

"you are not old enough to have been kissed by John Greenleaf Whittier."

This called up childhood memories of osculatory old gentlemen, and I pieced them together with a few imaginary, sententious phrases. A writer, as Tolstoy has said, must be able to see a street fight and to turn it into a battle. Out of this hazy material I made, for better or for worse, the character of John Brill. I have been thunderstruck since then to have different readers tell me that he is a faithful representation of John Greenleaf Whittier, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Edward Everett Hale, and Bronson Alcott, because I know hardly anything of the habits or appearance of these gentlemen.

It was also necessary for the purpose of my plot to create a professor of literature. I suppose I have encountered in my time a hundred different persons, fond of books, who have written but who have scarcely lost their amateur standing. Dr. Allen Southby is a composite of all of them; and though he is only a character to me, he has been identified as a famous critic, as each of four different Harvard professors, and as three from Yale. I am acquainted with several of them and any one of them would have been awkward, wooden, and inartistic had I put him in my story.

You may think you know people in a novel, but the truth is you don't. Even your most delightful and flamboyant friends would be indifferent actors in the theater of white paper. If they were to be introduced there, even for a page, they would be tossed into the wastebasket by a competent author. Actually fictional characters, although they seem like living persons, must always be types in some measure familiar to every reader. Not one of your friends or mine could stand the strain or the unnatural contortions which must be undergone by a fictional creation who is worthy of his salt. These poor shadows who are pressed into pages are obliged by the demands of plot and space to face quite a different existence from that of human beings in the everyday world. These harassed type-distorted people worry and love in a non-dimensional plane where they meet a series of situations which must of necessity be grotesque and overdrawn in order to convey an illusion of reality. Even the characters of the most tranquil novel are caught in an accelerated stream of dialogue and action and live their span at many times the normal tempo. The only way to make them seem like living people is to give them the positive and divergent traits drawn from whole platoons of human beings. Their creator's success is directly in proportion to the skill he displays in making a diverse selection of the mannerisms and speech from the shadowy army of impressions that marches through his mind.

I can only say, in conclusion, that I do not know the Brills of "Wickford Point." I know a great many people who possess a few of their peculiarities but that is all.

## Successful Liar

*THE WOMAN IN THE HALL.* By G. B. Stern. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by AMY LOVEMAN

IT was a tangled web that Lorna Blake wove when first she practised to deceive, but since the wages of her sin was success she slid without a bump into a career of humbug and cajolery. A quiet, demure, rather dowdy little widow, utterly devoted to her two charming small girls, why should the kind-hearted victims of her schemes suppose her to be a cheat, and her deprecating self-respect merely a weapon to force the money from their pockets? Lorna Blake was an artist at dishonesty; she knew just how to vary her plea for help to fit the person she was preparing to rob, she knew how to use her little daughters to aid her in her begging, she knew when to retire to the enjoyment of her ill-gotten gains, and how to avoid the consequences of her few missteps. What she did not foresee and could not prevent was the effects of her career upon her children, the conditioning of their lives by

their early experiences, and the long train of events that grew out of her fertile and skillful fabrications.

To outline the incidents of G. B. Stern's diverting tale would be to deprive it of half its effectiveness, for though its device is repeated over and over again it is presented each time with variations, and throughout the novel there runs a consistent inconsistency in the reactions of the characters. "The Woman in the Hall" is excellent entertainment. It is a sprightly tale, delusively light, perhaps, for its gay raillery of the adventuress type of woman, and its abandonment to high spirits have a sharp edge in the ironic implications of the action. The story itself has many implausibilities—in fact many of its situations are cut from the stuff of standard romantic fiction—but there is a dexterity in the involvements of the plot, an ingenuity and cleverness in the psychological pattern of the tale, that delight and surprise. It is seldom one finds a novel of its kind which accelerates so fast as it progresses or which extricates itself from the train of its circumstances with so much cleverness.

## Fallen Angels

*FRAY MARIO.* By Helen Douglas Irvine. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1939. \$2.

Reviewed by LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

OUT of the material in this novelle of eighteenth century Peru another writer might have chosen to construct a swash-buckling romance on the grand scale with operatic overtones. Miss Irvine has made of it instead a minor but impeccable work of art, notable for its simplicity. Extracts from supposed letters, journals, and reports of the time, arranged in coherent order, trace the story of two outcasts from virtuous society, fallen angels both, but with a common afflatus that transcends the cheap virtue of their traducers. Many readers will recall the character of "La Pericholi," a notorious actress and courtesan of colonial Lima, from Thornton Wilder's "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." Probably none will be able to claim prior acquaintance with Mario Otaegui, a figure reminiscent of Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi, who evidently is on the roll of

minor poets known only to scholars specializing in the period.

Without benefit of omniscience, the "documentary" information from which this story is pieced together can give only an indirectly lighted picture of the protagonists. It is in the imagination of the reader that they become vivid, and herein lies the author's art. Fray Mario, the disreputable son of impoverished Spanish nobility, and Micaela Villegas, the waif of the streets of Lima who became a prima donna overnight, meet face to face only once in the entire course of their turbulent careers, and then for no more than a fleeting moment. Theirs is a convincing love story, not because they are ever lovers, but merely because the reader comes to believe that they would inevitably have been, under better circumstances. But circumstances are all opposed to them, and this, too, is inevitable.

A simple and moving love story told with great restraint, "Fray Mario" promises to remain with the reader long after more flamboyant tales are forgotten.



Woodcut by Clare Leighton for "Fray Mario"

# The Season's Theater

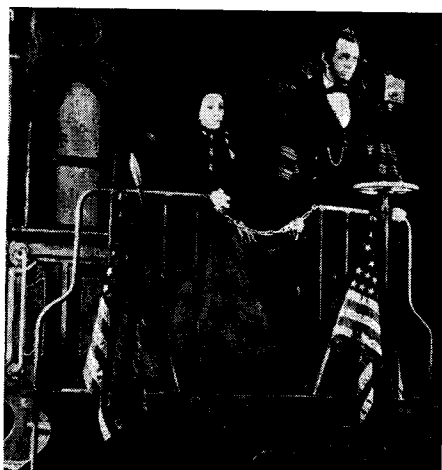
BY JOHN ANDERSON

**T**HOUGH the theater is not exactly innocent of profit motives, it would be unduly cynical to suggest that the closing season has found which side of the box office Democracy is buttered on. Doubtless it has merely made the solvent discovery that now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party. With new people discovering America every day it is nice to know it is so popular, and simply as a check-rein on undue enthusiasm I would point out that last season the theater, with equal abandon, discovered God.

Two general points may be made about the season: one is this patriotic propaganda, and the other, that in most plays the acting has far outshone the writing. With a scarcity of first-rate dramatists, there's nothing like grease paint in an emergency. Thus these printed plays do not suggest to the reader, as nearly as printed plays sometimes do, the particular merits of the season.

Without the dilation of performance, without the brass bands, stage crowds, and pictorial detail "The American Way," for instance, seems no more than a blueprint for a rally. Being superb technicians Kaufman and Hart have made their hokum theatrical hokum. They know it gets results on the stage where their show belongs, and where it is more pageantry than drama. Printed, the dialogue retains its fresco scale, and the book seems to scream in the library. In the theater it's the eagle screaming, which makes the difference. The publishers should note that an important speech in the "run on the bank" scene has been omitted from the text.

Though it loses enormously in its separation from Raymond Massey's dedicated performance, Mr. Sherwood's "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" has one great advantage over the acted version, and that is a collection of workshop notes appended to the text. They reveal the care with which the author has used his source material,



The Lincolns leaving for the inauguration, from "Abe Lincoln in Illinois"

and they make very fascinating reading. It still seems to me that the merit of the play as drama has been confused with its undeniable value as preachment in a troublous time.

Mr. Rice's "American Landscape" springs from the same passionate adherence to the American way, but its miscellaneous and undefined use of ghosts (such assorted ghosts as Mrs. Stowe and Moll Flanders) made it disconcerting in the theater, where, oddly enough, all actors are flesh and blood. Reading it is more satisfactory, because the reading mind makes a reservation on the ghost dialogue which the eye and ear do not allow in the theater, and so, actually, type preserves Mr. Rice's scheme in a way impossible on the platform. That, of course, was his mistake as a dramatist and it is a curious mistake for a craftsman of Mr. Rice's perception.

Two plays bring these generalities of human freedom and individual right into sharper focus on smaller canvases, but with the same unmistakable urgency, with the same awareness of surrounding challenge. Irwin Shaw does it in "The Gentle People" with a fable, uneven but sometimes delightful and occasionally muddled, about two elderly cronies whose sole pleasure lies in fishing off a motor boat at Coney Island. It is a parable for dictators, and it makes its eloquent points, one of them being, I suppose, that the meek shall inherit the earth even if they have to do it with a stick, but the play's power is bound up closely with the Group Theatre production, which propped up Mr. Shaw's wobbly typewriter.

Going back in a more humorous vein to just such an Irish parish as he used in "Shadow and Substance," Paul Vincent Carroll has written, in "The White Steed," a close parallel to Mr. Shaw's defense of human right. Mr. Carroll's villainous dictator is a snoopy priest bent upon ramming his blue-nose regulations down the conscience of a free and easy community; but he is checked by the affable, wise, humane, and deeply religious understanding of an old canon who hopes "that God's no theologian or we'll all get our backsides scorched." It is an eloquent, richly amusing, and penetrating defense of faith against dogma and it makes the fervent announcement that we must live and let live, a platitude which in a world crucially imperfect at the moment, takes on the aspect of news.

The beautiful and incorrigible Clare Boothe announces in the preface to "Kiss the Boys Good-Bye" that the play was intended as a political allegory about fascism in America, a fact which seems to have escaped everyone connected with the production, including the producer. Anyway it's a good story and Miss Boothe



Vandamm

Lee Baker and Tallulah Bankhead in "The Little Foxes"

sticks to it by pointing out that her unreconstructed Confederate Cindy Lou represents the first fascist impulse in this country—the Old South. She takes the movie moguls and the Westport intelligentsia as Hitler took Prague, but my suspicion is that if it's an allegory, the play's tail is bigger than the kite. My reading of the play, which has its deft lines and amusing scenes, confirms the impression of its opening night, to wit: that if it proves anything it is that the human race should be condemned and dismantled as unsafe for occupancy.

As if to point out the dangers of rugged individualism implicit in democratic practice, three plays take up the problems of anti-social behavior. Though a perfect type, Oscar Wilde has always been more clinical than dramatic, but Leslie and Sewell Stokes have managed, with the help of Wilde's own collection of epigrams, Frank Harris's impeached memoirs, and the benediction of Lord Alfred Douglas, to run up a play that is unflinching, honest, and tactful. It is, of course, verbally amusing, and finally tragic; and it is obvious, in reading it, that much of its theater fascination stems from the extraordinary performance of Robert Morley in the title part.

Mamba's daughter, Hagar, is pretty near the opposite pole in mentality and motive and her transgression of the law is on solid theatrical basis, for this dumb, giant Negress murders to avenge her daughter's honor. In the printed version the authors have gone back to what I am told was the original plan discarded by the producer, so that here we have a prologue and an epilogue embracing the main action parenthetically. It still doesn't save the play from the clutter and sprawling uncertainty it reveals on the stage, where it is illuminated by Ethel Waters in a performance that makes Hagar's tragedy somberly magnificent.

Miss Hellman examines this theme of rugged individualism in terms of bitterness and anger. "The Little Foxes" is a pitiless study of predatory people. They are non-aristocrats of the South, time 1900, who have plundered everyone