

Sparks from Kenyon's "Kindling"

by
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PERIODS of distress seem ever to be the prelude to successful achievements. One might almost say that any art work in which a revolution stirs is bound so to shock by its very bigness that, in the consternation which its appearance sets up, its greatness is not seen; or else one must believe that the so-called experts really know so little concerning the elements and forces in a work which make for success that they do not recognize the very qualities which they seek and will later applaud. Theatrical works in particular are subject to this impish law of the perverse which provides struggles as preliminary to recognition. Many a playwright with a big play hidden upon his starving person has wandered, a weary Odysseus, up and down Cyclopean Broadway ere ever his Penelope smiled upon him and opened the door of fame.

(Whenever I find myself hovering on the verge of an interview which promises to develop brain food for the "lofty demed," I invariably try to mention Greece—ancient Greece, I mean. It gives tone and distinction to a preface and is perfectly safe to handle, because it doesn't mean anything.)

Well, Charles Kenyon's drama, "Kindling," is that kind of a drama. It is a veritable "Valiant for Truth." It had a pretty hard time of it, before E. J. Bowes, who was new to the game of theatrical producing and, therefore, without hampering prejudices, accepted it, and Margaret Illington touched it with the illuminating match of her almost fierce emotionalism.

"Kindling" has had the distinction of having been rejected by more play experts than turned their thumbs and their noses in different directions over Charles Rann Kennedy's "The Servant in the House," or Eugene Walter's "Paid in Full," or even William J. Brady's "Way Down East."

I know that it is exceedingly bad taste to mention such a play as "Way Down East" in the same paragraph with Kennedy's masterpiece and Walter's biggest play. Aside from the fact that it has been earning—or, anyway, settling—royalties for "nigh onto 20 years," it is, as we all know, extremely bucolic and highly H. Hollerish. I only drag it in with its clover blossom suggestiveness because it gives me a chance to mention William J. Brady and introduce my interview. Brady was one of many who took a look at

"Kindling" and couldn't "see" it. Neither could his actress wife, Miss Grace George. Harrison Gray Fiske also regarded "Kindling" adversely, and Mrs. Fiske, who has given ample evidence that she entertains no prejudice against a playwright merely because he chose a spot in America for a birthplace and wrote his initial play first, was not able to discern anything of usefulness in the nicely typewritten pages of Kenyon's manuscript beyond those inglorious uses which the title of the drama ambiguously suggested.

Kenyon was not disheartened, however, and told me that he kept after his market. He hoped to find favor for his play with the New theater, which was just then putting its back against the wall for a finish fight in behalf of native and worthy drama. But Kenyon's "Kindling" did not prove as alluring to Winthrop Ames, or whoever bossed the New theater's destinies, as Sheldon's "Nigger," and Kenyon was kept on his pilgrimage. He finally offered it to Florence Roberts, and she, too, made a face at it.

Poor "Kindling!"
BUT meanwhile the greatest actress into whose care "Kindling" could possibly fall was weeping for a play.

Margaret Illington's need for a big, inclusive drama in which her ardent and sanguine temperament and keenly pitched emotionalism could move unhampered and grandly was fretting her into a condition of nervous prostration, and in her zeal to discover a suitable play she and her husband-manager spent their days and nights in searching and reading manuscripts.

They even asked me if I hadn't a play about me which they might look over.

Miss Illington's endeavors, in fact, to procure a drama in which she could "come back" on the same plane of dignity as that from which she stepped when she retired from the role of Marie-Louise Vovain in Bernstein's "The Thief" and from the stage in general, as well as from the patronymic, Frohman, excited the deepest sympathy

from her legion of admirers. In whose I am happy to count myself. Edward Elser's "Until Eternity" wouldn't serve. Its strongest scene, in which Mrs. Benson tells of the unhappiness of her married life, was too intimately a confusion of the actress and the woman, and the play, an adaptation from the French, had so little to recommend it that the writer was forced to this conclusion in his review two years ago that "somewhere there is a bigger, better play waiting for Margaret Illington." Only I didn't know what it was. Charles Kenyon did. He wrote it.

After "Until Eternity" Miss Illington tried Bernstein's "The Whirlwind." A special performance was given in Oakland immediately following her appearances at the Savoy in this city in September, 1910. I was honored with an invitation to hear it, but did not avail myself of the opportunity, having read the play. It was impossible that Miss Illington could find success—a big success—in Bernstein's essentially foreign and remote "Whirlwind." Still another new play was tried, and it was called what it proved to be, "The Encounter." It left Miss Illington still unprovided with a proper play.

NOW we shall let Mr. Kenyon talk a little while. It's his turn.

"I had come back home with 'Kindling' in my trunk," said he to me a few days ago. Nobody seemed to want it in New York, but I knew that I had a big theme and was not especially depressed. Besides, I was con-

stantly writing on it. "I have written ten acts to 'Kindling,' writing and rewriting them and proving the epigram that good plays are not written, but rewritten." Perhaps it was because so many of Kenyon's friends were wishing for an adequate presentation of his play, and so many of Margaret Illington's friends were wishing for a fitting play for her that she and her husband connected up, per phone, with Kenyon. I like to think it happened that way. At any rate, ac-

ording to Kenyon, he received a long distance call one afternoon at the Press club.

It was E. J. Bowes, husband, yet manager of Miss Illington, and he was talking in San Jose. He asked Kenyon who sat in the little booth at the Press club where the door invariably and obstinately blows open at just the wrong instant in a telephone conversation, whether he (Kenyon) had a play.

"Sure," said Kenyon.

"I want to look at it," said Bowes.

"Very well," said Kenyon; "I'm willing."

"As a matter of cold fact," said Kenyon in telling me the history of the trials and tribulations of "Kindling," "I had yet to rewrite again the second act and the fourth act was still incomplete. I went to work at once on

the second act, finished it that night and sent it with the first and third acts and the assurance that the fourth act would be forthcoming to Mr. Bowes. Before he received the last act, however, Bowes wired me an acceptance of the play and I started at once for Los Angeles, where Oliver Morosco was going to stage the drama."

YOU shall see that the troubles of "Kindling" were not yet over, even though it had found the hearts of a wise, though new, producer, and a splendid actress.

"The first rehearsal of the work," said Kenyon, "ran until 5 o'clock in the morning. We kept cutting it until we got it down so that we dropped the final curtain at 2 a. m. Henry

Miller about this time took a hand.

"My hat is off to him," said Kenyon, with a touch of piety and much affection in his voice.

"He put his finger on the spot which I had felt needed help, but which I didn't have the courage to cure. Already the play, as we all could see, had the punch, and the making of a sensation. It was manifestly dangerous to tamper seriously with it just before taking it into New York. We succeeded in excluding it to fairly reasonable proportions, and most of us were unwilling to assume responsibility for further emendations or excisions or corrections; but Miller said: 'Cut out the second act altogether. Take the third act and cut it in two. Nothing of the action will be dis-

turbed, but what subsequent dialogue can make equally plain. Pull your climax to the top of the newly made second act and spring a surprise in the third.'"

They recognized good wine from a new bottle, and said so.

Everybody around the theater was well pleased with the "notices," but a single appeal to that fickle and forgetful public is not enough in New York, and "Kindling" blazed dimly advertised. It was on the point of going out, for one must tend a new fire, and nobody attended to "Kindling."

And here a strange thing happened. Will Irwin went to Daly's. I do not mean that it was strange that Irwin went to the theater, because no doubt he goes very often, and I don't suppose he cares any more whether he has to speak to the box office man with the stuff that talks or whether he just gives the ticket taker a merry "good evening." What was strange about Irwin's trip to Daly's was that he happened to select that particular playhouse where he had not been for some time and where he did not know that another Stanford man was having a fight to make a living with his first big dramatic effort. Will went to the Lambs' club after the "show" and he was full of "Kindling." Clayton Hamilton was there, and to him Irwin unloaded some of his pent up enthusiasm. "Better see it," said Irwin. "It's a great play." Lincoln Steffens wandered into the club and Irwin's dissertation on the new sociological drama by an unknown (sic) western writer



Charles Kenyon

naturally interested Steffens. This pair went next night and came back to the Lambs' club as full of enthusiasm as ever Will Irwin was. The propaganda spread, and all this time Irwin remained in ignorance of his fraternal relation to Kenyon, a younger Stanford and San Francisco man.

There resulted an extraordinary bit of press agency. It had never been done before anywhere.

It is, in fact, unique. Newspaper men and women, magazine writers, story tellers and persons of letters prominent in the nation's literature banded themselves into a body for the purpose of "boosting" the work of this young man, Kenyon, and his young play, "Kindling."

Norman Haggood, Wallace Irwin, Will Irwin, Irvin Cobb, Channing Pollock, George Middleton, Rachel Crothers, Charles Rann Kennedy, A. E. Thomas, Clayton Hamilton, Gelett Burgess, Lincoln Steffens, Austin Strong, Rupert Hughes, Paul Armstrong, Walter Pritchard Eaton, Percy Mackaye, Thompson Buchanan, Witter Bynner, Inez Haynes Gillmore, Arthur Bartlett Maurice and Leroy Scott were some of the notables of literature and drama who made up the concert band which called the public's attention to the unheard-of play and the unknown playwright.

The result was a glittering success, for New York quickly talked about this new play, and what New York talks about theatrically makes money. "Kindling" completed its engagement at Daly's with the flag of success flying, and will go back to New York, in October, says Kenyon, to open the new Illington theater, which is being built by John Cort, E. J. Bowes and Peter McCort of Denver.

"The reason for its success," says Kenyon, whose talk about his play has a charming air of detachment about it and is thus without the smudge of egotism, "is that it deals with a woman's rights and her contention that as woman's greatest duty to society is the perilous one of perpetuating it, she has the right to demand of society that her children be born amid surroundings which shall not maim them mentally, morally and physically."

I spoke in the beginning of this interview of the art works in which revolution stirs.

Perhaps Kenyon's theme was too big to be grasped immediately by play producers.

Judging from a careful reading of the manuscript, however, it is plain that Kenyon has made his exposition of the theme clear, has put a wealth of thrills in the revelation of the second act and has negotiated the final disposition of his characters with consummate facility.

If the playgoing public of San Francisco desires a play with a purpose and wants to think as well as thrill in the theater, San Francisco is bound to follow the slow but sure verdict of New York, and the immediate enthusiastic opinion of Chicago and approve its own product's product—Kenyon's "Kindling."

COLUMBIA

Married women who are happy, married women who are unhappy, girls who hope to be happy when they are married, girls who fear they may be unhappy if they marry and girls who merely hope to get married—here's a secret: Winning the six day house cleaning endurance contest may be all right in its way, but it's a poor way to hold a husband's love. What a man craves is attention and a wife who is good to look upon and be proud of.

Proof of this is in "The Real Thing," the play which Henrietta Crossman will present at the Columbia theater beginning tomorrow (Monday) night and for the two weeks following. It is said that this play has caused more comment from women writers than any other play produced in 10 years. It's the kind of advice that Ruth Cameron might give you if you wrote to her and asked for a solution of the domestic problem that confronted you.

A woman has to divide herself between her husband and her children and it is always a question how it shall be done. The husband may think he is getting the worst of it. So the wife—the really successful wife and mother—has to be a diplomat of the highest order. Now, all women are not diplomats, and so there is unpopularity in some households.

It is this question that "The Real Thing" takes up. The peacock is not often considered a wise bird, but in this comedy the peacock is the sister to the goose, and she is a widow who has studied the game. Miss Crossman impersonates the widow, and the play is said to be the best she has yet produced.

Surrounding Miss Crossman is the same clever company and the remarkable scenic concomitants that caused much favorable comment during the New York run at the Maxine Elliott theater. The praise of the metropolitan critics was not only tendered because of the charming acting of Miss Crossman, but also for the sterling qualities of the play itself.

During Miss Crossman's engagement at the Columbia matinees will be given Wednesdays and Saturdays. The bargain matinee, Wednesday, will be at special prices, from 25 cents to 50.