

# William Winter's "Life of David Belasco"

By BARRETT H. CLARK.

THE position of William Winter in the history of our native stage is secure. It is at present impossible to estimate the exact importance of his voluminous contributions, but not even his most unsympathetic detractors can deny that he is an imposing figure, one impossible to ignore. Were it only for the mass of material that he has already collected in book form his writings would loom large in our libraries and form the basis of much of our material on the American theatre.

Winter was not only a critic who practically dominated a great dramatic—or let us say theatrical—epoch, he was a man of letters; his books would demand attention by reason of their delightful style if not for their matter.

## "Si Monumentum Requiritur—"

The publishers are rendering a distinct service in issuing volume after volume of the collected works of the veteran critic. These already include three series of studies relating to *Shakespeare on the Stage*, two volumes of miscellaneous material in *The Wallet of Time*, two on *The Life and Art of Richard Mansfield*, not to mention biographies of actors, single volumes of reminiscences, and finally, the most imposing of all the biographies, *The Life of David Belasco*—two volumes, with a total of 1,093 pages!

A quick glance at this formidable set is sufficient to see that the writer has been at pains to gather all available material not only on the life of Mr. Belasco, but on the numerous associates of Mr. Belasco and the various activities with which he has been identified. Indeed, had Winter confined himself merely to a biography of David Belasco that manager must surely have protested. Bernard Shaw's biographer dared not devote over half the space to his hero that Mr. Winter has given to his, and I know of no Goethe biography—even by a German—that is longer than the work now under consideration. Surely William Winter must have considered his subject rather as a centre of activities, a point of departure, than a demigod.

## Belasco's Claim to Fame.

I intend no disrespect to Mr. Belasco, who is a very able manager, a play-tinker of talent who rendered signal service to the American theatre during a period of depression. In all probability the obstacles he was called upon to face and surmount were fully as great, if not greater, than those faced and surmounted by our younger managers and playwrights. But seriously, is there any comparison between the plays produced by Belasco and the manner in which he mounted them, and the plays and artistic achievements of Arthur Hopkins and Robert E. Jones? At a time when Europe

was building theatres that we are just beginning to imitate, when managers were putting into practice lighting devices which Belasco has just "discovered," our own "Wizard of the Stage" was erecting ill-ventilated and uncomfortable playhouses and producing plays nine-tenths of which were of no more than passing interest.

In spite of this our biographer is right in his fundamental implication: that Belasco was in his day the right man in the right place, though he is pitifully wrong in claiming for him a position he does not deserve. The chief interest in his *Life of David Belasco* is not David Belasco, but the variegated and moving picture we are offered of the American stage of the past four decades. The style of William Winter has rarely been put to such excellent use as in the descriptions of the late palmy days with which these volumes are studded.

## The "Good Old Days."

Here, as in *The Life of Richard Mansfield* and *The Wallet of Time*, we are invited to enjoy the first nights of the '80s and '90s and the quarrels of actors and managers; we are guided—by a prejudiced observer, however—through the mazes of the old Syndicate intrigues and finally we find ourselves perchance beguiled into thinking for a moment that perhaps the palmy days were indeed palmy, until we are rudely jolted by one of those ill-advised outbursts of temper which the old gentleman could not restrain and forced to admit that the palms were simply dead palms. To Winter the past was beautiful not because it was the past, but because it was not the present, and his later years were one long drawn wail over the invasion of the new, the vile excrescences of the Gloomy Norwegian, the sewage of Shaw, and the pruriencies of Pinero.

And yet somehow the work is vitally interesting. For one thing the documentation is thorough. This is in the shape of letters, photographs and programmes, many of them of the first importance to the student of the period, and nearly all of prime interest to the general reader. The historian of the future will find this part of the book indispensable. Unfortunately he will find himself unable to accept Winter's judgments as they stand. Due allowance in every case must be made for the personal equation. There is no use repeating what is now a commonplace: William Winter was constitutionally incapable of understanding the first principles of the art of Ibsen and his followers.

## An Angry Old Man.

Had he been content to champion the "wholesome" drama of the past, which he understood, and not set himself against the new movement, which he did not understand and which he was eternally striving to belittle because it stood for ideas that were radically opposed to his own, we should still have been able to abide by his judgments; but in condemning modern plays and modern actors he became obsessed with the notion that the earlier actors and the earlier plays were far superior to all else. He lost his sense of proportion and, consumed with a mania of impotent rage, spluttered helplessly in a sea of exasperated invective.

The vindictive note is everywhere present in the later works. In *The Life and Art of Richard Mansfield* his spitefulness takes the form of childish tricks when he considers the famous *Beau Brummell* case; for example, he consistently avoids referring to Clyde Fitch by his rightful name, preferring for his purpose such devices as calling the well known dramatist "Mr. W. C. Fitch," "C. Fitch" and the like. In *The Life of David Belasco* we are afforded the same sort of thing. Says Winter on page 267 of the second volume in reference to one of the conspicuously few first rate plays produced by Mr. Belasco:

## A Winter Come to Judgment.

"Mr. Eugene Walter's play called *The Easiest Way*, is one of the most obnoxious specimens of theatrical trash that have been obtruded on the modern Stage. . . . It is melancholy and deplorable that he [Belasco] should have lent his great reputation to the support of the vicious play which now disgraces his Stuyvesant Theatre. . . . We do not want to see in the Theatre the villainess that should be shunned; we want to see the beauty that should be emulated and loved!" I am not aware, that Winter

criticised *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* on the same grounds.

It would be unfair to quote further instances of our critic's aberrations; I wish only to indicate his greatest defect. I am even willing to grant that essentially he may have been right and that the future will see in him a prophet in the evil days of twentieth century drama; but on the other hand it cannot be doubted that his method of attack was fatally wrong, and the note of spite that is constantly sounded a continual warning to the wary reader in search of facts.

The reviewer is often embarrassed in the appraisal of a work of this sort in

his effort not to lay too great stress on the shortcomings, and yet—it takes so much more space to describe these than to praise the whole. Personally I am grateful, if not overgracious, to the writer of *The Life of David Belasco* for having afforded me a broad if not unprejudiced view of a very important man and of an epoch that is fast slipping from us into the gilded past of American theatrical history.

THE LIFE OF DAVID BELASCO. By WILLIAM WINTER, edited and completed by his son, Jefferson Winter. In two volumes. Moffat, Yard & Co. \$11.

## From Examination Papers in Victorian Literature

MATTHEW ARNOLD had a rule by which poetry could be measured for worth of thought and style. It was not, however, applicable to vers libre.

Dickens was a romantic realist. Which means that he had the qualities of a good scenario writer.

Tennyson was made Poet Laureate of England because he wrote the *Charge of the Light Brigade*.

Thackeray was the first man who experienced the horrors of serial writing. The "devil" was always after him for more and more copy, a fact which explains why he had to kill Col. Newcome so prematurely.

George Elliot read 2,000 histories of

Florentine life at the time of Savonarola before she wrote *Romola*.

Charles Kingsley was a preacher who incidentally wrote boring novels.

Thomas MacAuley was the opposite of Carlyle.

James Stuart Mill wrote a compendium of the world's history at the age of eight and fell in love at twenty.

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* shocked the prudish Victorian public because she was the first woman in any English novel who made anorous advances to a man.

Tennyson opposed woman suffrage. This is proved by the fact that he wrote "Woman is the lesser man!"

Thackeray was a cynic because he hated snobs. M. J. A.

**THE MARINE'S OWN BOOK**



"Dear Folks at Home"

MORGAN DENNIS U.S.M.C.

*The glorious story of the U.S. Marines in France as told in their own letters from the battlefields to the "Dear Folks at Home"*

Letters selected by Corporal Kemper F. Cowing  
Edited by Lieutenant Courtney Ryley Cooper  
Illustrated by Private Morgan Dennis U.S.M.C.

\$2.00 net.

## Newest Books

**The League of Nations, Today and Tomorrow**  
By H. M. KALLEN—\$1.50.

**Letters of Susan Hale**  
Have been called "letters of light."—\$3.50.

**Can Mankind Survive**  
By Morrison I. Swift—\$1.50.

**Racial Factors in Democracy**  
By Philip Ainsworth Means  
\$2.50

**Marshall Jones Company**  
212 Summer St. Boston, Mass.

Ask for



White Man

By GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN  
Manufactured by Kamin. Price \$1.75 net.  
The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Publishers

**JOHN GALSWORTHY**

says:

## THE GREAT HUNGER

"is the first work of fiction I have ever reviewed. This story by the distinguished Norwegian writer, Johan Bojer, is so touchingly searching and sincere that it interested me from the first page to the last."

**JAMES BRANCH CABELL**

says:

## THE GREAT HUNGER

"ascends beyond prosaic narrative to lyric splendor. It is—or ought to be an enduring book."

Price \$1.60 Net.

At all bookstores.

**MOFFAT, YARD & COMPANY,**

Union Square, New York