

LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

THE HIDDEN HAND OF SIDNEY WEBB

Not long ago Mr. J. L. Garvin, editor of the London *Observer*, who usually devotes his weekly articles to sage and serious consideration of the extraordinary muddle known as European politics, turned to a more frivolous (though no less muddled) subject, and hilariously discussed the Baconian origin of Shakespeare's plays. Poor Shakespeare, of course, was quite out of it long ago, but nowadays M. Abel Lefranc, a French professor, and Mr. Thomas Looney (proper people resist even the most tempting puns!) are both coming forward with brand-new candidates and it begins to look as though Bacon were out of it too.

If Shakespeare did n't write the plays, and if Bacon did n't either, and if Professor Lefranc and Mr. Looney can't agree, what shall an anxious world conclude? Obviously, that no one wrote the plays and that they don't exist.

Mr. Garvin threw out one fruitful suggestion. If, he suggested, the old English dramatists were not above hiring other people to write their plays for them, why should we conclude that the modern ones are either — Mr. Bernard Shaw, for example? Can we be quite sure that his plays are not the handiwork of Mr. Sidney Webb?

Upon this fascinating notion fell Mr. St. John Ervine, the author of *John Ferguson*, with a whoop of pure joy. This ingenious dramatist has elaborated a theory to prove that Mr. Webb has been a good deal busier than hitherto supposed. Not only has the industrious economist written ponderous volumes on trade unionism, rent, capitalism, poor laws, socialist constitutions, and other such light and airy

persiflage, but he has had time (doubtless while resting from his labors) to dash off the entire works of Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, and Granville Barker — not to mention Mr. Ervine himself, who ingenuously proceeds to 'prove' that one of his own plays is also from the flying Webbian pen.

'The evidence in support of the theory that Mr. Webb wrote the plays of Mr. Shaw, Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. Granville Barker, and myself is far stronger than the evidence that Bacon wrote the plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Greene, Nashe, and the rest of the Elizabethans.' There can never be so much disputation about Mr. Webb's authorship of the contemporary drama as there is about Bacon's authorship of the Elizabethan. Who else could have written them? He is a very industrious and learned man, adept with his pen, and well known to all the authors named. I am inclined to think that he probably wrote the whole of Mr. H. G. Wells's novels as well as Mr. Shaw's plays. If Bacon could dash off the *Faërie Queene* and fob it off on Spenser, who among us will deny that Mr. Webb could dash off *The New Machiavelli* between the sittings of the Poor Law Commission? There is surely some significance in the fact that "Wells" and "Webb" both begin with a W and that the word "Shaw" contains exactly the same number of letters as the word "Webb."

'Observe the character of the contemporary drama. It is nearly always sociological. Why should all the dramatists of England suddenly have begun to write about social reform? The first of the plays attributed to Mr.

Shaw is *Widowers' Houses*. This play is written round the housing problem and the question of slum property, and is full of references to the Local Government Board and to the sanitary authorities and to vestries and health committees. It is true that Mr. Shaw was at one time a member of a London vestry, but it is also true that Shakespeare was a member of a theatrical company and had tinkered with plays in the course of his professional duties.

'Consider the subjects of the Galsworthy drama! Industrial disputes, the legal system, prison reform! . . . Surely the fact that *Strife* was written by the author of *Industrial Democracy* and *The History of Trade Unionism* shrieks to heaven! Who but the author of *English Prisons under Local Government* could have written *The Silver Box* and *Justice*? The evidence here is at once complicated and made clearer by the fact that "Bernard Shaw," the mysterious vestryman from Marylebone, wrote a preface to *English Prisons under Local Government*. This seems the supreme bluff of bluffs! Sidney Webb writes a book on prison reform in his own name. He then writes a preface under the name of "Bernard Shaw" to his own book, in the course of which he refers, in a footnote, to his play, *Justice*, written under the name of "John Galsworthy." The intention here clearly is to put the student off the scent.

'His share in the works of Mr. Granville Barker is plainly revealed in the play called *Waste*, where there is considerable discussion of the problem of education. One act of the play actually shows a Cabinet meeting in consultation over the details of an Education Bill. We have two grounds for believing that Mr. Webb wrote this play. The first is that Mr. Webb was for many years associated with the administration of the Education Acts and is

the author of a book called *London Education*. He has had official relationship with the old School Board, with the London School of Economics, and with London University. Legend has it that he was the author of one of the Education Acts. The second ground for believing that he wrote *Waste* is that a common rumor at the time the play was first performed by the Stage Society was that Mr. Webb had been consulted by Mr. Granville Barker about the details of the Education Bill which is discussed in the play.

'I will not attempt to deny that, after a few conversations with me on the subject of religious and industrial strife in the North of Ireland, he sat down and wrote the play called *Mixed Marriage*, which I have shamefully claimed as my own. How could I possibly be the author of that play? I have never seen a riot in my life. I know very little about trade unions or industrial disputes. Is it likely that a person of my limited experience and knowledge could have written a play on such a theme? I still claim the authorship of *Mixed Marriage* because I derive an income from it.'

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OUT ON BAIL

THE *Westminster Gazette* has recently added an interesting feature to its columns. This consists of thumb-nail studies, little bits of fiction, remarkable for their contrast and vividness. They are signed only with initials and are called 'Sketches from Life.' We quote one of the first:—

He had avoided me for a week.

On the morning that he was due to reappear in the local police-court I received a note. 'Your money is all right,' it ran; 'I have not gone away. I am grateful.'

The little court was crowded when I

reached it. The accused was a man with many friends and the many innocent follies that make friends. He said not a word to me as he stepped forward. It was left to his solicitor to thank me for standing bail. The hearing was brief. My friend was acquitted.

Then, with tears in his eyes, he stepped down and rushed to take my hand.

Others were eager to take his, but he had no eyes or ears for them.

'Let's get away where we can talk,' he pleaded. 'My God, I have had the lesson of my life. I have discovered that I have n't a friend in the world save yourself. After this my sympathies will be with any poor devil who is blind enough to accept bail.'

'Freedom is sweet,' I said sententiously.

'Don't let us talk platitudes between each other,' was his impatient answer. 'Bail is n't freedom. It's hell. I believe all those people we have just left thought me guilty until this morning. My lawyer approached seven men whom I had regarded as friends before he saw you, and they were each afraid to be mixed up in a police case. Those were their words. They had known me for years, but, it seems, their knowledge could not stand the first breath of trouble. It was good of you to come to the rescue.'

'Why did n't you come to see me afterward?'

'Because the first day I went out the world was full of eyes. I could n't stand it. Some men to whom I had been hail-fellow-well-met just gave me a cold nod and passed on. The tradespeople became churlish. They even visited my own supposed sin on my brave little wife. A child in the street told another as I went by that I had been locked up; their four keen curious eyes followed until I had passed out of sight. I went around to the works,

and, of course, there was no work for me. I was told I must stand off until the case was over. What could I do? I rushed back home to the smiles and the faith of home.'

'Well, it's all over now,' I replied. 'These friends of yours know it was all a mistake.'

'Friends,' he repeated, in a tone of sad disillusionment. 'One friend and a multitude of acquaintances. Perhaps I should have kept my illusion had I been content with a cell. Bail . . . it's only preferring a torture-chamber to a small cell.'

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OXFORD AND THE LAW

TOWN and gown conflicts at Oxford have extended from the physical to the legal realm. Oxford University enjoys some very wide, and in modern eyes odd, legal privileges, and nowadays there appears to be a disposition on the part of certain University authorities to insist upon these rights and even to revive a few that have gradually fallen into disuse. Of course the University has always sent two members to Parliament. It also has its own court of law, in which it exercises civil jurisdiction which is limited neither by area nor by the amount involved. If one of the parties to the proceedings is a resident member of the University, the University Court takes precedence of the civil courts of Great Britain. In 1886 a libel case involving two London daily newspapers had to be transferred to Oxford on this ground.

The University also exercises criminal jurisdiction in all offenses below the rank of felony, and this jurisdiction extends not only to members of the University but to their servants as well. Oxford can impose sentences running up to two years — more considerable power than is enjoyed by magistrates. It can moreover exercise control

over the markets in Oxford, and has the right of access to railway commerce with the privilege of detaining suspected persons found there anywhere within ten miles of Oxford.

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SIR WILLIAM ORPEN AND THE WAR

SIR WILLIAM ORPEN's picture at the Royal Academy's exhibition, which he calls 'To the Unknown British Soldier in France,' has set London agog. There are those who profess to find difficulty in explaining it, but its main intention is not to be mistaken: the picture is a grim and ruthless satire.

Sir William originally contracted to paint three pictures for the Imperial War Museum. Two of these are already there, one representing the Peace Conference, the other the signing of the Treaty at Versailles. The third was to represent the Hall of Mirrors of Versailles, where the Treaty was signed, with the politicians, generals, and admirals who won the war. Sir William made the portrait studies, painted the scene, and grouped the whole thirty or forty figures in the canvas. It cost him nine months of toil. But Sir William had been at the front during the war; he saw war as it was. He knew that modern war cannot be painted as Meissonier and Detaille painted the wars of the last century. He knew its horror and its terrible cost. In a sudden frenzy of rage and disgust he painted out his whole picture. Generals, admirals, and politicians vanished with a few contemptuous strokes of the brush.

And then, overcome with indignant emotion, he set on the canvas a painting to tell the world what he felt. It is not a pretty picture; it does not pretend to be one. He has shown a doorway in the Hall of Mirrors. In front of this is standing a coffin draped with the Union Jack. On each side stand two

soldiers apparently on guard. Into these figures the artist has put all the hatred and horror of war. The soldiers are nearly nude. Their flesh is not in the ordinary flesh tone, but in the horrible greenish hue of the body that has long lain on the field. They are gaunt and emaciated. In his hand each holds a rifle, and each looks out at the spectator over the coffin of the Unknown Soldier. Above them two cherubs are flying and behind, through the arch, is an avenue of light leading up to the crucifix. As an English critic says, the artist seems to cry aloud: 'To what purpose, O statesmen of the world, have you sacrificed these children?'

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WHAT'S WANTED

'WHAT'S wanted'—not by any particular patron of the advertising columns, but by civilization in general—is listed as follows by Sir William Bull for the British Institute of Patentees:—

Glass that will bend.

A smooth road surface that will not be slippery in wet weather.

A furnace that will conserve 95 per cent of its heat.

A process to make flannel unshrinkable.

A noiseless aeroplane. A noiseless gun.

An aeroplane that can be easily and safely managed by a boy or girl.

A motor engine of one pound weight per horse power.

A key that will not lose its identification.

A method to reduce friction.

A practical method of making use of the power of the tides.

A process to extract the phosphorus from vulcanized India rubber so that it can be, so to speak, boiled up and used again.

A pipe that can be easily and effectively cleaned.

A temperance drink that will keep and not pall on the palate.

A cinema film that will speak.

BOOKS ABROAD

The Decisive Battles of Modern Times, by Lieut.-Colonel F. E. Whitton. London: Constable, 1923. 12s.

[*New Statesman*]

THIS book challenges comparison with Creasy's *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*; it deserves an equal popularity. Its lucid, well-planned narratives, its avoidance of technicalities, its excellent maps, its careful accounts of the political events leading up to the battles described, and its due regard to the wider issues involved, will make it attractive to the general reader. As with Creasy's book, there will be controversy as to the author's use of the term decisive; no one, however, can doubt the importance of the five battles which he has selected. Vicksburg, the turning-point of the American Civil War; Königgrätz, which led to the rule of Prussia and to the development of modern Germany; Mars-la-Tour, the bloodiest battle of the Franco-German War; Tsushima, which, closing the tragic career of the Russian Baltic Fleet, opened a new era for Japan; the Marne, of too recent memory — each has had vast consequences. And no doubt the series is not yet closed; for, as the author of the present book points out, the outburst of violence is still remarkable.

Bismarck's Diplomacy at its Zenith, by Joseph Vincent Fuller. London: Humphrey Milford, 1923. 16s. net.

[*Spectator*]

BISMARCK'S victories between 1864 and 1871 hypnotized rivals and historians alike; his later diplomacy has been judged by his earlier success. Professor Fuller subjects the critical two and a half years between August, 1885, and February, 1888, to close examination, and his conclusions are not favorable to the Chancellor. Bismarck was, as always, masterly in inducing other nations to handle hot chestnuts, in giving foreign rivals the impression that Germany was committed to action that she had no intention of taking, in behaving as an indifferent honest broker for a considerable brokerage. French policy was at times insane, and drove Salisbury, a patient man, to see possible good in an anticipated second Sedan; Russian tactics were fatuous.

But Bismarck, though he won tactical victories, did not really succeed. In 1885 Russia was inclined to friendship, France reconcilable, Great Britain at worst neutral. The unpardon-

able threat to France in 1887, the treachery to Russia, the attempt to use England and Italy as catspaws in the Near East — these in the long run left Germany with Austria as her one genuine friend, and herself pledged to support Austria in an Eastern policy of which the risks outweighed the benefits. It has been a German commonplace that Bismarck would have avoided the war of 1914, or would have entered it with an arguable moral case. Professor Fuller's cold analysis sees Bismarck forcing Russia to an unwilling alliance with Republican France, the founder of the system which triumphed in 1908 to fall in 1918. Harshlest judgment of all, he believes that the late Kaiser's attempt to secure diplomatic success by dynastic friendship with Russia postponed a storm made inevitable by Bismarck's obsession that Austria must be supported at all costs.

La Décomposition de l'Armée et du Pouvoir, by General Denikin. Paris, 1923.

[*Morning Post*]

GENERAL DENIKIN, in his newly published book, *La Décomposition de l'Armée et du Pouvoir*, gives a moving account of the events of the spring and summer of 1917 in Russia, which resulted in the utter dissolution of that fine army which only a few months before had driven the Austro-German armies in a series of brilliant victories halfway across Galicia. The blame he attributes chiefly to the mischievous influence of the Polivanoff Commission, and the weakness of Kerenskii, which was heightened by his dread that some victorious soldier, some yet unknown Napoleon, would capture the revolution and direct it away from the vaguely socialistic channels in which Kerenskii fondly hoped that he could keep it.

The Polivanoff Commission, which was formed under the War Minister Gutchkoff, with a view to keeping the army in the hands of the new rulers of Russia, and under Bolshevik influence, promptly set out to undermine authority and sap discipline. Civil commissaries, who were merely delegates of the Soviet organizations, were attached to all the army commands, and soon succeeded in rendering the position of the commanders impossible. On May 9 the famous Declaration of the Rights of Soldiers, drafted by the Polivanoff Commission, was sanctioned by Kerenskii, in spite of the unanimous protest of the army commanders who met at G.H.Q. for the purpose. General Alexieff, who had also presided and spoken at a meeting of three hundred