

Nine in a Taxi

THE *Young Lady*—Well, I must say I enjoyed that.*
Driver, go up Fifth Avenue.

The Broker—It was colorful.

Mr. MacMoron—How destructive Shaw is of shams. How he hates pretense and bigotry.

The Stranger—How incurably romantic he is.

The Lady who once met GBS at a dinner party—I wish Mr. Shaw could have seen it tonight. He'd have liked it.

The Gossip—I hear he's writing a new play.

The Critic—This is a queer insulated thing, this *Devil's Disciple*. Very near to us, about something well known and in our recent past, yet how little is it historical. You don't feel that Saratoga is just around the corner. The play is as much of a desert Island as a musical comedy. Now in *Androcles* what vistas there were leading into the great dark world. A play of starting points. While this is a play of arrivals.

The Stranger—As soon as you begin to make characters who are all villains or heroes, you cut yourself off from the world. I'm sure this is a favorite of Shaw's. All villains and heroes. He'd much rather, at bottom, simplify the world than see it as the complicated thing it is.

Mr. MacMoron—But has any one ever pointed out the sheer brilliance of Shaw?

The Lady Who Once, etc.—I told Mr. Shaw he was the cleverest man I'd ever read.

The Young Lady—The Court Martial Scene was a scream.

The Gossip—I hear Morris Gest is going to write a book about the theatre and dedicate it to Max Reinhardt.

The Critic—The point is, how does this play correspond with reality? What is the reality Shaw has in mind?

The Stranger—At bottom, the reality of the Lump in the Throat. One hundred percent sacrifice moves Shaw unspeakably. And he translates this wholehearted unquestioning bravery, this finest flower of the human spirit, into something that moves us too, unspeakably. I mean we have no words for it. Where Dick Dudgeon lets the soldiers take him away. . . .

The Young Lady—Oh, that gave me *such* a feeling! How splendid of him!

The Broker—It was a fine thing to do.

The Lady Who Once, etc.—I'm sure Mr. Shaw has sacrificed a great deal himself. Those eyes of his. . . .

Mr. MacMoron—Whenever I see or hear of sacrifice, I have a lump in my throat. Now, for instance—I have a sister who is a trained nurse. . . .

The Critic—In other words, this is high romance. Romance besieged, cut off, isolated. Melodromance. And it ought to be played as such, with terrific speed, cruelty, hardness, lightheartedness, and cynicism. . . .

The Young Lady—Do you think Shaw is cynical?

The Actor—I agree with you. The performance was made up of little pieces and kept stopping all the time. Now the first act—Wasn't it slow?

The Critic—That was the fault of the direction. Speaking of directors, did you read what Kenneth Macgowan. . . .

The Gossip—I hear Kenneth is writing a new book. It's to be called the Theatre of the Spring of 1926.

* *The Devil's Disciple*. A melodrama by George Bernard Shaw. Presented by the Theatre Guild. Directed by Philip Moeller. Settings by Lee Simonson. At the Garrick Theatre, April 23rd.

The Critic—Leaving the direction aside, we can say of this as we can of nearly all Theatre Guild productions, that it was a fine thing to the eye. . . .

The Musician—And terrible to the ear. Just try blind-folding yourself and sitting through the *Devil's Disciple*. It's mostly eye.

The Broker—It was colorful.

The Lady Who, etc.—Mr. Shaw has a red beard.

The Artist—Pleasant, yes. Bully costumes. The sets finely composed as to color. I liked the blue and white severity of the Waiting Room scene particularly. But on the stage objects of three dimensions have a way of sticking out and spoiling by unexpected lines a fine composition of color. Take the first act. Too many objects. Though finely related to the whole in color, how they jut out. And the last act was miscellaneous.

The Actor—What a poor mob at the gate. Not angry, but maudlin; not Yankee rebels, but half-wits.

Mr. MacMoron—The Yankee rebel forefathers were highly intelligent.

The Young Lady—Wasn't Basil Sydney splendid! He's one of the handsomest men!

The Actor—And one of the worst actors.

The Gossip—They say he's going to play Hamlet.

The Young Lady—I could fall in love with him.

The Lady Who—Mr. Shaw has such eyes! If he wanted to I know he could be a heartbreaker. . . .

The Actor—Basil Sydney's a sponge squeezer. He'll squeeze a line until it's dry of meaning, and then some. Give him twenty words and he'll use twenty face muscles and four kinds of breathing, and he'll slant up his eyebrows meaningfully, and pretend to chew gum, and shuffle his mouth and lips and redeal them. . . .

The Broker—He ought to be made to play poker and have not to change his face for seven hours.

The Critic—He has a kind of condescendingly soothing insistence that soon becomes unbearable.

The Musician—All the tones of his voice seem in the same key of self-satisfied assurance.

The Young Lady—I'd marry him tomorrow.

The Stranger—That's the praise he, or any one else, would most like to hear.

The Critic—To continue. Miss Lotus Robb. . . .

The Young Lady—She's a dear.

The Gossip—I hear she's going to play Juliet.

The Actor—Judith Anderson is a hard part. There she is planted in the court martial scene, which is pure joyous verbal duelling and slap-stick, and all the time she is an intensely tragic figure.

The Artist—Perhaps she ought to sit with her back to the audience.

The Stranger—A very fine bit she does when Anderson finds her fainted on the floor.

The Critic—A strain of poignant life, like music.

The Actor—That change from half-conscious puzzlement to terror and remembrance is not easy, and admirably done. One of the best bits of acting in the whole play.

The Stranger—The change to a new mood is good, but the reality of the new mood is not maintained.

The Young Lady—Don't you people ever like *anything*?

The Actor—We all find Mr. Moffat Johnston good.

The Gossip—I hear he is going to play Hamlet.

The Critic—He is warm, natural, sympathetic.

The Stranger—He's too much the same in every play.

The Young Lady—I felt so sorry for Anderson's poor wife. Imagine—a man so *much* older!

The Gossip—Which is older, Gest or Reinhardt? Rein-

hardt is writing a book on the American Theatre. It will be dedicated to Morris Gest. He has been to see Kiki.

The Lady Who Once, etc.—I am sure Roland Young was not Mr. Shaw's idea of General Burgoyne.

The Young Lady—Oh, do you think so? I thought he was so funny and dry; so *amusing*.

The Gossip—I hear he's going to play Hamlet.

The Young Lady—You're thinking of Rollo's Wild Oat.

The Actor—Rollo, Anything Might Happen, General Burgoyne. The same delightful Roland Young, but the *same*. Now, his voice is more monotonous than Sydney's, but he knows just how to use it. Not a wide range, but within his special talent an admirable economy of sound, emphasis, gesture. He squeezed every drop of humor out of the juicy lines, but, unlike Sydney, he didn't seem to be squeezing.

The Critic—He is secure, but inelastic. His art, if not transcendent, is at his command.

The Stranger—Anybody who didn't score high with those lines ought to be shot. Of course he seems good.

Mr. MacMoron—Shaw is well known for his biting humor.

The Gossip—I hear that Reinhardt is going to have the Hippodrome. Or maybe Madison Square Garden.

The Stranger—Of course Roland Young's conception of General Burgoyne was all wrong. Or rather the century he put it in was all wrong. Young is too modern. Burgoyne was, with all his flippancy, much more impressive. He was acid rather than salty, and subdued his officers by the hint of a cold savagery held in reserve. And his eyes, says Shaw "were large, brilliant, apprehensive. . . ."

The Lady Who, etc.—I'm sure that's the way Mr. Shaw thought of him.

The Stranger—And we can't give Roland Young new eyes. Nor fifty pounds more weight. Nor a post-portwine richness and fastidiousness of bearing.

The Gossip—I hear that Reinhardt has leased Croton Reservoir for the gondola scene from the Merchant of Venice.

The Broker—It's a fine location.

The Critic—There's something that worries me about Miss Beverly Sitgreaves as Mrs. Dudgeon. A fine command, but a too heavy insistence.

The Actor—She impresses one, and that's good; but she often impresses one when she should not be making any impression at all.

The Critic—She tends toward the imperialistic. She is a competent enough actress to get more of your attention than her lines deserve.

The Young Lady—You are so critical! But I like to hear you talk. It must be fine to have a means of self-expression.

The Lady Who—I wish Mr. Shaw could be here now.

The Critic—As for the others, the smaller parts. . . .

The Actor—Now there's one thing I like about you. I don't as a rule understand what you're talking about, but you do notice the smaller parts.

The Critic—Miss Bryan Allen as Essie was disarming and authentic. Mr. Hamer as Christie did well with his body, and badly with his voice. The Dudgeon uncles (Messrs. Russell and Cecil) were heavy exaggerations where salty caricatures were wanted. Mr. Cecil later reappeared as the Sergeant, in which part he was unrecognizable, and adequate.

The Actor—I see what you're driving at.

The Stranger—I don't. You have fallen into jargon. It's nearly, but not quite, comprehensible. Still, I couldn't do any better. Some sort of verbal shorthand is necessary. All honor to the players of small parts. May they never be spoilt by becoming stars.

The Young Lady—An actor's life must be awfully interesting.

The Broker—They never get any exercise.

The Gossip—I hear Max Reinhardt is going to do a dramatization of the Telephone Directory.

The Musician—None of you people see that the whole thing's all wrong. If a symphony were played as badly as most plays—and this one—are acted, it would be hissed off the stage. This is all separate, unrelated notes. It needs a conductor. The tempo is the same, rigid, pedestrian same, throughout. Even were the acting left, in detail, as we saw it tonight, a lot could be done by having an intelligent person with a baton down in front speeding things up here, slowing them down there. But as it is now it's in the darkneses of the pre-rehearsal era.

The Actor—Yes, it's true we actors seldom get out of the rehearsal stage. It's not entirely our fault. It's financial.

The Gossip—I hear the Theatre Guild Bond drive was oversubscribed: \$542,800. The next step, I hear, is to call in the Otis Elevator Company and devise machinery that will rock the stage back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, so that the audience will think it's at sea.

The Young Lady—That would be *much* too realistic!

The Lady Who, etc.—Mr. Shaw told me he had crossed the Channel 184 times.

The Critic—Realism. That's the blight of the stage. We have much to learn from life, it is true, but more, at the present time, to learn from the experiments of the expressionists—or the essentialists. Now we want to get away from peep-hole realism, and bore through to the essentials, to the inner truth. . . .

The Stranger—Northern and Southern Dakota, upper and lower berth, inner and outer truth. Renascence, Quintessence, Truthessence, Senescence. Break the shell, boys. Bury all the old words, and the new ones under them.

The Young Lady—Mr. Critic, if I were an actress, what would you say about *me*?

Dr. Frank Crane (suddenly, from under the seat)—I take my hat off to Actor Sydney and Author Shaw.

All (shouting)—Say! This taxi holds only nine. (They throw him out.)

The Broker—He's an optimist.

The Critic—Shaw, to continue, is not really true to any reality except his own, nor does he choose the just, the inevitable mold, the unimprovable-upon vehicle. . . .

The Young Lady—But it's good fun.

The Stranger—And it makes you think, here and there.

The Critic— . . . for his inner, his sub-selfian, sub-Shavian mood. He does not articulate; he connects, irrefragably, sense with sound. . . . What we want is beauty revealed, perceived, translated. What we want are not representational actors, but non-representational actors. The Theatre needs non-proportional representationalism. . . . It must find, behind the outer rind, the inner mind. . . .

Everybody else—Driver! *Stop!* Here's where I get off!

ROBERT LITTELL.

Books and Things

ON page thirteen of her Joseph Conrad, *His Romantic Realism* (Boston: The Four Seas Company. \$2.50 net) Miss Ruth M. Stauffer gave me a bad scare. She asked two questions: "What is Romanticism? What is Realism?" I almost dropped her book, reached for my hat, started for the Peaks and the Great Waste Places. I was just man enough to sit tight, though, and I am glad of it, for Miss Stauffer doesn't answer her questions. "It would be wearisome," she says, "even to enumerate the books and articles that have been written in all languages to define these two terms." Not without thankfulness, with a sense of new perils passed, I read on: "A full examination of every one of these is out of place here." I turned to the *errata*, naturally expecting to find that "here" was a misprint for "here, there, everywhere, yesterday, to-day and forever," but did not find what I sought.

These things I mention because by doing so I can take a short cut to my opinion of Miss Stauffer's book. True, she does keep repeating Realism, Romance, Romanticist, Realist, but she also knows that these words have been worn pebble-smooth, concept-smooth. True, she cannot restore them to that lost paradise where Adam used them first, but neither does she attempt to define them. For Miss Stauffer, as for almost all their employers, they are, I admit, conveniences which are too easy, too dead easy, yet on her lips they are names not for non-existent things, but for two kinds of joy that Mr. Conrad's books have given her. These joys are deep and her own. Realism is what she says whenever her wonder is chiefly at the exactness of Mr. Conrad's truth to his impression; just as, whenever this wonder is lost in the other, which is all uneasiness and foreboding and excruciating hope, all tempest and shaken citadels, she says Romance. Useless to refuse her this vocabulary if you can't deprive her at the same time of her will to classify.

The will to classify! That must have been what Arthur Hugh Clough had in mind when he deplored the "ruinous force of the will." Even at this moment, when my resistance is not at its weakest, this will is urging me to make Mr. Conrad's arrival in the United States a pretext for one more attempt to classify him. The undertaking looks so much easier than it is. All one has to do is to begin anywhere, say with

In every work regard the writer's End,

For none can compass more than they intend,

and next, after conceding that nowadays hardly anybody agrees with Pope, to ask whether his couplet doesn't in fact help us to divide great writers into those who cannot compass more than they intend, like Heredia, and those who cannot for the life of them help compassing a lot more, like Blake. Such a classification looks pretty good for just so long as it enables us to forget what we were talking about, the case of Mr. Conrad, who obviously won't go into either class. He is the inventor of a difficult method, which he could not have invented without much hard conscious thinking and planning, which he sticks to throughout some of his novels rather fanatically, and by dint of this method he moves and haunts us as no other great man can who seems to have such infrequent access to his unconscious mind.

If one thought about the metre while writing a poem, Goethe said to Eckermann, one would go crazy. *Der Takt kommt aus der poetischen Stimmung, wie unbewusst.*

A novelist would be as likely to go crazy if he thought about making realism or romance. I am speaking of artists, of course, not of manufacturers. A critic cannot very well help talking about metre, but of romance and realism he can stop talking, if he tries hard and prays hard. A new point of view might be the reward of such abstinence, and a closer acquaintance with one's subject. "A search for buried gold," thus does Miss Stauffer describe Mr. Conrad's raw material, "the explosion of a bomb, the plotting of anarchists and spies, a revolution in Costa Rica and another in Spain, shipwrecks and pirates, cannibalism and savagery, murder, love, beauty, fate, self-seeking, and heroism. Yet such events as these, which lie at the heart of all Romance, become in the hands of Conrad not in the least mere exciting adventures in the circumstantial, objective sense, but adventures far more tense and intricate, adventures of the spirit." How near that passage brings us to Mr. Conrad! And how close-fitting Miss Stauffer's two adjectives are, her "tense and intricate"! I should like her book better if she had never mentioned Romance except as here, incidentally, and had not mentioned Realism at all.

Very good, too, is Miss Stauffer's assertion that "not even the slightest detail of all the crowded impressions of those twenty-five years at sea escaped Conrad's observation." Grossly untrue of such a being as man, with no more than man's power of attending to each of those innumerable specious presents which are now his past, this is the right sort of exaggeration, the sound useful sort. It is an accurate account of one of the illusions with which Mr. Conrad has enriched and liberated his contemporaries, while posterity is waiting its turn. What Miss Stauffer says reminds us that Mr. Conrad has lived more nearly as the Greek poets lived than any other professional writer of his age. He would have been in his element, the sea, at Salamis. He could contrast for us, if he were less unwilling to talk of himself, the artist's life and the man of action's. We should like to know whether the antique writers he has always valued have the same faces at his desk as at sea, and the same names, justice, austerity, renunciation, courage.

Now that Mr. Conrad is in this country, and for the first time, some of us have been trying to pick out the men whose opinion of us we should be as eager to learn. We are not to learn it, I believe, and I can't help being sorry. Would he say of us, as he once said of another creator's creatures, that our "fate is poignant, it is intensely interesting, and of not the slightest consequence"? The most we can hope for is that one of these days he may show us as much of ourselves as he has shown us of another subject he doesn't care to discuss. In *Notes on Life and Letters* he has given us, he says, "a thin array . . . of really innocent attitudes: Conrad literary, Conrad political, Conrad reminiscent, Conrad controversial." He has given us "a partial view of a piece of his back, a little dusty, . . . a little bowed, and receding from the world not because of weariness or misanthropy but for other reasons that cannot be helped: because the leaves fall, the water flows, the clock ticks with that horrid pitiless solemnity which you must have observed in the ticking of the hall clock at home. For reasons like that." To suppose they mayn't get more than this glimpse makes me less envious of those luckier persons who are to be in the same room with Mr. Conrad. After all, one can try again to know him by his books, with their treasures of irony, and truth and spindrift, fortitude, mystery, and tropic gales.

P. L.