

Lament of a Press Agent.

The press agent expertly shifted the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other without interrupting his flow of conversation. For a second it seemed suspended in the air and moved with his tongue while he talked.

'Still nothing doing,' he said with a sigh, 'although July is half over and it begins to look as if the demand for our services isn't what it used to be. One manager recently said he always engaged his actors early in July because they were always so thin and haggard with suspense if they hadn't got engagements by that time that it took 'em a month or two to recover. Now if that's true of an actor who has nothing to do but repeat what other people have written, how much more important must it be in my business, where a man not only has to rely on his own brains but has to work to get the results of his efforts into the papers afterward? Either of these things is by itself enough work for one man but it's the press agent's duty always to combine both branches of the business, and then he has to wait around until a month before the season begins to get a job at that. I tell you it jars me and anything that jars a press agent must be serious.'

'Somehow or other, I've the feeling that they don't want us now in the same old way that they used to. They don't cry for us. In the best days of this business, the press agent used to be as important as the star. A manager engaged his agent before the ink was dry on his star's contract. No man would think of sending out a new play or a new actor, until he had a good press agent to start ahead of him and sow the necessary seeds of interest. But nowadays, you'll find that the managers trouble themselves very little about the press agent. They'll always take one in the end, but they don't pay him much and they're always able to get him at any time without much trouble.'

'Of course they can't get a man to do the sort of work that was wanted in the old days. There were giants in the business then. They were well paid and they deserved it, and a man who was a press agent in those days was a somebody in the theatrical world and stood in importance somewhere between the manager and the star. He hadn't been reduced to the ranks of the also-rans, as he is today, but he had a right to sit in the manager's office if he wanted to, and the manager was very glad to have him. That was the press agent of twenty years ago. His was a legitimate business and he had a right to everything that came to him.'

'Yellow journalism and cheapening the rates helped to kill the business. The yellow journals would print any yarns that was brought to them and never ask any questions. The trick was so easy that the managers couldn't see the use of paying a man to do anything that took so little trouble. To have a chorus girl bitten by a shark at Coney Island and to supply a picture of her and the shark too didn't take any more work than taking the fable right into the newspaper office. The yellows were always willing and anxious to print it. Jobs of this kind got as cheap as three or five dollars, and nowadays they don't bring that price. The yellows all do the press work for the chorus girls and those a little bit higher up in the profession without wanting any pay at all. Pick up one of them any day and you'll find photographs of unknown soubrettes, inconspicuous minor actresses and theatrical nobodies puffed as generously as if they were celebrities. Now all that it takes to accomplish this is to send the photographs to the newspaper offices. Any office boy can do that and the work really is high at \$3.00 for the job.'

'The press agent of former times had to do his work in a way that appealed to intelligent and careful men. He had to add some element of picturesqueness or bit of novelty to his tale before it could get into a paper, where it would do any good. But the yellows have never made any test of that kind. They'll take anything that comes along. With no particular ability demanded in the men who do this kind of work for them, the managers came to regard the press agent in a wholly different way. From being an important functionary he dropped into a place far below that he formerly held. So the yellow journals, while they made his work easy for him at the outset finally did more to reduce the value of the press agent's services than any other influence and to bring him down to his present estate.'

'I can only remember one case of really fine press-work that has come under my observation during the past ten years.'

That was as good in its way as anything ever done in the balmy days of the profession. It established here a foreign concert hall singer who would never have made any more impression than a dozen others of her kind if interest had not constantly been attracted to her in the most sensational and novel way. She was kept the heroine of various exciting episodes that were all prepared with a sufficient appearance of probability to get into something more than the yellow journals. That was the sort of thing that we all did in the old days and it was not regarded as anything more than the duty of every press agent. He would have been considered of very little account if he didn't do some of the kind for everybody who engaged him. That one year of press work gave the actress in question a vogue that made her at once as well known as if she had acted here for a decade.

'One other cause for the decline of the press agent's power is to be found in the doubtful value that managers have come to put upon publicity of a certain kind. The concert hall singer I referred to was made in this country by the sort of advertising she received at the time of her arrival here. But just that sort of treatment was suited only to her particular case. An actress of dignity would have been irretrievably injured by such unworthy means of exploitation. But for the musical hall divette they were all right.'

'Just the opposite course was followed in the case of another actress, who three years ago left the support of a popular star to become a star on her own responsibility. Now managers are accustomed to say since

this enterprise proved a complete success, that it was managed in wonderful fashion from the first step to the last. But the hand of the press agent was not noticeable in it anywhere. The only publicity acquired by the actress at this time was of the most conventional formal kind. It is difficult to see why in some cases such means of putting forward a new star could be used successfully, while in other cases they fail. It may be that a really good thing wins on its own good merits, although very few persons in theatrical life would be willing to wait for a good play to win out, without intimating gently to the public something about the quality of the piece, or at all events what the manager thought of it.

'Publicity apparently ceases to be effective after a certain point is reached. The best advertised woman on the stage today is a certain beautiful comic opera singer. For the past ten years she has been known by name and face to a larger section of the public in this country than any other woman I know of. A friend of mine told me that in a lumber camp far from any railroad lines, in a forest of the northwest, he once went into a hut where two pictures were hanging. One was of this woman and the other of the Virgin Mary. Now if notoriety in itself had any value that woman would draw audiences larger than any other woman or man on the American stage could expect to attract. But as a matter of fact, she has for some years past failed to draw the public, with a persistence that was the despair of her managers. She was tried in all kinds of comic operas. Thousands of dollars were spent in the effort to attract the public. Failure after failure resulted, and this much advertised woman retired from public view as a star and took her place with a number of other singers and actors in a stock company.'

'Another case of the same kind was noticed last year in the grand opera field. A certain star, who has been associated always in the public mind with a certain very popular opera, travelled for the first

time through a number of western cities. The expectation of the managers was that it would be necessary only to announce this woman's name on the dead walls to have the public flock into the theatre. But quite the opposite happened in a number of places. The public knew all about the woman and had heard her name for years, not be one quarter as large as they are outside of New York. For years actors are mentioned in the newspapers and become moderately well known by name. Yet that publicity does them little or no good with the public. One of the best known comic opera stars in the country retired from that conspicuous position several months ago because the public was no longer going to see him. Yet he is today one of the very best known men on the American stage, and his notoriety failed to attract the public completely. But it did not exhibit any great desire to pay its way to hear her sing, and the same experience has often befallen managers who have expected that a singer, because he or she was well known, was certain to draw large audiences.'

'The public is sometimes quite indifferent. On the other hand, it is largely the curiosity seekers who go to hear Paderevski, although he is justly accounted the greatest pianist of his time. Yet it only those who understood and appreciated his music went to hear him his audiences would be much smaller. That was another instance in which the work of the press agent failed to accomplish anything.'

'I don't believe that any manager in the business to-day has any clear idea as to the value of publicity. That it undoubtedly helps a person in public stage life, while it wholly fails to make them successful in itself, seems to be the best opinion of the managers to day. It used to be the belief of the managers that publicity was almost equal to making the actor from every point of view, and as that could be best done by the expert press agent, we were accordingly very much more appreciated in the past than we are to day. I'll

admit that the old confidence in the great power of publicity for actors seems to me now to have been a little exaggerated.

'Something more than mere knowledge of an actor is needed to attract the public to hear him. What that particular thing is nobody can tell. The manager who discovered it would never make a mistake. His fortune would be made if he could find out why A draws and why B doesn't. That is the great problem of the manager's career. And unfortunately he has come to the conclusion that the press agent has no more to do with it than he has. And this conclusion was of course very bad for us.'

Good-Sized Berries.

On a old Carlisle bridge, in Dublin, there used to be a fruit stall kept by Biddy, the apple-woman, who was a well-known figure to all passers-by. She had a ready tongue and never did a verbal opponent retire with all the honors.

An American visitor, who had heard rumors of her skill at fence, one day took up a watermelon displayed for sale, and said gravely:

'You grow pretty small apples over here. In America we have them twice this size.'

Bridget looked up, coolly surveyed the joker from head to heels, and replied, in a tone of pity:

'Ah, what for should I be wasting my breath to talk to wan that takes our gooseberries for apples!'

Gallant and Witty.

The recent visit of Queen Victoria to Ireland brought out not a little wit; the example which follows bears the tang of its own soil:

The queen's farewell letter to the Irish people was dated from the Vice Regal Lodge, Dublin. Said a prominent Irish Nationalist member of parliament:

'It was the Regal Lodge for the time being; and indeed, for many a day she has knocked the vice out of it.'



PRESENTS FOR THE BABY.