

## After the Play

**T**WO revivals: *The Easiest Way* and *The Merry Widow*. One new production: *Don Juan*.

One should not miss *The Easiest Way*, especially if one has never seen it before. Some day the curtain must fall for the last time on that picturesque old charlatan, David Belasco, and it is worth while watching this extremely clever and well-arranged clap-trap for which he is so much responsible. It has practically nothing to do with the human soul. It has no ethos, as I believe the Bryn Mawr ladies call it. But what place has ethos in the American theatre? What one looks for is "drama"—a situation sufficiently simple and convincing so that, when the particular mouse we're asked to watch slips out to steal her cheese, one innocent nibble releases the spring and down on her neck, whack! comes the relentless trap. There you have "drama," with Belasco sauce, and if you want ethos besides you'd better read a book.

To give us the terrible whack in the case of *The Easiest Way* we have three perfectly standardized human beings, two men and a woman. The woman is a "kept" woman, a high-class prostitute. She has drifted, by processes more or less drowned by the rustling of late arrivals at the performance, from some unhappy economic condition of the past into this condition of loveless but amicable enslavement, economically happy. We see her first, with one foot in prostitution, and another in the theatrical profession—a state, by the way, that is offered with unflattering candor but (one supposes) on the author's and producer's sound authority. When the curtain goes up, this woman Laura (played by Miss Frances Starr) is in the act of informing her proprietor, a "wise" New York broker, that she has fallen in love with a simple, buoyant young Western newspaperman, wide of horizon and bounding in faith, and that if he comes through with his offer to marry her she is going to explain her past, marry him and go straight.

The scene is admirably thought out for this announcement. It is on a clean mountain verandah in Colorado, in God's great out-of-doors. It even reminds one of a scene in Henry James, "pink with the mountain rose, the cool air as fresh as if the world were young." The lovely mountain-side with "undiminished snows" is visible in the distance. As the act passes the sunset plays on it and above it, toward the end, a shy little star comes wambling in the sky.

Does the broker beat his "woman" when she tells him, in the sunny afternoon, that she may quit him? Not at all. He is an economist. He simply says, "This young fellow hasn't any money. You're a spender. You can't live without money. You think you'll go back into the theatrical game and wait for him. You haven't got the spunk to do it. But you suit me, I like you, I'll miss you, I'm willing to gamble on your coming back to me." Then, later, to the young man: "You have faith, young man, and I like you. I tell you what I'll do. If she ever comes back, I'll be 'on the level' with you, I'll let let you know."

There, of course, you have the mouse-trap recognizably planted. If Laura goes back to this man-about-town, he promises to let Mr. Y. Lochinvar know all about it. And you realize, naturally, (the American theatre being the American theatre), that Laura will just have gone back to Mr. Broker when, behold, Lochinvar lands a great big nugget and comes with it to Laura—too late.

The second act is devoted to the rolling-up of Laura. She lives in an awful New York theatrical boarding-house

with red wall-paper, and she owes three weeks' rent. Lochinvar writes to her every day—darling letters, a shoe-box full, but not a cent of tribute. Poverty stares her in the face. We see her frugal meal—she blows the snow from the little old milk-bottle as she takes it from the sill. An antique out-of-work actor comes in to chat. Cheery bird, but he brings no hope. The landlady duns her. Laura snuffles, hums bravely, snuffles again. Then arrives the temptress—or rather, the procuress, a strapping young girl who knew Laura at Claridge's (used to be Rector's). The broker, it appears, is a power in the theatrical business. Laura can't get work anywhere except through his favor. Extraordinary coincidence! But, O God of our Fathers, what can a young girl do? The picture of Lochinvar comes tremulously off the wall, the shoe-box of letters is hidden away, the broker (who has been waiting downstairs while the amusing show-girl prostitute acted as advance agent) comes up stairs, is very non-sensational and deft and kind, hands her a few hundred dollar bills, arranges a party at Claridge's, arranges her departure for a clean hotel, (the wages of sin is cleanliness), and then makes her write a letter to young Lochinvar, dictated but not signed, which she (lame invention) is to mail.

Laura, being weak, wants to play the game both ways—wants to solve the unemployment problem at the broker's expense and at the same time wants to keep herself for the man she loves. So she does not mail the letter. She burns it. Returning to the bed of the broker, she goes on loving her young man. Then, by the time she is fairly settled as the broker's mistress and is working in a theatre he controls, word comes that Lochinvar has struck it rich and is on his way to claim her. She hides this news, but the broker learns it, learns that she never mailed his letter, and learns that she still wants to marry the young man. Once more he gives her rope. He announces an ultimatum and a time-limit: she must tell Lochinvar the whole truth.

When Loch arrives from the West so happy, so sanguine, so credulous, so eager to marry her and snatch her up and carry her back, Laura defies the ultimatum and decides to risk deceiving both men. On the way to get the license, however, the man hears a rumor of her liaison. Just as she is perjuring herself about this, the broker opens the door of his "love-nest" and walks in. A situation. She tries to shoot herself, under the disillusioned gaze of her retreating Lochinvar. When he goes, she tries again. But her heart isn't in it. Then, to the tune of a hurdy-gurdy that played once before when she was reading her love-letters, she shouts that she'll start out as a regular prostitute and "make a hit."

The moral of this play, it seems to me, is quite sound—Once a prostitute, always a defective. And Miss Starr acts the part of a defective to perfection. But it is interesting, if one is looking for "drama," to see how the anecdote is psychologized. It is arranged, as said before, with three types, types standardized by the newspapers and consequently circulating as sound currency all over America. One is the breezy, healthy-minded, virile, Western lover, who raises ideals of womanhood as the plains raise alfalfa and who thinks in great romantic chunks. I never saw him, but Laura could have sold him the Bush Terminal Building as well as her loyalty while she was about it. His vis-à-vis, the wealthy broker, is equally real. He is at one moment the shrewd calculating sensualist, at another moment the romancer who doesn't mail the letter he dictates. He is the irritable rounder but he is always the gentleman to his "kept" woman, never sentimental, never

brutal, never foul-tempered. In other words, the intoxication without the vomit, as the American middle-class demands. No abortions, no rough talk, no bed-candor, nothing but pink lights, references to being "on the level," and some strong silent wordliness. The third type, Laura, is merely the whimpering mouse. Mr. Belasco having provided the cheese and Mr. Walter having set the spring, we watch the eternal playhouse-feminine caught in the trap. She would not have been caught in the trap if, being unemployed as an actress, she had got \$10 a week from her fiancé (who, when a dollar still stood for 100% dollarism, earned \$30—a salary on which newspaper men often married). Or, if this solution didn't offer itself, she could have addressed envelopes, become a waitress or a sales-girl. The "easiest" way, in fact, to a girl really in love, is the incredible way. If she were drunk, or mentally defective, or rudderless—yes. But what do these things matter in a theatre à la Scribe? And people do get a thrill. "Oh!" I heard one young woman say, "it was lovely to see that first scene and those two men in the dark, only their cigars. But oh! it was terr-bul!" So, on a plebiscite, Mr. Belasco would probably win.

The Merry Widow is a refreshing change. It shows us Laura under the name of Flo-Flo, Clo-Clo, Frou-Frou or Choo-Choo, playing friskily around. It is certainly no more realistic but it manages to be twenty times as amusing. Coming from that far-off world, the world before the war, The Merry Widow seems gay, innocent and old-fashioned. The tenor from Amsterdam, Mr. Reginald Pasch, is extremely pleasing. He has verve, humor, and an expressive voice, with a distinguished profile. The merry widow, Mme. Lydia Lipkowska, is an accomplished and charming performer with a light touch. Mr. Jefferson de Angelis clowns admirably.

Don Juan, translated from the French of Henri Bataille by Lawrence Langner, is one of the best plays now being shown in New York. The setting is the choicest work of Mr. Lee Simonson that it has been my fortune to see. The second act, the cathedral of Seville, is cleverly managed in a tiny space and in addition is rich in color, atmosphere and depth of feeling, the streams of Spanish costumes and the funeral procession of "Don Juan" being superb. The other two settings are quite delightful, and the play equally so. Mr. Lou Tellegen does not in the least resemble the runty or hairy professors who, in real life, turn out to be so successful in love-affairs, nor is his equable and stately Don Juan so impetuous as some people seem to expect. But this hero, after all, ought to be a little tired. His depletion, combined with his matter-of-fact and dry humor, are natural to a man who has reached the stage of writing the memoirs of his dead life, and Mr. Tellegen seems to me to catch just the tone of a post-graduate lover. The sad point of the play, however, is that with a great lover as with any other performer who is excessively petted there is no such thing as a positively last appearance. When the man whom Don Juan assists into the duchess's bed as his substitute is unfortunately killed by the angry husband, Don Juan has the joy of attending his own funeral and watching himself in the mirror of his fellow-beings. But even this sobering experience doesn't cure him of romance. Like drunkards who end by becoming silly on a pint of beer, Don Juan cannot resist—but that is M. Bataille's story. It is a cool and witty story, though probably too veracious for our village.

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## Marionettes of Fate

*Punch: The Immortal Liar*, by Conrad Aiken. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.00.

CONRAD AIKEN, as a poet, has matured very slowly; and that, I believe, is a good thing. The farther a man is destined to travel, the slower he is about it—witness, for instance, Goethe. There has been a hopeful lengthiness about Mr. Aiken's progress which should warn critics to keep on the alert.

All young poets are imitative, but Mr. Aiken's first work was almost pathetic in the obviousness of its imitation. To say that a young writer is like an older one, is easy criticism and sounds learned. So the reviewers fell upon Mr. Aiken with gusto and pointed out that he was first like Mr. Masefield and then like Mr. Masters, and paid no attention to that part of his poetry which was like nobody at all but a young person with so fatal a facility for the writing of verse that it had far outstripped the growth of his personality.

That Mr. Aiken had stuff in him, became constantly more evident as volume after volume appeared over his name. Finding that "imitation" no longer did as a tag, the reviewers took up "obscurity," and so was Mr. Aiken flayed again, and with enough justice to injure him considerably in the eyes of the sheeplike public. But the man was crystallizing. With an enormous courage, he pursued his own way, and gradually his direction cleared to his sight.

It has been both a good and a bad thing for Mr. Aiken to have been so much affected by Freud. In spite of the apparent objectivity of Mr. Aiken's work, he is a subjective poet, projecting his ego into the world about him. Science, which is the outcome of logical thought, wedded to a purely emotional series of reactions, is bound to create a good deal of disturbance. So in *The Jig of Forslin* and *The Nocturne of Remembered Spring* we find much beauty playing over an inchoate mass of sensations imperfectly directed by a theory which Mr. Aiken only vaguely apprehended. Little by little, however, the theory is becoming a mere dash of coloring matter in a substance more and more made up of the material of pure poetry. Man's struggles with himself, man engaged in realizing himself before a chill and unrelenting natural law, have become his theme. It took a recognizable shape first in *Senlin*; urged itself forward vigorously in *The House of Dust*, and now, in *Punch*, has achieved a splendid and veritable triumph. For, in this last book, Mr. Aiken has cast his ego into the form of humanity. The particular in him fades before the universal, and we have a phase of experience dropped into a mold of poetry so perfectly adequate to receive it that the result is one of the most significant books of the poetry renaissance.

There has never been any question of Mr. Aiken's poetic ability, what he has needed hitherto was not a technique, but a subject; not the power to create a style, but a theme of sufficient weight for that style to act upon. His prime desideratum has been an idea so compelling that the tide of his words could not escape from it. Death, the motif of *The House of Dust*, failed in being such an idea exactly in proportion to its immensity, it admitted too many ways of treatment and allowed too many loopholes for Mr. Aiken's besetting sin—the blur. This sharply bounded, dominant idea he has at last discovered, and beautifully discovered, in the old *Comedia della Arte*.