

Drama

DRAMA INEXPERIENCED
AND EXPERT

THE THREE HUNDRED CLUB is an association for performing the plays of beginners. The beginners may be old masters in some other art than play-writing; age may have snowed white hairs upon them or they may be under twenty; they may have by them stacks of unacted dramas or only one: such facts are irrelevant. All that the Club requires is that they should not be recognised adepts in stage-craft, for its purpose is to hunt for new talent and to provide that necessary element in the education of a dramatist, namely, the illuminating experience of seeing his own work take shape upon the stage. Much can be learnt from seeing other people's plays performed, but it is still more instructive to see your own; indeed, without that experience a dramatist can hardly discover why scenes which seemed so brightly illuminated in the theatre which he carries under his own hat seem dim upon the stage, or why passages he thought negligible stand out in performance as significant. Then there is the vital question of preparation; unless an author sees his play acted he may never discover where he tends to elaborate over-much and what kind of points he tends to scamp. I take it that *The Three Hundred Club* is a school for dramatists in the same sense that we have long had schools for actors. It serves as important a purpose. The audience may be lucky and hap upon a masterpiece, but *The Three Hundred Club* is not thinking only of the audience. It takes for granted in those who join a special kind of interest in the drama: a generous curiosity and a readiness to excuse crudities and defects in a play for the sake of "a something" that may be in it; "a something" which the dramatist, henceforth, will have a far better chance of bringing to perfection after performance. There must be that "something" in any play which the club accepts, some kind of beauty, some new kind of method, or some idea; that is the qualification for being performed by them, and it is not so often fulfilled as might be supposed. The play itself may be inferior to many which do not possess it; no matter, the aim of *The Three Hundred Club* is to hunt for that "something" and to drag it to light that like a plant it may grow. In doing this they are dependent not only upon the curiosity of the public, but upon the generosity of the profession, which fortunately never fails such enterprises. It is astonishing what good hard work actors, actresses and producers will give for nothing.

Miss Gladys Parrish's *Barton's Folly*, acted at the Court Theatre last Sunday, had that "something," though it was a bad play. You can sum up its defects in a single comment: it borrowed Ibsen's rumble of distant thunder without supplying his lightning. The whole play was devoted to creating an atmosphere of momentous and obscure tension, but those white, dazzling flashes when character and situation leap into vivid life were absent. The two sharp shots off scene at the last moment before the curtain dropped were far from discharging all the electricity mysteriously accumulated during the three acts.

One thing Miss Parrish will have learnt from the performance of her play—that the device of giving a clair-obscure depth to people's relations to each other, by making them go over their past lives together, can only be sparingly used. Ibsen may be said to have invented it; at least, no dramatist before him made such effective use of it. It is fascinating to find ourselves in the middle of

a story and to acquire only gradually deeper insight into the relations of the people in it. The sensation that much has already happened before the play began is exciting, and when each fragment of the past as it is revealed explains what at first puzzled us in the behaviour of the characters before our eyes, that excitement is intensified. But of course it will not do if what is going to happen before our eyes is not more significant still. The characters in *Barton's Folly* were perpetually asking each other "Do you remember?" till the inevitable exchange of memories, however earnestly imparted, whenever two people were left alone on the stage, become almost ludicrous. And what was even more fatal, the intensest moments in the play were those when they harked back to the past. Moreover, in the case of the two most mystifying characters, Carola Hartland and Morgan Gretton, it was, in spite of these repeated reminiscences, by no means clear what their relation had been. They were apparently both crazy. Carola seemed to sympathise with the craziness of Morgan; and there were indications which came to nothing that she loved him. If the dramatist had made her his half-sister, instead of his step-sister and therefore no blood relation at all, her mysterious inhibitions and dark hints would have explained better her behaviour; as it was we had to fall back on the supposition that she was as mad as he. Carola was very well played by Miss Leah Bateman.

Still the play had that "something" which justified its performance by *The Three Hundred*. It lay in the dramatist's sense of the interesting complexity of human relations. Though inexpert, confused, and full of bugbears, *Barton's Folly* is the work of an imagination. I found it often absurd, but never dull. Miss Parrish's mistake lay in aiming at the creation of a sinister atmosphere without a solid story. Atmosphere must be an exhalation rising from facts; the factual basis of her play was much too vague. The most telling moment in the play was the moment when Morgan's young wife, who is terrified of him, realises that, by allowing herself to be frightened into doing what he wants, instead of placating him, she exasperates him further.

No Man's Land, a translation of M. de Curel's *La Terre Inhumaine* is a marked contrast to *Barton's Folly*. Its defects spring from exactly the opposite qualities. M. de Curel treats human passions as though they are ingredients as independent as chemical elements, and his art consists in measuring them out and combining them. Patriotism 4 + sexual attraction 2 = Drama, just as H₂O equals water in the laboratory. *No Man's Land* is a story of the late war. A young French spy revisits, on a mission, his mother's house in Lorraine and finds there a young German princess who is visiting her husband at the front. She knows he is a spy; they are attracted by each other, and spend a lover's night together. But it is touch-and-go that he does not shoot her to prevent her giving him up, and she, too, knowing her danger and the injury he is doing her country's cause, is inclined to betray him. They decide, however, for love. The next morning he carelessly tells her of some of his exploits behind the German lines, and she makes up her mind to inform the military authorities. He is spared the hideous necessity of shooting her by his old mother, who kills her. Miss Haidée Wright was admirable in this part. There is energy and some clever oscillations in the verbal duel between these lover-enemies; but though deft, the psychology strikes one as mechanical, and the passion of patriotism, which is intended to inspire us with sublime emotions, appears in rather an ugly light. M. de Curel is a dramatist of high though not very wide repute in France. It is a pity that the first specimen of his work we should see should not have been a finer example of it.

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