

THE LONDONER

The "Stanley Weyman" — Changed Taste in Novels — Aldous Huxley — The Libraries — Henry Seton Merriman — Middleton Murry and Keats — Worldly Success in Literature — Philip Lee Warner — John Lane — "The Constant Nymph" — First Editions.

LONDON, March 1, 1925.

I WAS referring a month or two back to the suggestion made by Mr. Pett Ridge (who, I am glad to see, is now recovering from a severe illness) that public houses in England should be named after authors of excellence. It seemed a reasonable notion, but not one which we had any chance of seeing in actual practice. But there is no end to the surprises which are to be found in daily life — "Truth is stranger, etc." . . . "More absorbing than any novel, etc." — and since that moment I have noticed a strange occurrence to which attention, so far as I know, has not yet been drawn in the English press. A Yorkshire fisherman was recently arrested and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment in, I think, Iceland, for fishing in prohibited waters. The name of his boat was the "Stanley Weyman". I do not suggest that there is any appropriateness in the name of the boat upon this occasion, but the literary inspiration is remarkable. Is there not scope in this department for the celebration of our writers? And, while I am upon the subject, would not the Pullman Company of America find in this field material for the naming of its coaches? The names in use are amazing enough, but they must eventually be either exhausted or superannuated. I wonder no enterprising publisher has entered into an arrangement with some such company —

either railroad or steamship — to put into action the further celebration of literary success.

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Stanley Weyman is now, I gather, somewhat out of fashion; but when I was young his books had a vogue of immense proportions. The best known of them was, I suppose, "A Gentleman of France"; though "Under the Red Robe" must have run it close in the minds of many. It may even have taken the lead since it has been dramatized. "A Gentleman of France" retains some life and popularity among those who do not so much follow the fashion in reading as read what they enjoy. It certainly has a character of its own. I must have read it half a dozen times at least, particularly in times of illness, when old favorites do not pall. And while I could not endorse the remark once made in my hearing to a young person who was divided between reading "The Three Musketeers" and "A Gentleman of France" — which advice was to read "The Three Musketeers" first, it was so disappointing after "A Gentleman of France" — I do feel a weakness for Stanley Weyman which I should be sorry to shed. I am glad that a boat is named after him. It is very fitting. Unfortunately — or fortunately, as the case may be — fashions have changed. They have a way of changing. The authors who at the

present moment are the height of fashion in England are E. M. Forster and Aldous Huxley. Mr. Forster has reached a wide public with "A Passage to India", and is the admired of all, though whether the admiration will last in face of the popularity I do not pretend to be able to foretell. He has a very subtle intellect, is a beautiful writer, and is able in the first part of "A Passage to India" to hold the attention and convince the imagination. There is something electrifying about the early chapters of the book. Later, I think, it is less satisfactory, less convincing, less interesting. The book as a whole leaves me with the doubt whether Mr. Forster is temperamentally a novelist at all. He falls back upon morbid hallucination when the need is for emotion. It is not a very good substitute, and Mr. Forster has used it before. I reserve my judgment, therefore, upon Mr. Forster as a novelist. For Mr. Forster as a writer and as an intellect I have the greatest admiration. If he wishes to write novels, he shall do so without protest from me. But I think I should prefer him as an historian or as a biographer. I do not like to see a novelist, when the call is for emotion, falling back upon morbid hallucination. But perhaps I am wrong in this as in so many things.

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The other writer who is at the present moment very fashionable in England is Aldous Huxley. Not only have his works a first edition value before and after they are published — so that extraordinary manoeuvres are resorted to by wicked dealers to possess themselves of illegitimate supplies — but when they are upon the market they are actually bought and not borrowed. American readers, who buy their

books, have no conception of the English readers' dependence upon the circulating libraries for all their books, and therefore they may miss the significance of this remark. I will repeat it, for the sake of emphasis. Huxley's books are bought. He is the only writer whose books may be seen all about Chelsea and Hampstead (the two most intellectual of London suburbs) in the hands of young women, and in the original dust covers, unsoiled. Nay, did I not with my own eyes see two separate young women in the West End of London carrying first editions of Huxley's new book, "Those Barren Leaves", on the very morning of publication! Always young women, mind you; not young men. It is the true indication of Huxley's modernity. I am very glad to see this, because Huxley has always appeared to me to be the brightest spot in our youngest writers. With every temptation to be precious, to be the idol of cliques, he is making his own progress. He lives away from the cliques, being in fact rather too large a proposition for cliques, and having rather too much humor for the coteries; and he is working. Instead of cultivating a reputation, he is earning one. If I am not mistaken, "Those Barren Leaves" is an advance upon all Huxley's other prose work. It is also interesting for something besides its positive merits. It shows that Huxley is developing. When that can be said of a man of thirty, who has quite a number of books behind him, the auspices are good.

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I have more than once in these letters referred to the English habit of borrowing books. When it is realized that Messrs. W. H. Smith and Sons have branches all over England, at which,

besides selling books, they lend them for a fixed subscription; and further that Boots, the chemists, run similar subscription libraries in connection with all their branches (or nearly all), it will be seen that the Times Book Club and Mudies, with London headquarters, cover but a portion of the field. In addition to these firms, there are smaller libraries, both in London and in the provinces; there are the little shops in every village which are occasionally "in connection with Mudies", but which more often subsist upon cast off copies purchased in quantity at the distributions by which the larger firms clear their shelves of surplus stock. There are the Free Public Libraries, from which as a rule one novel and one non-fiction volume may be borrowed at one time (that is, not more often than once a day), the village libraries, made up of books which the more wealthy residents wish to disperse; and there are the uncontrollable lenders of books. These people may have had books given them for Christmas or birthday presents, and they will lend and borrow from their friends to an endless extent. This last item, you will say, indicates that some books must have been bought by the lenders. Not a bit of it. They will actually lend borrowed books! It is most commonly done. I have myself been lent books borrowed from other people. Crowning grievance — an author will be asked by almost total strangers to lend them copies of his own books. The line taken is: "I'd like to read it . . . knowing you, and all that. Can't afford to buy books!" Well, I do not expect people in England to buy my own books. I do not wish them to do so. But there are books which *ought* to be bought, and this is a thing which English people will have to learn if they are to be anything but parasitic book

readers. It is ridiculous to think of households which possess nothing at all in the shape of a library. There are many such households still, although the cheap editions of Messrs. Nelson and Collins have done much to remedy the evil. For this reason I am glad to hear of a new scheme which is to be tried for the better circulation of books. For the sale and purchase of books, perhaps I should have said. This is nothing more nor less than a caravan. The caravan is to go about the country with stock selected from the catalogues of about forty different publishers. The enthusiasts who are driving the caravan are going to charter local village halls in order to give better demonstrations of the books, and by means of talks, exhibitions and other efforts, they hope to achieve some tangible result. With every good wish for the enterprise, I am not hopeful that it will be commercially successful. It sounds too amateurish for my liking. But this caravanning business is becoming all the style here. We have caravan theatres and concert parties — why not caravan booksellers? We shall see what the result is. At any rate, the books sold will be real books, and not those built up sets of rubbish which so many poor housewives are tempted into buying by traveling agents. I think the caravans should first of all tour East Anglia. In the whole of East Anglia — consisting of the counties of Essex, Suffolk, and Norfolk (I do not know how many hundreds of square miles) — there is only one bookseller's shop of any note at all. Attempts to establish other shops in such centres as Norwich have ended in disaster so wretched that booklovers in the eastern counties are in despair. If the caravan bookshop can alter this state of things, it will have done pioneer work.

A new volume of Conrad stories is just published here, and I expect in America also. A magazine is serializing a novel by Conrad, the title of which, following the one word habit which began with "Chance", is "Suspense". I do not know whether it is realized that this title has been used before, but in any case the former use which is familiar to me is that of a book not much known in this country. The late Hugh Stowell Scott ("Henry Seton Merriman") wrote several books before he adopted the later very familiar pseudonym. These were published anonymously, and "Suspense" was one of them. Others were "Prisoners and Captives", "Dross", "The Phantom Future", and "Young Mistley". In England, these five books are never reprinted, and I have read them all in American or Canadian editions. Speaking just now of Stanley Weyman reminded me of Henry Seton Merriman, because the two men were personal friends. I see that the sale of Merriman's novels continues, and I wonder that nobody has ever written any personal reminiscences of a writer who should not be despised. By "highbrow" standards, of course, he is nothing at all. It is the easiest thing in the world to make fun of his sententiousness and his effective and mechanical contrivances for maintaining melodramatic significance throughout a conventional story. Yet he did the thing with a great air, and for what he was — a popular novelist who carefully set his scenes in a foreign country and extracted from the briefest sojourns abroad material with which to support a mechanically romantic tale — he was miles ahead of our current practitioners. He could make more drama out of nothing than any other novelist I have met in the course of a long experience of novel reading. I wonder

whether he is known in America. I should have supposed his work ideal for film purposes.

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I hear that Middleton Murry has been appointed to a lectureship at Oxford. He is to deliver a series of lectures, and the subject originally set was Shakespeare. This, in view of Murry's present great preoccupation with Keats, is to be modified, so that the series will now be on Shakespeare and Keats. The mixture will shock some bigots, and yet I do not know why it should do so. We know, upon the authority of Sir Sidney Colvin, that Keats was "underbred" (as I fear so many of us are in the eyes of the hyper-refined), but there is no poet who has more of the Shakespearian loveliness than Keats. The mixture should be a good one. Keats will be very much to the fore in a short time, for in addition to the great work which we are all expecting from Amy Lowell there is to be a book by Murry devoted entirely to Keats. With this book and the lectures, which no doubt will presently be published, Murry will have said his say about Keats, and then all the literary journalists will say their say about Murry and Keats and the canons of criticism; and we shall then know pretty well all there is to know about Keats. One point that strikes me about Keats is the number of people I have heard of who believe themselves to be reincarnations of Keats. Three distinguished writers of the present day are known by me to have had this delusion. Two of them are novelists. Not one of the three would ever strike an outsider as showing signs of reincarnation. But there must be something in a personality which has survived two books by Sir Sidney Colvin and such diversity of interpre-

tation as is indicated by the delusion I have mentioned.

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When I said that I did not wish people to buy my books I was laying myself open to a charge of insincerity. In the sense that I am a professional writer I do desire that my books should be bought. It is commonly said in England, as I mentioned last month in connection with Edmund Gosse (who has now joined the glorious brigade of literary knights, so that he is once more on terms with his old idol, Sir Hall Caine), that novelists are a prostituted class with no aim but that of money getting. I should be sorry if that were true, and I prefer to think that it is untrue. Certainly, I do not hear novelists talk so much about money as do their critics. And I think it is due to the novelists to say this, that very few novelists of the present day are rich as the result of income made directly from their novels. Rich, that is, as compared with business men. But the popular reputation of a novelist is of considerable use to him in the earning market when he is required to do something other than novel writing. I imagine that when Mr. Bennett and Mr. Wells write for the press they can practically name their own terms, because the proprietors of the periodicals which require contributions from such men know that no other men can do what is wanted. Mr. Bennett and Mr. Wells have always been journalists. They were journalists before they became novelists. It is natural to them to express their views interestingly upon a great variety of subjects. Take for example Mr. Wells's latest book, "A Year of Prophesying". It has been objected by critics that this book is journalism. Of course it is. It says it is. It is set out as journalism. But

if it had not been collected into book form I should never have seen it. We do not all read the same newspaper, and it is easy to miss the most charming article or short story if it is not made generally available for those who follow the work of a distinguished writer. And so I am very glad to possess a copy of "A Year of Prophesying". More, I think it should be salutary to those who bring against the book the charge that it is journalism. Who are the people who call Mr. Wells a journalist? Are they not also journalists? The point that should really be made about this book is not merely that it is journalism, but that it is such astonishingly good journalism. If any reason were needed for Mr. Wells's enormous popularity — and I suppose there is no doubt that his work is familiar to more people than the work of any other living English writer — it is to be found here. He is, as a supercilious friend of mine once said grudgingly about Arnold Bennett, "so damned interesting". The good journalist is the man who can be "so damned interesting" about a variety of subjects. By this standard Mr. Wells is proudly a journalist. I wish I were one.

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The late Philip Lee Warner had been working so hard, and in such an almost chronic state of ill health (rather than actual illness) for so many years, that his death has taken nobody by surprise. Yet those of us who knew him well were not the less shocked upon that account. The "Times" obituary notice, although it said much that Lee Warner's friends would recognize as essentially true, made one or two slight slips, as when it said that Lee Warner was with the firm of Putnam's after his sojourn with the firm of Dent, and that the Riccardi font of type preceded the

Florence. In each case, the reverse is the fact. Lee Warner was for a time in the Bank of England. He then went into the firm of T. Fisher Unwin, the London publisher, then to Putnam's, then to Dent, proceeded to a partnership at Chatto and Windus, left at the end of the term agreed, and established the Medici Society as a separate business. The Florence type was designed at his instigation during the Chatto period, and the Riccardi type belongs to the Medici Society period. Contrary to the opinion expressed by the "Times" writer, it is extremely doubtful whether Lee Warner's taste was of the finest. He worked at such pressure that it was impossible for him personally to supervise every detail of the work which he so energetically promoted. The band of his lieutenants, indeed, was so variously recruited, and included so many men of personality only less strong than Lee Warner's own, that the organizer was in a state of perpetual battle. Half of Lee Warner's life was wasted in battle. He was as immense a battler as he was a letter writer. His letters were of extraordinary length. He was a born writer, who found his way into business and there, at top speed, with feverish energy, inaugurated vast schemes and spent enormous sums of money with romantic lavishness. I am under the impression that one of Lee Warner's novels was published some years ago by Macmillan's (the author's name being disguised, of course); but I may be wrong about this. It was a book concerning Saxon times. But he had also written, when I first knew him, some remarkable chapters of a novel about a gambler. The book of which these chapters formed a part was probably never finished, but my recollection is that it was of unusual subtlety. Lee Warner,

himself, I should say, was subtle. He was probably too subtle to be a business man, for his subtlety made him appear capricious. Yet a more lovable man I have never met in the whole of my days. He was very highstrung — his eyes twitched almost incessantly — was a great smoker, a man given to sudden impulses. For these reasons, the mind in memory recalls him as always in action, sweeping from one room to another like a great grey dragon fly, pouncing, blinking, talking quickly through his nose, while his body curved away from his companion as he prepared for fresh and even swifter flight. It was a good head when it allowed itself to be seen, and the brains inside it were good, too, when Lee Warner would allow himself to use them. But whatever the brains, I think Lee Warner probably estranged more friends than the average man ever acquires. Most people (except myself) appear to have quarreled with him at one time or another, fearing that he was in some way overreaching them, that he was going to ruin them, or something of the kind; but I have never met a man who spoke ill of him. Some of his printing efforts, with third rate illustrations excellently reproduced, I regard as lamentable; as I think were some of his choices of pictures to be reproduced by the Medici process. This is why I questioned above the excellence of his taste. His taste seemed to me in fact very fallible. I liked him the better for that, because his faultiness was a part of his charm. That he *was* charming I believe there is not one who knew him who would deny. That he seriously advanced the cause of fine printing I should doubt. Nevertheless, there are many who very greatly admire the Medici prints, and for the introduction of these he will always be entitled to great praise. My own admiration and

affection for him are based upon quite other deeds than his printing and his pictures, and I always found him a loyal and generous friend.

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The death of John Lane, also, should not go unmentioned here. Lane was nearly seventy one, and for some time he had not been in good health; but he did not look more than sixty. I saw him within a month of his death, after his return from the United States. He was one of the few publishers who had stamped a personality upon a business. No list was at one time more "characteristic" than Lane's. In their own way, Lane's business and Heinemann's were alike; because in each case the publisher was following his own bent and making a success of it. Taste and judgment were strong enough to carry a business through all trials. Of course, in the last ten or fifteen years Lane's business had lost something of its personal interest. It had expanded, and a very large production can never retain the same air of distinction as a small list to which the publisher can give all his individual attention. But Lane retained an extraordinary degree of interest in his firm's books and enthusiasm for them. He was a real publisher, who cared greatly for certain types of books. As a personality I can only say that whenever I met him he seemed quiet, conversational, and well informed. A strong impression he did not make on me; but that was probably due to his natural modesty.

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The newest author to be discussed everywhere is Margaret Kennedy. Young, and living as a rule down in Cornwall, far from the world of letters and tea parties, Miss Kennedy has

scored a remarkable success with "The Constant Nymph". I consider this novel one of the best novels I have read for some time in English, and one of the most promising. It is promising because it suggests such possibilities, and not because it has any air of immaturity. Judged by itself it is an astonishing performance. Perhaps the early part is the best, perhaps the one conventional woman in the book is unsympathetically treated and so made shadowy, perhaps the ending is somehow scrambled, perhaps the almost incandescent quality of the book burns so white that in memory one will make less of it than one does at the moment of reading. These things may be; yet, equally, they may not be. In any case, everybody who cares about good novels should read "The Constant Nymph". For the younger generation here it is a pity that the principal enthusiasts for the book in print have been septuagenarians who do not know a novel from a horse trough; but I can assure my readers that younger men have much admired Miss Kennedy's great talent, and that among themselves they have cordially expressed such admiration.

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I was talking recently to a man who buys first editions. He told me some curious things. According to my friend, there is a considerable and increasing demand for first editions of Michael Arlen and Robert Keable. Stevenson, Conrad, and other late enthusiasms are already on the wane. The two dead authors who are tremendously in the ascendant — so that a modest buyer is alarmed, although he is told that even at present prices their books are worth "buying for a rise" — are Trollope and Gissing.

SIMON PURE

AMY LOWELL ANALYZES CREATIVE GENIUS

By John Farrar

THE aspects from which Amy Lowell's *Life of John Keats* may be called great are so many that it is difficult to select one and call it more important than another. As a study of a sensitive, unusual, brilliant, and finally sick boy, it excels in tenderness and penetrating power. As a description of the poetic temperament in general, and of the progress of Keats's genius in particular, it seems to me unique among critical studies. As a work of scholarly biography it presents an array of new material, marshaled with the zest usually employed by explorers to unknown lands or detectives at work on baffling mystery cases. Nor has Miss Lowell allowed any one phase of the book to run away with her sense of proportion. She weaves them, makes them whole through real love of her subject and a magnificent prose style which is always readable and shiniingly clear, bursting every now and then into passages of lyric or dramatic intensity and beauty.

The book is long, some twelve hundred odd pages, and it is closely written. It offers no easy meadows for casual wandering. It is not a story by Maurois, Strachey, Werner, Dibble, or the like. It is an important biography written by a woman who knew that Sir Sidney Colvin and others had already covered the same field and covered it well. Her first excuse for undertaking it was her own collection of Keats manuscripts and first editions, which contained much new material. I think, though, that she needed no such excuse.

Her understanding and admiration for the man whom she considered the most modern of his poetical age was enough, and it is this admiration which gives the book its authentic note of genius. To recreate the life of a man in all its happy, tragic, wearisome yet fascinating detail, is what Miss Lowell set out to do. And she has made his friends and his time real to us. The writing of a phrase, the construction of a great stanza, these are as dramatic to her — and to us as we read them — as the two gun duel of a western thriller. This is the story of a poet by a poet, the analysis of a lover by a woman who would have understood him, who would have chid him for his weaknesses and deplored his selfishness and sentimentality, but who would have been awed by the genius of his phrases and the sweetness of his character at its best.

In her first volume Miss Lowell has been happiest; for here she has her hero in his moments of robust development, before trouble and disease had exaggerated tendencies toward melancholy. How well she uses the methods often before employed in her work, in "Can Grande's Castle" and elsewhere, of creating a period around her central figure by the recital of synchronous events! She does not hesitate to reconstruct by the aid of her vivid imagination what a journey to London must have been like to the young medical student. "Did he walk"; she writes, "and leave his precious port-manteau to be sent on by wagon, or did he ride up to town on the top of the