life is not a fairyland, but they revel in the make-believe. Living lives emotionally impoverished, performing dull chores or engaged in routine jobs, they sink back in blissfulness at this version of a dream come true. Coolly examined, the story of "Daddy Long-Legs" is falsification throughout. By every theatrical device sympathy is worked up for Judy, and by every trick and dodge Miss Chatterton avails of this mood. To the fastidious it is disgusting—as disgusting as the use of sugar for the disguise of a venerable cooking egg. But in monotonous lives there is a great craving for sweetness, and so, since the disguise is plausible, the general public is glad to be cheated to indulge in the perversion of life. It does not, however, prove that the public is wrong to desire sweetness. It only proves that it is always willing, in art as in religion, to behave like a child and to believe that life is, after all, a cake which may be eaten without being earned.

But children enjoy it? My children have no such illu-

Books and Things

BROWN: Assuming, as a matter of routine courtesy, that there is something in what you say, I still don't see how it's practicable to keep all militarist literature out of young people's hands. Take, for example, this book I've been reading lately. It is called "Hymnal According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America." An elderly edition, printed in England, I observe with regret. It is a militarist publication. Glorious is the war to which the Great King goes, after girding on his sword and ascending his conquering car. His son, girt with his Father's might, appears in a wreath of flame and robe of storm. When he goes forth to war his blood-red banner streams afar. Christ the Captain, Christ the Conqueror, is welcomed in Heaven with shoutings. Glittering robes are worn by conquerors. The Hymnal paints pictures of everlasting bliss with militarist colors. Very different pictures there are in the Hymnal, I grant you, but would any church-going child learn from them to regard war as in itself undesirable? Would he not learn, on the contrary, that war is the means to an end which justifies the means? What do you propose to do? Abolish the Hymnal, expurgate it, or what?

Guy: I would not be irreverent, but it seems to me that the time has come for subjecting the Hymnal to a somewhat thorough process of revision. This work should be performed tenderly and tremblingly, by a mixed commission composed of persons in holy orders and godly laymen. Their task would be as delicate as the reward of its successful performance would be rich. A few hymns, though not so many as you appear to think, would have to be omitted. These few, into the very grain of which the military spirit had entered, might perhaps be reissued in a separate volume, for the private perusal of Christians who had passed the age of military service. With those more numerous hymns which are militarist only in certain lines or certain stanzas the committee would go differently to work. It would entrust the task of re-writing them to a carefully selected corps of Christians blessed with the gift of sacred song. Every reference to implements used exclusively in warfare, like arrows and swords, would be scrupulously and reverently effaced. References to certain other implements, useful both in war and in the arts of peace, like chariots and armor, which is sometimes worn solely as a protection against the assassin's knife, would be kept or removed according to the use for which, in the particular hymn involved, the implement appeared to be intruded.

Robinson: A sort of conditional contraband, eh?

Guy: Now, while it is more than likely that in Heaven, as we shall some day see it, Christ's victory over sin will be celebrated daily throughout eternity, and that the Celestial City will always look as if freshly decorated in commemoration of a military triumph, still we must remember that these insistent references to warfare cannot possibly prove dangerous to the redeemed. In a community of the blessed, when the last war has been fought and gloriously won, there can be no possibility of breaches of the peace. You cannot have a war later than the last. I need not elaborate this point, but will proceed merely to say, that whereas the Hymnal after expurgation may give us a less faithful likeness of Heaven than the Hymnal in its present state, yet this sacrifice of truth is justified by the fact that among sinners, for whose use, after

Brown: Let me think a minute. What would that Heaven be like which we should see in your revised and diminished Hymnal? A place where fountains of living water refreshed the weary, where there was happiness after sorrow, perfection after sin, where the solemn pomp of redemption was accompanied by noblest music. Saints and angels blessing the Lord forever would fill Heaven with a sound of endless praise. Yes, I see the picture.

Robinson: Your excellent intentions, Guy, might possibly have this result—the young, who are a peculiar people, might not like the prospect of such a pacifist Heaven. Even now, with the Hymnal in its present unregenerate state, I am not certain, not quite certain, that all boys and girls are satisfied with an eternity in which Fourth of July is so heavily alloyed with Sabbath calm. What will they say to your safe and sane Heaven? In time, I admit, pacifist imagery may crowd out of the moral and spiritual life all the imagery that has come down to us from the old military world, where the taking and giving of blows was all in the day's salvation. This change may come fast or come slow. I've no idea which. But certainly it cannot be made without a good deal of tact. What does the Christian do now, when he sees the host of sin advancing, Satan leading off? Puts his armor upon him, doesn't he, takes his sword in his hand, and jumps into the thick of the fight. How about your pacifist Christian? He won't fight. He won't even rattle his saber or don his shining armor when he hears that the hosts of sin are mobilizing. He will approach Satan diplomatically, with an offer to submit their differences to arbitration. Perhaps the Christian will next recall his ambassador. He may declare an embargo. Any way, as I see it, we must suppose the pacifist Christian life to include a transition from a state of peace with Satan to—no matter what, so long as it isn't war. This supposition is violently contradictory of the present orthodox view, namely, that the Christian and Satan are always at war, with never an armistice. I see by the expression in your face, Guy, that you wish to interrupt me. Curb that wish.

Guy: One moment! One moment! You have convinced me that we must drive all warlike imagery from our inner spiritual life. We must not even think of peace, for peace suggests war. Let our task be to reconceive the Christian life in modern terms, to conceive the Christian's endeavor as a progress from poverty to riches, or from sickness to health. Surely the medical science of today, so much more extensive even than that which furnished the mind of Saint Luke, the Beloved Physician, will prove rich in pertinent imagery. Besides, the conception of sin as sickness is already familiar.

Robinson: I prefer sin as sickness to sin as poverty. Words like deposit, dividend, coupon and overdraft are not easily used in the service of edification. But in time I could get to think of the moral life as relapse, convalescence, reinfection and ultimate discharge as cured.

Brown: The fact that you have both stopped talking, in defiance of probability, disposes me to think that other things may stop, even war. When war is dead, imagery which is now inflammatory will do no harm. Until that day comes you had better leave the Hymnal alone. Let it remain what it now is, despite its hospitality to a few masterpieces, like Addison's "Spacious Firmament," a beautiful example of the degradation of noble material by inferior talents. How can people nourished on the English of the Bible and the Prayer Book tolerate Sunday after Sunday the English of most of our hymns?