

The Trained Audience

MY friend and I were agreeing that tears were mother's milk compared to smiles, so far as audiences went; that comedy must always be the rarest thing in the theatre to arrive at any distinction, and that even when it reached distinction, whether through the play or the playing, it must have an audience of people with the training and the habit that will enable them to follow it and to see the point—a fruitful enough discussion before seeing an artist like Miss Tempest, but cut short by the arrival of my neighbors on the left.

They were two women. The nearest me was a large woman, not very tall, with a great head of black hair cut short and turned under in waves, with black eyes outlined in black, a full red mouth and a skin made very white. Her dress was black, round on the full shoulders, the sleeves stopping at the round elbows and slit all the way to show the arms, whose wide white lines, beginning high up, ran down until they disappeared in the shadow of her figure and lost her hands to sight. It was one of those sack-like dresses caught in at the waist with a girdle; from the shadows came now and again a gleam of jet, and when the wearer moved you heard a grinding and rattling noise like some great set of ill-fitting teeth that were biting the lady in half. Her companion was smaller and plainly the more daring of the two. She had golden hair, cut short also, but curled out spiritedly and bound with a gold tape. Her face was as white as her friend's, her lips as red. Her gown was red, and she had earrings and a bracelet of bright red coral. She smiled constantly, and as she did so was always drawing her upper lip down over her teeth and stretching her nostrils as if breathing was to her a form of haughty inspiration. I looked at the two and thought of them as belonging rather at so many other places on Broadway than at anything Miss Tempest might do. Some eloquent agent, I concluded, must have sold them tickets. But there they were at any rate, and were about to speak, I saw, as they opened their programs and read. The lady in black spoke first:

"Lisson," she said, "it says Mrs. Middleton's apartment. And one week later. And next morning. Just one place! Say!"

"What?" said the lady in red.

"I don't like these plays with just one scene. I don't think they are ever any good. D'you?"

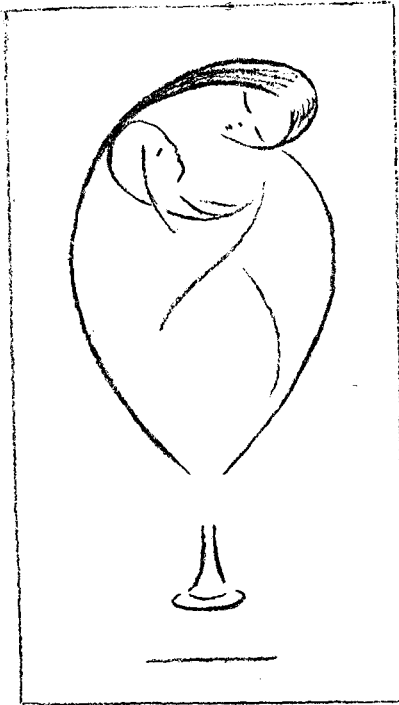
"Oh, I don't know," the other lady replied. "Look at The Bat. That had only one scene and it ran two years. One scene—and another I mean that was just an attic."

"Well, I don't like these plays either because they've not got any sub-titles. I like sub-titles so that you can know what's going to happen. Don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. Of course I like the movies, but I like the drama too. Sh!"

The curtain went up.

The devoted old maid-servant is knocking at the door on the right to waken the young man, who now comes in. He is a young reprobate with a headache, Jerry Middleton, and Mr. Leslie Howard plays him very well, though with far too much recourse to that trick that English actors have of seeming to fight shy of feeling, of being abrupt, reserved, the supposed British male, and so screening themselves behind realistic half-truth and dodging too much of the labor of acting. Jerry Middleton has spent most of his mother's money. He has gambled and drunk, had affairs with women. Meantime the mother that Miss Tem-



Motherhood

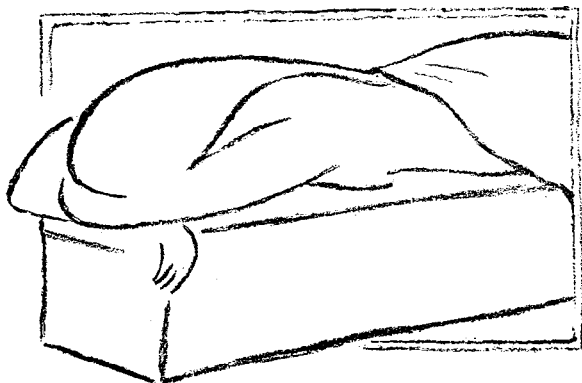
Respectability: He is afraid the wrong persons are about to accost him.

(right)



Small Profits: He is just as happy over what he makes in his

stationery shop, as the greatest magnate is over his largest deals.



Finis

CLARENCE DAY, JR.

pest plays has spoiled him, adored him beyond all bounds. Jerry announces his engagement to Janet Trendall, the daughter of the millionaire, Morgan Trendall, who had been almost a lover of Mrs. Middleton's years ago. He and his daughter come then to a meeting of the clans, old chains revive—pretty patently; Mr. Graham Browne is a lovely man, and all seems well. The curtain falls.

The lady in black took up her program. "Lisson," she read, chopping her way through the lines, "it says 'how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child, King Lear.' Say what is a serpent?"

Several people in the row ahead turned to look round at such a question. The speakers only patted their hair and rattled their jewelry and went on—

"Haven't you ever seen a serpent's tooth?" asked the lady in red.

"No. What's a serpent?"

"Haven't you ever seen a serpent in the movies?"

"No, dearie."

"Not in the animal movies?"

"No, what is it?"

"It's an animal."

"Well, lisson, I know that, or they wouldn't have teeth. What sort of an animal?"

"I don't know. But their teeth are sharp, I'll tell the world."

The play began again. Mrs. Middleton is giving a dinner, with a caterer in and fifty dollars for the bill. The girl from Jerry's last affair arrives in a taxicab and keeps blowing the horn for him to come down to her. Finally he is scared into going, and makes business excuses. Then the mother can pretend no longer, and tells Janet the truth about the man she is about to marry. Janet refuses to believe ill of Jerry, and her father carries her home.

The lady in red was snapping her fingers to the usher for a glass of water. My companion and I went down to the lounge.

You would never believe that about the serpent, we agreed, if you had not heard it. It would seem only a cheap and far-fetched story, about as subtle as the people who said it. But there it was, all too actual, too heard, just as the women were there. We sat silent in the smoking-room, full of grim thoughts and modern instances.

All during the intermission, then, I thought of Miss Tempest and her art. It is an art the elaboration and method of which is a trifle obvious or over-deliberate, perhaps a little more so now than once; but the method is unerring in its results; it has a convincingness that almost thwarts your judgment of the play it carries. An art like this of Miss Tempest's has about it the quality of high comedy because its spirit is so keen, its vivacity so fluent and ready, its tempo so well in hand, its mentality and wit so exact, its division between tears and laughter so vague and poignant. I sat there under a cloud of smoke thinking of how she had taken her points as they came, so un-faillingly and so happily, and had been driven no doubt to find some of them for herself, to bolster up the play with her own invention. I thought of how she had put style into what were really but familiar moments from an everyday material; how she had made herself a comment on all these moments by seeing them in the light of a large common sense and pity and ironical mockery and strength.

The Serpent's Tooth, to begin with, was too short even in time. The play seemed afraid to take the time to think as it went. It was afraid to fill out the intervals of its action with a conversation in which the slant of the author's mind

toward all this little human hubbub might be exhibited. It trotted along with the story, with too few revelations and too much energy, too little contact and too much coming and going. It deserved its imminent failure. But if it had been a better play, I asked myself, and Mr. Graham Browne less manifest, and Miss Ann Merrick less impossible for everything else except what is due to the accidents of time and appearance—if the Serpent's Tooth had been a better play, as good even for wit and elaboration as Mr. Richman's piece, *The Awful Truth*, not far off down the street, could we have kept my two neighbors in their seats at all? And if we have a Broadway full of such as these two ladies in red and black, what happens to comedy and its luminous bath of reason, its tradition, its well ventilated code of social judgments, its search for the necessities of taste and of the glancing criticism and robust discernment of daily values?

The bell recalled us, the third act was beginning.

Mr. Browne has come to see Miss Tempest to explain. He feels deeply about everything, very deeply about the sentiment attaching to the combination that occurs to him of the past and the present. He expresses his mood.

"Lisson, he's good all right," said the lady in black, leaning over.

Mr. Graham Browne explains anew, opening his palms for the gallery to see and raising his upper eyelids, with an art as obvious as the razor advertisements; and the lady repeated her praise:

"He's good, I'll tell the world!"

Jerry in a fit of remorse catches his mother in his arms and kisses her. The lady in black chuckled and said, "He's gettin' to like her, ain't he!"

The play drew to an end. Mr. Trendall will send Jerry to a ranch where he feels sure the food, the work and the company will reform him. He himself will marry the mother, and the mother will wait with the daughter till the redeemed Jerry comes back again.

The curtain fell with great applause, mostly for Miss Tempest, who got herself out of Mr. Graham Browne's platitudinous arms to bow. There were more calls and bows. The lights came on in the house.

I turned to see how our two ladies were taking it; enthusiasm, I thought, would be in their line. But they were gone. Then I saw them at the side exit. They had already bought a newspaper from a man and were bending their heads together over it as they hurried along.

"Heh's your murder, heh!" the man called. "Heh's your murder! Three women killed by a bootlegger! Git your paper! Paper!"

STARK YOUNG.

Song to be Said While Walking

We may wander and wander far,
Wander far as the blue hills are;
Yet never so far as the blue hills seem—
Oh, the blue of a hill is a mist, a gleam,
Lighting a face, cooling the mind.
And though the roadways wind and wind,
And though we follow and wander on
Always the blue grows green as a lawn,
And always though roads run green, run high,
Blows a blue mist across the eye.

HAZEL HALL.