

The American Theatre

A History of the Theatre in America, From Its Beginnings to the Present Time, by Arthur Hornblow, 2 volumes, New York: J. B. Lippincott.

THE rather sensational auction sale last October of the books and pamphlets relating to the theatre, which had been accumulated by the late Evarts Wendell, was a surprise to many on account of the number of American plays included and the variety of books, several hundred in all, relating to the history of the American stage. General students of literature have known nothing about this field, because it is ignored in school and college curricula; and special enthusiasts of the stage and drama have been conscious of little except the earlier periods—Dunlap in genial error and Seilhamer in caustic correction—and the present, with its commingling of invective at the commercial theatre and its speculative hopefulness for a new stage, and drama, and playgoing public.

Of the general historians of American literature none but Moses Coit Tyler has paid any attention to playwright, actor or producer. There is no word about them in the substantial volumes by Richardson and Wendell, none in the ordinary run of textbooks, and not a mention of them even in the four-hundred and odd pages of Pattee's American Literature since 1870. Yet there is work for a lifetime on the American drama and the American theatre, and, either in the raw or half-refined, an immense amount of material available.

The appearance, therefore, of a compendious history on this subject is very much to the point; the first general survey has now been attempted; a modest observatory has been erected from which the intelligent sightseer can look out over the field; a beginning has been made. However, an observatory is perhaps too substantial for a faithful likeness to Mr. Hornblow's volumes; a captive balloon would be a better metaphor; for the captive balloon, I am told, has three kinds of motion,—pitching, spinning and rolling,—and is a profitable seat of observation only to the man with a steady nerve and a trained eye.

The work in hand is similarly blown about by various winds, so that one is never sure from chapter to chapter as to the altitude or angle from which he is looking down at the field. Nearly half the work is devoted to the history of events up to 1825. The period is full of interest, but it is after all like the formative period in the life of any author, and should be treated so, as to both emphasis and proportion. But the proportion throughout the work seems to have been determined largely by the abundance of material at hand. At one point Seilhamer presents a vast amount of documentation as to casts of early plays, and it is included; at another William B. Wood indulges in circumstantial reminiscence about the social bad manners of George Frederick Cooke, and three pages are devoted to one episode; at another the escapades of Lola Montez attract the historian's attention, and a page and a half are dedicated to her, of which only six lines have anything to do with her relation to the American theatre. Again, as the balloon has cavorted in mid-air the pilot has sacrificed accuracy to the need of clinging to the sides of the basket. For example, President Dwight of Yale did not declare anything about the stage in 1824 because he was then seven years dead; the poet Whittier's first name (one hates to quibble) was John, and not William; Dunlap's translation from Zschokke is spelled Abaellino; and the whole point of the Wilde title, The Importance of Be-

ing Ernest, lies in the proper spelling of the punning last word. Finally, as these latter items suggest, the work is deficient at points where publisher should share responsibility with author. Yet, as has already been said, the book is a pioneer work, and is entitled to the respect due its kind. First works in untrodden fields are seldom unqualifiedly successful.

Seen as a whole the history of the theatre in America presents a moving pageant of the most fascinating sort. It is the old story of the cultural history of America reconfirmed in these particular terms. The first unit tells the story of a slowly decreasing dependency on all things English. This involves the presentation of English plays by American amateurs in regular audience rooms with improvised stages; next the development of semi-professional and wholly professional companies who played short seasons at irregular intervals; next the erection of special playhouses; and, finally the formation of more permanent professional companies—both English and American—all of which took place in the course of two generations or more before the emergence of any American drama.

Throughout these developments a prevailing inhospitality to things theatrical had to be worn down. In New York and Philadelphia the indirections of the politicians combined with the head-on animosity; and, of course, the conquest of New England was a problem in itself. The early counsel of Samuel Sewall, that Boston colossus, pillar of the church and supporter of the law, had been sounded in 1714. The Council Chamber in Boston should not be used as a playhouse: "Christian Boston" should not "goe beyond Heathen Rome in the practice of Shameful Vanities." Evidently the counsel prevailed; yet old truepenny ghost of the drama would not meekly submit to banishment. The Massachusetts General Court showed that he was still active underground in 1750, by its act for "preventing and avoiding the many great mischiefs which arise from public stage plays, interludes, and other theatrical entertainments, which not only occasion great and unnecessary expenses, and discourage industry and frugality, but likewise tend generally to increase immorality, impiety and a contempt for religion." And while Massachusetts was, to use its own diction, getting its dander up, the ungodly Rhode Island, Puritan influenced, but not Puritan bound, in a temporary burst of worldliness, built a theatre, sanctioned professional players, and contributed to dramatic humor by inventing the long-used device of the "moral dialogue" subterfuge for eating its cakes and conserving its virtue too.

The Continental Congress war measure of 1774 was colonial rather than Puritan, but quaintly indicative of things dramatic with its classification of exhibitions of shows and plays with "horse-racing and all kinds of gaming [and] cock-fighting"; but the petition to the General Court in 1790 is to the point, as is the referendum vote of the next year, and the successful conclusion of the campaign in 1783.

The yoking of plays and cock-fighting does not seem quite so bizarre if one recalls the proprietary attitude of the public toward theatres and actors on both sides of the Atlantic in the good old days. Garrick pelted out of his theatre and pursued to his house for an unwelcome change of bill, the "Old Price" uproars let loose and continued for three months at Covent Garden Theatre, and the mad behavior of the London pits and galleries, gave ample precedents for high times in the American playhouses; and the precedents were followed. In 1800 Mrs. Byrne, ap-

pearing as danseuse in Philadelphia, was greeted so warmly that she stayed off the boards for several nights and then returned with a revised and amplified costume. In 1811 in the same city, a Scotchman, McKenzie, broke his contract with the Chestnut Street Theatre, and his friends finished the job by bombarding the company when an attempt was made to present the play with a substitute in his place. In 1821 Edmund Kean affronted a Boston audience by leaving the stage because the receipts were too small, and four years later American resentment was so strong that on his return to this country his New York performance was a pantomime in Bedlam, and in Boston he was driven off the stage. Most sensational of all was the popular furore over the rival claims of the Englishman Macready and the American Forrest. This became an international matter, a perfect illustration of patriotism gone mad; and in the Astor Place riot of 1849 twenty-two persons lost their lives and thirty-six more were seriously wounded.

In the middle half of the nineteenth century the comparative poverty of American dramatic writing was offset by the brilliance of a succession of really great actors. "In quick succession the American stage was enriched by the terrifying acting of Edmund Kean, the delicious drollery of Charles Mathews, the extraordinary genius of Junius Brutus Booth, the natural comedy of James H. Hackett, the intellectual art of William Charles Macready, the tempestuous splendor of Edwin Forrest, the irresistible comedy of John Brougham and W. E. Burton, the delightful impersonations of Joseph Jefferson, the majesty and pathos of Charlotte Cushman, the humorous eccentricities of E. A. Sothorn's "Dundreary," the noble presence and beautiful voice of Edwin Booth, the scholarly and versatile art of Edward L. Davenport, the nobility and charm of John McCullough, the distinction of Lawrence Barrett, the spontaneous humor of the versatile John Gilbert, the loveliness of Mary Anderson, the mournful beauty of Adelaide Neilson, the grace of Fanny Ellsler, and many other players of almost equal renown." If the sceptical modernist inclines to lift the eyebrow at such a list of names and characterizations, the relatively small list of plays which served these oldtime stars will give him pause. The backbone of it was Shakespeare; there was a high seriousness in the supplementary tragedies from Addison's *Cato* to Payne's *Brutus* and beyond; and the comedies,—largely eighteenth century English—were marked by distinction and grace. The great actors of that golden age were not content with cheap vehicles. Moreover, they mastered vast repertories, and continued in a variety of parts, the only notable exceptions, Jefferson and Sothorn, creating character parts of extraordinary finish.

Naturally in those same days the vulgar play flourished too. Melodrama had its devotees, as always, and popular bills of the most lavish variety—two plays and interpolated features—drew large houses. And in those days it is well to remember, there arose to notoriety the most shamelessly sordid and the most triumphantly impudent of showmen, P. T. Barnum. It was he who managed the \$700,000 tour of Jennie Lind, and converted Charles S. Stratton into the world-famed Tom Thumb; and it was he who set up as an adjunct to his Museum the Moral Lecture Room, with a conservatism that he could readily simulate for the dollars it might bring him, and started on notable careers many actors in the successful presentation of "continuous performance" programs.

For the welfare of the American stage, and an antidote

to Barnumism, a factor of equal value with the great stars, and of more stability, was the development of the finer stock companies, of which the most distinguished was Augustin Daly's. In many ways Daly represented the highest idealism that can be expected in the manager of an unendowed theatre. He believed from the bottom of his heart in the value of the best drama, and in the dignity of the actor's art. He knew from practical experience the technique of the drama no less than of the stage, for he could write a successful play as well as direct its production. If he could not foretell a play's success, he was no worse off than any other producer whom the world had thus far known; but he learned at last that the nearest thing to a certainty in the way of a new play was his own rewriting of contemporary comedies by any one of three or four German playwrights. On these he depended far more than on the French who are usually described as his chief props. For the most part, and increasingly as the years went on, his best efforts and his most loving care were devoted to the production of Shakespeare and of certain revivals from the eighteenth century, the very repertories in both respects which had served for the earliest professional companies in America. The concessions he made to popularity from time to time, were made simply in order to take in the money that would make possible the undertaking he cared most about. If he could draw big houses to big plays his cup of content was filled.

Then during the '90's the shadow of the new commercial combinations began to darken his path. One by one the best of his players were drawn off by the lure of larger returns, and year by year he found it more difficult to secure new plays, as the more promising playwrights were bought up by a kind of retaining fee system employed by the syndicate managers. And so the curtain was rung on stock companies like Daly's, the education of actors through a wide experience in many repertories became less common, the vogue of stars—not fixed but twinkling—was established, and with it the system of long runs, and the ethics of Barnum prevailed throughout the country.

At this point Mr. Hornblow's history comes to an end, for this point is the present; but it comes to an unfortunately indeterminate end, and after some self-contradiction, lays the whole blame of the situation on the producers, and calls—*mirabile dictu!*—for a new Moses to lead the way out of captivity. That is a double mistake; Moses has publicly disqualified himself; and for the last ten years the public have shown that they are slowly groping toward the way themselves. They began with the New Theatre. That it failed within two years is not half so important as that it was founded, that others on smaller scales have been founded and have failed, that municipal theatres have sprung up here and there and are being supported by various plans, that scores on scores of little theatres, neighborhood playhouses, and peoples' country theatres have been founded, that producers like Winthrop Ames and Stuart Walker are established in the popular consciousness, that the Drama League of America is a country-wide organization, and that the printing of plays for a reading public is manyfold its proportions of twenty years ago. The Napoleonic theatrical managers are still in the saddle in America, but the uncommercial stage is coming to be more considerable every season. The leaven of popular intelligence is at work, and the new audience, the new theatre, and the new drama,—combining the best of the old with the best of the new—in due time will come to their own again. PERCY H. BOYNTON.

The Foreign Visitor

The Stranger, by Arthur Bullard. New York: The Macmillan Company.

A MAN in the first year of his maturity, thoughtful, travelled, master of languages and experienced in the manners and customs of many lands, comes to New York. He is the son of an American medical missionary in Morocco who had become a Moslem and he himself has been reared in the Mohammedan faith. Now at length he visits for the first time his father's land and after a period of studious loneliness he becomes acquainted with a group of zealous young Americans representative of the higher ideals struggling for recognition in this country: a painter, a novelist, a political reformer, a socialistic and atheistic professor, an efficient practical-minded woman whose life work is the organization of the finances of charities upon sound principles,—and a frail young woman who makes the text and illustrations for children's books and whom an incurable malady has doomed to an early death. His entrance into their lives affects markedly the career and character of several of these people; but by carefully subordinating the parts played by the other members of the group to those played by the painter, the charity worker and the illustrator of children's books, Arthur Bullard, has avoided any too close resemblance to Pippa Passes or to The Passing of the Third Floor Back.

The nearest literary affiliation of this remarkable novel is to a much older kind of book. It is now nearly three centuries and a half since Giovanni Paolo Marana started the vogue of what may be called the Letters of a Foreign Visitor type of fiction and satire in his once famous *Espion du Grand Seigneur*, known in English as *The Turkish Spy*. The situation of an intelligent, thoughtful and observant man, placed in the midst of a civilization utterly different from that in which he has been brought up, gave excellent opportunity to drive home the lesson of the great diversity and incongruity of the religious beliefs and moral codes of mankind and of the need to recognize the degree to which individual beliefs and codes are produced by non-rational forces such as race, environment, tradition and education. The corollary that followed from realization of this fact was the necessity of purging the mind of all ideas due to the accident of historical position; to limit belief to those truths acceptable to all; to acknowledge that manners and modes of thought alien from those to which a certain civilization has become accustomed may be as valid as, may be nearer the ideal than, those accepted by that civilization; in a word, to clear the mind of prejudices. Such lines of thought appealed to the cosmopolitanism characteristic of the eighteenth century. In our own time the same train of ideas has been followed successfully by Mr. Lowes Dickinson. It has remained for Mr. Bullard, while discarding the convention of the letter-form, to employ a similar theme brilliantly in a novel dealing with twentieth-century New York.

For the development of such a theme the author has many happy qualifications. His power of acute observation of modern society was shown in the earlier novels which he wrote under the pen-name of "Albert Edwards." His knowledge of the ideals of the Moslem world has already appeared in his book, *The Barbary Coast*, written under his own name. The juxtaposition and entanglement of

these two conflicting intellectual interests make capital material for fiction. There can be no doubt of the value of such a book in our present pressing need for a cosmopolitan point of view. The question is whether Mr. Bullard's mind and art are not too refined to enforce his lesson in the virile fashion necessary if it is to command attention.

It would have been easy to evolve from his material a series of harshly satiric rasping scenes filled with crude contrasts of Western with Oriental manners and ideals. Mr. Bullard avoids anything so obvious. There is satire and reproof in plenty, but it is subtle, restrained, often by implication rather than outright, and placed second in interest to the delicate love-story between the Oriental visitor, Donald Lane, and Eunice Bender who employs her scanty dole of life in fashioning delight for children. From the *Stranger* the painter who has lost touch with his art through an unfortunate and unsympathetic marriage gains advice that leads to a drastic but simple solution of his domestic difficulties. From the *Stranger* the atheistic socialist learns something both of the Moslem idea of God and of the practical socialism of Morocco. Through intercourse with him the successful organizer of charity finances gets a suspicion of distrust in the all-sufficiency of her gospel of Efficiency. From him the delicately beautiful artist whose work had been looked down upon by her sturdy and practical friend, who had become reconciled to pity as the only meed bestowable upon her, and who is soon to die, learns that there is another ideal possible than the American one of robust physical health and that into even her wan life love can come.

As Mr. Bullard has avoided the rocks of mere Menckenesque satire, so has he steered clear of the equally dangerous shallow pools of sentimentalism. The beauty in his book has in it no touch of the maudlin. He has not achieved a great book—there are few such in the world—but he has penetrated pretty nearly to the core of some of the counterfeits that time will break. His story is interesting, thoughtful, reasoned, suggestive. It offers the balance of an alien ideal with which to weigh the shibboleths of modern America: education, reform, health, progress, efficiency.

S. C. C.

From The Yiddish

A Lithuanian Village. By Leon Kobrin. Authorized translation from the Yiddish by Isaac Goldberg, Ph. D. New York: Brentano's.

THE ascendancy of Yiddish in the literary world is one of the outstanding phenomena of the last half-century. When one remembers that almost until yesterday Yiddish was either ignored or despised by most of the enlightened even of Jews, one cannot but wonder at the high place it has nevertheless succeeded in achieving for itself.

The Jewish Art Theater was one of the very few places—possibly the only place—in all New York last season where drama of worth was given a hearing. And those afforded the access will testify that of all the newspapers in America today, few other than those printed in Yiddish make even a pretense to literary importance. Possibly that is because the English-reading public goes to the magazines for its periodical literature, while the Yiddish reader can