

After the Play

IN ordinary cases it is easy enough to congratulate anybody upon anything, yet at the present moment, when I have just returned from a visit of congratulation to my old friend Colonel Bannard, I am far from certain that he found my best wishes satisfactory. Two years ago Colonel Bannard, who isn't far from fifty, married Nan Southard, who isn't much over twenty. Nan was not at all keen about marrying him. She was more or less in love with young Ellsworth, a lieutenant living at the same post with Nan and her father and Colonel Bannard. After her father had been stabbed by a Mexican he uttered what was practically a prayer for the marriage of Colonel Bannard and Nan. She allowed herself to be influenced, unduly according to my notion, by her father's dying words.

Colonel Bannard, in spite of his having a heart of gold, was not the right companion for a wife so much younger. He was always an inexpressive man. Nan was lonely. She saw more and more that her only escape from miserable loneliness was by way of young Ellsworth, who had always, as they say, loved her. He sometimes told his love, and Nan sometimes listened. At length they became lover and mistress. This irregular relation of theirs became known to a disreputable orderly with a German name, Bill Hecht. This wretch had long desired Nan. He thought his knowledge of her guilty secret put her in his power. When she refused to submit to his detestable caresses he kissed her against her will. A fortunate accident alone prevented the accomplishment of his other and yet more hellish purpose, and Hecht ran away, leaving Nan in a faint on the floor.

I ought to have said that before Hecht's act of violence Nan had broken with young Ellsworth. She felt that her betrayal of her noble elderly husband was base. She was a woman stricken by remorse. After she had told Ellsworth that she thought Bill Hecht knew their story, and after Ellsworth became certain that this was so and realized that Hecht would likely tell Colonel Bannard all about it, Ellsworth committed suicide by shooting himself through the head.

Colonel Bannard had never had a suspicion. Nan's confession was of course a terrible shock. He first verified what she told him about Bill Hecht, spy and ruffian, and then shot Hecht dead. Immediately thereafter he forgave Nan. He and she are now convinced that she always really loved him.

My business, you see, was to congratulate Colonel Bannard upon being reunited to his wife, and upon reaching after such a stormy voyage a haven of happiness. Somehow I could not do this with a whole heart. Doubts would and will obtrude themselves. Young Ellsworth's suicide does render impossible a renewal of the intrigue which Mrs. Bannard had voluntarily broken off, but neither Ellsworth's suicide nor the killing of Bill Hecht has lessened the difference between Bannard's years and his wife's. Neither event has made the gallant colonel a gayer and more exhilarating companion for a woman half his age. When I hear that she has always really loved him I realize that these are vague words. And I can't help wondering how he will take the publicity which is sure to beat upon him and Nan, most pitilessly, when the authorities have investigated the killing of Bill Hecht. My doubts about the happiness of Colonel and Mrs. Bannard throughout the rest of their married life are all the graver because he does not appear to have any doubt at all.

My feeling would be a question mark if Colonel Bannard were really a friend of mine, and my feeling after seeing Augustus Thomas's "Rio Grande," of which I have just told the story, is not very different. But Mr. Thomas himself, so far as I can guess, offers "Rio Grande" to us at the Empire as a play with a happy ending in forgiveness.

Years ago I sometimes thought of American playwrights as belonging to the class of "those miserable males who sniff at vice, and, daring not to snap, do therefore" seem unreal in their work. I used to think that American plays dealing with adultery would be more real if it were committed instead of being merely talked about and planned and prevented. Adultery, I said to myself, is a weapon with which American playwrights are willing to wound and yet afraid to strike.

Thoughts not unlike these strayed about my head when I first saw Mr. Thomas's "Arizona," in which a young woman, married to a colonel much older than herself, and living mostly at a lonely army post, contemplates adultery, is frustrated, loves her husband all the time, and is by him forgiven after the prospective adulterer has been killed by a Mexican by whose fiancée he has had a child.

Well, I was quite wrong. The adultery which in "Arizona" was only a plan is a fact in "Rio Grande," yet there has been little gain in reality in the later play. From neither play do we get any insight into the nature of guilty passion or the psychology of forgiveness. Forgiveness follows sin, provided the husband be sufficiently noble, and happiness, provided the wife really loved her husband all the time, follows forgiveness. For the mind of a grown person this is pretty thin food.

Nothing herein contained, however, shall be taken as an assertion that from "Arizona" to "Rio Grande" there has been no change in Mr. Thomas's moral attitude. Whereas in "Arizona" he seemed to imply that the lover of a married woman is always a low hound, he seems to admit in "Rio Grande" that there may be extenuating circumstances. Young Ellsworth is offered to us not as a hissing villain, but as a youngster unhappy and erring. I had a rather kindly feeling for him until he spoke these words to his mistress: "You angelic, delectable baby, God made you the Paradise men fight for."

Although there is no other speech to match this in "Rio Grande" or elsewhere, so far as I know, in Mr. Thomas's work, yet his weakest side is habitually shown in love scenes. Wherever poetry is needed he is likely to give us sentimental rhetoric, just as he gives us rhetoric whenever his characters aspire to be loftily reflective. I wish he would try to keep women off his stage. The worst things his men say are said to women.

When they are alone their speech is genuinely American. It consists partly of such sentences as are actually spoken by soldiers, gamblers, brokers, lawyers, partly of sentences which are Mr. Thomas's specialty, and for which his recipe is to take things such men might say and to give them neatness and point and force and humor and often wit. "Prejudice, my dear Helen, prejudice," answers the professional gambler in "The Witching Hour" to the woman who has said his material possessions are a monument to the worst side of him. "You might say that if I'd earned these things in some respectable combination that starved out all its little competitors. But I've simply furnished a fairly expensive entertainment—to eminent citizens—looking for rest."

I have not the slightest idea who is the foremost American dramatist, but my guess is that if everybody voted a majority would vote for Mr. Thomas. His stories never

mean much, but he tells them so well that they are often exciting and never tedious. There is something large in the ease with which he can move so many persons on and off and about his stage. There is something robust in his pictures of two men confronting each other, in the threatening directness with which their wills speak. Through plays which deal with familiar violences, as through plays which raise and shirk less familiar problems, he has managed to keep and to express his humor and a kind of large-limbed honesty. He has taught ready-made sentimental morality to talk with a voice that sounds almost male.

Q. K.

The New Generation

Songs and Satires, by Edgar Lee Masters. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.25.

WHEN you twitch your ears for a small boy you create a special and apparently inexhaustible craving. You cease to be an ordinary human being in that boy's eyes, you become an incarnated ear-twitcher. The sole justification for your existence, as he sees it, is your delicious faculty for twitching your ears. In this respect the small boy is not unlike the American people. The American people is not quite so simply pleased but if you once do deeply please it, if you once become identified in its vague monstrous mind with any particular gesture or intonation, you cannot get much response from it except by duplicating the performance that aroused and fixed its taste. You may not wish to repeat it. You may, like Peter Dunne or Mark Twain or George Barr McCutcheon or O. Henry, have a few little intentions of your own. But there is something slow and obdurate about the public. Like a horse, it is hard for it to form an idea. Once formed, an idea is a devil's pitchfork in its brain.

Because of this trait in the public "Songs and Satires" will probably be disappointing. In "Spoon River Anthology" Mr. Masters did more than write poetry. He presented his poetic themes in a way peculiarly dramatic. His method, obviously, made for striking success with the public, and it created the notion that as an inventor of method Edgar Lee Masters stood supreme. Only a madman would have harped on the original device, and Mr. Masters is not a madman. In the absence of another startling device, however, he has not the same salt of novelty, and those who savored just the novelty in "Spoon River" will undoubtedly deem "Songs and Satires" flat.

Mr. Masters, however, is the same Mr. Masters. Different in method and varied in theme, "Songs and Satires" is penetrated with the same quality as "Spoon River Anthology." And because Mr. Masters is a deep poetic spirit, one of the greatest in the America of our time, it would be an immense pity if the absence of a certain special excitement should keep the readers of "Songs and Satires" from finding the treasures inside.

As to the essential Mr. Masters there are various opinions. Out of Loudonville, Ohio, there recently came one unspoiled opinion, straight from a suffering heart. "'Spoon River'" said the Loudonvillian, "is not life,—it is death. It does not present life truly, wholesomely. It does not satisfy the demands of the poetic nature. It is too earthly. It creeps like a reptile through slime and evil. We are depressed; our imagination is destroyed, and we close the book with a disgust for its vulgarity. There is life in this

book, say what you will. But it contains none of the 'noble and profound applications of ideas to life.'"

At this opinion one may imagine Mr. Masters himself lightly smiling. One may imagine admirers and advocates of his receiving it with wrath. But why should a poet, a fine poet, so disgust and depress and perplex? Why should he seem slimy and vulgar and unwholesome? Mr. Masters is big enough to make any attempt at a reasonable answer worth while.

The best man to answer, so far as I know, would be Thorstein Veblen. If one thinks Masters big as a poet, it would be feeble not to apply that word or some more eulogistic word to Veblen as a social analyst. The confusions that arise about Mr. Masters are due to his arrival on the stage at a period of economic and moral transition. For the right clues to this transitional period there is no observer so fertile, so brilliant, so inexorably honest as the author of "The Theory of Business Enterprise."

What the man from Loudonville is butting into, in "Spoon River" and "Songs and Satires," has a quite terrific name. It is, in the jargon beloved of Mr. Veblen, "the cultural incidence of the machine process." Under the circumstances, evidently, the Ohioan kept his temper remarkably well. The difference between him and Mr. Masters is a considerable difference. It is a difference, using another catchword, in "norms of validity." The Ohioan's norms rest "on conventional, ultimately sentimental grounds; they are of a putative nature. Such are, e.g., the principles of (primitive) blood relationship, clan solidarity, paternal descent, Levitical cleanness, divine guidance, allegiance, nationality." Being an honest, conventional man, he argues *de jure*. His characteristic habits of thought are "habits of recourse to conventional grounds of finality or validity, to anthropomorphism, to explanations of phenomena in terms of human relation, discretion, authenticity, and choice. The final ground of certainty in inquiry on this natural-rights plane is always a ground of authenticity, of precedent, or accepted decision." He is, in short, a normal "conservative" man, and his disgust and distress over Mr. Masters is due to the fact that Mr. Masters is one of the first poets to become really articulate in a civilization affected by the machine.

"On the whole," says Mr. Veblen, "the number and variety of things that are fundamentally and eternally true and good increase as one goes outward from the modern West-European cultural centers into the earlier barbarian past or into the remoter barbarian present." Loudonville, in this connection, stands for the remoter barbarian present; and Mr. Masters for the number and variety of things that are decreasingly good and true.

It is no wonder that Mr. Masters is out of touch with many sincere Americans. He is breaking new ground poetically, ground that "is neither ecclesiastic, dynastic, territorial, nor linguistic; it is industrial and materialistic." One discerns all through "Songs and Satires" that this has come to pass. Mr. Masters belongs definitely to an age and sphere that has new habits of thought. It is dissonant with fine literary tradition. But those whose experience and sympathies have been similar to Mr. Masters's, can see that it is not his personality alone which gives the troublous accent to his work.

"The machine process throws out anthropomorphic habits of thought." "The machine process gives no insight into questions of good and evil, merit and demerit, except in point of material causation, nor into the foundations or the constraining force of law and order, except such mechanically enforced law and order as may be stated in