

Augustus Thomas Talks About Playwriting

By BARRETT H. CLARK.

THE fifth and sixth volumes of Augustus Thomas's representative plays have just appeared. They are *Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots* and *The Other Girl* (Samuel French, 50 cents each).

While it is highly desirable to have a cheap edition of the best plays of one of our most skilful and interesting playwrights, and while readers and play producers will welcome *The Witching Hour*, *The Earl of Pawtucket*, *Alabama* and *In Mizoura*—these were published last spring—the best part of this edition is Augustus Thomas's own prefaces.

These prefaces are, in the author's own words, a series "so planned that each should set forth such difficulties as their respective plays had presented in the making and the manner in which these difficulties had been surmounted or accommodated."

Good Doctrine Expounded.

The six prefaces so far printed are a veritable mine of information, a curious and amiable mixture of frank sincerity and shrewd advice; when the series is complete the prefaces will no doubt constitute a body of dramatic doctrine of decided value.

Of course Mr. Thomas can help would-be dramatists, but his delightful little essays will appeal to the reader and afford him an insight into the labyrinthine ways of the theatre; far from destroying his illusions in acted drama, they will enable him to enjoy it the better. Mr. Thomas is not "technical," or at least he does not appear to be so, and the layman need fear no long, dry explanations and disquisitions. The following excerpts from the preface to *Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots* are characteristic:

A Home in New Rochelle.

"*Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots* was salvage; that is to say, it was the marketing of odds and ends and remnants, utterly useless for any other purpose.

"In the summer of 1903 Henri Du-may, the French dramatist, was visiting me at Easthampton, and talking of dinner parties one evening I told him of a blizzard dinner ten years before. It was upon his banter that no playwright could make more than one act of it, and the encouragement of Mark Twain's statement, 'A short story is a novel in the cradle,' that I began at once to write *Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots*.

"There was at Easthampton an empty box stall in the stable with windows set so high that one couldn't look out of them. I put in only a kitchen chair and a small pine table from the village general store—not even a calendar to distract attention. My play material to start with was a suburban home—isolated by a storm on the evening of a prepared dinner. Persons once there couldn't easily leave, and only the sturdy and the heroic could arrive. Question: What is the best use to make of that set of conditions? Answer: The exploitation of a person or of persons who would like to get away and can't do so. What person would be the most effective figure under such constraint? A girl!

Plotting a Play.

"I began to picture a storm bound girl in this suburban house. I made her a guest for whom the ill fated dinner party was arranged. I gave her youth and beauty and all the simple charms I could imagine, and with her thus endowed I made myself see her still fretting to get



AUGUSTUS THOMAS.

away, and I asked myself and the walls of the box stall why? My first problem was to devise a reason for her uneasiness.

Bad Man or Good Man?

"In this instance the best reason for my storm bound girl's uneasiness seemed to be her wish to avoid meeting a particular man. Her very opposition made the man important, and I began to inquire—why opposition? Who is he that she doesn't want to meet him? What is he—especially to her? It was easy to say a bad man, and easier still, if a very bad man, to hand him over to the police, but that looked like drama and not comedy—so I 'about faced' and thought of him as a good man, all right, fine and in every way admirable—so admirable that she had once loved him; yes, still loved him, but yet wished to escape him.

"And so on, step by step—
"In constructing such plays the French have the three act formula expressed by one of their modern writers:

"Act one; get your man up a tree.
"Act two; throw stones at him.
"Act three; get him down.
"I had my man up a tree. My work was to find stones to throw at him. Obviously one missile would be the girl's suspicion and her anger when she discovered

that the solitary lady guest was the woman of the scandal. To have my discovery at all required a preceding mystery; that is to say, the woman of the scandal must be anonymous, and she and Corbin must affect to be strangers when they first meet in the play. Corbin's reason for that concealment could be the presence of the jealous sweetheart; the woman's reason could be her promise to a jealous husband to avoid the man. A second stone to throw at the man in the tree was thus obviously the jealous husband himself, and the playwright's problem at this stage of the story's construction was to devise situations involving Corbin and the woman

which would look suspicious to the sweetheart and to the husband, as, for example, to put Corbin on the stage in his pajamas and in hazardous nearness to Mrs. Leffingwell, also in unconventional attire, and to do this decently and without incidents shocking to gentle patrons. The lounge bed improvised in the living room was one bit of machinery to such an end. The sweetheart's and the woman's rooms near by were another. The telephone calls at midnight were a third and served the double purpose of calling in the ladies and of bringing the jealous husband into that part of the story.

Now for the Detective.

"At this stage of the progress there arose one of those pine knot difficulties in the logic of story building that invariably or almost invariably are to be met and resolved. As another stone to throw at my freed hero I wanted the presence of his real accuser, the crooked detective who had manufactured evidence against Mrs. Leffingwell and against Corbin, or at least I thought I wanted him and I began mentally to investigate him. Up to this point he had been a vague factor merely predicated in the construction. His charge was hearsay. His confutation, as arranged, was merely the innocent hero's denial. He was unquestionably a weak link in the chain of circumstances. He must be flesh and blood. His motive must answer logical inquiry. Merely a venal officer inventing a false accusation against two entirely innocent persons was too contrived. To have him manufacture evidence at the husband's command would destroy the husband as a genuine factor. Problem: find a better motive for the detective than money. Then slowly the mental search touches these high lights, not in such close succession as I give them here, but after elimination in this selected order: Hatred? An old enmity? Hatred between equals? Social equals? An insane hatred? A demented detective? Pause!

Lay Off, Macduff!

"I was immensely satisfied with the find, and quit work for that day on which I had made it. A vital factor, a new cog changing completely the gear of your dramatic machinery needs a night of subconscious assimilation at least.

"As you read the play you will see how completely the idea of an artist and his studio changed the chemistry of the story; how utterly different it would all have had to be without the mannikin and the studio and the double deck and with only the arrangement of the usual suburban house!

"From this point onward the making of the play was as simple as reassembling a picture puzzle, and when once together and the picture was complete, it remained only to tell about it—which is the easiest part of the business."

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