

LOVE OF GOSSIP AS BASIS FOR NEW PLAY

Spanish Dramatist Who Wrote the Original Took Some Pages From His Own Personal Experience

By J. F. S.

The French, who are second only to the Hebrews of old in the ability to include a great truth in a few words, have a proverb which runs something like "La mortie du monde prend plaisir a medire, et l'autre mortie a croire les mediances" (One half the world takes delight in telling slanders, the other half in believing it).

At one of the local theatres a week or so ago, we saw a play based on the evils caused by the world-wide love of gossip. "All on Account of Eliza" was a pretty little comedy; the gossip distortions of ziggzagged village minds did but little harm to the schoolma'am, and all ended happily. It was a case where the one gossiped of had the good fortune to live down the busy tongues and their wagging.

To many who saw the play it seemed like farce—like a crass exaggeration of conditions even such as are found in the antique, straight-laced New England villages where the church steeples set a model of woodiness and straightness for the backs of the citizens, and where, too frequently, the church-bell also sets its example—the example to the ever-willing tongues to take advantage of every opportunity to ring out wildly.

Little Eliza, in the story, had worn a low-necked gown in public. Ding-dong bell, Eliza had kissed a man in the cemetery. Ding-dong again. And then a few rings more to keep up the interest of the neighbors.

When William Faversham was in Portland a few weeks back he told about his new play, "The World and His Wife," which deals with the same problem that little Eliza was forced to grapple with.

Only the people in the Nerdlinger play have a worse problem to solve. They struggle with the slander of fools and of knaves, of women and of young men—the four classes who are supposed to take particular delight in gossip. In the end they lose their reputations—"of" without merit and lost without deserving"—and the play ends in dark and very bitter tragedy.

It is taken from a story and play by Jose Echegaray, the Spanish dramatist, which the author called "El Gran Galeoto" (The Great Gossiper). Echegaray is rather an interesting fellow, and is said to have suffered greatly himself from the evil tongues of his supposed friends.

He was a mathematician—a professor in Madrid, later a political economist, was a revolutionary leader and minister of the short-lived Spanish republic. He took to writing after the dashing of his political hopes, and succeeded and failed as have all men in all times.

He suffered the great tragedy of his life through slander—the tragedy that overshadowed even that of the bursting of the bubble of his political ideals. And then he wrote the terribly morose but wonderfully impressive "El Gran Galeoto." It depicts bitterly and movingly the wrong done by the talking of curious neighbors.

Whether such a play will be a success remains doubtful. There are some faults common to us as a world-race that we can hear spoken of with equanimity.

We share a very common greed for gold, and we smile comfortably when the spectacle of commercialized souls is spread out for our perusal. There are very wide social sins which never trouble our consciences longer than 10 minutes at a time, and are then pushed behind us and forgotten.

But this question of gossip, which is so very near and dear to us, is different. It is a bore to mention the fact that it may result in harm. A spicy story is dearly loved by nine out of ten persons.

It is said that in our very best circles there are certain bits of news to hear which even the bridge table will be temporarily abandoned. This sounds highly improbable, but is given on the very best of authority.

And then we middle-class people all know with what delight we greet the arrival of our busybody friend—the one for whom the French have invented the name "la mouche de coche"—those nice, fussy coach-flies which go buzzing about into everybody's business and fill from person to person whispering all the house-to-house leased-wire service at least a day before anyone else gets hold of it.

We clasp them to our bosoms the minute we see them. We bring in a pot of chocolate and arrange the cushions and settle ourselves expectantly. Let no unwary third party dare to put in a hindering hand and suggest a timely explanation of the suspicious circumstance. Out upon the doubting wretch! He's a sour-visaged creature, anyway.

In one of the western cities there is a writer of something more than past middle age. During his life time he has probably done a personal act of kindness to nearly every one with whom he has come in contact. He has given many a poor, frightened chap, with the fire of ambition burning bright in his soul but without the chance to prove his worth, the desired opportunity. He has helped to find a market for his work and has directed his talents in their right direction. And one day a group of men were gathered in a club in that city. And in that group were several of those whom the man had helped.

It seems that he had been mixed up in some disgraceful affair—he had rowed with someone's husband, or done some other beastly thing, and the news had spread to the club very quickly.

How they did anxiously ask one another for every possible detail! How their eyes glistened as they spread the report! The Home Missionary society of the First Congregational church of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, could not have carried the thing off better.

Benefits forgot are crueler than those withheld. The little tree-shaded college town in the east a professor who lived a rather ungracious life, to the displeasure of the rest of the community, suddenly began to act suspiciously.

There were many things that militated against him. His subscriptions to the various school funds were infinitesimal. His clothes were too rusty, too shiny, for a professor even in that modest little college. Strange and completely unexplained nocturnal visits stretched the curiosity of the community to the point where something had to break.

Something did break—and, unfortunately, it was the man's heart. They learned the whole miserable story afterward, and were sorry and did their best—the best which was dictated by the mandates of New England consciences—to make reparation to his family.

Of course, the reparation didn't do any good, but gossip lost something of its popularity in that particular settlement for a good many years.

Last week we were given an opportunity to contemplate the results of what one busy tongue managed to work for the cause of the telling of something that one isn't supposed to tell.

It is said that F. Augustus Heinze, the copper king, was forming a ring with which he expected to corner the copper market. His plans and those of his assistants were all laid—everything was in readiness and but awaiting the arrival of the propitious moment to spring the deal and send Standard Oil and Amalgamated into a long and dreamless sleep.

But Mr. Heinze had a guest—a young Butte girl, who loved to walk in the corridors of the Waldorf-Astoria, and of whom the copper magnate was very fond. He talked over his plans with her and made a confidant of her.

When the other women told their choice bits of news she was just dying to spring her surprise—and one day she did it, extracting solemn promises from her hearers, of course, that it would go no farther.

Of course, such things never do go any farther. But the next morning a detective agency had the details and had planted its agents everywhere among the offices of the men concerned in the copper deal.

And last week the sequel came in the form of ruin for Mr. Heinze and his friends. No doubt the other women had lots of fun hearing the young lady from Butte tell all she knew.

The gossip is usually a person whom we acknowledge to be brilliant. Our friendships are based far more often on common dislikes than on common likes. If some one of our acquaintances will only express a good, strong, biting opinion of some one else of our acquaintance, we immediately fold her to our heart.

What remarkable discernment she has! There's a clever woman for you! Good women, the kind who go around with a smile and a cheery word for everyone, are always stupid, anyway!

There is an old saying that if you only throw dirt enough some of it is sure to stick. Thackeray's Becky Sharpe was an ideal gossip. Her active brain seized upon everything within reach and converted it into the cleverest, the most delightful examples of what is known in the vernacular as the "knock."

And she remains today doubtless one of the most popular characters in the realm of fiction. Most men have secretly or openly wished they could have known her and heard her consummate descriptions of her friends and their little follies.

First women would like to have known her, but all would be somewhat afraid of the acquaintanceship. It would be delightful, of course, to hear Becky talk, but one would want to seal her mouth before one let her out into the world between times.

So the success of "The World and His Wife" is problematical. It depends on something more than the mere cleverness of the men and women who play the parts—something more than the bright dialogues and interesting situations, the parts—something more than the good looks of Mr. Faversham himself; it depends upon how closely the audiences will feel called upon to accept the moral of the story as applying to themselves. And that is something about which, as "G. B. S." has said, you never can tell.

Why Jimmy Didn't Sit Down.

The woman who had shopped until the closing gong had sounded stood at the transfer station and awaited the suburban trolley.

"What," she wearily asked herself, "does it profit a woman if she does gain the elusive bargain and loses every trace of physical freshness?"

Presently the car came along. It had the usual fringe of humanity strung along the running board, and the woman resignedly prepared to stand between the seats, when a grimy youth arose and tendered her his place. Protesting faintly, she sat in it. He registered a vow never to shop overtime again.

In due time several seats were vacated, and the woman looked hopefully toward her knight.

"Jimmy," a friend of his was saying, "there's room inside now. Why don't you sit down?"

And the last drop of discomfort was added to the woman's cup of humiliation when Jimmy responded: "What's the use? No sooner I'll get me legs stretched when another third old hen will get on and I'll have to hop up."

Wonder What He'll Do Next.

"There's the latest man who ever signed a hotel register," remarked Colonel Peacock, the veteran managing clerk of the Hoffman house, indicating a large, well-set-up stroller about the corridor.

"He's a drummer for a big Philadelphia silk house, and his name is Samuel Parker Sedgewick Elliott. When I first knew him, 10 years ago, he used to sign his full name in a very deliberate and careful manner, using considerable flourish. A couple of years after he began to abbreviate it slightly, like this: 'Samuel P. G. Elliott.'"

"Then I noticed on the register 'Sam' P. G. Elliott."

"The following trip disclosed a further slight elision, S. P. G. Elliott. 'Coming in one night rather late, he took the proffered pen and wrote 'Sam. Elliott.'"

"On his arrival here last week I saw he had the habit incurably, and there was no hope for him whatever. Here is what he had scrawled: 'S. Elliot.'"

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