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The Engineer's Bookshelf

By Wilson R. Dumble

MEN IN WHITE—*Sidney Kingsley*—Covici Friede (\$2.00).

THE LAKE — *Dorothy Messingham* — Doubleday, Doran (\$2.00).

FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS—*Gertrude Stein* —Random House (\$1.00).

I HAVE been quite interested recently in some of the plays that are now running on Broadway, ones which have been published in book form. Unfortunately, we who live in the provinces must content ourselves with the reading of these plays; for apparently the theatrical producers refuse to send out road shows to the larger cities. Not so many years ago the people of Columbus were fortunate enough during the course of a theatrical season to have at least a handful of good legitimate attractions during the winter and spring. But now the talkies have taken their place and we are fortunate to get even a fleeting glance of Katherine Cornell as she goes through the country.

Men in White

In particular I was impressed by *Men in White*, which by the way, as I write, is being advertised as shown at a local movie house soon. *Men in White* is a powerful story of a young doctor and his trials within the walls of a hospital. There is the usual wealthy girl to whom he is engaged and who demands all his time, and there is the young nurse working in one of the hospital wards whom he loves. There are several complications in the story which give rise to the single plot, and if the Hollywood people have followed the play script accurately it should make a splendid picture.

The Lake

The Lake, which I also read several weeks ago, was the starring piece which unsuccessfully brought back Katherine Hepburn to Broadway. The play is not important in its theme; it is not successfully written and from what I learn in the newspaper reviews, it was not produced well. *The Lake* is the story of an unhappy girl in an English country town, who, seeking to escape from the influence of a dominating mother, tries several wrong roads to freedom, stops herself just short of disaster, agrees to marry a man she does not love, falls in love with him just before they are married, and as they drive off from the wedding and their car pitches over an embankment into the lake, escapes the death that overwhelms them.

The story in itself, it can be seen, is very artificial, and this, no doubt, is the reason for its failure on the stage. It makes interesting reading, however, especially for one who cares to follow the current stage.

Four Saints in Three Acts

My third attempt at reading a play was not very satisfactory. I purchased a copy of Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. I admit that I read it; I also admit that I failed to understand it completely. To begin with, there are fifteen saints in the piece and according to my count, I found five acts and a prologue. But that is Steinian and cannot be considered worth mentioning in any account of the play. I frankly say that I do not know what the piece is about, but if I am pushed into a corner and forced to give an account of it I might add that it seems to be a half-serious and half-playful experiment in carrying to their illogical conclusions some of the rather ribald themes of esoteric literature which has been published in the last few years. I believe, but I'm not sure, that in it, I discovered something of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and probably a little of *The Waste Land*. Again, I am not sure. I do not think that anyone could be sure. It is probably the most bewildering piece of literature that ever came before my eyes. Yet, I feel certain, if I were in Manhattan, I would try to see the production on the stage, if for no other reason than to satisfy my curiosity.

Salome

Several weeks ago as I sat listening to my radio one Saturday afternoon I chanced to tune in on the Metropolitan Opera Company's production of *Salome*, and it recalled to mind a production of that famous opera which I heard some fifteen years ago in Baltimore. Being at boarding school at the time and under quite strict regulations, I had made an especial effort to attend the matinee. Mary Garden was to sing the title role, and it was rumored that she would do the famous dance of the Seven Veils carrying the head of John the Baptist on a silver charger. The New York performance several weeks before that Baltimore presentation, had been stopped by the police because of the dance, and more particularly because of the head on the charger.

Well, I attended the performance; Mary Garden with her throaty voice sang the lead; and Mary Garden with her non-too-slim figure danced the dance of the Seven Veils; but—Mary Garden did not use the head of John the Baptist. The Baltimore police department had its representatives back stage and when the long black arm of

the executioner was thrust up through the cistern, it handed to her only the silver charger. The audience had to imagine that it held the head of the dead Nazarene. However, I learn that when the opera was revived last month in Manhattan the head of John the Baptist was used in the presentation.

The fate of Strauss' opera *Salome* has been, indeed, a stormy one. Oscar Wilde wrote this opera as a one act play in French in 1892, and ever since, it has made the author's name a household word where ever the English language is not spoken. Two years later, Lord Alfred Douglas made an English translation of the play so that it could be produced on the English stage. It seems that the Spring before Lord Alfred made his translation, the British censorship had stopped the rehearsals of the play in London. Sarah Bernhardt was to have played it to London audiences in French; but London censors decided differently. For a number of years the matter was dropped, and then, about the turn of the century, Dr. Richard Strauss wrote the music for the opera, using, however, the translation, not of Lord Alfred, but of Madame Lachmann. It was not until about 1912 that Mary Garden was asked to sing the role in this country, and as I have stated before, was so interrupted by censorship in the various cities where she took the production, that it was deemed advisable to drop it from the repertoire.

Recently I have re-read my copy of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and to my mind that is the real way to appreciate it. It is a beautiful piece of work in the original French. Of course, it was a daring experiment at that time, but I believe, was a complete success. The story itself is little changed from the old Biblical tale, the tale of the young and beautiful Salome, princess of Judea, who demands the head of John the Baptist from King Herod. The slight action reaches a climax when Herod begs Salome to dance for him, but she is unwilling, and he makes the fatal promise to give her what she wills if she will dance. Salome does dance and then demands the head. Herod tries in vain to turn her from her choice; he offers her the great emerald that Caesar gave him, his white peacocks, his jewels, his carvings, and the very veil from the sanctuary itself. But she is obdurate, and he yields. The order is given, and soon a black arm bearing the silver charger with the head on it, is thrust up from the cistern. Salome takes the charger triumphantly, mockingly, bitterly, but the stage is immediately plunged into darkness, the slaves put out the torches, a cloud hides the moon, and Herod, in the dark, mounts the stairs. Suddenly, a ray of moonlight falls and illumines Salome, and, as Herod turns and sees her, he cries: "Tuez cette femme!" The centurians crush her under their shields.

That, briefly, is the story of *Salome*. I suppose it is unhealthy, morbid, unwholesome and un-English. It does not show quiet domestic life such as the English people of the Nineties liked, and nobody slaps anyone on the back during the entire play; but in this tragedy the beauty of a perfect work of art, powerful in character, is easily seen.

Oberammergau

I have been snowed under recently with the most interesting literature about foreign travel, all the steamship companies stressing European travel in general and the three hundredth anniversary production of the Passion Play at Oberammergau in particular. They all recall my travels into Germany during the summer of 1922 when I made a special trip from Munich to Oberammergau to see the Passion Play.

In looking back over my journal which was written in Munich under the date of August 4, 1922, I find these words:

"I was very tired last evening when our car rolled up to the hotel here from that long drive from Oberammergau. We left the village a little past seven o'clock and arrived at the hotel shortly before midnight. The production was worth seeing, however, especially since I was fortunate enough to be quartered in the home of Anton Lang, the Christus. Lang speaks rather good English and has two charming daughters, true Bavarian beauties, who speak splendid English. The evening before the play he helped serve the dinner to the guests in his house, after having worked at wood carving all day in his shop.

"The play itself began yesterday morning at eight o'clock and continued until 12 o'clock noon. There was then an intermission of two hours for luncheon. We returned to our quarters for lunch, but were back in the theater at two o'clock for the last act, or the afternoon performance. The theater seats about four thousand people, and two performances are given every week, Wednesday and Sundays, from May to October. In case there is an overflow crowd in the village, a second performance is given on the following days. The seats in the theater are under cover but the stage is in the open, the theater being open to the weather at one end. In some scenes more than five hundred people were on the stage at one time. There was a splendid orchestra of fifty pieces and a singing chorus of seventy-five voices."

Although I did not record it in my journal, I recall so vividly the crucifixion scene. Naturally it comes in the course of the play, about five o'clock in the afternoon, and is silhouetted against a gloriously beautiful sunset with the snow-clad peaks of the Bavarian Alps in the background. As I remember, that scene in itself is well worth another trip to Germany just to see once again.