

## Shaw or Shakespeare

By E. J. KYLIE

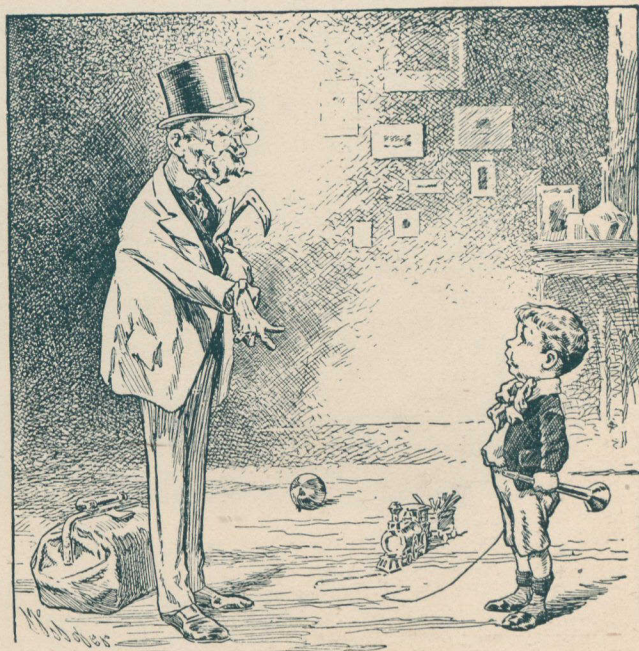
**U**NDoubtedly we laughed at "Man and Superman" the other day more than we should have laughed at "Much Ado About Nothing." The two comedies are, of course strikingly similar. Both Tanner and Benedict cling to their independence, though they both recognize that "the world must be peopled. Ann Whitefield and Beatrice are two masterful women, the former artfully working her will upon all within her circle, the latter no less dreaded, making her scorn of men the mask for her real affections. Both couples have obliging friends who force them together, and in the end the Life-Force wins. So, too, there is the little side-plot in each play. In some respects Shaw's comedy seems superior. Tanner is cleverer and more resolute than Benedict, Ann more designing and more dangerous than Beatrice, Straker more illuminating than—but then there was no Polytechnic in Shakespeare's day. Shaw's idea, also, that the woman chooses the man is undeniably true. Of course, he must exaggerate, as every poet and painter must gain effect by the sacrifice of lesser truths to greater. Hamlet was a very disappointed prince, Othello a very jealous Moor, Lear a very foolish king, just as Ann is the most consummate of husband-hunting women. Again, we have advanced far since Shakespeare's day in our knowledge of human nature, of its complexity, of the infinite variety of our motives, of our endless inconsistencies. So some of Shaw's characters are more subtle, more delicately drawn than Shakespeare's, as for example his Caesar, in "Caesar and Cleopatra." Indeed, Shaw is in many ways "better than Shakespeare," but for that very reason he will die, while his rival is eternal.

We recall the lad Shakespeare in the sleepy town of Stratford, days away from London at that time, getting a little education at the grammar school, probably, of course, a better education than ours for he knew the little well. To break the monotony of his youthful years, he poached on the lands of his richer neighbours, and married unhappily. Finally, he turned to London to seek his fortune, just as our country lads go to the cities. He became the young man about town, worked casually in a lawyer's office, hung about the theatres, probably fell in among the "supers" now and then, for his purse was light, and ultimately became something of an actor. From behind the scenes he studied the world of fashion and the groundlings in the audiences. What wonderful audiences! The men of the new, rich, prosperous England, strong, boisterous, passionate, yet not unrefined—we know how elegance and low morals were mingled in Elizabeth's court—fearing neither God nor man. Puritanism had not yet saddened them, and they had just whipped "the dogs of Spain." He saw, too, how they were being catered to by young, loose-living fellows who decked out popular stories in euphuistic verse. He learned the trick. At first he merely furbished up old plays, then he tried his skill at working up themes from a gossip history of England, from some fairly clever Italian novels, and from a translation of Plutarch, an amusing and discerning biographer. He caught the popular craving for stories of England's past, for rather broad comedy, for tragedy where the passions of the characters were strongly and unmistakably portrayed. And such a language no poet has since found at his command—the virgin English speech, vivified by the national enthusiasm, enriched by the classical renaissance, unused and unspoiled. Bombastic and rhetorical he always was; it was beautiful still. His success became unparalleled, for Marlowe, who might have done a good work, was gone. But he kept a clear head, improved in his profession, and, having grown rich, retired sensibly to Stratford. There he reestablished his good

name, grew bald and corpulent in the enjoyment of his ease, talked, drank, and smoked with his old home-friends.

This sane, practical, common-sense Englishman, with this experience of life, is our unequalled poet. The characteristics of his contemporaries, their prejudices, hatreds, loves, their joy of living, their laughter, their self-reliance are the simple broad traits of all humanity. When the renaissance broke down mediaeval restraint, human instincts and passions sought free and vigorous expression. Shakespeare held a mirror up to these, and it reflected nature. Shaw catches our subtle moods and emotions, in the manner and spirit of Browning and Meredith. His portrayal appeals to us in our time, and to a few of us as a class. It would have mystified the Elizabethans and will be out of date in a later age, more subtle still. And Shaw has received the language worn threadbare: to catch our attention he has to deal in the epigram and the paradox. But Shakespeare's phrases ran for him like new and sparkling wine, which only grows the richer for us with the years. Finally, Shakespeare was a dramatic genius. He had no theories or politics, religion, marriage, or even life, or at least he kept them to himself and let his characters develop consistently in independent and self-determined action. But Shaw's characters, clever as they are, have his speech and his ideas, and whenever they falter of themselves, he pushes them forward to deliver his brilliant paradoxes on ethics and political science. His views will be forgotten fifty years hence and the characters and conversation may pass with them. But the melancholy of Hamlet, the love of Desdemona, the madness of Lear will live for us when we have all Santos-Dumonted to Mars. So, because Shaw is "better than Shakespeare," Shakespeare will live. Of course, because he was artist enough to conceal himself, we have done our best to give Shakespeare an imagination, a seer's power, a universal knowledge which were impossible for him at his time. Indeed, he was much better without the fiendish ingenuity with which his students have credited him. He knew men, women, life, but with his arm-chair critics he would scorn to have even a bowing acquaintance. Yet they have had an ample revenge, as Shaw is having his revenge upon the public which ignored him.

## The Eternal Juvenile



"Well, Johnny, what shall I tell Santa Claus to bring you?"

"Oh, 'most anything that isn't fit for little boys to have will be all right."—Life.