GEORGE M. COHAN, LITTLE KNOWN PHILANTHROPIST OF BROADWAY

Phase of the Character of Actor-Playwright of Which Public Is Not Aware—Expects to Retire From Stage Next Year to "Make Good" in Broader Fields of Playwriting

By J. I. C. CLARKE.

"I HAVE not had time to study the classic drama because I have been so busy writing plays."

The young man of thirty or so who said this, looking modestly down on his after-dinner demi-tasse while one finger strayed with a fine affectation of bashfulness over the edge of the tablecloth, well knew that he was saying a good thing as well as telling the truth. For presently he raised his lowered lids and his blue eyes twinkled roguishly as laughter crackled around the banquet hall and applause came back to him in a wave.

The Society of American Dramatists and Composers was making him its guest of honor at Delmonico's that night, and short and modest as his speech was in reply to the toast of his health it seemed "to all present well worth the price of admission."

"The deuced clever absurdity of it, you know," said a visiting English dramatist, "Haw-haw-haw!" And there were many other comments equally admiring but differently conditioned. "It's so darned true," said another guest, "except that he can hardly be said to have written his plays; they always seem to have written themselves."

And there it was, wreathing itself in cigar smoke over the heads of the gay banqueteers: George Michael Cohan, successful playwright, song composer, lyric writer, actor, singer, solo dancer, producer, manager and (as we shall discuss later on) eruptional philanthropist, dismissing the great past of the drama with a jest and celebrating himself in three syllables, "writing plays."

Around him and facing him were many men and women who, following their earnest study of the classic drama and the foreign drama and the modern drama, had also written plays and had not always, had not often, had seldom, indeed, seen the golden flower of success blossom in their little garden plots. Many were like himself, successful children of the lighter mood theatrical, and they enjoyed it hugely. A slap at the "highbrows" is always a joy in Philistia, and wakes long echoes in Bohemia at large, but the honors, after all, remain with those whose successes are won along the snowy heights, no matter how much better the gold digging may be among the foothills. From various viewpoints the Cohan speech was examined in the talks that followed, some of them brilliant, and some, God wot, not; but, singularly enough, all converging on the one point: George Cohan is a genius, genius makes its own rules, and when he takes time to study heaven knows how high his genius will carry him.

And now, a few years later, George M. Cohan is going to take time.

He has said so himself. According to his announcement he will retire from acting at the end of February next and devote himself to writing and composing. He will sail for Europe in June, where he will travel and sojourn until September.

And it will give him a wrench to do it, for the stage is in his blood, the footlights in his eyes, the kettledrum in his heels. The little cane he carries is really a conductor's baton. His jaunty straw hat is a "prop." For him thunder, lightning and rain, sunlight and moonlight are mere "effects." His comedy turkey stride long antedated the turkey trot, perhaps suggested it. To "exit" for good, never to rouse a handclap, never to take a call—it is unimaginable almost. Fancy, he has had only to emphasize his nasal twang to set his audience in a roar, and he faces long years wherein he must walk at a normal pace, must use only his ordinary talking voice when he wants to "put one over." Unhappy George!

It is the defect of his genius that it makes much money. No matter which way it happened to turn him he became a mint. The coinage of his brain has been showers of double-eagles. His songs when they were not golden were greenbacks and redbacks. He could not show his face without filling the house, and he loves it all passionately. Else why for years past has he endured the circuit? Why tolerated the queer hotels, the weird food, the quick shifts on rainy or snowy nights, the rattling trains, the poor connections of "the road"?

One answer is characteristic of the man's filial love. Playing as he did for years with his father and mother in his company, it was his uniform habit, even after he came to man's estate and was married, to call at his parents' dressing rooms, greet them and kiss them before going to his own. Now, it is said, he went out this season because his father wanted to act, and that meant that George had to act too. Perhaps that counts, but the real answer is that this favorite of fortune loves nothing in the world so well as taking in great gulps of the hot air that comes across the apron; has more joy in a quarter hour of ecstatic acrobatic dancing on the resounding boards than in any half century of rhythmic motion he could compass anywhere else.

He thrills to his own songs with a rapture nothing else can give him, and on the stage he always sees a beckoning figure of great beauty and allure that says: Come on. And he pauses now as he tours New England in "Broadway Jones" with father and mother and wonders will he see the same figure and feel the same responsive urge when he has left the stage behind.

Deep down in him snuggles a belief that he will see the beckoning Fame in finer garments and of a greater mien; that he will "make good" in broader fields and higher reaches than ever before. It is an even thing that he still balks at the idea of study, however footloose he may find himself—study of dramatic classics above all; but he goes forth to learn something, and he knows that he has much to learn.

Not as a Paul at Damascus does George turn away from good worldly estate to follow his vision into poverty. It is rather as a young Crœsus turning from one joy to another. He is rich. It is not our concern to guess in true American newspaper style how rich, but, thanks to a somewhat careless prudence, very rich in accumulations, and, thanks to his insight into "what the public wants" and the remarkable talent and boundless energy with which he has supplied it, he is master of an inflowing tide of profit that can but add enormously to what he has in hand. And all this at 35, all his own work.

No, not all. We are, none of us, starting points in the broader sense. The "Little Millionaire" of to-day is but a projection of his ancestry. Somewhere in the remoteness of another century there grew upon a western Irish hillside a happy harper called O'Caomhan, a strolling minstrel whose heart was full of song and mirth but who knew as well the ways of the soul in stress. Translate the harper into the joyous fiddler O'Cohan of a couple of generations later; see him lead the dance at pattern and fair while playing his soul into his fiddlestrings as they thrilled to jigs and reels, or listen to him telling at night around the fire of turf the old heroic tales, the fairy lore and the elfin tricks of the "good little people" who mostly came abroad by the light of the moon. How he embellished the tales of the countryside till his hearer rolled in laughter or froze in horror! Somewhere he settled down and lived upon the land: the minstrel habit passed out of his generation.

A gay hearted descendant, dropping the O as his grandfather had dropped the silent m, having fallen on evil days in a hapless land, crossed the Atlantic and settled in Rhode Island, where a son was born to him, which son was Jerry John Cohan, father of our George. Remove the pressure from the pent up inner waters and lo, they rise sparkling to the surface in pleasant springs. In Jerry Cohan the Gaelic harper, the Irish fiddler, the singer, the story teller came back to life in a modest way. All it needed was another Celtic infusion to give it full vitality. Through pretty Helen Frances Costigan it came, and so July 4 (significant date) in 1878 George Michael saw the light in Providence.

Jerry Cohan and his wife were players in the variety line, as vaudeville was called at that time. His cheery face and voice and his light feet and inextinguishable good humor made him a favorite everywhere. So the young couple were able to look after George and his little sister Josephine in becoming style. Happy for the children of the children of the stage when this is so. George and Josie lived with relatives while the parents were on the road.

George grew up a sturdy boy. He was living at Orange. It was in December, 1886, when George had reached the mature age of eight, that he wrote to his "Dear Papa and Mamma"—with a boyish eye on the coming of Santa Claus, in whom he profoundly believed, "I am doing well in my schooling and music lessons. Dear Papa, Mr. Jones says that I will have to have a new violin because he says I am outgrowing the one that I have now." There was the fiddler of aforetime breaking out sure enough. "We had examination in reading and I stood at 93." The old story teller is plainly emerging!

"Joe and I played last night seven o'clock till half past nine together and Mr. Jones says that me and Joe is to practic together all the Time till christmas and then christmas day, Jimie Cusack and Harry Cusack and Joe and myself are all going to play together and I only wish that you were here to hear us and Mr. Jones says that it will be a great orchestra."

The theatric is clearly sprouting, is it not, thanks to the acute perception of Mr. Jones. And now George M. in all his bravery, all his audacity, all the get-at-it and do-it with serene underlying self-consciousness emerges in the letter of this boy of eight:

"I think I am improving when I play the same Duetts as Harry Cusack and Jimnie and Joe can. them boys has been taken music lessons for the last three or four years. I should think that they would feel kind of flat when they saw me playing with them Christmas. Don't you think I am getting a long Good?"

Of course he was, the little rooster of talent and hard work, flapping his little wings and crowing with a shrewd eye on something extra good at Christmas, for in this remarkable letter he forthwith goes on to intimate: "I think I heard Santa Claus last night and I was telling Aunt Nellie of it this morning, and Aunt Nellie says that he was here, and he ask if I practic Good," &c.

So the old leaven of heredity was working—the old love of art, the old gift of story telling—vivid and simple—the old glad mysticism. It was only necessary to call it forth to action.

"The boy simply couldn't be kept off the stage," says Jerry proudly. Anyway in his ninth year he "went on" at Haverstraw, N. Y., as the child in "Daniel Boone," and that settled it. He was an actor before he was out of knickerbockers.

Now came the happy thing in his opening career. His parents took their children with them on their tours and worked the two tots into their "sketch." Never was such a happy family on the stage, sharing nightly triumphs, the budding talent of George finding facile play in doctoring their sketch, merriness on and off the stage. Then George went off to be "Peck's Bad Boy," and he certainly was bad as a boy but amazingly good as a boy actor. Then for ten years he went up and down the land, now with a separate company, but mostly with his family, who were known as "The Four Cohans," to the enjoyment of millions all over the country.

He had led but four years of his stage life when he became known as a lyric writer and song composer. A couple of years later he began turning out one act plays such as would fit the world of vaudeville—bright, snappy things of quick action and full of native wit—a little of the slapstick and a lot of catastrophe, but all "filling the bill."

All this time George was a breezy, healthy boy of quiet tastes, acting continually and writing at night "after the show" in the calm of his bedroom—a habit that has not left him. He held an honest pride in his successes, never obtruding this pride on others, but acutely self-conscious of every advance he was making, and straining every nerve for further advance. If nothing succeeds like success, George was never content to let it go at that; he was always driving his team.

At twenty-two he presented his first three act musical play, "The Governor's Son," and the Four Cohans played their first Broadway engagement in it at the Savoy Theatre. That is thirteen years ago, and since then George Cohan has a staggering list of successful plays and musical comedies to his name and to his credit. He wrote, for instance, the books, lyrics and music of "Little Johnny Jones," "45 Minutes From Broadway," "George Washington, Jr.," "The American Idea," "The Talk of New York," "The Yankee Prince" and "The Little Millionaire." The straight comedy of "Broadway Jones," in which he is now playing, is entirely his. Besides he has dramatized from novels "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford" and "Seven Keys to Baldpate"—the first a very clever picturesque comedy, and the latter an amazing blend of melodrama and farce that astonishes and delights large audiences in town. He composes the music of his songs after peculiar fashion, picking them out with one finger on the piano and then dictating them, as it were, to his orchestra leader, who orchestrates them.

Ten years ago he went into management with a partner who is credited—amiable exaggeration—with putting in his share of the work counting the profits. At any rate they have managed many successes, and Mr. Cohan has worked hard on recasting and retouching a score of the plays that his firm has fathered managerially. Besides his own play, the firm is now running Raymond Hitchcock in "The Beauty Shop"; "Stop Thief!" a last year farce, which is used by four companies they have sent out; "Nearly Married," which has a road company as well as one on Broadway. They own, with another, the Bronx Opera House at 149th street, they lease the George M. Cohan Theatre and the Astor Theatre in New York and the Cohan Grand Opera House in Chicago.

It is a matter of very recent history that just before the production of "Seven Keys" George, his daughter and Wallace Eddinger were thrown from an automobile and all three hurt more or less, and that George, just recovering from a broken arm, went on and played Wallace Eddinger's part in the play with Wally looking on—a sight that did more to stimulate the latter to go on and play it himself than all the doctors could do to build him up and put heart in him.

George Michael Cohan.

Mr. Cohan has believed and doubtless still believes somewhat in the dynamic method in comedy. It is the natural outcome of his early and later environment. They must have quick effects and prompt results in vaudeville, character being largely a label interpreted by makeup. It leaves room nevertheless for smart writing and characteristic bit if not for rounded character itself. Such method is almost of necessity that of musical comedy, but "Broadway Jones" exhibited a firmer grip on the essentials of true comedy, to wit, sustained situation, development of character and some realizing sense of actual life.

This advance was hailed on all sides with pleasure in dramatic circles. The man who has gone so far can go further. That the period of study, after his own way of studying, is upon him is shown in a pithy article in the November *McClure's Magazine* entitled "The Mechanics of Emotion," to which his name and that of George J. Nathan are signed. We may well believe that it is the fruit of George Cohan's observation with the Nathan dressing.

This article sets out to show the various doings of the stage by which the dramatist elicits tears, laughter and thrills from his audience, if he gets one. Thus we learn thirty ways that tears may be drawn, and they run from a child in its nightie saying "Now I lay me" to "the singing, playing or mentioning of 'Home, Sweet Home.'" People we know laugh at the spectacle of a man laden with many large bundles, but he mentions fourteen others, such as a man consuming a large drink at one gulp. Then he notes a dozen thrillers, from a woman's scream to a loud ticking clock. Naturally he does not exhaust the list in any of the three departments.

I recollect reading an article once on the comic and the tragic diseases. The shades are infinite of emotion creating deeds and conditions, and they cannot be reduced like dramatic situations to the number of thirty-six, as affirmed by Gozzi, Schiller and Polti. What the article indicates to me is that George M. Cohan has come to the parting of the ways in his intellectual development, and that henceforth, having mastered the mechanics, he is about to grasp drama in every vein with clearer view of the things that drama may mean beyond its puppetry. And that we have every right to hail.

So one pictures George taking his little cane and starting out on the big Broadway of the world which circles the globe from the Battery to London and Paris and Rome and Egypt and Siberia and China and Japan and Hawaii and San Francisco and Chicago back to City Hall, before settling down for his new start in authorship. On one thing, however, all the "wise guys" and prophets are agreed, namely that in nothing will the experience change George Cohan himself. The same genial man and steady friend may be met at all phases of the journey or back home.

Every one knew him as kindly sympathetic, open handed, but only accident revealed recently that he can do astounding things in charity when his emotions are touched. There exists the man of small means who is frequent in his givings to the importunate unfortunate and is known as "the easy mark." Half his givings are short cuts to getting rid of his plagues. It is these and not his really meritorious donations that earn him the somewhat contemptuous title I have noted. No one has set down George M. Cohan as an "easy mark," which shows that where and when he has given it has been with a quick and somewhat unerring judgment of the right view of the case. Yet when Ren Shields, the song writer, died the other day it came out that the last two years of struggle with disease had been made less bitter through largesse from George and a few others.

Now since Shields had written "The Good Old Summer Time" and "Waltz Me Around Again, Willy." That appealed to a kind heart that ticks to dramatic impulse.

Some years ago a once popular comedian who had lost his vogue and had nothing else was persuaded to write his reminiscences. He came to Cohan and feebly urged the taking of a page of advertisement in the coming volume for which the proposed publisher suggested $1,000 would be a neat price. Cohan questioned him and saw that the publication would cost about that and saw further that the actor's book would have little or no sale. He consented to take a page, wrote a check and handed it to the man, who sat with streaming eyes, and left, putting the check in his pocket and a sob in his throat. Next morning he came tearing back into the office and said, laying the check before Cohan:

"George, George, look what you've done! Cancel it; write me another."

George looked at it with some concern, and said simply and quietly: "You gave me a shock. It seems all right. I signed it, and it goes as it lays."

It was for $10,000.

Men whom he sent to Colorado knowing they would die there; men whose troubles called for quick relief or none; women suffering undeserved misfortune, the number mounts up as one inquires. It is not the characteristic of the men round about him, no doubt these look upon him as "doted" to do such things.

Once he had in his employ a man of talent for long liable to intemperate divagations. The man shut out the perniciousness and prospered. Seeing him one day before a bar with others he called him aside. "What are you drinking?" "Buttermilk." "No booze in it?" "Why, Mr. Cohan!" "See here, I believe you, but I want to keep you up to it. If you are still off alcohol when New Year's comes around I'll give you $5,000."

And he did to the day.

But why pursue it. The vultures of mendicity and mendacity already begin to hover. I am telling it simply as a phase of a character remarkable in so many other ways.

The Four Cohans when they appeared in "The Governor's Son."

George Cohan, a Violinist at 10.

When Electric Lamp Burns Red.

There is a certain similarity between the electric lamp and the old kerosene lamp. Both are everlasting, barring accidents. But what most people forget is that the filament of an electric lamp is no more everlasting than the wick of the oil lamp. Both will burn out in time.

Everybody who has used oil lamps knows and expects this. The difference between them and some users of electric lamps is that the latter fail to realize the fact. They expect the filament, or wick, to last as long as the glass globe in which it is enclosed. So when the lamp burns red and does not give its usually good light they blame the electric light company for not furnishing "good" current, whatever that may be.

The fact is that when the lamp burns red and dim the filament is about exhausted. Best then to replace it with a new one. It is consuming just as much current as it did when its light was good, thus making a poor light as expensive as a good light. Every electric light company has a basis of exchange.