

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

POOR OLD MARRIAGE

By F. Scott Fitzgerald

ALTHOUGH not one of the first I was certainly one of the most enthusiastic readers of Charles Norris's "Salt"—I sat up until five in the morning to finish it, stung into alertness by the booming repetition of his title phrase at the beginning of each section. In the dawn I wrote him an excited letter of praise. To me it was utterly new. I had never read Zola or Frank Norris or Dreiser—in fact the realism which now walks Fifth Avenue was then hiding dismally in Tenth Street basements. No one of my English professors in college ever suggested to his class that books were being written in America. Poor souls, they were as ignorant as I—possibly more so. But since then Brigadier General Mencken has marshaled the critics in aquiescent column of squads for the campaign against Philistia.

In the glow of this crusade I read "Brass" and suffered a distinct disappointment. Although it is a more difficult form than "Salt" and is just as well, perhaps more gracefully, constructed, the parallel marriages are by no means so deftly handled as the ones in Arnold Bennett's "Whom God Hath Joined". It is a cold book throughout and it left me unmoved. Mr. Norris has an inexhaustible theme and he elaborates on it intelligently and painstakingly—but, it seems to me, without passion and without pain. There is not a line in it that compares with Griffith Adams's broken cry of emotion, "Why, I love you my girl, better than any other God damned person in the world!"

There was a fine delicacy in Frank Norris's work which does not exist in his brother's. Frank Norris had his realistic tricks—in "McTeague" for instance where the pictures are almost invariably given authenticity by an appeal to the sense of smell or of hearing rather than by the commoner form of word painting—but he seldom strengthens his dose from smelling salts to emetics. "Brass" on the contrary becomes at times merely the shocker—the harrowing description of Leila's feet could only be redeemed by a little humor, of which none is forthcoming. Early in the book one finds the following sentence:

He inflated his chest...pounding with shut fists the hard surface of his breast, alternately digging his finger-tips into the firm flesh about the nipples.

Here he has missed his mark entirely. I gather from the context that he has intended to express the tremendous virility of his hero in the early morning. Not questioning the accuracy of the details in themselves it is none the less obvious that he has chosen entirely the *wrong* details. He has given a glimpse not into Philip's virility but into the Bronx zoo.

Save for the pseudo-Shavian discussion on marriage near the end Mr. Norris manages to avoid propaganda and panacea. Some of the scenes are excellent—Philip's first courtship, his reunion with Marjorie after their first separation, his final meeting with her. Marjorie and Philip's mother are the best characters in the book, despite the care wasted on Mrs. Grotenberg. Leila is too much a series of tricks—

she is not in a class with Rissie in "Salt".

Had this novel appeared three years ago it would have seemed more important than it does at present. It is a decent, competent, serious piece of work—but excite me it simply doesn't. A novel interests me on one of two counts: either it is something entirely new and fresh and profoundly felt, as, for instance, "The Red Badge of Courage" or "Salt", or else it is a tour de force by a man of exceptional talent, a Mark Twain or a Tarkington. A great book is both these things—"Brass", I regret to say, is neither.

Brass, A Novel of Marriage. By Charles G. Norris. E. P. Dutton and Co.

TABLOID DRAMA

By Sidney Howard

CERTAINLY there is no criticism so satisfactory to write as that of an anthology of plays. It accords the critic the privilege of revamping the original without any of the cruel labor of proportionate selection. Can it be, he says, that such a gem as "Deirdre's Dug-out" is omitted when "____", not to speak of "____", is included? And the anthologist cringes.

Though I confess to an irrational dislike of the one act play as a form and to a red-blooded prejudice against any little theatre, here is a book and an anthology with which I have no quarrel. It has unquestioned value. The list of fifty authors is catholic in extent and varied in style and affords the usual opportunities for comparisons between techniques. The gathering of so many short plays within the scope of a single volume saves time and room. The plays are followed by

what seems to me an excellent and inclusive bibliography.

Many old friends are here: the erotic bully, von Hofmannsthal, Schnitzler and Maeterlinck making imaginary faces at one another, Wedekind with "The Tenor", a group of familiar Englishmen, the priceless Lady Gregory, Giacosa, Andreyev (little better than he should be), and Chekhov with his masterly miniature, "The Boor". Very few members of the League of Nations suffer from the discrimination of the anthologists and the balance of power is tactfully and overwhelmingly assigned to the dramatists of God's Country.

Two absentees are to be noted. There is no specimen of the sonorous vacuum of Lord Dunsany's art and none of Shaw's admirable one act dissertations has been included. Dunsany is small loss and Shaw, among other one act dramatists, is out of the picture. The volume does admirably, should be a happy hunting ground of little theatre managers and an amateurs' El Dorado.

From the introduction (by Mr. Loving) I cull one phrase, "a younger generation of dramatists, which is achieving its most notable work outside the beaten path of popular recognition, in small dramatic juntos and in the little theatres". This is the description accorded by the book to the American group whose plays it publishes. One wonders. I am inclined to fall back, for the moment, upon Brander Matthews's old distinction between the short story and the story which is merely short. Perhaps that is my quarrel with the one act play, that it has the same limitations as the short story, the situation which begins in the middle, develops no character, and ends too soon with a punch in the last line. Art demands leisure, dra-