"MARGARET SCHILLER"—ACT 1

"The heroine, Margaret Schiller, is an enemy alien who lives in a little nest of German spies in Soho Square. . . . The Prime Minister is about to engage, as governess for his little daughter, a Swiss girl whom he has never seen. This Swiss girl is a friend of Margaret's. Margaret, therefore, assumes the name of the Swiss girl, and goes to get the job."

SOMETHING TO SAY IN THE THEATRE

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

THE least pretentious of reviewers would fain agree with Matthew Arnold that criticism is an art; but it is at best a secondary art,—an art at two removes from nature. The critic is not permitted to make his own selection of material from life; he must accept the material that has been selected by the author of the work before him, and must do with it the best that he can do. Criticism at its highest is the record of "a soul's adventures among masterpieces"; but what is the soul to do if there are no masterpieces among which to go adventuring? Anatole France, who coined this golden phrase, has confined his own criticism to works so noble that they have called forth noble commentaries; but what would he have done if he had been called upon to criticise volume after volume of mere trash? The critic is dependent on his subject-matter. Any critic who has learned the alphabet of his art can write something worth reading about Keats; but could even Walter Bagehot have written anything worth reading about a novel by Laura Jean Libbey?

One reason why there is so little good dramatic criticism in America is that there is so little good drama to criticise. It is easy enough for any critic to write an eloquent interpretation of a new play by Maeterlinck or Barrie; but it is scarcely possible for any critic to write anything at all about a new play by Mr. George V. Hobart. In literature, as in physics, the axiom pertains that it is impossible to make something out of nothing.

It is not within the province of the critic to complain, or to seek relief from boredom in mere ridicule. Criticism, in

"JUST A WOMAN"—ACT III

"The wife swears that she has, indeed, been unfaithful to her marriage vows, and that her little son is not the child of her husband. The judge now perceives that she is lying; and consequently orders the arrest of her husband and his lawyers and his witnesses for conspiracy."

intention, is not destructive but constructive. Despite the popular fallacy that the critic is always eager to find fault, the truth of the matter is that the critic is always eager to find merit. What the critic really seeks is masterpieces, among which to send his soul adventuring; and in the search for a single masterpiece, he is willing, through months and years of waiting, to maintain an heroical endeavour to keep his spirit forever fresh, forever unfatigued, forever ready for a quick and keen impression. The true critic may be said to watch and pray for masterpieces; but sometimes, for years, the watching is unrewarded and the prayers are unanswered.

To the periodical reviewer of the drama, the current season has been especially discouraging. It has been a successful season from the commercial point of view; but very few plays have been revealed which were worthy of a second thought. Even if a man should have a soul (and Browning has pointedly reminded us that it is by no means always that "a soul can be discovered"), it may be doubted that his soul could find adventures, at the present moment, in many of the theatres of New York. Without renouncing the duty to maintain a steadfast optimism, it must be admitted that most of our theatres, at the present time, are given over to mere twaddle.

When a person of intelligence and taste has spent four dollars of his money and three hours of his time to attend a performance of *Moonlight Mary* or *The Greatest Nation* or *The Pride of Race*, he has a right to feel disgusted with the theatre. With that same four dollars of money, he might have bought a dozen volumes of *Everyman's Library*, any one of which would have been a hundred times more interesting than the play that he has seen. With that same three hours of time [and time is *not* money, because it is immeasurably more precious], he might have walked the streets and noted the faces of the people as they passed, or

"ERSTWHILE SUSAN"—ACT I

"The hero, Barnaby Dreary, has already killed off two wives by overworking them; and, in order to save money, has now advertised for a third. His advertisement is answered by an elocution teacher from Iowa, who, many years before, had been disappointed in love."

he might have sat at home before a fire and sent his spirit winging through illimitable regions of imagination. Considering the great waste of time and money that is necessitated by attendance at a bad play, and considering the overwhelming chance that a new play will be bad, it may indeed be wondered why people of intelligence and taste, still following the *ignus fatuus* of the footlights, are willing to repeat the perilous adventure of going to the theatre.

For, after all, why do people go to the theatre, when there are so many other things in life to do? They go to the theatre to be interested by some presentation of the subject-matter of the theatre, which is human nature. The purpose of the theatre, therefore, is to interest the public in humanity. This interest may be effected in either of two ways,—first, by setting forth a commentary which is new, or, second, by setting forth a commentary which is eternal. A play is good if it is novel; a play is good if it is real; but unless its commentary upon life either assures a new thought or reassures an old thought, it is not worth the expenditure of four dollars of money and an evening of time.

If a dramatist can tell a person of intelligence and taste something about life which he has never known before, his play will be worthy of serious consideration. And if a dramatist can remind a person of intelligence and taste of something about life which he had always known subconsciously but had never articulately formulated for himself, his play will be worthy of a long life in the theatre and of a niche of remembrance in the temple of dramatic literature. Mr. Bernard Shaw is worthy of serious consideration because he tells us many things about life which we had never thought before; and Sir James Barrie is worthy of more high consideration because he reminds us of many things about life which we had always known but

"THE HEART OF WETONA"—ACT I, SCENE 2

"Wetona flees to seek advice of an Indian agent named John Hardin. Her father follows her to Hardin's house, and surmises at once that Hardin is the guilty man. Hardin in reality is innocent; but he loves Wetona, and, in order to protect her, he marries her forthwith."

seemed to have forgotten. But any dramatist worth listening to must rank himself in either of these two classes,—the class of the great informers, or the class of the great reminders.

Unless a dramatist can make us recall and realise what we have always known, or can tell us something that we have never known before, he will fail to interest us in life itself, which is the subject-matter of the theatre. Yet, how many of the dramatists whose works are current in America can fulfill either of these prime requirements? The answer is a matter of fact, and may be computed mathematically.

Every season, in New York, the professional reviewer is required to attend not less than one hundred and fifty new productions in the theatre. Of these, according to the variation of the seasons, from five to ten may be of interest to people of intelligence and taste, on either of the two grounds which have been defined above. To strike a common average, one play in every twenty-three is worth some after-thought.

To the critic of the drama, the one play which is really good means more (to speak in terms of a familiar parable) than the ninety and nine which are of no account; but, to the casual theatre-goer, the proportion of twenty-two to one on the wrong side of the gamble must seem indeed discouraging. A person of intelligence and taste who casually takes a chance on going to a play is likely, twenty-two times out of twenty-three, to have his intelligence insulted and his taste offended. He goes to the theatre with a fresh desire to be interested in life itself by something new or something true in the counterfeit presentment; and he slinks home with an uncomfortable sense that, all along, he has known much more about life than the author could presume to tell him.

The trouble is that, in America, our best plays are not written by the men who are best equipped to tell the public

"THE MELODY OF YOUTH"—ACT II

"The hero, a young Irishman who has been studying in Rome with the intention of becoming a priest, is heavily embarrassed by the fact that he has been appointed guardian of the belle of Dublin. . . . He takes her to a little house on the top of a hill; and there, beneath the apple-blossoms, he complicates the situation by falling in love with her himself."

something new or something eternal about life itself. Our wise men do not write for the theatre; and our practised playwrights are not wise. If a man wants to know the truth about his liver, he goes to a physician; if a man wants to know the truth about the legal status of his business, he goes to a lawyer; and, similarly, if a man should want to know the truth about life, he should be able to go to a dramatist. Suppose that Mr. X has had a quarrel with his wife and desires to adjust the difference for the advantage of their children. Obviously, it would be well for him to seek advice from such a dramatist as Shakespeare, or Molière, or Ibsen; but would it particularly help him to seek advice from such a dramatist as Mr. Roi Cooper Megrue?

The selection of Mr. Megrue's name in the present context is utterly impersonal and not at all invidious. He has been chosen merely to indicate the most successful type of American playwright at the present hour. As part-author of *It Pays to Advertise* and *Abe and Mawruss,* and as sole author of *Under Cover* and *Under Fire,* Mr. Megrue has achieved four great successes in the last two years. It seems likely that the theatre-going public will pay him at least a quarter of a million dollars for the privilege of seeing these four plays. But will the public, having seen these skilful and entertaining pieces, be any wiser than before? Will the public learn as much about life from the experience of seeing them as might have been learned by spending four evenings at home and reading *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel?* This is the sort of disconcerting question which makes the dramatic critic often doubt the value of his own profession as a commentator on the current theatre. Our native playwrights are often clever and frequently ingenious in exploiting the merely technical devices of the drama; but very, very rarely do they re-

"THE CINDERELLA MAN"—ACT I

"The heroine is a poor little rich girl who, after the death of her mother in Europe, returns to the house of a wealthy father in New York who is incapable of understanding her."

"THE EARTH"—ACT IV

"The Countess of Killone comes forward to insist that the Wages Bill must be put through at any cost. She beards the lion in his den, and tells Sir Felix Janion that, if he dares to attack her reputation, she will in turn expose him as a master of the methods of blackmail."

ward the public with something real to say.