

A Review of the Theatre
“An Enemy of the People”
 By FRANCIS RUFUS BELEAMY

IT is no small evidence of a play's inherent interest that ideas contained in it should be worth discussion forty-four years after the play was first presented. Yet such is certainly the case with Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People," which Walter Hampden is reviving at his theatre above Columbus Circle—if revival is a word to be applied to a play which no American actor has ever (unless we are forgetful) offered us.

Although the play is by a foreigner, deals with foreign life, and first saw the footlights in Norway, the theme of this satirical comedy might have been suggested to a Galsworthy yesterday by any number of recent developments. Much of it can still be reviewed as the offering of the 1927 playwright.

It is a dramatic exposition of the idea that new truth is, and always will be, the enemy of society. Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist of the play, believing, as Ibsen himself did, in distinction of soul as the aim of life, and being a doctor as well as a seeker after individual truth, discovers that the water which supplies the great health baths, on which the town's prosperity is based, is poisoned.

Driven by his scientific enthusiasm for truth, he calls the fact—somewhat muddle-headedly—to the attention of the powerful group who politically control the town.

Readers of Ibsen are more or less familiar with what happens. Since the town's prosperity is at stake, and the water cannot be purified without great loss, in a remarkably short time everybody in the town, including those friends of the Doctor's who at first saw an opportunity to profit by the exposure—

everybody is agreed that the discovery is probably false, that it must be kept secret, even though some invalid visitors die, and that Dr. Stockmann is an Enemy of the People for ever having ascertained the truth.

The Doctor is discharged from the baths, where he is medical officer, his house is stoned, his family ostracized, his brother, the Burgomaster, repudiates him, his father-in-law disinherits him, and all that is left to him is distinction of soul and a perception of the fact that the strong man is he who stands most alone—that the pioneer of the truth must necessarily be twenty years ahead of his time. For him, the price of truth is loneliness, bitterness, and poverty.

The application to society, past or present, of such a story—I have left out the characters of the play—would be obvious, of course, even if Ibsen did not speak his theme directly through Dr. Stockmann's own speech to his fellow-townsmen.

Despite this obviousness, nevertheless—and there was nothing obvious in it in 1883 in Norway—the contemporary theatre offers few more stirring, magnificent moments than those Walter Hampden provides in the fourth act when he delivers this speech of the Doctor's to the townspeople.

One forgets the unnaturalness of some of the earlier scenes of the play (in justice to Mr. Hampden, the fault is the dramatist's, not his). One forgets, too, some of the rather evident earnestness of the play's presentation. (Yes, my dear friends, this is a masterpiece we are giving you this evening.) One remembers none of these things, and forgets even that Dr. Stockmann is really just

Walter Hampden being genial in Ibsen.

"Yes, by Heaven, I am a revolutionist," shouts Dr. Stockmann to the crowd, stung by the bitter jibes of those whom he had considered his friends.

"I am going to revolt against the lie that truth belongs exclusively to the majority. What sort of truths do the majority rally round? Truths so stricken in years that they are sinking into decrepitude. When a truth is so old as that, gentlemen, it's in a fair way to become a lie. [Laughter and jeers.] Yes, yes, you may believe me or not, as you please; but the truths are by no means the wiry Methusalehs some people think them. A normally constituted truth lives—let us say—as a rule, seventeen or eighteen years; at the outside twenty; very seldom more. And truths so patriarchal as that are always shockingly emaciated; yet it's not till then that the majority takes them up and recommends them to society as wholesome food.

"I can assure you there's not much nutriment in that sort of fare; you may take my word as a doctor for that. All these majority-truths are like last year's salt pork; they're like rancid, moldy ham, producing all the moral scurvy that devastates society. . . . The truths acknowledged by the masses, the multitude, were certain truths to the vanguard in our grandfathers' days. We, the vanguard of today, don't acknowledge them any longer; and I don't believe there exists any other certain truth but this—that no society can live a healthy life upon truths so old and marrowless. . . . The notion that culture demoralizes is nothing but an old traditional

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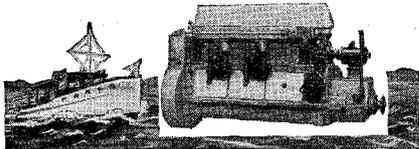
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lie. No, it's stupidity, poverty, the ugliness of life, that do the devil's work! In a house that isn't aired and swept every day—my wife maintains that the floors ought to be scrubbed too, but perhaps that is going too far;—well, in such a house, I say, within two or three years, people lose the power of thinking or acting morally.

Our Own Theatre List

Still With Us

- "The Spider," Music Box.—Mystery melodrama with more surprises than any play on Broadway.
- "Broadway," Broadhurst.—Life back-stage in a Broadway cabaret. Done with vim, rum, and pistols.
- "In Abraham's Bosom," Provincetown Playhouse.—The Pulitzer Prize play.
- "The Road to Rome," Playhouse.—A slightly Rabelaisian take-off on history which might have been a great play if genuine emotion had been substituted for wisecracking. An amusing evening, as it is.

New Faces

- "The Shannons of Broadway," Martin Beck.—Vaudeville and melodrama, with vaudeville taking the tricks.
- "Burlesque," Plymouth.—Back-stage drama in the small towns, with maternal emotion making a success of an otherwise ruined actor.
- "Pickwick," Empire.—All right, if you like "Pickwick Papers." If not, use your own discretion.
- "Trial of Mary Dugan," National.—Evidence turned inside out, in an expert and engrossing mystery murder trial.
- "Balieff's Chauve-Souris," Cosmopolitan.—"Mother Goose" under one arm, the "Arabian Nights" under the other.
- "An Enemy of the People," Hampden's Theatre.—It's bitter; but it's Ibsen—and true.

Musical Shows

- "Hit the Deck," Belasco.—Louise Groody—and a fast show.
- "The Five O'clock Girl," Forty-fourth Street Theatre.—Has nearly everything.
- "Good News," Chanin.—We haven't seen it, but our friends like it.
- "The Mikado," Royale.—Our old friends Gilbert and Sullivan excellently represented.
- "The Merry Malones," Erlanger's.—George Cohan—and everybody dances.
- "Manhattan Mary," Apollo.—Ed Wynn. What more?

Lack of oxygen enervates the conscience. And there seems to be precious little oxygen in many and many a house in this town, since the whole compact majority is unscrupulous enough to want to found its future upon a quagmire of lies and fraud. . . . What does it matter if a lying community is ruined! Let it be leveled to the ground, say I! All men who live upon a lie ought to be exterminated like vermin! You'll end by poisoning the whole country; you'll bring it to such a pass that the whole country will deserve to perish. And if ever it comes to that, I shall say, from the bottom of my heart: Perish the country! Perish all its people!"

Here is truth, drama, and fine emotion, uttered by an aristocrat of the soul, as he is being torn down by common wolves. Hampden makes you feel that—and it is no small achievement, in view of all that has gone before.

Judged by the playwright's own standard, some of the fire has gone out of Ibsen's attacks upon dead social

truths because they are more than twenty years old. There remains, nevertheless, the individual truth of the play, none the less living and vital because Ibsen is dead and gone, and precisely as applicable as ever to the philosophy of living. One can quarrel with minor defects in the character of Dr. Stockmann and perceive where Ibsen failed because he did not wish his protagonist to resemble the playwright himself—which makes the Doctor a little too genial and muddle-headed.

But the poet's perception of eternal truth remains, to thrill Broadway for a few moments, even in this day of many Burgomasters, many property-owners, many "compact majorities," and very few Dr. Stockmanns.

It's bitter; but it's Ibsen—and true.

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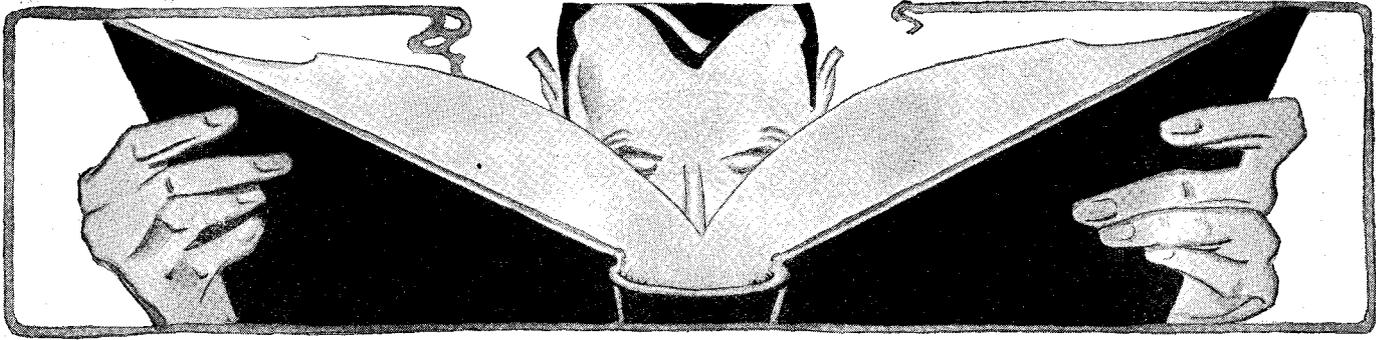
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The Middlebrows

By LAWRENCE F. ABBOTT

Contributing Editor of *The Outlook*

IN one of my recent articles in these pages I confessed to an inability to read George Meredith with spontaneous pleasure, and added that "this is probably because I belong to the great middle class." This statement has prompted a correspondent in New Jersey, who holds an important and highly responsible office in the educational system of that State, to ask an interesting question. After paying me some compliments (which, I greatly regret, a decent respect for the appearance of modesty prevents my emblazoning here), my correspondent goes on to say:

There is one topic that I have been thinking of for a good while and hoping you might see fit to write on it: What about the classes in this country? Just what differentiates the "middle" class from the "lower" classes? A still more interesting question to me is, When does one emerge into the upper classes? Let us assume that a professor at \$7,500 is in the middle class. If he marries a wife who brings him a million or two, or if he falls heir to that much, does he now read his title clear to a seat in the boxes? Suppose the professor's windfall is only a paltry \$100,000. Has he made the grade, or does he still linger in the somewhat upper limits of the middle class? In other words, how shall he know where he is and how to classify himself—if he cares to?

ISUPPOSE my correspondent's use of the dollar standard is a sly thrust at the tendency in this country—a tendency characteristic of all democracies—to measure a man's status in society by his riches. The time was when a millionaire was such a rare specimen that the very rarity gave him a certain social prestige. He was like a blue rose or a three-legged calf or any other *lusus naturæ*. But that has all gone by. Now that a man can make a million dollars in ten rounds of so-called prize-fighting,

the possession of that once glittering sum of money is no longer a social distinction. Its value as a measure is to aid the income-tax collector in his unpopular work, so that to-day genteel poverty is rather more elegant than brazen riches. We must try to find some other method of classification than that of wealth.

But try as we may, we shall find the task a hard one and the problem almost insoluble. It has puzzled philosophers from the time of Solon and amused social satirists from Lucian to Matthew Arnold and H. L. Mencken.

CURIOSLY enough, the division of society into three classes has been a common practice among sociologists from the earliest times. Whether this tripartite arrangement is in accordance with some as yet unformulated law of nature or whether the number three has some mysterious and esoteric significance like the number seven, I do not know; but social trinity certainly exists. Rawlinson, the translator of Herodotus, informs us that a comparison of the statements of Herodotus, the Greek traveler, Diodorus, the Greek historian, and Strabo, the Greek geographer, led to the conclusion that the society of ancient Egypt was based on three classes—the priests, the military, and the peasants. The Greeks took this triple classification from the Egyptians, and the Romans took it in turn from the Greeks. Thus Rome in its heyday had patricians, plebeians, and slaves.

So it has gone on through the Middle Ages down to modern times. Old England had its barons, yeomen, and villains; modern England has its nobles, commoners, and laborers, whom Matthew Arnold, almost as much of an iconoclast as H. L. Mencken, proposed to call Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace.

Classification of this kind is easy

enough in a titular aristocracy. But when we come to democracies, it takes a very astute scientist indeed to label and pigeonhole properly the various social genera or species. The Revolutionists in France solved the problem by calling every man "Citizen." And Thomas Jefferson, in our own Revolution, tried to settle the matter by declaring "that all men are created equal." But it is not so simple as all this. Montesquieu, from whom both the French republicans and the American Jeffersonians derived much of their social philosophy, saw the difficulties more clearly than his disciples did. He observed that "the greatest difficulty in a democracy is dividing the people into classes in accordance with justice; upon it depend the success and the permanence of democracies."

So we come back to the question asked by my correspondent—How can the American who cares to classify himself tell where he belongs? I certainly cannot answer the question, but possibly two suggestions may throw some light upon it.

The man who regards this country as a plutocracy will have no great difficulty in determining in which of the three classes composing a plutocracy he should be enrolled—the millionaire class, the salaried white-collar class, the trades-union class.

The man who believes that a democracy is a form of government based primarily on intelligence will have much more difficulty. Intelligence is a variable and elusive thing and has almost infinite gradations. A New York wit recently explained that the Chicago weekly "Liberty" is a periodical designed for people who think the "Saturday Evening Post" is too highbrow. And there is a pertinent—or is it impertinent?—story of a chorus girl who,

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