

# A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

## OTIS SKINNER'S REMINISCENCES

By Alexander Woolcott

THIS is the last book review I shall ever write. For the editors of literary magazines are much too like those hostesses who put each guest in a handy pigeonhole and firmly keep him there despite all his feeble struggles to escape. Such a hostess turns to the sombre fellow on her left, murmurs "Engineer" to herself, and asks him brightly about Muscle Shoals, when, as a matter of fact, the poor fellow seethes with ideas about the later poems of Paul Verlaine. She turns to the playwright on her left and taunts him laughingly about the success of "Abie's Irish Rose" the while his mind happens to be engrossed with many fascinating facts about the square of the hypotenuse.

In this wise the editor of THE

BOOKMAN passes by Ring Lardner's "How to Write Short Stories", which seems to me a masterpiece of truth and insight and flawless craftsmanship, before whose author all ink stained wretches should make obeisance. Likewise the editor, when thinking (however fondly) of me, does not by any chance suggest that I write a piece about "These Charming People", that mad and beautiful book by the Oxonian (and Armenian) Michael Arlen — a book which not even "Bunker Bean" nor Plato's "Republic" nor Kenneth Grahame's "Golden Age" nor Marcel Schwob's "La Lampe de Psyché" shall displace from my personal shelf. I could dance in the streets after reading "These Charming People", but that would necessitate an awkward and conspicuous descent from my pigeonhole. So I find myself reviewing "Footlights and Spotlights" by Otis Skinner.

Fortunately my natural resentment does not so cloud my perceptions that I cannot see its manifold excellence. A stalwart actor of the old school, a battle scarred trouser thick with the dust of the road, has here set down the print of his remembrance. It is the good story of a good life, simply and agreeably told. It is almost the last of those reminiscences which have covered so thoroughly that golden time when a good director had a good company in a good theatre and, thus fortified, had the sense to stay there. It will be, indeed, the last of the Augustin Daly reminiscences, unless Clara Morris should take up the tale again or Kitty Cheatham write of the time when she played with Drew and Ada Rehan at Daly's Theatre. To be sure, there is always the danger that Willie Collier and May Irwin may burst into reminiscence. For who would put it past them?

In the Skinner tale, I shall remember longest two stray morsels of fact and memory. One is just the plain but somehow engaging fact that, when Otis Skinner was a freshman at the high school in Hartford, Connecticut, he looked up enviously toward the senior class, which had a dramatic club. And the star of that club was a lanky youth named William Gillette.

Then I shall remember long the account of that night in 1873 when John Wilkes Booth's trunk was delivered to his brother at the latter's theatre in New York. Edwin Booth bade his handyman wake him at three in the morning, and silently the two went to the cellar of the theatre and one by one consigned the contents of that trunk to the furnace. Thus the flames caught and ate the hauberk of Hamlet, the blue coat of Claude Melnotte, a girl's satin dancing slippers, a packet of letters in some woman's handwriting.

Mr. Skinner tells the tale in the words of an old property man he knew, for this Garrie Davidson had been basket boy at Booth's Theatre and it was he who tended the flames that night in the cellar.

"Presently he [Booth] drew out a long, belted, purple velvet shirt, ornamented with jewels, and an armhole cloak trimmed in fur. Both garments were creased and worn in places. He sat down on the trunk with the things on his knee, and for a while he didn't move — just sat looking at the costume; then he broke down and cried like a child.

" 'My father's', he said. 'Garrie, it was my father's *Richard III* dress. He wore it in Boston on the first night I went on the stage as *Tressell*.'

" 'Don't you think you ought to save that, Mr. Booth?' I asked.

" 'No, put it in with the others', he said.

" 'By and by it was nothing but ashes. I felt as if I had assisted at a crime.'

It was three hours later when those two came out of the cellar and it was years after the death of Edwin Booth that the basket boy told the tale to Otis Skinner. He has recaptured it with great skill, and those who compile the school readers for the youngsters of this land might look further and fare worse.

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Footlights and Spotlights. By Otis Skinner. The Bobbs-Merrill Co.