

THE LONDONER

Plays and Dramatic Critics—"Sanditon"—"The Adelphi" and Some Other New Monthly Reviews—Cliché, with Contributions by a Nurseryman—An Advertisement of W. B. Yeats.

LONDON, April 1, 1925.

THE latest London scare, as I write, concerns the production by a private society of W. J. Turner's play, "Smaragda's Lover". A universally irate press has decided that the play is a wicked affair, and that these societies which exist for the production of wicked plays should be forcibly exterminated. Where, the press has asked, is the censor? And so on. The fuss will all die down again in a few days, and no more will be heard of it for months more. Then there will be the same fuss about some other play, and we shall have the same angry comments from those who produce the plays, and again there will be placid calm. But the press has had a very severe time over the theatre this year. It has decided by a majority (the majority is as far as I can see a unanimity) that five of the plays shown in the first two months of the year are the worst that have ever appeared. These five plays are—first, one that was produced at the St. James's Theatre (I forget the name of it) by an unknown author from the Stock Exchange, in which play a woman undressed behind a screen upon the stage. This incident provoked controversy with the Lord Chamberlain because that gentleman was very anxious that the screen should be guaranteed solid and not likely to blow over at an inconvenient moment. You can see what kind of play that was. It ran for a few days only. The second

was "Camilla States Her Case", by George Egerton, a naive play for feminists who believe that women have a very rough time in a man ridden universe. The third was a really terrible affair, produced by "A. Keeper, Ltd.", called "The Monkey House". The fourth was Arnold Bennett's "The Bright Island". And Mr. Turner holds fifth place.

Now it is no part of my work to draw attention to the weaknesses of critics; but it should be apparent to all that men like Mr. Bennett and Mr. Turner do not write works of the inept incompetence of "The Monkey House". They may write plays which for them are less than good (I do not say that they did so in the cases of "The Bright Island" and "Smaragda's Lover", neither of which did I see); but whatever such men write is quite clearly upon a different plane from the wretched "un-idea-ed" stuff (as Dr. Johnson might have called it) contained in the three other plays. I do not wish to be snobbish, but merely to state a fact. We know that a play by Mr. Bennett will contain amusing lines, we know that it will result from his own very characteristic view of mankind, and we know that it will sin, if it sins, from deliberate choice upon the part of the author. Even those who dislike Mr. Bennett's work will admit that the author is not a fool. The same applies to Mr. Turner, although Mr. Turner is younger than Mr. Bennett and for that reason may

be expected to be less sage and more unconsciously experimental. But did the dramatic critics make it clear to their readers that there was any difference in the five plays they condemned so wholeheartedly? They did not. They left their readers to infer that all were of a piece, and unspeakably bad at that. The same critics, immediately afterward going to a musical comedy the libretto of which escaped by a hairbreadth the customary banality of musical comedies, proclaimed that this musical comedy was the gem of the season. They enthusiastically commended it to the same readers who had been told how bad the five plays were.

I need not draw a moral. This kind of criticism is rampant in all the arts. Mediocre, conventional works are given easy praise; and works of greater ambitiousness are scrutinized almost destructively. They never receive such high praise as the conventional works. It is difficult to praise highly where the judgment has been severely tested. The temptation to qualify, to play for safety, to weigh the word of praise, is very great. For immaturity, imbecility, and incompetence, the critic has toleration. His line is that the book or play or picture which he himself despises as insane is just the kind of thing that many people will like. To condemn it will be to mark himself a high-brow. To praise it — ah, well, it would be cruel to destroy such work; and nobody will tax him with his indulgence, because all other critics and readers (apart from the very young and iconoclastic) have similar weakness for the puerile. And since the young and iconoclastic despise all that has not been written by their friends, he need not trouble about their judgment of his own work. Accordingly the critic slops about in the slough

of his own vague standards, and thus all that he does is vitiated by timidity, uncertainty, kindness, the sense that established authors will not suffer by his dispraise; and the criticism of books and plays remains as unsatisfactory as ever. On the one hand there is a tendency to give easy praise to work that is third rate. On the other hand there is fear of being the first to dash out with the discovery — which may be laughed at — of something first rate. I do not know whether, for the sake of my argument, I may be allowed a third hand, but if so I should say that on the third hand there is the inability to discriminate between what is incompetent and what is original. To me, as I have so often said here, the only quality that matters in any work of art is its originality. I care nothing for form or for any of the rules of the non-creative, so long as the work seems to my judgment to be that of a person who thinks and feels entirely for himself. But for most professional critics originality is nothing at all. They constantly praise unoriginal work because it is neat, or because it conforms to their own notions of what is praiseworthy. Or rather, not their own notions so much as the notions in vogue among their friends. As a result, much good work is praised or dispraised in precisely the terms ordinarily applied to mediocre work or even inept work in the same field.

Take the case of "The Constant Nymph". In my opinion this novel is the most distinguished novel written by a woman for many years. It seems to me to indicate the arising of a new talent. Shortcomings it may have, but it is original and it is imaginative. But was the press reception of this book uproarious? It was not. Praise the book had, indeed, but stereotyped praise. There was nothing in the

praise given by the press to indicate that Miss Kennedy was outside the run of conventional talents. She had not had a clique behind her, and took her chance with the "also ran" novelists who are responsible for "the stream of trashy novels constantly poured forth by the press". Except that "The Constant Nymph" was celebrated by one or two octogenarians who have no skill as novel reviewers, it might have been a new novel by any one of two or three hundred mediocre writers.

I think there really is something wrong about this. It is well known that talk and talk only makes reputation and circulation for novels, and this talk has been accorded "The Constant Nymph" and its author; but it should not be so. The press critics fail in their duty to humankind. It is their business to create such esteem for their judgment that readers will look to them for advice. They neglect their business. Criticism in the press is really negligible, largely, I think, because it is so usually perfunctory. But it is also negligible because it is incompetent. Critics should have at least the wit to indicate whether they are judging work by the standards of first, second, or fifteenth class literature. They cannot do this because they have no standards. They go to the theatre or they pick up a book, full of prejudice against or in favor of the author they are to criticize, and they are bored before they begin to assess values. They do not yield themselves to the work they are examining, but stand frowning or smiling upon it because of some quite extraneous reason. If they can get through it without mental effort they praise it; if they can do nothing of this kind they bring out their soiled and overworked adjectives and sprinkle them like pepper upon pieces of *précis*-writing which schoolboys would reject

in disgust, as unlikely to pass their form masters.

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A couple of months ago I said in these pages that the most popular literary discovery anybody could make nowadays would probably be a new novel by Jane Austen. As if in answer to my wish, there has been published here, and I suppose in America also, the fragment of what is practically a new novel by Jane Austen. When Miss Austen's nephew, J. E. Austen Leigh, gave to the world "Lady Susan" and the unfinished story of "The Watsons", he said of the present fragment that it could not "be presented to the public", and he merely gave a sketch of its contents, with tantalizing extracts from the work itself. Present day interest in Jane Austen has brought about a change in the attitude of those in possession of her manuscripts. A little while ago we had some juvenilia, collected under the title of "Love and Freindship" (it is strange to notice from the new fragment, which is printed exactly as it was written, that Miss Austen always spelled wrongly any words containing the letters "ie" in juxtaposition); and now we have "Sanditon". I should like to say at once that to me this fragment is not in the smallest degree a disappointment. The old touch is to be perceived in every line. If anything, Miss Austen would seem to be more caustic than before. She sketches quite a number of people, and as far as the book takes us into their characters she makes fun of most of these. The hero, unfortunately (for I take it that he is the hero), makes no more than a passing appearance at the end of the fragment; but we have a glimpse of his character from the comments of his relatives. He is a fun-maker of the kind near Miss Austen's heart. The heroine is perceptive and

realistic. She has not, in the chapters written, much more character than that. But she promises well. She promises so well that I believe we might have had a good comedy from her relations with the humorous and humbug ridiculing hero. Of course it is difficult to tell when so little is available, but the book promises so delightfully that I found myself gnashing my teeth when I came to the end of the text. The editors give some invaluable notes of variant readings which the Austen lover will be able to study with much profit. Here are grouped the phrases which she struck out while she wrote, or afterward. They should give real insight into the working of her mind. I have not yet been able to examine them in detail, or to read the story more than once, and I assume that no unfinished tale can ever be so warm a favorite as one that is all before us. Nevertheless, there is matter here which is of great and mature excellence. It is particularly interesting as showing how Miss Austen as she grew older was becoming more reflective. I think the book does take us further along that line than "Persuasion", which, though I love "Pride and Prejudice" better than any other of her books, I consider the most beautiful of them all. There is no beauty (other than incidental beauty) in the fragment of "Sanditon", but there might well have been much of it as the story opened before our eyes. There is not the radiance of Miss Austen's early work, and there is even an additional pungency to the satire; yet there is a delicacy and sureness unsurpassed in any other of her works. This is an impression after one reading. Already "Sanditon" is more attractive than either "Lady Susan" or "The Watsons". There are some Austenites who feel great dislike of "Lady Susan" — even contempt for it. I am not of

their number, but the prospects before the modern reader of "The Watsons" are certainly less enticing to the imagination than are the prospects before the same reader of "Sanditon". I find myself already a "Sanditonian", and I believe that no reader who can bear to read a fragment at all should or indeed can afford to miss this latest Austen treasure.

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It will be remembered that "The Adelphi" started under very favorable auspices in the Summer of 1923. It had good will behind it and about it, and the reception given to the early numbers showed clearly how cordial a public there is in England for a periodical which shall rise above the level of the ordinary English magazine. An enormous circulation "The Adelphi" never had, of course, but it was for its class of paper a respectable and encouraging circulation. Now, after about twenty months of life, "The Adelphi" is appealing for subscribers. Middleton Murry, the editor, explains that unless there is a solid body of people who will undertake to support him by definite subscriptions the magazine will have to cease publication. The reasons for this change of situation on the part of "The Adelphi" are several, chief among them being possibly that Mr. Murry has quite honestly and intelligibly departed from the position he adopted when the paper was started. That is, "The Adelphi", which began as a sort of intellectual commonwealth, has become an autocracy. It has latterly been more and more a vehicle for Mr. Murry's own views, and less of a vehicle for the talents of Mr. Murry's first coadjutors. Even so, I do not think that there would be any question about "The Adelphi's" continuance if Mr. Murry

were really bent upon using the journal effectively as a vehicle; but as to this there may be other opinions. "The Adelphi" is to die unless its circulation is definitely guaranteed. Meanwhile, a new monthly upon somewhat similar lines to the original "Adelphi" has just been started under the title of "The Calendar of Modern Letters". This periodical, of which the first number has just reached me, is edited by a young poet and critic named Edgell Rickword, whose work has appeared in "The London Mercury"; and it contains contributions by D. H. Lawrence, who seems essential to any contemporary non-commercial venture, Siegfried Sassoon, A. E. Coppard, Robert Graves, the editor, and others. At first glimpse, "The Calendar" is not overwhelmingly novel, but it has interesting items, and should be a good investment if it keeps its word as to the character of its contributions. It is very desirable indeed that there should be a monthly journal in which the work of young talents can appear. We have, indeed, "The London Mercury", but that monthly is not run especially for the young. Hence, no doubt, the occasion of the new monthly. I hope "The Calendar" will discover some noteworthy new writers. I am sorry to see in its pages the names of so many older men, or of men whose talent is fixed, although I can appreciate the reasons for their presence. What chiefly I regret is that the first number does not contain any "creative" work by a young and unestablished writer. We want this "creative" work more than any criticism. Probably Mr. Rickword will presently attract to his venture some fresh stars. If he can do this he will have performed a great service to his generation. It is the regrettable feature of so much young talent that it runs to criticism of others

— sometimes to very adverse criticism — without, so to speak, showing its own hand. "The Calendar" will doubtless — indeed, it must — shortly show its hand. I can therefore do no more at present than salute the confidence which has led to its establishment. I could wish that the format were more distinguished. The type used is not more than commonplace, and its arrangement is uninspired. The best thing about the format of the first number is the cover, which is printed in a good blue. While I am on the subject of "The Calendar" I may perhaps mention that another monthly will presently be published along lines not altogether dissimilar. I hope the two ventures will not clash. It would be a pity. I expect the other venture, a title for which has not yet been found, will run upon rather broader lines than "The Calendar". It will make its first appearance in September. I shall give fuller particulars at a later date.

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I mentioned a page or so earlier that the critic's vocabulary was a little restricted. It may be retorted upon me that unless large numbers of new words are constantly added to the English language, some such repetition of well used adjectives is forced upon any rapid writer. It is certainly hard to avoid cliché, and if once one begins to look for cliché in one's own work one will soon feel despair at the stereotyped phrases to be found in every sentence. I suppose that I use as many clichés as anybody, but if I do so it is done unconsciously. The same may be said of most writers. The other day I heard three very experienced writers accusing each other sternly of the bad habit and at the same time denying the charges brought against themselves. I could not defend myself in this way, because

it is impossible to judge the quality of one's own writing. Some words have a way of getting overworked, and these words I should naturally avoid if they came into my head; but I remember making fun of a friend of mine who twice in one book used the phrase "understanded of the people". My friend asked why I objected to it. I said, "Because it's such beastly cliché." Whereupon he said, with great simplicity: "Is it? I only know of it in the Prayer Book." This shows how one man's cliché is another man's golden ore. The word "drastic" is one word that I should avoid. It seems to me detestable. Writers of football reports in England often use the word "convincing" in a horrible way. They say, "Bonsham gave a convincing display", or refer to "Twonjett's convincing form", and so on. Reviewers are fond of the word "stark". One sees "flesh and blood", "cover to cover", "admirable", "charming", and so on. I believe we all use the more common commendatory adjectives. In themselves they are not clichés, but they become so when they are used with any strain. This is perhaps the real sign of a cliché, that it is used slightly out of its meaning, or with exaggerated emphasis, or as an evasion. We all laugh at the clichés of the house agent — his "commodious", etc., but we hardly recognize that he is faced with the need of expressing himself through a convention. The house agent's "charming Old World cottage", "commodious mansion", "dwelling house, situate", etc., etc., are all perfectly intelligible to any person who has ever hunted a house. Business men resemble the house agent. They and he are all driven into cliché because they dare not use the common word, or dare not repeat the same word twice in a sentence. They are hampered by their

respect for the English language. There is no gusto in their style. Their vocabulary is limited: it is banal but its phrases are less clichés than conventions. Conventionality could not be brought as a charge against nurserymen. I need not refer to the Dutch bulb grower, who gets some of his effects by way of Babu English. I am thinking rather of our own, home grown nurserymen. I have now before me a catalogue, illustrated with highly colored pictures of all sorts of magnificent flowers — in gardeners' language, "showy plants" — and I am struck with admiration, not of the highly colored pictures, but of the highly colored language in which the plants are commended by the nurseryman himself. Here is an example:

Next to the Rose, there is nothing that can equal the Pæony for regal splendour. It is a luxurious flower, putting one in mind of quantities of velvety rose petals brought together to form a single majestic bloom. Folk who grow a few old-fashioned Pæonies — huge bushes occupying several square yards of ground, which seldom produce more than two or three second or third-rate flowers — have simply no idea what our Pæonies, which have been selected from the finest varieties in the world, are like. The delicious fragrance of these Pæonies, together with their splendid form and colour, make them absolutely irresistible.

I quote it to show the freedom of the author's style. I proceed:

SEDUM, "STONECROP". When God made the deserts, He made the Stonecrops. They haven't got a hump like a camel, but they are protected by Nature with the means of sustaining life on short rations of water, even during long periods of drought. They are therefore well adapted for the dry places "where nothing will grow". Have you an ugly wall, or a wall which is simply bare without being ugly, a dry bank or a ledge on the rockery which you regard as a death-trap for all plant life? Then try the Stonecrops. They will thrive and thank you.

Here the gardener has touched a deeper note, indeed. He is subtle. He ap-

peals to the ordinary man whose garden is like a brick yard. But it is when he comes to some new varieties of delphinium, which he calls "Hollyhock Larkspurs", that he rises to eloquence. If the first of the following extracts does not seem to you a piece of generous appreciation which might with profit to us all be studied by reviewers and dramatic critics, what about the second? The first is:

SEALANDIA. If flowers can be judged by the same standards as feminine beauty, it is to this exquisite representative of the Larkspur family that the prize should go. Words could never be found to faithfully portray its delicate loveliness or perfect grace of form. The broad spikes tapering towards the top are sheathed with parma violet flowers, tinted sky blue. In the centre of each petal is a small dark eye. A valuable late-flowering variety.

The second reads as follows:

WINSOME. Award of Merit, R. H. S. In an effort to describe the indescribably fine colour of this variety, the gardening press has printed the following: "A perfectly single flower of Reckitt's blue colour, relieved by small spots of heliotrope towards the tips of the petals. The spike is tall and shapely." As a matter of fact that is but the uninspired version of a tired reporter who has struggled through a stifling tent in an endeavour to describe a host of flowers seen in an artificial setting. In the garden the plant presents a different aspect. The flowers are of a vivid "live" colour which challenges comparison with anything in heaven or earth. It is a changeful colour; warm and pulsating in the full light of day; misty and dreamy in the pale of evening. Winsome is both its name and its character.

If only our literary commendations were written in so free and so *convincing* a style, there would be no need for publishers' advertisements. Once again, reviews would really sell books, as they are supposed to have done in older days. What the nurseryman

could do in the way of invective if he should wish to express an adverse view of anything — flower, book, or play — can be imagined. Style such as his would freshen up our critical journals. Written with such freehanded use of language, they would all be readable for entertainment.

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It will be generally admitted that W. B. Yeats is one of the best known of our living immortals. He is the winner of the Nobel Prize. His plays have been performed all over the world. His volume of collected poems is in its thirteenth impression. A short time ago I had my attention drawn to the advertisement by means of which his English publisher sought to press upon the English public the aforesaid volume of Mr. Yeats's collected poems. The advertisement read as follows:

W. B. YEATS—POEMS (*Thirteenth Impression*) With a Photogravure frontispiece. 10/6 net. "Mr. Yeats is the only one among the younger Irish poets who has the whole poetical temperament. . . . It is this poetical quality of mind that seems to me to distinguish Mr. Yeats from the many men of talent, and to place him among the few men of genius."—Mr. Arthur Symond (*sic*), in "The Saturday Review".

A little out of date, one would think; although of course bearing witness to Mr. Symonds's admitted excellence as a critic. I suppose the words to have been written between twenty five and thirty five years ago. And you see with what lordly disdain the publisher ignores the Nobel Prize. It is not without reason that the English are regarded as a conservative race.

SIMON PURE



From "The Panjandrum Picture Book" by Randolph Caldecott (Frederick Warne)

THE REVIEWING OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

By Anne Carroll Moore

*The children come, the children go,
Today grows quickly yesterday;
And we, who quiz quaint fashions so,
We soon shall seem as quaint as they.*

—From *Old Fashioned Tales*
Selected by E. V. Lucas

THE formation of a special literature for children has been going on ever since the appearance of "Goody Two Shoes" in London in 1765 and in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1787. But the recognition of this special literature as a subject worthy of sustained attention the year round — worthy of such continuity of presentation from year to year as would keep its challenge fresh and vigorous — has been long delayed, far too long delayed, for the encouragement of original work of definite quality.

Children's books fall very readily into two main classes: *creative*, belonging to the very essence of literature,

timeless and ageless in its appeal, and *informative*, belonging to the social period for which the books are written.

To miss the joy of reading and re-reading outstanding books of the first class in childhood means irreparable loss, for no grown up ever brings to his first reading. To miss books of the second class is a matter of minor importance, since their essential content is as bound to reappear at regular intervals as are the hardy annuals and perennials of a well tended New England garden.

Now that we are assured that all departments of knowledge are going to be preserved in outlines of generous proportions for the benefit of the fathers and mothers, the uncles and aunts, the teachers and lecturers who have been accustomed to buy children's