

THE PASSING SHOW.

I have seen Minnie Maddern Fiske as "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" four times this week. I could not see her oftener in one week without risking a nervous collapse. Flesh and blood can endure only up to a certain point. Of all the performances now on the American stage I think this is the only one that will go down into history.

In the first place the play itself is a marvellous piece of work. I should be inclined to class it with the few really great plays of the last half century. I doubt if a more vigorous piece of play-writing has been done since the younger Dumas in his prime wrote *Le Dome Aux Camelias*. In point of construction it is not flawless, for the last act is an anti-climax, a jarring note. But dear me, we have so much clever stage carpentry; there are all the heavy domestic dramas of David Belasco which are put together almost faultlessly, but which mean nothing at all. "Tess" has the vital quality which is so much more potent than cleverness, the thing which makes a play live. I should almost call it the play of the present; the play which best embodies the tendencies of modern art and modern thought. When I say this I am speaking only of English plays, excluding the dramas of Ibsen, which to futurity will stand for this century as Shakspeare's stand for his. I would place "Tess" beside "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray."

For all practical stage purposes the "legitimate" has had its day. There is no use in fighting the facts any longer. When you have said all you will against "problem plays," the truth remains that fairy tales, however replete in grace and poetry, charm the world no longer. They were the fancies of an earlier, cruder, happier civilization than ours. They lack warm contemporaneous interest. The drama that is truly potent today must be so through the only religion that is left us now—the religion of human suffering and of human pity.

"Tess" will stand close scrutiny as a piece of literature; it has distinguished literary quality. The spirit of Thomas Hardy is wonderfully preserved throughout. From what other pen could these hoydenish milkmaids and the elder d'Urbervilles and the inimitable country bumpkins have come? They might have stepped right out of the pages of "The Woodlanders" or "Far from the Madding Crowd."

Here is a play for you without the accused manufacture of "comedy element," yet rich in indigenous comedy, so to speak. The natural comedy that grows out of life in an English village, so virile and earthy that it might have been written by Fielding or Goldsmith.

And yet, after all, what is a play but a wraith, an inanimate thing into which some man or woman must pour his or her heart's blood, a thing born of the passion of some great brain, and which lives only in the atmosphere of the passions, as certain sea mosses, which have lain shrunken and brown upon the rocks many a summer, expand and grow green again when they feel their native element about them?

When Mrs. Fiske first steps before you she, by no means, fills the mind's ideal of Hardy's blooming, voluptuous woman. Her body is frail to emaciation; she has absolutely no physique. Her face is pinched and plain, utterly without charm. Her's is not a big, broad, mobile ugliness like Nether-sole's, her face is simply plain and characterless, like those of hundreds of women you meet every day in the street. An actress who is as beauti-

ful as the morning remarked to me yesterday. "When I think of the great soul imprisoned in that frail little body and shut in behind that pinched, pale face, I rebel. It is a miscarriage of divine justice." And, indeed, I know of no better way to express it. The woman has everything against her, lacks everything but—genius. Her triumph is purely one of *art*—that word mouthed about the world so much, but of which we see ah, so little in a lifetime! Her power is in the naked truth and the passionate sincerity of her words, and in the penetrating power of an analytical intellect. I never saw anyone who could so impart almost anything to you without the aid of words. She speaks to you mind to mind, in a new and soundless language. You can absolutely look down into her brain and watch her mental processes.

Mrs. Fiske's first entrance upon the stage is a piece of the most unconventional work I have ever seen. While the milkmaids and dairy hands are chaffing each other at the front of the stage, she comes in at the rear, wiping her hands on a towel, her back to the audience.

The first act of the play occurs at the dairy farm, where Tess' mother and father and little brother have come to congratulate her upon her approaching marriage with Angel Clair. One of the prettiest scenes in the play is that between Tess and Abram, her little brother. They sit down together under a tree and he tells her how he hopes she'll marry and be a fine lady so they can have the roof mended and buy a cow and always have plenty to eat. She puts her arms about him and says, "I would do anything in the world for you and Liza-Lu, Abram, to keep you safe and put you in the right path. Sometimes I think you are all in the world I have to live for. And I, I want to take care of Liza-Lu—I want to take care of Liza-Lu!"

"How bright the stars shine tonight, Tess. Be it true that they be all worlds, like ours?"

"Yes, Abram, they be all worlds like ours; all filled with sad, suffering women, I suppose."

"And no men?"

"Ah, if there were no men, Abram, the women wouldn't suffer!"

Then the lad tells her how they miss her at home and a gleam of almost hysterical joy lights her face. Who is there who does not know how good it is to be missed at home?

Inside the cottage Angel Clair begins singing, accompanying himself on his harp. Then you begin to realize how great an artist is before you. She takes the little boy's arms and winds them tight about her, holding his hands against her breast. Now the child has never seen Angel Claire, but his hands are on that heart and he whispers, "Be it he, Tess; be it he?" She only holds him closer and closes her eyes. And O that face, that face across the footlights!

Then comes the beautiful little scene between Tess and Angel, in which she begs him not to marry her, but "just let her go on loving him." She tries to tell him what she has tried a thousand times to tell him, and cannot. He asks her about her childhood, and she rises with a smile more bitter than tears, and half facing the audience she utters some of the finest lines in the play:

"At Mariott there is a cottage smaller than this. There are three rooms; the kitchen, with an earthen floor, my mother's bedroom, and the loft where the children sleep. Some times the Monday's work is done by Saturday; sometimes it is not done at

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