

## Books in Brief

*The Political System of British India, with Special Reference to the Recent Constitutional Changes.* By E. A. Horne. Oxford: Clarendon Press. \$3.50.

Mr. Horne, who is attached to the India educational service, has embodied in this useful book the substance of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1921. Beginning with a brief survey, first of the history of British rule in India from the establishment of the East India Company, and then of the complex political geography of the country, its general social and economic characteristics, and its political and constitutional development, he passes quickly to the main subject of the book, the great Government of India act of 1919 which inaugurated the reforms proposed in the Montagu-Chelmsford report. As the narrative at this point is little more than a concise record of events it does not in itself call for special comment, but the reader will find also a clear analysis of the elaborate provisions of the statute in question, a careful explanation of the conditions which dictated the recommendations of the report, and an impartial account of the difficulties which speedily developed when the new system came actually to be applied. While it is clear that Mr. Horne regards the revolutionary agitation in India as a regrettable interference with a system which ought to be allowed to work and whose results would probably be beneficent, his description of the motives and acts of the revolutionary leaders is commendably fair. That he should touch at length or very strongly upon the shortcomings or excesses of British rule in India is more than could properly be expected of a British civil servant, but his outspoken condemnation of the Amritsar massacre leaves nothing to be desired.

*The Biology of Death.* By Raymond Pearl. J. B. Lippincott and Company. \$2.50.

Mr. Pearl is a scientist of the first order. He juggles statistics, curves, and graphs, but happily only as a means to an end. He has written a fascinating book, and he has written it in his own fashion. Not infrequently the scientist becomes a special pleader, and one has the feeling that this particular scientist finds a robust and wholesome pleasure in dealing stiff blows to accepted theories. There is no "dry rot of academic biology," nor futile and fatiguing chasing of statistical bunglers, but a lively presentation of many of the facts of life and death, with frequent touches of an attractive personality and of personal philosophy.

*A Treasury of Plays for Men.* Edited by Frank Shay. Little, Brown and Company. \$3.

If any dramatic club is so impoverished as to be without feminine talent, it may dip into this volume with impunity, assured that there will be no situation in which the gentler sex is required. This is a companion piece to Mr. Shay's "A Treasury of Plays for Women"; it contains crook and war plays and a fair proportion dealing with less specialized themes. They are, of course, of varying degrees of effectiveness; perhaps, however, the best possible anthology when one considers that the distaff side of drama has been excluded.

*Ellen Prior.* By Alice Brown. The Macmillan Company. \$1.50. A metrical tale of old New England, pathetic but prolix, and very lamely versified.

*Patuffa.* By Beatrice Harraden. Frederick A. Stokes Company. \$2.

It is thirty years since the publication of "Ships That Pass in the Night," and Miss Harraden still, at intervals, writes novels to remind the world of that popular favorite. The latest is a substantial piece of work, a study in temperaments, generously understood and projected in a narrative of considerable breadth but little flavor.

*Tulips and Chimneys.* By E. E. Cummings. Thomas Seltzer. \$2.00.

Mr. Cummings is a poet. One deduces that from his language, his observation, and an occasional idea that struggles across his pages. But he is also a pedant. His typography is so perverse that the reader is scared off before he has gone very far. The puzzle of his punctuation is not even an amusing one; it certainly is not worth solving.

*Holland Under Queen Wilhelmina.* By A. J. Barnouw. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.

After a quarter of a century of ruling, the Queen of Holland is still on the top of the deck, sharing with the Queen of Rumania about all there is of romantic interest attached to the sovereigns of Europe. Mr. Barnouw has composed a comprehensive and well-digested narrative of her reign, to which Edward W. Bok has written an innocuous foreword. It is well to be reminded that diminutive Holland still controls, in the Malay archipelago, an area half the size of non-Russian Europe, and is not—as some folks carelessly imagine—merely the home of tulips, windmills, and wooden shoes.

## The Nation's Poetry Prize

**THE NATION** offers an annual poetry prize of \$100 for the best poem submitted by an American poet in a contest conducted by *The Nation* each year between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. The rules for the contest in 1923 are as follows:

1. Each manuscript submitted in the contest must reach the office of *The Nation*, 20 Vesey Street, New York City, not earlier than Saturday, December 1, and not later than Monday, December 31, plainly marked on the outside of the envelope, "For *The Nation's* Poetry Prize."
  2. Manuscripts must be typewritten and must have the name of the author in full on each page of the manuscript submitted.
  3. As no manuscripts submitted in this contest will in any circumstances be returned to the author it is unnecessary to inclose return postage. An acknowledgment of the receipt of each manuscript, however, will be sent from this office.
  4. No more than three poems from the same author will be admitted to the contest.
  5. No restriction is placed upon the subject or form of poems submitted, which may be in any meter or in free verse. It will be impossible, however, to consider poems which are more than 400 lines in length, or which are translations, or which are in any language other than English. Poems arranged in a definite sequence may, if the author so desires, be counted as a single poem.
  6. The winning poem will be published in the Midwinter Literary Supplement of *The Nation*, to appear February 13, 1924.
  7. Besides the winning poem, *The Nation* reserves the right to purchase at its usual rates any other poem submitted in the contest.
- The judges of the contest are the editors of *The Nation*. Poems should in no case be sent to them personally.

## Drama Comedies

**TWO** American and two British comedies pass before us. There is very little, if any, difference in either literary or theatrical skill. But the American comedies are far less amusing than the British ones because they are so much less serious. This is not in the least paradoxical. No real mental adult can laugh for more than a fleeting moment at the trivial. We laugh from a great depth only at a comic treatment of grave and central things. But the authors of American comedy

shrink from such subjects. They essay neither tragedy nor comedy; they are subject to the tradition that important things must be treated at a distance and with the ignorance of mere respect. Now if you reverence a thing after a thorough knowledge of it you have hold of a very great experience indeed; if you reverence it ignorantly and by rote you know nothing either of the thing or of yourself. Good comedy can be written only by him who has a powerful and intimate grasp of the tragic issues of human life.

Miss Zoe Akins, who wrote "Daddy's Gone A-Hunting," is not without such a grasp. But she evidently thinks that comedy works with different material, whereas it works with the same material as tragedy, in a different mood. Schopenhauer and Shaw proceed from the same data. Miss Akins writes passages of witty dialogue, and true wit is always based on profoundly serious perceptions and thoughts. She even at one moment creates a fleeting mood of that immense melancholy which is always in the background of true comedy. But her fable is woven of sand and her people built of bran. She seems to think that the comic dramatist works with unrealities and fluff. She went, of course, to that card-board Zenda for a single character to be impersonated by Miss Ethel Barrymore. But that character is ridiculously incredible. Such a surface cannot be only surface and that is what we are asked to believe. Miss Barrymore, admirably young and agreeable in appearance and gesture, weaves that surface with her well-known melancholy flippancy, the astonished pathos in her voice, her general attitude of the world well lost for fifteen minutes and so—as Pepys used to say—home. It was so in "The Laughing Lady"; it is so now in Miss Akins's "A Royal Fandango" (Plymouth Theater). The play and the performance are pretty and pleasant and null.

I am sorry to have to give the same report of "The Deep-Tangled Wildwood" (Frazee Theater). I have a very serious liking and respect for the work of the authors of "Dulcy" and "To the Ladies." In these comedies there was enough truth for laughter and enough edge for delight. The exaggeration in the new play of Messrs. Kaufman and Connelly is too gross to be amusing; the idea is too trivial to make one laugh.

How much better the British comedies are in their choice of material and in their approach to that material! Neither "Spring Cleaning" by Frederick Lonsdale (Eltinge Theater) nor "The Camel's Back" by Somerset Maugham (Vanderbilt Theater) is a masterpiece. But both start with an ironic vision of reality; both deal with a world of moods and characters that are recognizable, human, important, and therefore fit subjects for laughter. Mr. Lonsdale's theme is the more pregnant; Mr. Somerset Maugham's execution, especially in the first act, the more brilliant though not the more sustained. It is true, to be sure, that neither comedy is thinkable without the Wilde-Shaw tradition. But that tradition does not consist, as is commonly supposed, in a reckless dealing with mere paradox but in such witty restatements of the facts of life as to bring out the unrealities and self-deceptions by which most people live. Mr. Lonsdale's comedy is more firmly knit; Mr. Maugham's rather runs down in a manner not worthy of him even on this level of his work. Both plays give us, through characterization as well as through their dialogue, more than a few moments of that delighted recognition of human absurdity and its implied antithesis of wisdom which makes for that heightened vitality in the spectator at which good comedy aims. Excellent performances mark both plays. In "Spring Cleaning" Miss Violet Hemming at last adds intelligence to winsomeness; Arthur Byron is not only funny but significant; Miss Estelle Winwood has her usual astonishing incisiveness and—even in the quietest passages—electrical aliveness. In "The Camel's Back" there is Miss Violet Kemble Cooper, less florid and therefore far more interesting than is her wont, Charles Cherry who is adequate at least, and the ever excellent Louise Closser Hale.

LUDWIG LEWISOHN

## LECTURES and AMUSEMENTS

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