

The Play's the Thing

By

MARIAN HURD McNEELY

I MET a friend whom I had not seen since our early school days in the shopping district of a Mid-Western city. The conversation fell upon our respective families, and my old schoolmate spoke fondly of her only daughter.

"Is she blonde, like you?" I asked.

"I don't know," sighed my friend. "She used to be a blonde, but I can't say what she is now. Since she started to high school I never see her in the daylight."

I laughed. "Is her course of study so strenuous?"

"Oh, no; her study is easy enough. It's her recreation that makes a slave of her." And she went on to explain. The child belonged to the school orchestra, the basket-ball team, and a language club. And it was literally true from November to March that during daylight on school days she was never at home.

Since then my own child has entered the senior high school, and I find that my friend's speech was not so extravagant, after all. My daughter is, naturally, serious-minded, a good student, and interested in her class work, but now the grave is not her goal. She is a member of the hockey team and the orchestra; has joined a Latin club and the debating society. And when I remonstrate with her about filling every moment of her waking hours with some "activity," she says:

"But you want me to win school credits, don't you? I never will be eligible to the National Honor Society if I don't take part in school affairs."

If she stars in the National Honor system, she must also star as a boarder. I see her only at a hurried breakfast, at the dinner table, and, occasionally, in the evening. When she is not playing in the school orchestra, or "ushering" at a school entertainment, or selling tickets for one, or dancing at one, she is likely to be at home after dinner. But not with the family. She is in her own room, not only studying or "writing up a note-book," but making a mosaic copy of the "Cave canem" for the Roman banquet of the Latin Club, or drawing a poster for a contest, or planning a hike for the Nature Club. The sun never sets on the school program.

It is only within the past ten years that the public schools have broken out

with this epidemic of entertainment which threatens, eventually, to destroy their object. Under the engaging term "school activities," conditions are being developed that are a menace to the traditions of our preparatory institutions. Our children are over-burdened with recreation. So much amusement and entertainment is being provided for them that they are worn out with it all. They are overworked with play, and, as a consequence, the real object of school suffers.

I don't know how universal these conditions are in America, but from the fact that the National Honor Society, which has chapters in preparatory schools in all parts of the United States, makes participation in school activities one of the requirements for membership, I assume that the Middle West is not the only section in which these conditions prevail. One of the language teachers in our local high school told me recently, when I complained that I had made my child over to a school system, that the public schools all over the country were being run in the same way. "It's the modern method," she explained. "At all the educational meetings we hear the same thing: 'Make the school interesting to the children. Make school life enjoyable for the pupils.'"

To that end, organizations: musical and literary, social and dramatic, athletic and scientific. Lectures at the school assemblies, dancing parties at night. The school system has become a Miss Havisham, with her "Play, boy, play." For years the public schools were content with a track team, a football eleven, a basket-ball team, and a newspaper staff—possibly, a debating club. The modern school has all these and, besides, several glee clubs, a band, an orchestra, the Senate and the House, several language clubs, a nature club, a normal training club, a business society, and an outing club. These are the cares that infest the day. And the night shall be filled with music, with plays, with athletic contests, with occasional dances or lectures or concerts. In the meantime the lessons suffer. How can they help but do so? The old hour of "morning

practice" on piano or violin has vanished. Housework has gone the way of the petticoat. Who has time to make a bed or to fill the wood-box before the school bus leaves? In winter, it is still dark when the children go in the mornings.

I BELIEVE that our educational system is trying to do too much. In its desire to give the best to the young people of this country, it is overreaching itself. It is becoming a soviet government. One by one it has taken upon itself new duties—the health of our children, their vaccination and inoculation, their nutrition, their money-saving, their morals. And now it is assuming their entertainment. The effect of it all is not only to overburden the teacher, but to make irresponsible parents and dependent children. Modern education is not teaching pupils self-reliance. It is making them helpless. The up-to-date system is to sugar-coat every pill. One of the recent inaugurations in the public schools is the introduction of the "supervised study" system. To that end all the time of the school day that is not spent in recitation is devoted to what might be called "companionate study." Gathered in a small room, the class spends thirty-five minutes in listening to the teacher's explanation of the next lesson. All hear the same exposition, regardless of which individuals need it. This is followed by class study in the same room. There is no absolute quiet, no opportunity for concentration, no incentive for working out a problem for one's self. All must spend the same time on that lesson, regardless of their aptitude for it. The habit of quiet digging, which is one of the greatest things that any school can teach, is absolutely destroyed by this system. It levels all minds, and, while it may be helpful to the dull and the lazy, it is deadly to the fine student.

Just for curiosity, I dissected my daughter's school schedule a few weeks ago. I found that a member of the orchestra, taking gymnasium work and hygiene (both required), had but thirty minutes per week that she is free to devote to study according to her own dictates. Aside from that half-hour, her preparation during school hours for her recitations must be identical with that of

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Otto the Magnificent

By HARRY SALPETER

WERE Otto H. Kahn, head of the banking house of Kuhn, Loeb & Co., Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Opera House, and probably the greatest patron of the arts since Lorenzo the Magnificent—were he the conventional millionaire burdened with a sense of duty towards the arts and seeking by means of his wealth to obtain a modicum of *gloire*, he would have put aside a certain sum toward the establishment of a foundation bearing his name, and on the shoulders of the board of directors thereof he would have laid the responsibility of apportioning sums to individuals and to groups presenting claims to special gifts and special purposes. What was an impulse would have hardened into an institution, and the founder of the foundation, his conscience eased, would have retired into the shell of old habits and fixed limitations.

The essential difference between the conventional type of millionaire and Otto H. Kahn consists in the fact that he has not institutionalized his impulse. He has used his wealth to buy himself a share, a vicarious share, in some of the creative expressions of the modern world, especially in drama, music, and art. Perhaps, incidentally, he also has bought himself a share in the publicity which some of these creative expressions attract. Whether or not he seeks satisfaction for his egotism, he does seek to understand, to participate, in a measure, in realms as far removed from the normal concerns of Wall Street as are the Poles. And yet it will be a minor tragedy of his that he shall not know to what extent his opinions on art are tolerated because of his wealth, for with his wealth he has bought reputation which often is denied to impecunious intelligence. His good will, however, cannot be denied. When, for example, he returned from the Delphic games in Greece a year ago, he was literally besieged by artists and poets seeking subsidies. He might have delegated to a secretary the task of finding out who they were and what they wanted. But he did not, because it was he who wanted to know who they were and what they wanted. When, in an attempt to discover the criterion which governed his bequests, I suggested the hypothetical case of two applicants only

one of whom could have his request for help granted, he answered that no such problem could confront him, for he would grant the requests of both. Wherein he reveals the generosity of his impulse, or the lack of a rigid standard of taste. Perhaps it is his wisdom not to wish to give too wisely; or perhaps it is his vanity to wish to give, no matter how art may be served. His explanation, in his words, is that he believes that it is his job to give a chance to the forlorn hope, to lend a sympathetic ear to those who have no one else to turn to; he believes in the virtue of letting people test their artistic theories, whether he is in full accord or not. But the esteem which he has obtained through his contributions may well be out of all proportion to the actual advantages conferred—upon art, not artists.

That he is concerned exclusively, or informed deeply, wherein matters of art are concerned is, I believe, a fiction fostered by publicity, fostered in turn by vanity. He has bestowed his patronage upon musical comedy and revolutionary drama alike. But he has withstood, with some courage, the shafts of ridicule which his patronage has brought upon him.

The world has been informed of the spectacular enterprises which his interest has made possible. He made possible the temporary "loan" to American audiences of such organizations as Diaghileff's Russian Ballet, Copeau's Théâtre du Vieux Colombier, Stanislavsky's Art Theatre, and the Max Reinhardt Company. The Copeau organization remained for more than a year, at a great loss. The chairmanship of the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Opera House has not been a coupon-clipping job. The Theatre Guild and the Provincetown Theatre, yesterday, the Civic Repertory and the New Playwrights' Theatres today have not been without obligation to this Mæcenas. Among his early services to the Theatre Guild was the acquisition of a lease for the Garrick Theatre upon terms better than reasonable. One check bearing Otto Kahn's signature set in motion for two seasons a

group of radical idealists banded together under the name of the New Playwrights' Theatre.

OF these large benefits the world is more or less informed. But the world does not know of the scores of individuals whom he has quietly benefited, opening the windows of opportunity. If there were frauds and weaklings among them, he gave them the benefit of the doubt. Since he does not believe in stifling any individual, any group with subsidy, Mr. Kahn has been enabled to spread his benefits over so wide a surface that few beside himself could give the dimensions. And often he will disguise his help by giving in return for a single specimen of an obscure struggling painter's work a check which will purchase a round trip to Europe. Strictly speaking, he has bought a painting. While gathering material for this article I stumbled over many writers and artists who had reasons for gratitude to Mr. Kahn. The following cases are typical, data upon them having been obtained without his knowledge.

For two years he maintained an author who was gathering material to trace the thread of idealism through American history. He gave an unknown youth \$15 a week for a year to enable him to write plays. Five or six years ago he helped over the hurdles a sculptor who has now acquired an international reputation. A Danish-American artist has been maintained at Paris for two and a half years. For one year a distinguished, but not popular, young novelist and essayist was put beyond the reach of necessity by Mr. Kahn. At least one young writer now engaged on a play is having his bills paid by Mr. Kahn. He has also put one well-known critic on the road to economic independence by investing his surplus earnings for him. He has made possible careers for singers. He was the "angel" for several Bel-Geddes productions. He renders services which have a monetary value difficult to compute. From several of his beneficiaries I have learned that he attaches no conditions to his assistance and that whoever assumes that he must defer to his presumed opinions is in danger of losing his respect; the aforementioned critic has held up Mr. Kahn to good-humored ridicule at