

## After the Play

A GREAT many Americans never go to the Hippodrome in New York. They think that it offers a vast, crude entertainment, designed to earn guffaws and reminiscent of the untidy peanut. More vital mistakes could be made, but none more complete. The house is certainly vast. It has 5,697 seats, according to the five-cent program, and if the stage were an acre in size (how big is an acre?) the stage-population would sometimes be 600 to the acre. But the basis of the entertainment is not that heavy vulgarity which the word "popular" has been known to suggest. Vulgarity is still to be found in New York vaudeville. Such unfashionable houses as Proctor's on 23rd Street, and the Grand Opera House on 8th Avenue (once "the most elegant theatre in the world") still harbor the kind of amusement that was habitual before the flood. There you can see color-effects that were popular in the day of Loie Fuller. You can hear singing that could only be properly diagnosed by an ear-nose-and-throat specialist, and you can behold the most amateur dancing. The vulgarity is mainly in the humor. There are innumerable jokes by the Jews and the Irish on the Jews and the Irish that keep the tone of the peddler's cart and the back fence. There are broad schoolboy jokes about spooning and marriage, and elephantine allusions to underwear that make the gallery roar with laughter, and quips about the police department and saloons and kitchen sinks and back alleys that still provide a grin. But this kind of groundling entertainment, avoided by the re-fined, has so little in common with the Hippodrome that it is quite inaccurate to confuse them. The Hippodrome is practically in the Broadway mode.

When you consider that the best seats downstairs are retailed for two dollars and a half, with the privilege of paying the 10 per cent war tax reserved for the public when the law takes effect November 1st, you lose the illusion that this entertainment is economically "popular." It is true that the second gallery costs only a quarter (and is worth only a quarter), but it is the business downstairs that determines the standard on the stage; and that is the conventional standard set by well-fed, prosperous America. The present show is called a musical revue, "Cheer Up!" by name. Because the house is a monster it is actually less a revue than a warp of the ordinary expensive vaudeville on a woof of circus. But granted this difference which the size of the building requires, you get the species of humorous diversion that at present has national vogue.

The limitation of these attempts at wholesale entertainment is very simple: You can please all of the audience some of the time, and some of the audience all of the time, but you cannot, etc. No 5,697 people come that way. For my part I enjoy the ostentation, the pageantry, least of all. Next to that, I take the least pleasure out of the performing animals, sub-human or human. The diving horse I do not dislike, though an albino circus horse always seems to me to be so little equine that nothing he could do would astound me. But I hate enormously to see a man swiveling madly around, hanging on to a trapeze by one toe. This particular entertainment is accomplished by a troupe that rushes on in an armored motor. Up out of the motor rises a steel framework, with a revolving cross-piece on top. At one extremity of the revolving piece is the khaki acrobat with his trapeze, at the other a khaki mechanic in a sort of steel cigar with a propeller on it. The noxious scheme is to speed up the propeller, start the cross-piece swinging so furiously around that the mechanic is at the horizontal

and then have the acrobat hang on by his little finger, his little toes. It is sickeningly unpleasant, not so much for the man who may fall as for the man he may fall on. It is strange to reflect that it is really fundamentally less precarious than sitting at a desk and advocating an early peace.

Dexterity must be fascinating to any number of people. The Hippodrome, at any rate, proceeds on that assumption. There are lightning artists who draw Pershing in six seconds or pin twenty rags into the form of a snowy landscape in half a minute. There is a bicyclist who pops himself up steps. There are swimmers, feminine, who dive gracefully in every possible manner. The touch of beauty in the diving enhances it, as well as the hint of sex, but the really exciting dexterity is that exhibited by the troupes of Arabs who whirl and bound through the air.

As against flying buttresses of human athletes and divers who cleave water as soundlessly as a walker cleaves air, the large spectacles are a waste of effort. To see the profile of an Atlantic liner loaded with soldiers moved from left to right, disclosing New York harbor as it creeps out to the wings, allows one to gasp with surprise; and the spectacle of the sphinx and the historic review from Columbus to dental Theodore induce one to wonder at the extravagant investment. But only a really great director who is an artist and loves beauty has a right to undertake these spectacles. The Hippodrome management has learned nothing from the fleeting hints of loveliness that were given out by Mr. Mackaye's pageants at Columbia. Patriotism is supposed to be enough, ladled out as an æsthetic gravy.

But one forgives much to a management that gives a great place to its clowns. America gets so much good clowning free of charge that the standard ought to be high for the Hippodrome. Think of the United States Senate. Among the presidents of our universities there is considerable natural talent in this department, and the evangelical platform is not without its claims. Nor must we forget the abbreviated Sulzer engagement in New York or the superlative performance by the impeached governor of Texas. The liquor and the anti-liquor trades, the undertaking trade, the trade of goose-step patriotism, the busy boosters of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, the anti-aircraft defenders of New York, the *marraines* of poetry with a new crèche of American poets every year, the Union of Superannuated Statesmen Opposed to Woman Suffrage but in Favor of Revolution in Cochin-China—all these supply unlimited clowning free of charge. And yet the Hippodrome amuses. When its clowns are in action it can rightly say "Cheer Up!"

The horses employed by the admirable furniture movers are not subtle humorists, but their foot-work surpasses human hope and they do everything in their extreme misfortune that the most heartless child could wish. The clown who assists the bicycle act is masterly. His happy inanity is never tiresome, he is so completely in character from the start. Mr. Nat M. Wills is just the sort of hobo that prosperous America affords to think funny. He is rather funny in his stereotyped way, but the wit in Mr. Fred Walton's pantomime with his wooden soldiers is more attractive than the verbal slapstick of Mr. Wills.

The chemistry of entertainment often means that sweetness turns to acid immediately. Only beauty and comedy redeem the ostentation and sentiment and stale humor of the conventional show. There is some comedy but little beauty in "Cheer Up!," the music particularly failing of enchantment. And yet 5,697 average Americans come to be cheered up twice a day.

F. H.

## Books and Things

NOBODY is wider awake than Mr. Raymond Macdonald Alden, professor of English at Leland Stanford, to the difficulty of writing a book that shall live up or down to such a title as Tennyson: How to Know Him (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. \$1.50 net). "It is a commonplace," Mr. Alden says in his preface, "that Tennyson does not require a guide-book in the same sense as Browning or many another writer. Indeed it would have been somewhat easier to write this book if he had been essentially eccentric, irregular or obscure: the critic would have had a more agreeable sense of being indispensable." Nothing could be truer. Tennyson is almost everywhere easy to understand. But he is not easy to appreciate. It was Mark Pattison, I believe, who said that appreciation of Milton was the reward of consummate scholarship. An ideal reader of Tennyson would be somebody who had lived long in England, in the country and near the sea, who had studied the trees and birds and flowers and seasons and waters of England with loving and accurate eyes; somebody, too, who was familiar enough with the classical poets to hear the Greek and Latin echoes in Tennyson's voice, and to whom these echoes were dear. No handbook, no matter how hard it tries, can conceivably be anything but a very inferior substitute for this experience, for the long years in which Time has patiently ripened the fruits of reading and observation. Mr. Alden is too wise to attempt this impossible. The manner of his book, as he himself says so modestly and pleasantly, is "the manner of one who should read aloud from the poet to a company gathered by the evening fire, supplying such preliminary information and criticism as might be helpful to the listeners."

But the ideal reader of Tennyson, if we take for our ideal the reader who would get the greatest possible enjoyment from his poetry, is even more exceptional than this. He has other qualifications than those I have mentioned. The ideas of Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, although familiar to him, have become familiar so recently that he is still capable of surprise at finding these ideas used, and of pleasure at finding them used after a rather decorative fashion, by a poet. He believes that somehow good shall be the final goal of ill, and he believes this in a spirit of pious and docile acquiescence. He is in no great hurry to take off his coat and accelerate the inevitable cosmic processes. He is almost as patient as God. Fear of losing the good that we have slows up his pursuit of the good that we have not. No great radical, this ideal reader. Kings and queens, if English, are dear to him. When you tell him that obedience is the courtesy due to kings he feels no temptation to smile, for he is certain that we needs must love the highest when we see it. His occasional doubts exist in order that they may be slain by his faith. From the great central doubts he is serenely free. He is no more capable of doubting that God exists and means well by humanity than of doubting that Queen Victoria existed and meant well by England and the colonies. This ideal reader's God is a very little like the Empress of India and a good deal like some far-off divine Headmaster. In an Annunciation, if this ideal reader of Tennyson painted it, the Virgin would slightly resemble Victoria, and the Angel Gabriel would slightly resemble Dr. Howley, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was sent, more than willing, to tell the young princess that she was queen. In other words, the ideal reader of Tennyson is extinct.

It is also true that he never existed. Who, at the present moment, can be put in his empty and never-occupied place? That is the question which Mr. Alden must have asked himself, and to which, whether he asked it or not, he has given a discerning and persuasive answer. His estimate of Tennyson is very different from our ideal reader's. To Mr. Alden Tennyson is "neither a dramatist nor an imaginative psychologist of much complexity or depth"; he was not highly creative either in the field of thought or in the field of character; he was, like many another Victorian, "rather over-fond of death-beds"; his King Arthur, when he says goodbye to Guinevere, "comes dangerously near, even in his heroic proportions, giving the impression of being a prig or a cad," and Tennyson's style "tends always toward a beautiful circumlocution." A teacher who renounces much of Tennyson, and whose admiration of what is left is strong and contagious—such is Mr. Alden. In one or two respects only do I wish that he had seen his problem a little differently. He says, for example, that Tennyson's blank verse "is a traditional form, passing as rhythmically current coinage at any time between Shakespeare's and ours, but it now seems to many persons to have lost a part of its value merely because it has been current for so long. New rhythms, new speech, for new men and women—so runs our thought." This passage is addressed to a few narrow sectaries, who think all blank verse obsolete, and whose opinions upon this point do not seem to me of the slightest importance. The readers worth helping are those who love blank verse, who read Shakespeare's and Milton's and Shelley's again and again, but who are irritated by Tennyson's. Was it an Oxford or a Dublin undergraduate who made the famous parody?

And in those days he bought a pair of dogs,  
Caesar and Pompey, each so like to each  
That not one single man in the whole world  
Could tell the difference. And he made a song  
And sang it; strangely could he make and sing.

The wrong audience, it seems to me, is again before Mr. Alden when he attributes present-day depreciation of Tennyson to our tendency to "reject as unpoetical that which is laden with serious thought on moral problems." Surely nobody who is not an idiot objects nowadays to a poet's interest in morals. The question I wish Mr. Alden had answered is more special. Why have the years done more harm to the moralist in Tennyson than to the moralist in Browning or Matthew Arnold or Clough? Why do so many readers, not a bit more intelligent than the men and women who worshipped Tennyson's moralities fifty years ago, find him so poor in moral insight? Why do his moral ideas strike them as almost always either obvious or banal or exasperating? Or, if you agree with me in preferring to put the question the other way, how came any of his contemporaries, many of them persons of high intelligence, to think Tennyson's strength lay where his greatest weakness lies, in his moral judgments? Only after this admission is made, only after we have denied Tennyson as a moralist and thinker, are we ready to give him precisely the admiration he deserves as an observer of nature, a musician and a painter. For us, although he had an indoor spirit, and although the flavor of wild life is not in him, he is still one of the flawless decorative artists, making pictures that are beautifully exact in spite of their rather suave smoothness, working in lacquer and melody, perhaps too studied and bland a concentrator, but a concentrator with few rivals in English.

P. L.