

## FOREIGN NOTES AND COMMENT

### *Three Spaniards*

THREE centuries ago, the glory that was Spain either rested in or was made apparent by three writers: Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616), Lope Felix de Vega Carpio (1562-1635), and Pedro Calderon de la Barca (1600-1681). Cervantes — (seven cities and one town contested for the honor of having been his birthplace) — was a novelist; he was the author of "Don Quixote", which Carlyle termed "our joyfullest modern book". The work was so splendid that his dramas have been relegated to the dissecting rooms of university seminars. Lope de Vega was a dramatist; he wrote so many plays — some say 1,800 in all, though this number has never been placed on the shelves — that his novels have come to be used merely as reference material by specialists who write on him. Calderon was a dramatist too; less prolific than Lope de Vega by far, but so superior to him in talent that his plays constitute even to this day a vital part of the repertory of the classical stage. With Calderon the golden period of Spanish literature came to a close.

Today three other Spaniards hold the centre of the stage: Jacinto Benavente (1866—), Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (1867—), and Gregorio Martínez Sierra (1881—). Like Calderon and Lope de Vega, Benavente and Sierra were born in Madrid. Like Cervantes, Ibáñez is writing novels by which he hopes to cure Spain of its ills, such as illiteracy, excessive use of intoxicants, and too much mediæval bull fighting.

Like Lope de Vega, Benavente and Sierra are marvelously prolific. Like Calderon, Benavente is supposed to be the last of the moderns. And just as the three Spaniards of Shakespeare's time were surrounded by a sizable group of other writers whose creations were in no way mean, so are the three of 1923 not without worthy rivals. But, thanks to the enterprise and discriminating foresight of three of our leading publishers, E. P. Dutton and Company, Charles Scribner's Sons, and Alfred A. Knopf, the writers here under discussion represent the best that Spain has to offer at present, not simply to us but to other countries in which translators are willing, and to her own native children just south of the Pyrenees.

To contend that Ibáñez, Benavente, and Sierra are the equals or the superiors or the inferiors of their immortal predecessors would be hopelessly idle: it would resemble the attempt to prove that greater heroism was displayed on the flagship of the Spanish Armada than fell to the honor of Admiral Sims's doughtiest capital ship in the recent contest with the Central Powers. Times have changed; and times make the man, particularly if that man be an Ibáñez, for the times make the press agents. Never in all his sixty-nine years did Cervantes have as many favorable remarks made about him as Johan Bojer alone made concerning Ibáñez in that unusual and initial number of the "Arena", published at Christiania in November of last year.

Bojer gave it as his opinion that Ibáñez is the most read novelist,

of any age, in the world at present; that no Spanish author after Cervantes has ever acquired anything like Ibáñez's popularity; that he is Spain's Zola and more; that he is the Don Quixote of the Republicans; that he learned more during the various periods of his imprisonment than many men learn in college; that he has and maintains one house in Madrid, another in Valencia, another in Paris, another in Cannes, another in New York, and an entire estate in Argentina, whereas if you wish to locate him you are likely to find him studying the oriental question in San Francisco or taking an automobile tour through Scotland; and that as a painter of a scene on the sea or an intense situation on land he is the world's master.

To refute this as excessive or to uphold it as the unvarnished truth is not my purpose. I cannot help wondering however what would have been the effect on Cervantes if someone had said this about him — in a language which he did not read — when he was but fifty years old. And what would have been the effect on Cervantes's "later works" had his publisher been able to follow the example of Dutton and consume so much of a page in listing the various editions that it is necessary to leap over a few numbers and inform the reader that this is the "180th Edition". Moreover, Cervantes lived in a powerful country. Modern Spain is small and weak: just a little larger than California in area and with a population of twenty million, only eight million of whom can read or write. How does Ibáñez hope to make his messages of blood and sand effective in the case of those of his fellow citizens who need them most?

But then Cervantes himself did not write, in Spanish, for a highly cul-

tured public. And Ibáñez in one of his less heralded though, it seems to me, more important works, "The Cabin", touches on this very theme, in the person of Don Joaquín, the schoolmaster. It grieved the good man to see that his boys did not take well to Castilian pronunciation; that they did not regard his schoolhouse as a "temple, a torch that shines and dissolves the barbaric darkness". And there is an abundance of admirable admonition in this novel to the Spanish people to go to work. It is one thing to lead men away from the actually brutal arena; it is quite another to lead them out into the potentially fertile fields where they may work, and to the schoolhouses where they may learn to spell. If Spain comes back and through, Blasco Ibáñez will have had a part in the redemptive reconstruction.

And so will Jacinto Benavente, seven of whose plays are now made accessible to English readers. His American publishers have obliged, or permitted, his translator, John Garrett Underhill, to supply each volume with an introduction. This plan cannot be commended too highly. There may be a few readers who do not care who the author is, what he stands for, or where he came from. This type of person — it is to be hoped that he is lonely — should have the fact brought to his attention, by force if necessary, that intelligent reading is the only kind that counts, and that no reading is intelligent which is not based on and which does not start from appreciative familiarity with the author in question.

Mr. Underhill makes the point, in his introduction, that Señor Benavente has been "the most stimulating and compelling figure" in the redemption of modern Spain. It is not hard

to believe this; for there is a wholesomeness about his plays that we in this country would look for in a Longfellow whom God had endowed with a sort of Mediterranean technique. There is that exquisite little thing in one act entitled "No Smoking". A blatant woman, bedizened with the cheapest of cheap jewelry, leaves the woman's compartment of a train to escape, she says, the cheap talk of its occupants. She betakes herself to a smoking compartment where there is a man. Still more talk, but this talk is agreeable. The train stops; the man gets off; he does not return to that compartment immediately; the kind mother and her type of daughter toss his luggage out the window onto the platform as the train departs. Then he returns.

Prejudice is always the child of ignorance. But a man may be kept ignorant and prejudiced by being made too well informed on certain subjects; on certain phases of a situation. There is the matter of Spain, her romantic landscapes and her many castles with their gardens. On these there is literally no end of books in the English language. The latest is Ernest Peixotto's "Through Spain and Portugal" (Scribner). It is a beautiful volume. To read it, or merely to look at its glorious illustrations, is enough to make any man abandon his work and go over there and see these sights while there is yet time. Mr. Peixotto actually speaks of "Edens" and "Paradises". It is the consumption of such works, admirable in themselves, that has led the average American into believing that no Spaniard would be capable of writing such a play as "No Smoking". It is too sensible.

The rest of Benavente's plays are equally unlike what we have heretofore been taught to expect from Spain.

There is artificiality to be sure in "Princess Bebé", but it is not etched or colored; it is shown up in all its grim reality. Princess Helena says (Act II):

It is idle to attempt to change ourselves when we continue in the same environment. The past, not the future, governs the world. Despised history tyrannizes over the lives of men as of nations. . . . Life is a forest many centuries old, and our souls are rooted in it like centenarian trees.

It is precisely this environment that Benavente has set out to change; it is this forest that he is rooting up. He is sowing in seed which, when grown, will furnish leisured travelers with less to write about but will change the "court" life of the Princess Bebé into the lives of the people that really "constitute a State", as Sir William Jones conceived a state even in the eighteenth century. But then he was not a Spaniard.

The same theme—the awakening of Spain—is treated in another of Benavente's plays, "The Bonds of Interest". The action takes place in an "imaginary country", at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the other three Spaniards were trying to put their country in the forefront of civilization. It discusses the good and the bad that is in any individual man, and therefore in any country.

The gist of the drama is contained in the remarks Crispin makes to Columbine (Act II):

We have all within ourselves a great and splendid gentleman of lofty hopes and towering ideals . . . and by his side a humble servant born to forlorn hopes and miserable things . . . . The art of living is so to separate the two that when we fall into any ignominy we can say: It was not I, it was my servant.

There is much of Don Quixote-Sancho Panza in this, but let us not condemn

Benavente for his reminiscences, conscious or unconscious. Let us rather felicitate him on his dramatic aptitude, and congratulate him on his inexpressed but handsomely symbolized unwillingness to set himself down as a hundred percent Spaniard. That he loves Spain is obvious in everything he writes; and he has already written nearly one hundred dramas. That he is aware of Spain's perfection no man can detect from the three volumes of plays Mr. Underhill has thus far translated, and Charles Scribner's Sons have thus far been good enough to publish.

All of this applies equally well to the two volumes of plays (Scribner) by Martínez Sierra, unless it be that Señor Sierra is a trifle more artistic and a trifle less caustic than his colleague. Though his "Poor John" has some of the two fisted humor of Benavente's "No Smoking", such a play as Sierra's "Cradle Song" takes us back to Lope de Vega's *autos*, except that Sierra, while not in the slightest degree radical or disrespectful, writes of convents and cows with his tongue in his cheek. One illustration must suffice, apart from the Doctor, who is a most lovable "heretic". Sister Marcella has been accused of sticking her tongue out at Sister Inez. Here is her defense: "I stuck it out because there was a fly on the end of my nose, and since I had my arms out making the sign of the cross, I had to frighten him away with something." So long as that kind of line can be read in this kind of play—a foundling has been placed on the doorstep of a convent, and the nuns take it in, bring it, or her, up, and give her a right royal wedding—Señor Ibáñez need not spend his entire life writing novels against what he feels are the corrupt practices of the Church in Spain.

Sixty years ago, George Ticknor wrote one of the greatest books with which American scholarship can be accredited, his "History of Spanish Literature", three volumes. In the second volume he devoted a special section to the question, "Why Cervantes wrote 'Don Quixote'". After brushing away the cobwebs of closet spun theories he said, what everyone has known since he said it, that Cervantes wrote his "Don Quixote" for no other purpose than to give the death blow to those volumes on romance and chivalry which had become so numerous and noxious that sanity, to say nothing of real spiritual progress, was no longer possible. The three Spaniards before us are pursuing a different plan: they are writing constructive fiction; they are battering down the follies of tradition in Spanish life, and building up such realities as their countrymen must cling to if the pride that has long been theirs shall be justified in fact. That their books are finding such a wide clientele beyond their native borders is proof that Spain is not alone in her quest for an enlightened civilization.

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#### *Notes From France*

WHEN a man is surrounded by a legend, coming too near him is dangerous; your illusions are likely to suffer a partial collapse. I had been brought up (socially and literarily speaking) on the belief that Comte Robert de Montesquiou, who died last year, was not only a man of refined taste and of many artistic initiatives (which he was), and a unique representative of the ending nineteenth century, a sort of French Oscar Wilde,