

OUR CAPTIOUS CRITIC.

"THE PEARL GIRL," AT THE SHAFTESBURY THEATRE.

THE play opens with an otter-hunting scene in a leafy woodland of great beauty. Fair women and brave men through the stage with their long poles and their smart hunt uniforms, all of which cannot fail to increase the popularity of the sport, for not a word is mentioned of the necessity of getting out of bed before the dawn and standing knee-deep in chill mountain streams while we try, under the bullying eye of the Master, to "screw our courage to the 'stickling' point." So, after seeing this first act, no doubt we shall all set out to pursue *lutra* with our long sticks, and bravely talk of "bolts" and "chains" and "tailing him."

When Gilbert wrote

"there's no such pearl As the bright and beautiful English girl,"

he was not thinking of Miss Iris Hoey, but he would have been if she hadn't been in short frocks then. It is true that at the Shaftesbury she is only an imitation-pearl girl—they are the famous Palmyra pearls, to be precise—but what of that? Let us dispassionately consider the value, if any, of real pearls. False pearls are quite as nice to wear as real ones and much more charming to lose. A shopgirl has no use for the genuine article, because no one believes hers are real. A duchess has no use for them either, because the imitation ones are identical in appearance and relieve her of fear of thieves and socialists. The thief who steals the sham ones is only half as guilty as if he had taken the real thing, for he has done no one much injury. So it comes to this. Real pearls are only useful to safe-deposit shareholders and to the boys who love to read the beautiful stories of diving after them in Pacific seas—and even the boys run away before the mast, and talk sea-dog Latin in the fo'castle. "Train up a child, and away he goes." But to come back to the Shaftesbury.

The Palmyra pearl establishment in Bond-street was favoured of the gods. The beauty of its secretary and typist, Miss Miranda Peplow, was "too bright to be looked upon," for she was Miss Iris Hoey. The gloom of Byles, its odd man, made the pearls seem even more

merry and bright by contrast, for he was Mr. Alfred Lester, our modern Knight of the Rueful Countenance. Its manager, Mr. Lauri de Frece, could talk the head off a politician, let alone a pearl purchaser, and its head assistant, Mr. Harry Ray, was so nimble that he kept the Bond-street dancing championship in his pocket, and made Tango teas a superfluity to the patrons of the shop. Nor can we forget that there were ladies on the staff, ladies young and ladies fair, who paraded before the customers with hundreds of Palmyra pearls falling like cascades of moonlight from their bewitching necks. Girls who smiled and carolled:—

"And through our fingers all day long They make their pretty rippling song."

Who that had eyes to see and gold to spill, could fail those pearls to love and make his love known—with 2½ per cent. off for cash.

To this very desirable establishment there came one day a magnificent creature from the Argentine. The Argentine, as you ought to have known but did not know, is a place where the "best" families are so good that they "own 365,000 acres, 1,000 for each day of the year, with a polo ground in the centre of each 1,000." This relieves the best people from the wretched necessity, to which our impoverished aristocrats are sometimes reduced, of playing twice on the same ground. In addition to this, when they rent a box

for a season at the Argentine opera, they take care to get one large enough to accommodate a billiard table in it, and this is perhaps the best use to which money has ever been put, for "breathes there the man with soul so dead" that he wouldn't like a hand at snooker while a *prima-donna* contortionist is climbing up to E in alt.?

The magnificent creature from the Argentine was so afraid of thieves that she had really called to order from the Palmyra firm an imitation set of her world-famous real pearls, but no sooner had the manager said "Delighted, madam," than the magnificent one remembered she had fallen in love with the chief officer on the ship which brought her from South America. So she declared her intention of sailing back at once with the boat rather than let a good officer slip through her fingers. In his grief at the loss of so splendid an advertisement—for only newspapers can really ignore such considerations—the Palmyra manager had a stroke of genius. Why not let Miranda Peplow impersonate the departed magnificent one, while he himself, Mr. Jecks, posed as her millionaire father? Miranda could wear the Palmyra pearls, they could be "stolen" by arrangement in broad daylight at that famous polo ground called Hurleragh, and while London was ringing with the daring theft the news could be broken to the public that the lost gems were only Palmyra imitations after all, though so like the

real ones that even the expert thieves had been deceived. Neither Sardou, Hauptmann, Pinero, nor Sudermann ever thought of a plot like this, and its conception so exhausted even Capt. Basil Hood, the author, that he was incapable of doing anything more except to marry nearly everybody to somebody in the last act.

For instance, Miranda (Miss Iris Hoey) marries the Duke of Trent (Mr. Harry Welchman), for, after discovering that she is the daughter of a miller on the ducal estate, further hesitation would have been frivolous. Byles, the motionless and melancholy odd-job man (Mr. Alfred Lester), who was "his country's hope for the Olympic games," wanted to marry Miranda too, but he lost his chance mainly by serenading her from a boat beneath her window, for at first he was taken for a man crying coal for sale, and then for a man who was drowning loudly. So someone—first it wasn't really the right window—threw him a lifebelt which knocked him into the water. The Palmyra manager (Mr. Lauri de Frece)—a terrible flirt who always cooled down in the winter and took up fretwork—paired off with a wealthy Mrs. Baxter—

remarking that though she had made her money out of bacon he did not blame her for having pigs in her family, while the Duke of Trent's sister (Miss Cicely Courtneidge) fell into the arms of the Duke's land agent (Mr. Jack Hulbert). As to the magnificent one from the Argentine, it is supposed that the return voyage settled the fate of her chief officer, while as to what became of the beautiful maidens of the Palmyra shop in Bond-street, we know nothing but suspect the best.

The whole production is a gorgeous rattle and jingle. Although all the four scenes are brilliant ones, the most striking is the first, showing the "field" in their otter-hunting dresses against a sylvan background. The music of Messrs. Hugo Felix and Howard Talbot serves its purpose, but will not make history, and the book of Capt. Hood is a little characterless, the lyrics, too, being sometimes over-complex for musical comedy. One defect of the piece is the absence of a lady with first-class singing ability, and another the comparative brevity of Mr. Alfred Lester's appearances on the stage, but on the other hand the acting of Miss Hoey and Miss Blanche, the briskness of Mr. Lauri de Frece and the singing of Mr. Harry Welchman help on strongly an entertainment which a few years ago would have been thought a faultless specimen of its kind.

