

Votaresses of Britannia

REGENCY. By D. L. Murray. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

STUDENTS of the Regency period tell us that it is the eighteenth century dying of fatty degeneration, but dying with an air. The goddess of Reason reigns no more: in her place is Britannia, a buxom, semi-nude lady, but still a goddess. Very soon she will be clothed, imperial, middle-class, in her right mind; in the meantime she has her votaries. Like her, they are coarse; like her, they are inclined to bully; like her, too, they have the grand manner. And when they gather in the Prince Regent's Brighton Pavilion, with its scarlet lackeys, its preposterous gilded dragons, its exquisite china, they are even a little fantastic. Mr. Murray does very well by them. In one scene he brings them all together—the belles, the wits, the rakes, a nabob or two, Lord Barrymore. The Regent—he has left his 'cello in London—consents to sing "Rule Britannia" in a rich baritone, the heroine almost swoons; and so does Mr. Murray's style. It is a big moment, and I don't blame him.

The heroine of this novel is the lady Regency Davenport, and her father made his fortune dubiously in Patulipatam, India. Regency seduces a groom, wears boy's clothes, becomes the Regent's mistress, marries Lord Marah, and has a daughter by another man: in the intervals she is very womanly, even tender, though she has a murder on her conscience. Lord Marah kills her. The novel passes on to her daughter who is successively a Puseyite nun and the wife of a childish baronet. Her daughter marries a Jewish hotel-owner, is known to Brighton as Lottie Rosenberg, and entertains Edward VII when he was Prince of Wales. And Lottie's grand-daughter. . . . But we are now in the 1930's, so Lottie's grand-daughter dies to save a

friend who is mixed up in a Brighton dope-ring.

The point of all this is the persistence of the lady Regency's blood, which is courageous and speedy: except the nun, these women owe nothing to their fathers. They have Regency's blood in common and Brighton in common, and they have something else, too. They are all the votaresses of that early Britannia. They may not be coarse, but they are certainly fantastic: more fantastic than either the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries really permit. The strict may be disturbed by this, but Mr. Murray is not writing an historical novel; he is writing a semi-historical melodrama, a kind of fiction which is often much more fun to read and which occasionally leaps, in the most impulsive manner, right into the middle of a truth. Mr. Murray, for instance, tells a truth about women. It is not a subtle truth, nor is it universal—quite the opposite: it is simply that his women are constantly in motion, their motion is feminine, and it leaves you breathless. They are alive and original. They swirl about in a jumble of fact and fantasy, and the book which contains them is very readable—more readable than a dozen more delicate novels.

George Dangerfield has spent much time delving into English social history.

Play Plots

(Continued from page 4)

the mind and imagination of the dramatist who is telling it. Upon this second story our enjoyment of the first depends to such an extent that the two of them can be likened to the man and woman who, in what is a bold phrase for "Hiawatha," are described as being "useless each without the other."

We do not have to attend the theatre as if we were so many professors of dramaturgy to follow these two stories simultaneously. If we are really following a play as a play, and not as the literal transcription of life which it may pretend to be, we have no other choice than to

note, with curiosity and for what they are worth, the "ways, methods, and devices" which a playwright has employed to give dramatic statement to his fable. In appreciating the contribution these make to the enrichment or squandering of the subject that is being dealt with, we not only put ourselves into closer touch with that subject and the dramatist who is dealing with it, but with one of the most constant sources of the theatre's fascination. For if, as playgoers, we are aware of the challenges which the theatre presents to those who undertake to write for it, we do not have to be told that where story-telling, as it is usually understood, leaves off, playwriting commences.

Underlying the play we see as if it were tracks put down by the author to carry us along with his action, his characters, and his dialogue to the best views he has discovered in the country of his choice, is the playwright's plotting of his fable. If we would enjoy the trip which a play invites us to take, we cannot help being as grateful for the condition of the roadbed, the comfort of the coaches, the window space at our disposal, and the engineer's skill in starting and stopping his train as we are interested in the place from which we leave, the company in which we find ourselves, the stops we make, the speed at which we travel, and whether we are moving forward or backwards to reach our destination.

We no longer ask for the elaborate plots and subplots which were once in favor. We no longer admire those structures, reared in the name of "well-made plays," from which the carpenters often refused to move out to let the tenants move in. And so suspicious have we become of scripts written only from "the reason" and for the sake of the tawdry "big scenes" to which they lead us, that, in the presence of such concoctions we are inclined to echo the words of the Citizen in "The Knight of the Burning Pestle" and cry "Plot me no plots."

But, simpler as our tastes in story-telling are, we cannot dismiss plotting in the same way. It has not lost its fascination. It remains the initial guarantee of an author's presence. That in itself is all-important, for it reminds us of a fact which some theatregoers ignore when they listen to plays as if the actors were always making them up as they go along, or as if plays just wrote themselves.

To enjoy a play as a play, at the same time we enjoy it for the story which it tells or for the manner in which it is being performed, means only that we admit the dramatist's presence by being neither incurious about nor unconscious of the playwriting which has gone into his script. It does not mean that we are deaf to what the play has to say, that we lessen our absorption in its human values, that we fail to respond to the persuasion of its action, that we subtract from its pleasures as entertainment, or that we prattle off dull technical terms in an



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arbitrary fashion as if we were embryonic Freytags. It merely implies that when we see a play we are as prepared to appreciate the dramatist's contribution to the story he is telling in his chosen medium as we would be to admit the importance of Leonardo's contribution as a painter to the coloring, composition, and quality of such a picture as "The Last Supper," which is quite another thing from the story that it tells.

In undertaking to appraise a play in terms of its playwriting, we need have no mystical powers of divination. We must only have sufficient sympathetic interest in what we are seeing and hearing to accompany the advance of the dramatist's action by asking ourselves a few of the questions which, by his solutions of them, the playwright confesses he has asked himself.

We must be alive to the point and value of his selections; note the mood he seeks to establish in his introductory scene; be anxious to discover why he starts his action where he does; and watch his expository devices, trusting, that if he bothers to cancel them, he will be too inventive to rely either on the telephone or the butler and maid, whose weird custom it is to dust Lady Tippleton's drawingroom together at eight o'clock in the evening just before her Ladyship is expecting dinner guests.

Without removing ourselves from what is happening we must find time to decide in passing if by happening as it does it illustrates its author's point as fully as it might. We must consider what ends are gained, other than providing a star with a stellar entrance, by withholding the leading character for too long a time, or by introducing him at once. We must be ready to take what warnings the dramatist is giving us, notice the means he uses to create and maintain suspense, be grateful for the donations made by separate scenes and acts, and match the impolite prompting of our "sense of theatre" with the playwright's demonstration of his own. We must observe not only how he employs his characters but deploys them, how he distributes his action and expands it, and sense the wisdom or the lack of wisdom of his choices. We must have some consciousness of his design, for it is an integral part of his style, and be genuinely eager to know how it proclaims itself to be the work of his hand.

In short, we must have some desire to shadow the playwright whose play we are following even while we follow his play. If he be a dramatist worthy of the name, or of the time occupied by the enacting of his script, we have no other choice than to follow him contentedly at a respectful distance through the structure he has built. It is only when he allows us to catch up with him, or, worse still, when we discover he is trailing us without shame that we lose all interest in him and his work. It is not for us to say what kind of edifice he may rear, or

to dictate the architectural form he may give to the plotting which he offers as a domicile to the characters, action, dialogue, flavor, and idea of his play. Our only right is to insist that it be interesting; that in building it he consider the needs of the people who are to live in it; that he provide it with stout enough walls so that when once his characters have taken possession of it they need not worry about their safety and may feel at liberty to speak the truth as they know it; that he see to it that, whether it shows or is hidden, the wiring be connected; and that he endow his edifice with enough windows to let in the sun and the moon and the air, or, if he omits the windows, that he at least instal some ventilation system of his own devising, provide his own illumination, and engage singers to sing the sweetest of songs, clowns to cut the maddest of capers, or waiters to serve the best of champagne.

John Mason Brown is dramatic critic of The New York Post. The foregoing essay is to constitute a chapter of his "Art of Playgoing," shortly to be published by W. W. Norton & Co.

Samples of Dickens

DICKENS, THE MAN AND THE BOOK.
By Ralph Straus. New York: Nelson & Co. 1936.

Reviewed by ARTHUR COLTON

LARGELY quotations, specimens of Dickens, with commentaries. The commentaries are not notable in themselves, and yet the book is notable, in a sense, for this reason: it amounts to a sort of biography in terms of Dickens the writer. The outline of his life is given passingly but the story is mainly the story of his authorship by samples, and it makes a very readable story. Mr. Straus makes some interesting suggestions, for instance, that Dickens's childhood was perhaps not as wretched as he represented it, very much as John Dickens, his father, was not quite so peculiar as Mr. Micawber. His sufferings in the blacking warehouse were those of an abnormally sensitive and imaginative child rather than because the warehouse was abnormally dreadful.

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