

INSIDE VIEWS OF FICTION

I—THE NOVELS OF THE THEATRE



OST of the \$1.50 novels that aim to relate stories dealing with the dramatic stage and its people reveal as much true insight as the ten cent novels that tell extravagant stories of the overland stage and its people. Where, in the latter, the attempt is made to sustain interest with pistols, in the former, immorality is usually relied on as a weapon by the writer. Real stage coaches, to be sure, are held up sometimes. It is the misfortune of the fiction dramatic stage to be held up almost always—as an object of shame.

Once in a great while, as in the instance of such a novel as *The Actress*, written by a member of the profession, a splendid story of the theatre is disclosed without sacrifice of the truth of things. A work such as this shows that stories of the stage can ring true and remain interesting without the shadow of vice written across their pages. Not the vice novels of the theatre, but rather the *vice versa* novels are to be recommended, in my opinion, to the readers who would not be led astray and be beguiled by fictitious melodrama under a mantle of alleged realism.

Stage novelists and story writers most invariably paint their actresses in one of two ways, and the word "actress," indeed, not infrequently is found to refer to a show-girl in both. One of the types

of "actress" revealed by the pen is the poor, distracted girl who, living in hall-bedrooms and subsisting on cheese crackers, is being forced to battle with a fictitious Fate either because she has no so-called (and again fictitious) "pull" or because, meeting it, she refuses to answer its whispers. If the writers only realised that Fate in the theatre is just plain hard work, and that the oft-repeated "pull," analysed, is a word with which incompetent intruders explain away their own failures or the well-earned success of their more able rivals.

The other and favourite type of story-book "actress" is the creature who wears diamonds and sables, who scorns any vehicle of transit save a great crimson motor car and in whose "art" the "h" is silent. These ambitionless women, with their careless lives, are used as morals in many a narrative the finger of which is pointed at the stage.

I was once asked by a man who had written a popular theatrical novel how I liked his heroine. "But I don't like her," I replied. He looked at me in poorly disguised astonishment. "And why, pray?" he questioned. "Because," I told him, "your actress is just as real as the alleged Latin Quarter artist who is supposed to wear long hair, corduroys and a flowing tie." "There are such, however," he rejoined, "such artists and such actresses." "Yes," I said to him, "but they are in such an insignificant minority. When you write of actresses of the char-

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acter of which you have written, the musical-comedy chorus kind, you should qualify your story as a story of *a* stage, not *the* stage."

There is the fault! The novelists pretend to write of *the* stage, the entire wide proscenium arch of the theatre, where, in reality, they are only writing of one tiny little bit of it, and an exaggerated bit at that.

Writers of the stage who know the stage do not fall into error. Those who write from the outside portray conditions that do not exist and magnify trivialities into "great" themes. The actress of fiction who is written with a fountain pen filled with champagne is as unreal as the actress of fiction who is sketched on a piece of hardtack. Neither dissipation nor deprivation are a proper keynote for the real romance of the theatre when they are sustained for too long a period. The extremes and the means are unfair.

Once in a while in these novels I catch a glimpse of truth, of realism shining from the lines, and I plunge on into the story hopeful that the note will be prolonged, but often in vain. It seems almost always as if the writer had whispered to himself: "Yes, I know this is true, but I am afraid it will not be interesting." So he imagines, he conjures up false pictures and—well, he may succeed in interesting some of his readers, but I must believe the number of his admirers would be augmented if he remained steadfast and held to the truth. You see,

I believe the novelist often knows better, but lacks the courage of his pen.

You may say to me, "Come, now, are you as sincere as you would have the novelist be?" Indeed I am. I hold that the great novels dealing with the theatre are still to be written and that when they are written, they will reveal stories that the men and women of the theatre themselves will acknowledge to be honest, vital and real. Realism gives birth to the finest and longest-lived romance. Sacrifice of truth to tinselled falsity, be the literary style as subtle as it may, can command only transient interest.

In short, novels of the stage (I am speaking in general) are to be criticised chiefly for their quality of what I may term fictitious fiction. Their "actresses" are not actresses; their theatre is a plaything, not a purposeful institution; their themes are those of the unreal plays that sometimes creep behind the footlights. The stage may be a little world all in itself, but its people are people of the big world beyond its doors. They are human beings, not brilliantined dolls and pieces of electric mechanism.

They eat, drink, breathe, feel, walk, talk and act like their fellow-men and women in other fields of endeavour. In every class you will find oddities. But you cannot—oh, I am so sure—tell the real living, pulsing story of the whole class by telling the story of one of its unfortunately freakish individuals. And novels of the stage do so love to do the latter.

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