THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

"CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAYS"

By Walter Prichard Eaton

Mr. Eaton's review is the eighth of a series of longer book reviews to be published each month in THE BOOKMAN. *The books discussed will not necessarily be new nor will they be books which have never before been reviewed in the magazine. The aim of the editors is to present, in the selection of volumes and reviewers, articles which shall constitute solid pieces of criticism.*

PROFESSOR QUINN is as sure that we have an American drama as the Theatre Guild is sure that we haven't. He is even as sure that we have as the Equity Players were before they started to produce it. It all depends, of course, on what you mean by American drama. If you mean stage plays written by Americans, our managers produce nearly a hundred every season now, and reject at least ten thousand which the authors are sure are masterpieces. (Did anybody ever write a play which he didn't think was good?) So far as we can gather from Professor Quinn's rather uncritical introduction to this selection of native texts, that is about what he does mean. But in that sense the Ford car represents the art of carriage designing. It will hardly do as a definition. Other than the fact that they were written by Americans, chiefly about American life, what is there to distinguish these plays from the plays of other nations? What is there in any or all of them which constitutes a contribution to the art of the drama? Are all or any of them more distinctively American in this sense than were our plays of a generation ago? In what direction is the real native impulse in our drama developing? These are questions I should like to see Professor Quinn answer. His introduction disappoints me.

The first of the five plays he includes, for instance, is Jesse Lynch Williams's brilliant intellectual comedy, "Why Marry?", produced in 1917. Nobody questions the wit and not many people, probably, the wisdom, of this highly polished, artificial, sophisticated work. But is there anything actually American about it? Mr. Williams was born, I believe, in Missouri, but his dramatic ancestors were Irish. Their names were Sheridan, Wilde, and Shaw. The play has the derivative quality which belongs to all our aristocratic literature of the past.

The next play in the book is Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones". Here, surely, is a drama of authentic originality. It would be an original contribution to the stage of any country. It is part, to be sure, of the world movement toward a release of the human imagination from the fetters of realism, but O'Neill is not a slave to that movement. Indeed, he is rather a leader of it, and from the very start of his career his plays showed the oppressive head of steam his imagination carried. In form, too, "The Emperor Jones" follows no

model. It breaks new tracks. Here indeed is American drama.

Third comes "Nice People", by Rachel Crothers. A great many years ago the realistic "problem play" got itself combined in America with the sentimental story dear to our hearts (and the hearts of all Saxons), and resulted in a form of hybrid exemplified by "The Lion and the Mouse" and a long line of dramas, of which "Nice People" is merely one more example. In literature, Scott Fitzgerald got something of an original and authentic point of view toward the modern flapper. But this play is merely journalism. It is one of our dramas which explain the attitude of the Theatre Guild. It is a distinct falling off, too, from Miss Crothers's own past standard.

"The Hero", by Gilbert Emery, on the other hand, is honest realism, American not in form — which is the standardized product of late nineteenth century development — but in unflinching treatment of a native theme. And this play failed in our theatre. Why should Professor Quinn say it "succumbed to unfavorable theatrical conditions"? The whole point is that the public would have none of it. The play refused to temporize or sentimentalize. It said a war hero was, and remained, a moral coward; that physical bravery is possible in a cheap skate, and that the world's applause often goes in our land where it isn't deserved. It was the truth without a sugar coat. And, as usual, the American public rejected it. So far as realism goes, time and time again we have seen it rejected in our theatre, when applied to our own life by an honest playwright. It appears still to be rejected. Why doesn't Professor Quinn discourse on this? "The Hero", in a true sense, is American drama. But what avails it when the public turns away?

The last play in the collection is the Kaufman-Connelly comedy, "To the Ladies!" The work of these two men has been hailed in many quarters as marking the birth of American satire in the theatre. Stuff and nonsense! Their satire is the superficial grin at our national foibles, or the good natured, keen eyed laughter at our more obvious absurdities, which newspaper humorists have indulged in for years, and which, as a matter of fact, was to be found in our theatre, in embryo, as early as the 1830's. "To the Ladies!" is American drama, in the sense that it pokes fun at the surface pageant of our life, as Ade did in "The College Widow", for instance, and in the sense that it combines this satirical but good natured laughter with a rather feeble and insignificant dramatic fable. In any high sense, of satire there is none. Compare "To the Ladies!" with "Androcles and the Lion", for example. The very fact that the satire here is so superficial, the dramatic fable such a trivial, mean thing, almost silly, makes the play, alas, but the more characteristically American. We have had satirists. Mark Twain was one. "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" is satire. It would make a superb play. I know a manager who considered it for a year, as a play. He rejected the idea finally because he said it was "too grim" for the public. What he meant was, it cut too deep. There was a chance for satire in "To the Ladies!", of this deep cutting sort. But either the authors lacked the ability or the courage to apply the subsoil plow. They cultivated their field with a short toothed harrow. And they made what is, after all, good,

traditional American stage entertainment. But they didn't make the kind of adult drama the Theatre Guild is after.

We heartily sympathize with Professor Quinn's ardent desire to turn America's attention to its own dramatic fare. But in the long run nothing will be gained by being so uncritical about it.

Contemporary American Plays. Edited with an introduction on recent American drama by Arthur Hobson Quinn. Charles Scribner's Sons.