

Shocking Difficulties

BY LOUISE MAUNSELL FIELD

Thrills In The Discard

IT is entirely probable that few of the vast army of present-day publicity promoters have ever so much as heard of their Eighteenth Century brother, Mr. Puff. Yet it was that most amusing of all the many amusing characters in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's brilliant play, *The Critic*, who declared that the two strongest inducements that could possibly be offered to tempt the public to buy a book were, first, that everyone was reading it, and second, that it was so shocking no one ought to read it. To the still extant influence of the first inducement, the Literary Guild, the Book-of-the-Month Club and all the rest bear sufficiently convincing testimony; on the drawing power of the second, publishers and theatrical managers, preachers and press agents, publicity seekers of all kinds and every imaginable description, have long been accustomed to depend. And the great, the stupendous disaster which has befallen all these is that the once reliable magnet is today little better than a lump of putty. Shocking the public was once an easy and an almost certain source of revenue. Few have the power to be really witty, eloquent, original or forceful;

but there was a time when almost anyone who tried hard enough and really gave his whole mind to it could succeed in being improper, and therefore shocking; today, what was once facile has become a feat so difficult as to demand positive genius.

CONSIDER, if you will, how very little trouble it was to produce a sensation fifty years or so ago! How comparatively simple to stir up a whole lot of excitement, ten years ago, or even less! Our grandfathers and grandmothers, even our fathers and mothers, lived lives that were just one thrill after another, packed with the excitement which we hunt persistently, and usually fail to find. It was once possible for *The Terrible Siren*, Victoria Woodhull, to produce a near riot by denouncing marriage, and declaring that love without matrimony was preferable to matrimony with or without love. George Bernard Shaw could cause chills of delicious horror to run up and down the spines of those "advanced" enough to read his plays, by asserting that family affection was all bunk and family hatred a very present fact, while the famous "shawl speech" of *Candida* was men-

tioned with bated breath. How exciting they must have been, those dear old days when thin ice was everywhere, when any ambitious clergyman could attain the front page of Monday morning's newspaper by a few well-chosen remarks concerning Jonah and the whale, when men lined up beside the Flatiron Building on breezy days to look at the ankles revealed by wind-tossed skirts, and so-called problem plays like *Iris*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, and *The Gay Lord Quex* were denounced by press and pulpit as destructive of morals and hideous proofs of the deplorable corruption of the age! When *Jude the Obscure* was nicknamed *Jude the Obscene*, and *Three Weeks* regarded as the very last word in daring!

BUT it isn't necessary to go back as far as even the most recent of these for a time when any novelist or preacher, playwright or producer, who earnestly and fervently applied himself to the endeavor, could be reasonably sure of shocking his audience. Only a decade ago the way was still open, and comparatively obvious. Prohibition had just aroused a new, more ardent interest in drinking, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's tales of bibulous parties whence guests retired to be sick in the bathroom were accounted quite startling; today, the recounting of such incidents is expected, and produces only weariness. The nymphomaniac heroine of *The Green Hat* was another much imitated source of excitement for a while, arousing a curiosity that brought popularity to a rather dull and tawdry novel. *Rain*, interesting, well-acted, intelligent play though it was, owed at least half its success

to the fact that the fall of the inordinately pious missionary profoundly horrified many estimable people. These truly virtuous souls immediately told all their dear and no less virtuous friends how perfectly terrible a play *Rain* was, whereupon those dear friends hastened to buy tickets, that they might judge its immorality for themselves, and tell everyone they met how deplorably wicked and completely corrupt the stage had become. A little later, the petting parties of the much discussed younger generation proved a perfect godsend to the would-be shock producers, especially to those whose chosen rôle it was to edify the spotless by describing the ways of the dissolute in the minutest possible detail, while shortly afterwards war books of a "now-it-can-be-told" variety other than that implied by Sir Philip Gibbs fairly luxuriated in long and frequent accounts of certain physical functions, literally quite naked and unashamed.

SEX of course has always been the shocking standby. At one time, the syllable itself was enough to produce a sensation. Then, as people grew used to the sound of the formerly alarming word, it became necessary to go further; and further; and further still. The development from the very mild situation for whose introduction Thackeray once thought it necessary to apologize to the much vaunted frankness of today, can be easily traced. But presently the end was reached. Impossible to go further, since there was nowhere further to go. Everything sayable had been said, not once but many times; everything describable de-

scribed. Normal sex relations having thus been exploited to the very limit, abnormal ones were the next resort. *The Well of Loneliness* and *Dusty Answer* proved profitably horrifying, whereupon authors who had apparently but just discovered that such unfortunate beings as homosexuals existed, dragged them into their books, imagining, no doubt, that they were thereby demonstrating their own complete sophistication, and administering the largest possible amount of shock to their readers.

ALL this in the past, distant and not-so-distant. But today, what are the poor, hard working, conscientious immoralists to do? Such places as Dayton, Tenn., may perhaps still be horrified with ease, but their playgoing, book-buying public can not honestly be called extensive. In Boston, the Watch and Ward Society still struggles gamely to maintain a state of shockability, actually banning books it deems improper. Lists of these banned books are occasionally issued, to the immense satisfaction of their authors and publishers. Only a year or two ago, a very clever young novelist complained bitterly to me about one of these lists, not because his new book was on it, but because it wasn't, and he regarded the omission as obviously unfair. Nor is it long since Boston barred *Strange Interlude*, with excellent results—from the box-office standpoint. But though here in New York itself there actually exist not only individuals but groups of individuals who occasionally avow themselves shocked by some play or novel, the general public pays

small attention to them. Even the intervention of the police can no longer save a dull play or a stupid book for more than a very little while.

The plight of those who have to depend for their success upon arousing public interest has thus become truly pitiable. A preacher, unless he is already a person of some considerable importance, can not hope to achieve the front page by denying God and immortality, much less Jonah and the whale. A lecturer may find marriage all to the bad without startling his audience one little bit. Indissoluble marriage, companionate marriage (and think what a stir the suggestion of that made, only a very few years ago!), no marriage at all; again, who is uninstructed enough to become really excited over the advocacy of any one of them? We've heard the arguments and attacks much too often. Sensationalism can no longer insure success, because nothing is really sensational any more.

THE predicament of the producers is particularly grave. For a while, some of these were cheered by the brilliant innovation of separating stockings and the chorus; rarely indeed do economy and publicity go thus sweetly hand in hand. Today, the revues have to meet more than the competition of the bathing beaches. At a certain very quiet little country place, this past summer, the younger set put on an amateur show. Girls from the cottage colony danced on an improvised stage in swimming suits of the scantiest possible description, and then proceeded to perform other evolutions in costumes which would once

have been deemed fit only for burlesque. As one middle-aged gentleman remarked, a few years ago such a show would unquestionably have been raided by the police. But he said it quite calmly. He wasn't at all horrified; he was merely making mild comment, as an interested spectator of changing manners and customs. The fathers and mothers, the sisters and brothers and cousins and aunts of the performers, middle-class people of the ultra-respectable sort, every one of them, beamed and applauded, as placid and as undisturbed as if they had been so many members of the intelligentsia, or the smart set. What would once have provided discussion, denunciation, chills and thrills for the remainder of the season, was rather less exciting than an old-fashioned tableau of the Lily Maid of Astolat.

MODERN life affords few spectacles more pathetic than the way those inveterate conservatives and optimists, the publishers and theatrical producers, cling to the formulæ which once spelled success. Books are still being advertised as "frank," "daring," and "sensational." Last season, play after play was produced for no other apparent reason than a vain hope that its coarseness and vulgarity might prove extreme enough to shock the audience. Instead, the audience yawned wearily, its only sensation one of profound indignation at being thus bored. Why, its members asked, should anyone expect them to be entertained by that old stuff? And they forthwith stayed away in droves. Where a single "Damn!" was once delightfully piquant, a whole flood of

profanity failed to excite a ripple of interest; bedroom scenes suggested only fatigue, and adultery, on the stage at least, seemed stupidly conventional, a mere matter of course. Sex punch, in fact, proved quite unable to produce a knockout, until some of the learned turned back a couple of thousand years or more, and in *Lysistrata* found the shocking reward that had seemed almost unattainable, even with the help of the police. And at that it may be remembered that Aristophanes has for some time been reputed a dramatist whose lewdness is not his sole and solitary claim to attention.

AS FOR the novelists, their plight is if anything more pathetic, more desperate than that of the dramatists, since they must perforce depend on descriptions alone, where the dramatist may have illustrations with, so to speak, living models. Once upon a time, successful novel after successful novel turned upon the useful triangle; now Paris, Reno and Mexico have made triangle situations seem rather ridiculous. Another favorite theme was that euphuistically called "the wages of sin." When the heroine lost her virtue she shed tears by the quart and took to suicide, or at least to her bed; the resultant excitement was enormous. The modern heroine, on the contrary, seems to worry a good deal more over the loss of her cigarette case than she does over that of her virtue, and not infrequently appears to regard chastity as something not quite compatible with decency. The really kind-hearted author is often considerate enough to divest his leading lady of such *impedimenta*

before she enters upon the scene at all.

Then, too, there was a time when mother, any mother, became sacrosanct through the mere physical fact of maternity. To attack the divine righteousness of all mothers was to profane the very holy of holies; it simply wasn't done. Suddenly came a period when mother, from being a creature who could do no wrong, turned into one who could do no right, becoming an object not for worship but for brickbats, denounced as greedy, possessive, shamelessly and completely selfish.

THE reliable Freud was called into court, and the Œdipus complex proclaimed with cheers. Father incidentally came in for a whack or two, but since he was quite often a business man and had in consequence long been regarded as an altogether inferior being, he was let off, by comparison, very lightly. At first, some were shocked, some delighted and some excited by the iconoclastic onslaught, which was waged with a fervor truly religious; but now it must be sadly admitted that the debasing and exalting of mother are about equally familiar, and unexciting. As for the hero and heroine who rebelled against the conventions, he and she have made the fortunes of literally thousands of novels. Nowadays we know all their tricks and manners, and rather wonder what they find worth making such a fuss about, since there is no longer anything quite as dreadfully conventional as unconventionality, and rebels are about the only people against whom it is possible to rebel.

The worst of it all is that we have here one of those exceptionally poor rules which do not work both ways. If it were possible to alarm the public of today by writing about the sanctity of marriage, filial duty, the saintliness of mothers, and the close knit bonds of family affection, there would be no dilemma at all. If the virgin heroine were as productive of opprobrium as the prostitute heroine, as Susan Lennox, for example, used to be; if marital fidelity were as heart-rending a spectacle as marital infidelity once was, and individuals with normal sex instincts as hair raising as the abnormalities were in the days of Oscar Wilde, all that would be needed in order to produce the desired sensation would be to reverse the old formulæ and go ahead. When everyone expected a hero or heroine to be a model of virtue, there was some point, some piquancy, in portraying one or both as thoroughly iniquitous; if everyone expected them to be bad, there might be something interesting in presenting them as completely noble; but when they are merely required to be human beings, what is a poor author to do? Shocking is unquestionably profitable, no matter how it is done. But where are you, I'd like to know, when it can't be done at all?

SOME observers have seen hope for future shocking possibilities in the return of the long-skirted evening gown, and its accompanying femininity. In fact, this very return has given every such hope a final blow. When long skirts were universally worn, short ones were exciting; and *vice versa*. But when each is donned alternately by the self-same in-

dividual, where, oh where, is any thrill to be obtained? The situation is tragic, and practically universal.

Music and painting are faced with well-nigh the same dilemma as fiction and the drama. How many people today would have their moral sensibilities outraged by a *September Morn*, or their æsthetic ones by a *Nude Descending the Stair*? As for music, discords may clash, shriek or squeal as they will, without arousing any really fervent protest from anybody. It is simply heart breaking to think of all the fun and excitement our forbears had, being horrified by all sorts of things that don't affect us one little bit. No wonder suicide and insanity are on the increase, now that so much of the joy and satisfaction have gone out of life! For in the good old days you could have it either way. For instance, if you were a woman, you could smoke cigarettes in public and revel in the resultant excitement, or you could be a non-smoker and have a perfectly wonderful time proclaiming your horror at all outrageous, cigarette-smoking hussies. In that happy time, the possibilities of shocking or being shocked were simply endless; today, they are just about ended. Accustomedness is the complete shock-absorber.

A FEW there are who look back at various historical periods, and, remembering that the license of the Eighteenth Century was followed by the prudishness of the Nineteenth, find cheer in the analogy. Why shouldn't old-fashioned sensibility return, and bringing a blush to the cheek of the young person once more prove feasible? But there is a

difficulty; the great difficulty that what was once conscious defiance has become a matter of course, that people don't care either way. Public opinion, once easily roused against an offender, just doesn't bother any more. It is merely indifferent, and rather proud of its indifference, which it miscalls tolerance. From a shocking point of view, there is nothing so discouraging. One can be immoral dramatically only in a morally self-satisfied era, virtuous dramatically only when there is really strong objection to the unco' guid.

THE twilight of the sensationalists has come. The gods they challenged are either moribund, totally defunct, or so changed as to be unrecognizable. Respectability has become a joke; right and wrong, inextricably mingled. We are all so used to having "the facts of life" paraded before us in their ugliest possible aspect that we no longer become excited or indignant. We can no longer be shocked at anything, because we have become used to everything. Familiarity breeds indifference at least as often as it does contempt.

We can still, some of us, be repelled by vulgarity and bad taste; and we can most of us be bored. We were profoundly bored last season by many plays that struggled to be daring, and succeeded only in being dull. As for psychopathic studies produced under the guise of fiction, they may be well done and consequently interesting, or they may be merely tedious; but they can't rely on "frankness" and "daring" any longer. Mr. Puff's successors must, after all, revise his formula.

Treasure in the Depths

BY KINGSLEY MOSES

This spring a new attempt will be made to salvage the treasure which went to the bottom in S.S. "Egypt"

HIDDEN treasure has always an extraordinary allure for human beings. Men waste their lives in its search; suffer incredible hardships; starve and freeze to death miserably; yet would not think of turning to any other pursuit.

This for the treasure which is hid in the earth.

For the fortunes sunk in the sea quite another sort of effort is necessary; though it is an effort which requires fully as much courage and even greater hardihood. The diver who penetrates the depths of the sea to salvage precious cargoes from the ocean's ooze and slime has to be an athlete in the most perfect physical shape as well as a man of indomitable courage.

Until last year it was generally agreed that the extreme depth to which a deep-sea diver could descend was about fifty fathoms — three hundred feet. That record had only once been passed — the attempt of the U. S. Navy divers to examine the wrecked submarine in the harbor of Honolulu. And even these men had gone but three hundred and six feet down.

Last autumn, however, an experi-

ment was begun which may change the whole future of deep-sea salvage. In 1922 the liner *Egypt* went to the bottom off the southwesternmost point of France with a cargo of five tons of gold bullion and forty-five tons of silver. The hulk of the *Egypt* lay four hundred feet down. It was generally considered to be beyond human reach.

BUT in September, 1930, two Italian salvage vessels, the *Artiglio* and the *Rostro*, owned by a Genoese firm, the Societa Anonima Ricuperi Marittimi, set to work on the wreck with a type of diving gear never before practically employed. Men were let down to the wreck in solid steel cells, fitted with windows through which the divers could observe, and with telephone lines by which they might direct the operations of their associates on the salvage vessels above them.

With submarine charges of explosives the salvors had been able pretty well to shatter the hulk; and by carefully manipulated grapnels they had managed to get at the safe in the purser's office and recover a few valuable papers and some dip-