

Through a Monocle

A FACT occurred this spring—or rather two facts—from which I will let those who have the courage draw the inference. The two-pronged fact was this—Mrs. Fiske appeared in Toronto in an Ibsen play and was greeted by empty benches; Madame Nazimova appeared in Montreal in two Ibsen plays and drew large houses. Now what do you think of that? Do you dare think that that means that Montreal is a more cultured city than Toronto, the home of Arnold Haultain and Inspector Hughes? Well, if you are thinking anything of the sort, you will please do so at your own risk. I would no more venture to print such a “think” in this department than I would dare hint that the justly celebrated Ontario school system is, possibly, not the envy of all Christendom. But there is the naked, undeniable fact. Nor can it be explained by any theory that Mrs. Fiske is not a good actress. Toronto has always been willing to give Mrs. Fiske crowded houses when she was playing “the lady burglar” or the lady “Becky.” It was not Mrs. Fiske that frightened Toronto; it was Ibsen.

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MADAME NAZIMOVA is the first woman who has challenged Mrs. Fiske’s supremacy on the American stage. We have, perhaps, not always quite realised Mrs. Fiske’s queenship, because her long war with the “trust” has compelled her to play under disadvantageous circumstances and has deprived her of much adventitious assistance which other lady “stars” have enjoyed. But one had only to see her, soon after sitting through a play by any of her possible rivals, to realise how vastly superior the little feminine dynamo was to any of her sisters on the stage, though some of them are capable and even artistic actresses and most of them have had all the help that “puffery” can bring. But the Russian marvel has entered Mrs. Fiske’s chosen field, and put the firmest of her admirers in doubt. She has the same power of mastery over her audiences, the same compelling magnetism, the same ability to make you feel that the other members of the cast are weaklings. Yet, of course, it is only fair to remember that she is a product of the stage of Europe, and not a graduate of our inartistic New World.

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THE contrast between the American and the Russian is as great as well could be. All the physical advantages lie with Madame Nazimova. That she can be tall, willowy and unspeakably graceful, she shows in “Hedda Gabler,” though her skill in “make-up” enables her to look relatively short as “Nora” in the “Doll’s House.” But Mrs. Fiske could never achieve the serpentine grace of “Hedda.” On the other hand, Mrs. Fiske has a long lead in articulation. She can talk about five hundred words to the minute and yet make every person in the gallery hear every syllable. When we consider that two or three years ago, Nazimova did not speak a word of English, and that she learned the language for playing purposes in six months, it is not surprising that she cannot rival the swift-tongued American in this. That she speaks as well as she does, is a miracle; for to-day there are not many traces of an accent. Where the Russian and the American meet, however, is in the dynamics of the art. Both play with an intensity of power which is not equalled to my knowledge by any other actress on the American stage.

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STILL none of this accounts for the failure of Ibsen in Toronto, and its success in Montreal. Mrs. Fiske is by far the best known of the two, and has the greatest drawing power among those who do not keep abreast with theatrical news. The difference must be put down to the different appreciation of Ibsen. Possibly Toronto does not approve of Ibsen. I would not put it beyond that highly moral city. It is always of the opinion that, whatever it waves aside with its Podsnap hand, disappears at once from the vision and mind of all proper people; and, for improper people, it has only pity iron-bound with condemnation. Again, it may not be interested in the problems which Ibsen discusses. They are not the sort of problems which we debate at the afternoon sessions of our indisputable moral reform

organisations. They are rather the problems which astonish and disgust us by appearing in concrete form in the midst of our best families and in spite of years of right teaching. They are the problems of life and not of the lecture platform.

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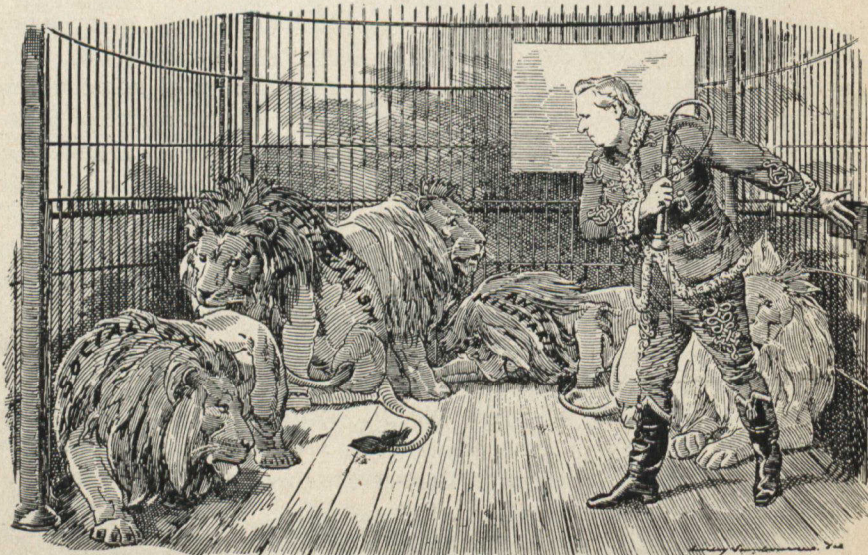
IBSEN is “Continental” in the sense in which we sometimes speak of the “Continental Sabbath.” This term of reproach means that a man or a thing is in accord with the feeling of the most civilised continent in the world; but we on this continent are better than civilised—we are evangelised. Thus to tell us that an idea is “Continental” is to condemn it quite as effectively as it does to tell a European that an idea is “American.” They do not appreciate us over in Europe. They do not realise how much better it is to be “good” than cultured. They have not had our “advantages,” I was just about to write that they lack our “freedom,” when I remembered that what we usually complain of in European literature and drama is that it is too free. Ah! but then that is easily explained. To go as far as we go is “liberty”; but to go farther with the Europeans is “license.” On the other hand, not to go as far as we go, is to be “conventional” and “conservative.” We are the chosen people. The pitiful part of it is that it takes the other sections of the world so long a time to discover our essential rightness.

N’IMPORTE

THE POWER OF PERSISTENCE

THE man with a grievance and the woman with a mission are not popular characters. We flee in dismay from the man who talks single-tax from soup to demi-tasse or from the woman who is bent upon sending blankets to the Hottentots. Yet the man may finally succeed in having his grievance removed and the woman may one day know the joy of beholding a properly-garbed Hottentot. We are bored and, perhaps, disgusted but we are finally glad to do as the agitator desires; and if one man spends his life in talking to all and sundry on a question which is more to the speaker than meat and drink, he is finally heeded. For more than a year certain feminine agitators in England have obstructed the carriages of cabinet ministers, rung the august door-bells of chancellors and secretaries, stormed the sacred precincts of Westminster and finally gone to prison, in order that the British Empire might know that they desired votes for women. They have done what humanity dreads above discomfort and misery, made themselves ridiculous, that their cause might be heard. They have come forth from prison to write magazine articles on a week-end in gaol and preside at banquets given in their honour by admiring adherents. Behold, the result of the whole matter is, that Hon. H. H. Asquith is about to take woman suffrage into serious consideration and the women of Great Britain may, ere long, become controllers of the polls. The campaign has proved once more that if you want anything with sacrificial warmth you will get it. If you are only willing to go to prison or be a laughing-stock for votes or anything else, the way eventually becomes a primrose path.

MR. ASQUITH AS A LION-TAMER



A Question of Mastery.—Punch.