

# Vodvil and Legit

By EDMUND PEARSON

IN the old days of "Puck" there were a great many pictures, usually by Oppen, of the actor parading the Rialto—or Broadway. He wore a rusty tall hat, and a long overcoat with shabby astrakhan at the collar and cuffs. His face was gaunt and his chin not recently shaven, but he carried himself with a magnificent strut. This, because he had "once played with Booth." He was very contemptuous toward folk whom he called "low-down variety fakers."

If this person ever existed, he is practically extinct today. Oppen's drawings were, of course, largely caricature, or at best he dealt with the ham actor who was himself something of a faker, like the leading character in Mr. Marc Connelly's recent play "The Wild Man of Borneo." The great and really successful actors have usually fought their way up from the humblest beginnings, and are sympathetic toward all their brother and sister entertainers, whether they paint their faces white and amuse circus audiences, shoot glass balls from horseback, or appear in charge of a troupe of trained seals. The famous star who has written one of the books mentioned here today would be the last person to object to a discussion, on the same page, of a book about the circus and another one describing the lives of variety actors in a cheap boarding-house. Indeed, Mr. Wallace Smith in "Are You Decent?" illustrates this exact point in the story about the great Shakespearean actor who chums readily and affectionately with his old fellow-troupers but is himself snubbed by the third-rate legitimate actor who declines his offer to appear in Shakespeare for the movies.

The circus might be classed, snobbishly, as the lowest form of the three kinds of entertainment represented in these books. Few of us nowadays make any such classification, or find it necessary to invent a small boy as an excuse for going to the big show. That the circus is a good subject for writers of books, whether fact or fiction, is perfectly well recognized. Jim Tully's "Circus Parade" is one of the best of these books; many readers would not qualify that statement at all. Its type was long ago described by some polished critic, like Andrew Lang, as "good although strong." I suspect that Mr. Tully and his more unrestrained admirers would feel some contempt for critics from Oxford like Andrew Lang,

## Books Mentioned in this Article

**Circus Parade.** By Jim Tully. Albert & Charles Boni, New York. \$2.50.

**But—Is It Art?** By Percy Hammond. Doubleday, Page & Co., Garden City, N. Y. \$2.50.

**Up the Years from Bloomsbury.** By George Arliss. Little, Brown & Co., Boston. \$4.

**"Are You Decent?"** By Wallace Smith. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York. \$2.50.

but I cannot help thinking that "Circus Parade" would have been a better book if the rough stuff were not inserted in such lumps. The stories at their best are very, very good. Take "The Strong Woman"—the pitiful tragedy of one of the circus performers billed as "The Female Hercules." She weighed four hundred pounds and could wring the neck of the average man with ease. Her heart, however, was a mush of sentimentality and an easy prey for the rascal who swindled her out of her earnings by pretending that he was going to marry her. It is trite praise, but I hardly see how Maupassant could have improved this story; indeed, it recalls, in some way, his "Boule de Suif." In other stories Mr. Tully heaps on the brutality. "A Negro Girl" and "The Last Day" are powerful yarns; by over-emphasis the author failed to convince me that they are true as fact or as art.

Even at this late day, I should like to agree with the Committee for the Suppression of Irresponsible Censorship (although I am glad I do not have to make out checks to it) in its protest at the suppression of "Circus Parade" in Boston. Not that my heart aches for Mr. Tully, who knew well the risk he was taking when he wrote certain passages, and who has profited financially by the local suppression. But I am sorry for Boston with its sweeping literary censorship exercised by policemen.

The title of Mr. Smith's "Are You Decent?" is taken from the traditional formality of the world back-stage. It is the inquiry of the visitor who asks if the one inside is sufficiently clad to receive a caller. The stories are about life in Mrs. Fisher's boarding-house, which is "strictly for the profession." Many readers will instantly recall some earlier books (I said earlier, not better, Brutus) on this hilarious subject. They are "At the Actors' Boarding House" and "The Maison de Shine," by Helen Green. Mrs. Fisher's house was one in which the knife and ax thrower might be con-

versing on serious topics in the parlor with the decayed actor who was faithful to the traditions of Irving and Barrett, while from below in the cellar came the fishy barks of Sawtelle's trained seals. There can hardly be anything better than the story of "The Snake's Wife"—of course, you know that a Snake is a human contortionist. In this tale the great actor, Eric Doberman, returns from his triumphs in London as Hamlet to visit his old friends of simpler days. As he is described as a member of a famous family of actors, many readers will insist on identifying him with the latest American to play Hamlet in London. To the boarders at Mrs. Fisher's, however, he is still "Wormy" Doberman, as in the old days, and they explain his desertion of the variety stage by the fact that they supposed somebody had to be playing this "here Shakespeare."

The great tragedian makes an attempt to dance a shuffle to see if he has improved at all, while the expert, Eddie Dean, looks on and criticises.

"How am I, Eddie?" asked Doberman.

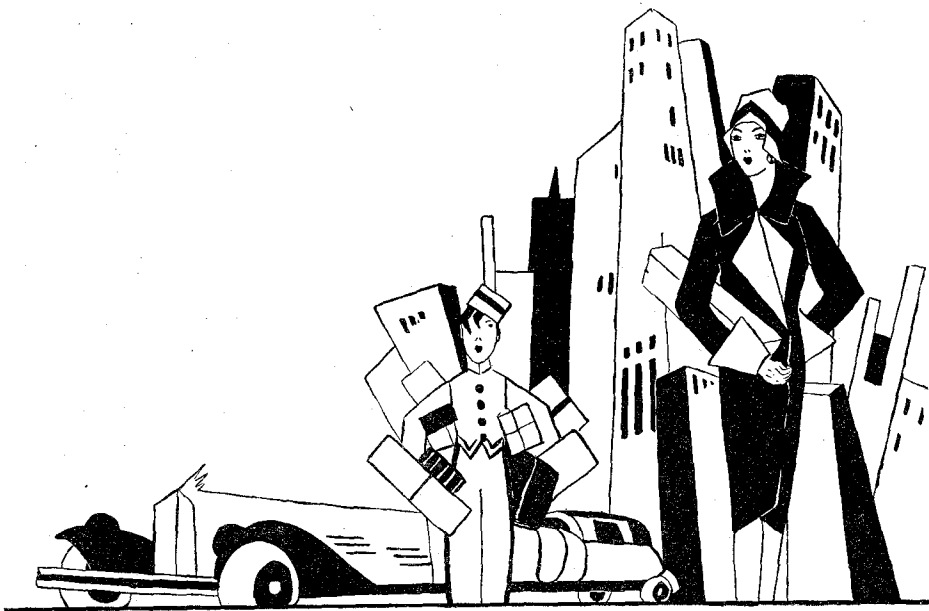
"You're lousy," said the real hooper.

"If I wasn't," said Wormy, ruefully, "I wouldn't be playing Shakespeare."

Mr. Percy Hammond's "But—Is It Art?" is a collection of brief essays about the stage by the dramatic critic of the New York "Herald Tribune." Mr. Hammond cannot write a dull line and his sense of humor is nearly perfect. I would not miss reading what he has to say about a new play, and I would not think of following his advice without seeing what some of the more hopeful observers have thought of the show. If I followed Mr. Hammond slavishly, I should never go to the theatre at all, for he is profoundly depressed and cynical about the stage. His hatred of the whole business of the playhouse is as remarkable as the good nature and humor which never fails in his writing.

At last we come to the legitimate actor in Mr. Arliss's autobiography, "Up the Years from Bloomsbury." Looking at its chapters brings up the pleasant recollection that I have seen Mr. Arliss in "Old English," "The Green Goddess," "Poldikin," "Alexander Hamilton," "Disraeli," as well as some of his rôles when he was with Mrs. Fiske in "Becky Sharp" and "Rosmersholm." I missed him as the War Minister in "The Darling of the Gods," as "The Devil," and

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