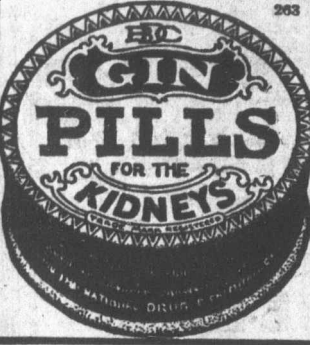


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Jernegan's Play

How He Came to Make
It a Success

By DWIGHT NORWOOD

It is a well known fact among authors that they cannot bring their characters to meet their conceptions of what these characters should be. In other words, the author does not write the story; rather, the story writes the author. There is a subtle reason for this that is very difficult to explain. The only statement that seems to fit the case is that the author does not always rightly interpret the human heart.

Jernegan was a playwright—that is, he wished to be a playwright. He was in the impoverished condition of a struggling literary man, being out at the elbows and hungry. Every play he had written had been turned down by the managers. But now he had struck something new, he thought, and would succeed. But inventing plots needs sustenance as well as shovelling dirt, and there was no fuel in Jernegan's stomach. He was pale and thin, and when he walked he staggered.

Jernegan took his characters from real persons. When he needed a hero or a heroine or a villain or a "heavy woman" he hunted up some one who was in them. The ordinary technique of the stage, he had learned from playing parts himself, for he had been an actor before trying to write plays. One morning Jernegan started off into the country without any breakfast to hunt up a minor character for a play on which he was engaged. He needed a young girl to pair off with a soldier boy, who was the bosom friend of the hero. She was to say very little, do very little, but at the end of the closing act was to stand hand in hand with the soldier boy. The playwright spent the only money he had—a nickel—for car fare; then on alighting where there were few houses and plenty of trees he walked along a road, stopping at a house here and there, hunting for a girl for his soldier boy.

All of a sudden while walking beside the road the turf came up and hit him in the head. The next thing Jernegan knew he was directing a rehearsal of the characters of his play. "How singular," he said to himself, "that these persons should be exactly as I have imagined them! And there is Charles Fearing, the manager, who has turned down so many plays of mine, looking on and evidently much interested."

"Mr. Jernegan," said the heroine, "you have made an egregious blunder in the makeup of this play." "The hero, Edmond Dixon, whom you intend that I shall marry, is a chump. "You can't put that girl on the stage as she is. You must either make her up as the audience imagines her or make a lady of her in the third act. Either way will do." "Haven't characters in a play any will as to what they will do?" asked Susan demurely. "Does the playwright control us entirely?" "Judging from this rehearsal," replied Jernegan, "the characters run the playwright. I've been working for three months on this play. When I got my scenario completed I thought I had an easy job in putting in the dialogue. And I had. But now it's all finished I find that the motif is wrong. I undertook to make the heroine happy after all her marital troubles, and behold, she calls the fellow I intended to solace her a prig! I've got a real country girl on the stage, and I've got to take her out and put in a wax figure. And now, after having supposed my work finished, my characters are clamoring to have their own way as to what they shall do."

"This is all wrong," said the manager. "You people go on with the rehearsal and stop your grumbling. Remember that you're to please the public, not yourselves. Proceed."

The rehearsal commenced, but it was evident from the first that the characters didn't jibe. The heroine was conscious of the fact that she was as much at fault in the matter of her marital troubles as her husband. She understood him and could have got on with him very well had it not been for the interference of the author between her and him. And, as for the hero, he was a man's man and not a woman's man at all. Her feelings being for her husband and not for his rival, she made a botch of it.

As for Susan, the dairymaid, notwithstanding her calico dress and cowhide shoes, there was something about her that was pleasing. Before the rehearsal was half finished the few words she spoke went straight to the hearts of those who heard them.

"I didn't realize what I was doing," said the playwright, "when I drew her. I thought I was putting all the merit into the heroine."

Billy Muzzle turned out to be excellent and was the life of the play. At

"I'll have nothing to do with him."

"That's discouraging."

"You'll have to give me another man."

"That would mean to burn the manuscript and begin anew. I couldn't think of doing that. I would starve before I had half finished. What's the matter with the hero?"

"He is a prig."

Jernegan sighed. This was not the first time his characters had rebelled against his authority as their creator, and there was nothing in all his work that so troubled him.

"You must go through the rehearsal, and perhaps I will discern what it is in him that repels you. If so I may be able to change him."

"I see where the trouble is," said the manager. "You have separated her from her husband and married her to a man who is her inferior. She doesn't take to the new conditions, nor will the public."

"But the first is a very weak and the second a very strong man."

"That doesn't matter. One of the first dramatic laws is that there shall be but one love, which must go through the play, for better or for worse."

"That's no dramatic law," remarked the hero. "Everybody knows that the world refuses to sympathize with a changed love."

"Call it what you like," said the manager. "It's absolute, and no author has ever yet been able to disregard it and win."

"Dumas did so," Jernegan put in.

"In the 'Count of Monte Cristo' he gave Edmond Dantes a second love."

"The only blot on that wonderful work."

Every one started at this criticism of an author whom they supposed to be invulnerable. Nothing was said for a few moments, when a chit of a girl, in dairymaid costume, asked in a little bit of a voice:

"Where do I come in?"

"You," said Jernegan, "are the character I have been looking for. You're a new kind of soldier boy, Billy Muzzle."

"Am I to marry that country girl, Susan Andrews?" asked Billy angrily.

"Yes. What's the matter with her?"

"She has no business in the play at all. Your characters are city persons. I can't breed myself. She smells of the barn, where she does the milking."

"Perhaps I've made her too realistic."

"Perhaps you have. Did you model her from a country girl?"

"Yes. I came into the country especially to find her."

"I know country people. They have nothing in common with city people. Do you suppose they can feed hogs and milk cows and be neat and clean? Not much. You must either dress up your dairymaid and put gloves on her hands or leave her out. I don't propose to marry a girl who hasn't anything better to wear than a calico dress."

"Billy's right," said the manager.

"You can't put that girl on the stage as she is. You must either make her up as the audience imagines her or make a lady of her in the third act. Either way will do."

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first he made a pretense of his devotion to Susan, laughing at her in his sleeve, but she bore this so patiently and showed so deep a love for him that she won him in a scene in the third act.

But nothing could save a play where in the principal characters were antagonists to their lines. Jernegan was convinced that his hero was what the heroine had called him—a prig. The heroine was well enough, but she was trying to act contrary to her nature. As to the husband, who was intended to take the place of the villain, Jernegan wondered how he could have intended to make the man contemptible. He was winning his wife in spite of the author's attempt to make him repel her. When the rehearsal came to the climax in the third act she took the bit in her teeth and defied the author by throwing herself into her husband's arms and asking his forgiveness.

Jernegan at this point came back to his real surroundings. Susan was the only character left, and she was in the flesh.

"Where am I? What's the matter?"

"I think you must have fainted, sir."

"How long have I been here?"

"Only a few minutes. I saw you fall. I was in that yard over there feeding the chickens. Let me help you to walk there. I'll give you a glass of milk."

Jernegan arose with her assistance and staggered to the house. The milk she gave him seemed like lifeblood poured into him.

"We'll have dinner soon," said the girl, who noticed that Jernegan was famished, "and I think you'll be better for eating something. We're going to have fried chicken."

Jernegan's mouth watered. The dinner hour was 12 o'clock, but the girl, noticing Jernegan's hungry look, hurried its cooking and got it ready half an hour earlier. When Jernegan had partaken of a good meal he was a changed man. He pretended that he was weaker than he was that he might stay awhile with Susan, as he persisted in calling her, though her name was Eunice.

When the playwright left the house he had turned his play upside down. The soldier boy and Susan, though introduced as subordinates, became the life of the play. The husband was the hero and the former hero the villain, who made all the trouble between the married couple. Jernegan went to Fearing, the manager, and told him of his dream, vision or whatever it was, and Fearing agreed to grubstake him till he could rewrite his play. When it was finished Fearing staged it, and it was a great success.

The chief reason for this was that Jernegan interested Eunice in it and persuaded her to prepare herself for Susan's part. She happened to be a natural actress and, despite her calico clothes and cowhide shoes, won her audience.

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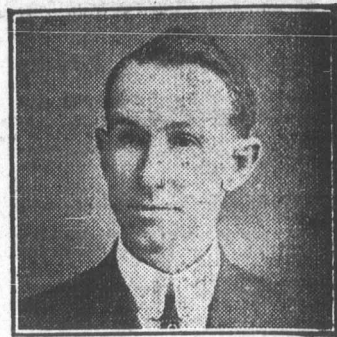
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