

THE DRAMATIST AS MAN OF LETTERS

THE CASE OF CLYDE FITCH

By Walter Prichard Eaton



TO take Clyde Fitch seriously always surprised many serious people. To take the theatre seriously always surprises many serious people, for that matter—the theatre, that is, not of the printed page, not of the so-called “literary drama,” but the actual playhouse, where farces and musical comedies, vaudeville and moving pictures, trivialities of all sorts, jostle with Shakespeare and Ibsen in the long effort to amuse. Now, Clyde Fitch was a man of that actual playhouse; his plays, though several of them have found their way into type, were designed for the foot-lights with no thought of type in mind. They were almost as much “produced” as written, for Mr. Fitch was his own alert stage manager and shaped his pieces in rehearsal. They were, most of them, frankly wrought to amuse, to entertain an audience in the playhouse, to bring the immediate returns of popularity and patronage. They were neither conceived nor considered as literature in the conventional sense. Mr. Fitch was perfectly willing to be a dramatic tailor, to cut a part to the measure of a star, to adapt from the French or German, to “dramatize” novels. Mostly, he may fairly be said to have been concerned not so much with weaving a fabric as cutting a garment, mostly he wrought, it seemed to his critics, not so much from a central idea, from an impulse of self-expression, as from a purely theatrical impulse to “shape up” an entertaining story. He belonged to Broadway, not the library or the class room. How, then, shall he be considered seriously, in the formal sense, and his work regarded as of literary importance?

It cannot be so regarded unless the critic is willing to make certain concessions. But neither can the stage work of men much more highly esteemed in literary circles than Clyde Fitch, the work, even, of some acknowledged masters of literary form.

“Peter Pan,” by J. M. Barrie, would make a poor showing in print. Yet is it less worthy work than “The Little White Bird,” his prose fantasy between covers, out of which it grew? A literary critic recently wrote of John Galsworthy’s “Plays”:

“While we are all aware that plays frequently get themselves printed in book form, we have very generally come to regard this as a mysterious and purely conventional activity of the publishers. But—and the fact is of some moment—Mr. Galsworthy’s plays are actually readable. They are not of the stage, stagey. They have literary form, fictional interest, and human appeal. . . . It would almost seem as though Mr. Galsworthy had rediscovered the underground passage between literature and the stage.”

This paragraph is more or less typical of the literary critic’s attitude toward the drama regarded as literature. It shows clearly the concession which must be made, not only in the case of Mr. Fitch’s work, but in that of many another dramatist. The critic applies to the printed play the same tests he applies to the novel or story, and finds “the underground passage between literature and the stage” only when the dialogue is sufficiently embellished, the characters reduced to cold type sufficiently plausible, the situations sufficiently interesting or poignant, robbed of the living pulse of interpretation by actors and actresses. Now, the novel or story is written to be read, and what it does in type is all it can do. The drama is not even written; it is constructed. And it is constructed to be acted in a theatre by living men and women, with illusive scenery, artificial lights manipulated at will, the tang of actuality about it, and the mood of it created for the spectator by a thousand aids which have no connection with the printed page, which can and do escape the reckoning of the literary critic. Its characters, impersonated by good actors, may conceivably say things of stinging hu-

mor or pathos which in cold type will look trivial and mean. Its situations, which may conceivably seem stiff and formal on the printed page by their very formality, may rise steadily to a thrilling climax in the theatre, where the interest of the audience is held by the eye and the ear and led on from one moment to the next, step by step, so that a formal, mathematical precision of incident is frequently an aid, not a blemish.

Unless it is drama written frankly for literary effect, as modern blank verse drama always is, its dialogue is the more effective the closer it approximates the inelegant speech of daily life, the closer it fits the characters who speak it, not as we visualize and exalt them in type, but as they walk before us in concrete form. No small part of the charm, the literary distinction of Maurice Hewlett's "Open Country," is in the rhapsodic outpourings of Senhouse, which, on the printed page, carry you irresistibly along. But in an acted drama one dreads to think of their fate, unless they were condensed, made more colloquial, robbed, in short, of what is now their grace of style. Again, addressed as the drama is so much to the eye, its finest passages are often impossible of reproduction in type. Can you get into print the final moments of "Shore Acres," when old Nat Berry, played so beautifully by James A. Herne, climbs the stairs with his candle, and then the empty kitchen glows silently in the fire-light, like a benediction, before the curtain glides down? Can you, indeed, reproduce a thousand and one poignant dramatic situations, carefully planned by the dramatist, when pantomime and silence get the mood and meaning across the foot-lights?

It is obvious, then, that what is most effective in the theatre need not be most effective in type, and what is the literature of the proscenium frame need not be the literature of the printed page. That a great many fine dramas are literature, in the formal sense, when printed—Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière, Sheridan, Ibsen—does not prove that a great many fine dramas are not. At best, it proves, perhaps, that the finest dramas transcend the theatre. And even they are never quite satisfactory till played, never quite the same things, at any rate. For ordinary purposes, what is or is not literature in drama should in fair-

ness be determined by the play's effectiveness and truth in actual presentation on the stage. The concession which the critic must make is this—he must learn to visualize the printed play as he reads, and judge it as literature by its stage value. He must understand that it is but the skeleton he has before him. To do this is difficult, but not impossible, the more as most printed plays have been acted. The critic of music would not dream of judging a symphony by the printed score, unless he had the technical ability to read it into sound.

If we apply this test to the work of Clyde Fitch, it is impossible to deny it a place, and an important place, in the stage literature of America. His plays were never concerned with large personages nor profound passions. His comments on the pageant of social life which he depicted were never deep. His preoccupation with the idea of successful "entertainment" was a blemish on much of his work. Nevertheless, that work at its best caught truthfully the surface of the life depicted and occasionally, with a kind of smiling irony, plunged down below the crust; it was made fascinating by a boundless observation and individual by the touches of its author's sprightly fancy. Never stirring profoundly the beholder, and not infrequently annoying him by its petty devices of villainy to bring a situation about, it was yet work which gave much pleasure at the moment, was freshly and vitally contemporaneous, and has counted steadily as influence in the American theatre. The stage literature of to-day in this country is more truthful, more carefully observed, closer to life and more consistently a comment upon it (for merely to observe truthfully is to comment) than it was before Mr. Fitch began to write. In this development his work played a large and important part. It could not have done so had it not been truthful work, had it not been dramatic literature. And one is tempted to add it could not have done so had it been written with the printed page in mind. It is the men of the theatre who do its real work.

That the better of Mr. Fitch's plays were a comment upon life, a truthful comment, and hence literature, although in the main they were designed for purposes of theatrical entertainment, was due to the fact that his instinctive respect for the theatre was

greater than that of the mere theatrical artificer on the one hand—Sardou, for instance, or perhaps Henri Bernstein or W. Somerset Maugham—and greater, on the other hand, than that of the usual “literary dramatist,” self-styled, whom Mr. Fitch probably held in considerable contempt. His respect for the theatre was so great that he saw men and women in the world about him, heard conversations in his daily rambles, observed incidents and characters, in the light of possible stage material. It was not in him to divorce this daily reality from the theatre. If it was good enough for life, it was not too good for the drama nor too mean. This, when you come to think of it, is a high respect. And his respect for the theatre, also, was such that his wish was to appeal to its habitual audiences, to catch their ear and win their favor. For the dramatic cults, the associated “high brows,” as they are known on Broadway, he cared not at all. That, at bottom, the desire for pecuniary gain had anything to do with this, all who knew Mr. Fitch can stoutly deny. It was an instinct with him. It led him, no doubt, into excesses of caricature or “comic relief” which marred even his best plays, as “The Truth.” But, on the other hand, it kept his work immediately and practically effective and enabled him to exert his influence along the only lines that were for him potential. Because he respected the actual theatre too much to give it less than reality, so far as he could, and because he respected the actual theatre too much to withdraw contemptuously from its verdicts, he made the actual theatre a better place within his own too brief lifetime, he helped to increase critical respect for it, and to refine popular appreciation.

When Mr. Fitch began to get a hearing in the theatre, in 1890, he was but four years out of Amherst College. He came on with the new generation who had been born too late for the blank verse heroics of the Victorian era or its silly farces, sentimentalities, and endless adaptations from the French of the school of Scribe. It was incumbent upon the newer dramatists to bend the prose drama into either a convincing substitute for poetical heroics and romance, or a sufficiently truthful picture of men and manners to answer an intellectual need. Unconsciously, perhaps, they chose the latter course. Silly plays, tawdry arrange-

ments of artificial situations, and shop-worn theatrical “passions” still flourished—and still flourish. Doubtless they always will. But at the time Mr. Fitch began to write, in Germany, France, England, and even in America, there were signs of better things. Ibsen’s “Ghosts” was produced in Berlin at the Freie Bühne in 1889, at the Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1890, by the Independent Theatre in London in 1891, and at the Berkeley Lyceum in New York in 1894. Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House” was first played in England, however, in 1889. This performance almost immediately followed the production of Pinero’s “The Profligate,” his first serious drama. Ibsen’s effect thereafter on Jones and Pinero was considerable, even if they had got on the track of what Mr. Jones sentimentiously called “the great realities of modern life” before the Norwegian was heard in English. What William Archer calls “a declaration of independence from French adaptations” ensued in Great Britain. In America, more remote from the whirlpool of controversy, the declaration of independence was slower in coming. But looking back over the last decade of the nineteenth century, we remember sharply James A. Herne’s realistic dramas, “Shore Acres,” “Sag Harbor,” and “Griffith Davenport,” the Civil War melodramas of Bronson Howard, Belasco, and Gillette, the “state” plays of Augustus Thomas, and Clyde Fitch’s “Nathan Hale” and “Barbara Frietchie.” These stand out as vividly national against the Zenda romances then raging. They did seriously and more or less consciously what Harrigan and Hart and Charles Hoyt were doing unconsciously and farcically—using American material, truthfully observed, for purposes of drama.

But so far only one of these men, James A. Herne, had gone much beyond obvious material. Probably he alone was fully conscious of the stream of tendency which he was alike guiding and guided by. Mr. Herne died, Mr. Howard ceased to write, Mr. Gillette faded into a more or less innocuous adapter of foreign work. Mr. Thomas has only in the past few years come to a full realization of what the drama means to him. But Clyde Fitch, man of the theatre though he was, cutter of garments to the order of any star, adapter and collaborator when the call came, in his numerically huge output continued to furnish a steady proportion of

American dramas, truthfully observed, with an increasing purpose behind them and an increasing wealth of significant and satirical detail. His example did more than any other single influence in the American Theatre to keep the on-coming dramatists lined up to the new standard and the new ideal. His name is writ large as a signer of the American drama's declaration of independence.

In the score of years during which he wrote for the stage, Mr. Fitch produced thirty-three original plays, counting as two plays each shorter dramas later rewritten, and twenty-three "dramatizations" of novels or adaptations of foreign works. He left behind at his death three additional original manuscripts and two adaptations. It has been for years the supposition that if he had written less he would have written better. Probably, however, this is not true. He had a "bottled lightning" mind and little power of reflection. Moreover, invention, the greatest difficulty of play writing, was easy for him, the labor of constructing a plot and situations less than for most men. He wrote as his nature directed; and it is rather foolish to quarrel with any artist's method of composition. The process of adapting a play, though Mr. Fitch, as in "Girls," for instance, often transformed the original into a new thing by his wealth of characteristic detail, is not a severe mental strain. Thirty-six original plays in twenty years of ardent and unceasing toil is not, perhaps, an inordinate number, certainly not a record number. Shakespeare, indeed, wrote almost as many.

And of these original plays all but one of them written since 1900 (and that one, "The Toast of the Town," was made over from an earlier piece) dealt with American subjects, almost all with contemporary American subjects, often in a fresh, vivid, and interesting manner. With increasing sureness the majority of them gained their chief interest not from the old tricks of plot nor the old virtuosity of the actors, so common on our stage a generation before, but from the essential truth of their observation of contemporaneous life and manners.

In 1901 Miss Amelia Bingham produced "The Climbers," after nearly every manager in New York had rejected it because, they said, "the public would never stand for the funeral stuff in the first act." How little the managers understood what was

coming to be vital in drama was shown by the result. The public "stood for" the first act, quite literally, three deep behind the last row of seats, because they recognized its deliciously ironic observation. A shallow social climber and her daughters, in funeral mourning for a father just lost, bargained with two other women for the sale of their now useless wardrobes. The scene was wickedly acid, for all its humor, and written with such observation of feminine trickery and the manners of a certain class of society that it was irresistible. The play went on to develop the tragedy of a Wall Street plunger and his socially aspiring family—a sordid tragedy of rather sordid and trivial people. But it was theatrically effective and proved anew that a popular play could be made without going back of yesterday or beyond New York for the material. And by the salient satire of its surface details, it showed how valuable a thing for the dramatist is the observant eye, the eye which is not shut as soon as the author quits the playhouse, but is then most open, gathering material not from the musty store-room of stage tradition but from the streets and drawing-rooms.

In "Barbara Frietchie," produced by Miss Marlowe in 1899 with great success, Mr. Fitch had shown in the minor detail of stage setting what can be achieved by good taste, solidity and truthfulness of setting, how in the contemporary prose drama sharply framed by a proscenium arch the illusion can be heightened by attention to the "production." Mr. Belasco, among others, was already working on the same tack. But Mr. Belasco's attention to the "production" sometimes results in a swamping of more essential things. With Mr. Fitch the setting was always one detail of a scheme of realism which reached as far as his plots, and only there broke down. In "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines" (played by Miss Ethel Barrymore in 1901) not only the stage replica of the old Hotel Brevoort in New York during its palmy days and the enormous skirts worn by the ladies gave the proper atmosphere, but the rehearsal of the old-fashioned ballet dance, the old ballet master himself, the pervading sense of a smaller New York of the early 70's gone mad over a pretty singer, after the fashion of our fathers, created an illusion historically truthful.

In "The Stubbornness of Geraldine" (written for Miss Mary Mannering in 1902) not only was the illusion of a pitching steamer created by the stage carpenter—a simple trick of no importance—but the scene on the deck was filled with such countless delightful strokes of observation, both of character and incident, that no printed sketch of an ocean voyage could have caught so vividly its humors. A gentle ridicule pervaded this scene, but ridicule which resided entirely in the aptness of the characters themselves and of what they did. "The Girl with the Green Eyes" (produced by Mrs. Bloodgood in 1902) was a play of more serious mettle. Here Mr. Fitch set earnestly to work at last to study a character. But he could not forego his detail, he could not keep out of his play those strokes of observation. That was one of his weaknesses; he abused his virtues by overworking them. The scene showing the Cook's Tourists before the Apollo Belvidere was capital fun, but hardly belonged in this serious drama of jealousy any more than did the young man who was incessantly taking pills.

"Her Own Way" and "Her Great Match," written in 1903 and 1905 for Miss Maxine Elliott (cut to order, as it were), on the other hand justified the "Fitchian detail"—already this close and sprightly observation of the surface of life had come to be accepted as a sort of standard. One was willing to pause and watch the minor characters and the intimate details of the story which were so vivid a part of the charm. In "Glad of It" (a failure) Mr. Fitch endeavored to dramatize a department store, which was at least daring. In "Girls," an adaptation from the German (1908), he shaped the original so much into his own manner that it became practically his play; and here his vivid observation of surface detail was seen at its best. The life of three bachelor girls in a New York flat—the rattling of water in the steam radiator, the singing of a "vocalist" across the air-shaft, the washing of handkerchiefs in a bowl, later spread to dry on the window pane, the suppers of éclairs and chocolate, the rows with the janitor—that was its substance, and that was caught with such smiling assurance, such deft truth, that it had the tang of actuality which the story of the play quite missed, and, slight and

unimportant as the little piece was, it made you dissatisfied with many a more ambitious drama, dissatisfied because the more ambitious drama lacked this surface reality, this sense of scenes and persons lifted out of life and set down upon the stage. A truthful surface texture, indeed, was with Mr. Fitch a matter of style, and almost as much an instinct as personal cleanliness.

It is no criticism of his truth as an artist to say that his people, even in the most ambitious of his plays, were generally small people, engaged in somewhat trivial affairs and moving in a shallow and trivial social world. It made many good people angry when, in "Her Own Way," a family were plunged in tragic gloom because they had lost all their fortune save a paltry \$600,000. Yet, for these shallow little millionaires, that was tragic. So long as Mr. Fitch remained true to the types he chose to depict, and among whom, it must be confessed, he seemed to move with the most pleasure, his art might be limited, but it could not be called false. He set out deliberately to study these types in serious drama, at least twice, to put aside except for the mere purposes of background the adroit surface detail, the array of amusing minor personages, the satirical or comic little interludes which he knew so well how to transfer from the avenue to the stage, and to track down the deeper spiritual truths of character. These plays were "The Girl with the Green Eyes" and "The Truth." In both of them he failed of complete success. In both of them he did demonstrate that he was not fully an artist, not, however, because he chose trivial types—that was his right—but because he could not remain consistently true to his task of tracking them down.

The trouble in "The Girl with the Green Eyes" was the plot, the chain of circumstances which revealed the character of Jinny, the jealous wife. Those circumstances were largely external to her character, arbitrary and artificial, Jinny remains true to herself in this play, to be sure, but it is not the fate of most of us to have unmitigated cads for younger brothers, as Jinny had, and it is only on the stage, perhaps, that a husband would risk his domestic happiness and the love of his wife by concealing the truth about her abominable brother under the mistaken notion that his

"honor" compelled him to keep a promise to that young gentleman. In other words, Mr. Fitch employed not the simple expedients which are, after all, sufficient to bring jealousy to a head and set it gnawing at character and happiness, but a highly colored and artificial—and rather needlessly unpleasant—set of circumstances. To create a play that should excite, he depended in reality more on plot than on character, and his study of character suffered accordingly. It seemed less typical, because its setting was not typical at all, did not spring from the character but the arbitrary will of the dramatist. This is, of course, to admit that Mr. Fitch was here too much a man of the theatre, and not free from the lingering Scribe conventions. But it in no wise proves that he was not an artist because the jealous Jinny, instead of being a regal figure, a modern Cleopatra, perhaps, was a frail, trivial, commonplace, every-day sort of female.

"The Truth," unsuccessful in America, where it was produced by Mrs. Bloodgood in October, 1906, successful in London where Miss Marie Tempest played it in April, 1907, and later taking a place in the repertoire of several Continental theatres, comes the nearest to being a completely satisfactory drama of all Mr. Fitch's works. For two acts, indeed, it has hardly a flaw. His preoccupation with amusing detail for its own sake has vanished. Engaged seriously in the study of a woman who, paradoxically, was both true at heart and a petty liar with her tongue, involving herself in webs of deceit, Mr. Fitch lays his preparation for the final inevitable blow to her husband's love with quiet ease, steady progression, and convincing naturalness. Printed, these acts are almost as engrossing and plausible as on the stage. They must satisfy even the "literary" critic!

And then once more Mr. Fitch is beset by his virtues. Enter Becky's father, a gambling, degenerate old rake, and the serio-comic landlady from Baltimore with whom he lives. The scene is transferred to their establishment, and though the father at least may claim some positive dramatic value, by explaining Becky's inherited proclivities to prevaricate (the playwrights would be hard put without the good old law of heredity!), the key of the drama is appreciably changed, a mood

perilously close to farce creeps in. Mr. Fitch always claimed living originals for these characters. But that does not strengthen his case in the least. Comic characters, however true, distract from the mood of tragedy or of serious character study, divert the attention, and so are false to the higher purpose of the play. One suspects that in Europe these two characters in the presentation were "toned down," and naturally in Europe it was not their comic element of truthful caricature which stood out, but their occasional emotional appeal. That may explain the greater success of the play abroad. Being superficially less realistic there, it was at bottom more so.

Mr. Fitch's faults in these two serious character studies of his, then, were the faults of his virtues—his preoccupation with the desire to make a story for his play that should interest the large general public, and his gift of sprightly, more or less satiric, observation, which he could not quite keep within bounds, even in a drama of grave import. He was too often as one who jested in a sermon. In "The Girl with the Green Eyes" he missed his mark because his plot was artificial and did not fuse with the simple reality of his character study. The plot exposed the character, the character did not condition the plot. In "The Truth" he missed his mark because he could not keep to the one mood of gravity, and lost his hold on the emotions of his audience by losing himself in the comic depiction of exaggerated types quite aside from his main issue. In "The City," Mr. Fitch's last play, posthumously produced in November, 1909, and plainly lacking his guiding and reshaping hand at rehearsal, he created what he himself is said to have regarded as his finest work. It is, at any rate, his most masculine work, for once putting forth a man as the chief personage and seriously studying him. But here again occurs the paradox—his virtue is his fault. His play fails of his higher purpose because plot and purpose do not comport.

"The City" is, supposedly, an exposition of the idea that New York, or, for that matter, any large city "shows up" a man in his true colors, brings to the surface his keenest ambitions and largest interests, so that if those ambitions and interests are unworthy, the man comes to know it, and the

world comes to know it also. The people from the little town of Middleberg in Mr. Fitch's play were moral hypocrites, as their father had been before them. It was not till they satisfied their longings and got into the thick of affairs in New York that they were brought to realize the fact, however. This is a fresh and perhaps a just view of urban influence. But the play fails of making it clear and convincing, because Mr. Fitch, too concerned with his theatrical story, brought about the revelation of hypocrisy to the hero not by the influence of the city, but by the plotting of a single character, the degenerate and illegitimate offspring of the country father. For the working out of that long, lurid, and theatrically exciting second act, the scene of the story need really never have left Middleberg. Mr. Fitch, too intent on his plot, forgot his purpose. His instinct was right. It was a virtue. He lacked the genius, however, to fuse his story with the exposition of character and the development of an intellectual idea. Not his preoccupation with petty people was his artistic weakness—though it may have been his moral weakness—but his lack of a balanced intellectual judgment on his own work, of a sufficient power of concentration on one mood or one idea.

Admitting these, his limitations, his half failures and incomplete realizations, we must at the same time admit his positive merits and, striking the balance, judge him as one whose contributions to stage literature possessed considerable truth and value of themselves, and have been of even more significance as influence and example. In the long array of his plays, stretching over a period of almost twenty years, will be found a varied record of the foibles and fashions of the hour, the turns of speech which characterized the fleeting seasons, our little local ways of looking at little things, the popular songs we were singing, the topics which were uppermost in our social chat, our taste in decoration, our amusements, the deeper interests, even, of our leisured classes; and always a portrait gallery of vividly drawn minor characters of great historic interest. Supplement the texts and stage directions of Mr. Fitch's plays with a collection of flash-light photographs of the original productions, to picture the costumes and settings (a collection of such stage photographs would be of great value

to any historical library), and they will afford twenty, fifty, a hundred years hence a more authentic and vivid record of our American life from 1890 to 1910, so far as it was lived in the gayer parts of town, than any other documents, whether the files of the newspapers or the fiction of the hour. The minute and faithful gift of observation which was his gave Mr. Fitch's plays at once their most immediate appeal and their most lasting value. Ruskin long ago pointed out that the only "historical painting" which will have value for our descendants is our record of our own times. The same is true of drama. Our descendants will not care what we thought of the French Revolution or even of the Civil War. But what we thought of our own immediate surroundings will be to them of historic interest and worth. They, at least, will be glad that the best of Mr. Fitch's plays have been preserved in print.

And because his appeal was so immediate, because his success, due to his keen and sprightly observation, was so great, his influence on other dramatists, consciously or not, was far-reaching and for good. He encouraged a more subtle and painstaking stage-management—a reform that in America still has a long way to go. He taught the value of a seemly setting for a play, of accuracy and solidity of scenery. He encouraged by his success the choice of American subjects and the stage illustration of American manners. When he began to write, the percentage of native American dramas in a single season was very small, and the characters in them were often native only in name. To-day the percentage of native dramas produced in a given year far exceeds the percentage of foreign plays, and most of them are now concerned with contemporary themes and people with characters recognizably American. It is impossible, of course, to estimate Mr. Fitch's share in this result, but that it was considerably more than that of any other single man, no one familiar with American theatrical conditions can doubt.

A man of the actual theatre, with the failings as well as the virtues of a man of the theatre, without the consciousness of a prophet's call or the intellectual assurance of a self-appointed leader, Clyde Fitch led by his practical success as a maker of popular plays, which were also truthful plays.

That those plays obeyed the tendency of the times and led the theatre still farther from poetry and true romance, there is no question. The pendulum had to swing. It is still swinging. The mission of the theatre to-day is to give reflective realism a full and fair trial. So far as he could, Mr. Fitch instinctively made his plays realistic, he commented upon the life about him by showing it on the stage as he saw it, often through the glass of a kindly irony. Because truth always makes its way when it is not dully presented, he was popularly successful above most other playwrights.

They studied the secrets of his success and wrote better plays themselves. The public—which never studies—felt the secrets of his success and demanded better plays. A man who has done this for the theatre need not fear that the theatre will forget him. But to deserve so well of the theatre, to have contributed so much to stage literature, is not yet, in popular estimation, to have become a man of letters. One is only left to speculate whether, after all, some acknowledged men of letters deserve so well of fame for any contributions they have made to vital truth in art.

LA BONNE COMÉDIE

By Austin Dobson

Les Précieuses ridicules allèrent aux nues dès le premier jour. Un vieillard s'écria du milieu du parterre: "Courage, Molière! voilà de la bonne comédie!" (Notice sur Molière.)

TRUE Comedy *circum præcordia ludit*,—
It cheers the heart's cockles. 'Twas thus that he viewed it,—
That simple old critic, who smote on his knee,
And named it no more than he knew it to be.

"True Comedy!"—ah! there is this thing about it,
If it makes the House merry, you never need doubt it:
It lashes the vicious, it laughs at the fool,
And it brings all the prigs and pretenders to school.

To the poor it is kind; to the plain it is gentle;
It is neither too tragic nor too sentimental;
Its thrust, like a rapier's, though cutting, is clean,
And it pricks Affectation all over the scene.

Its rules are the rules Aristotle has taught us;
Its ways have not altered since Terence and Plautus;
Its mission is neither to praise nor to blame;
Its weapon is Ridicule; Folly, its game.

"True Comedy!"—such as our Poquelin made it!
"True Comedy!"—such as our Coquelin played it!
It clears out the cobwebs, it freshens the air;
And it treads in the steps of its master, **MOLIÈRE!**

*** Written for Brander Matthews's "Molière."