

Books and Things

PROFESSOR BLISS PERRY has been giving American literary criticism a piece of advice which looks good and is bad. "Let it now serve the public without fear or favor," he says in the *Yale Review*, "and it will make sooner or later the astounding discovery that the public is on its side." This advice looks good because it is an exhortation to stop serving that which ought not to be served. It is bad because it is perplexing. Until Professor Perry has done some elaborating and expounding, his advice cannot easily be taken. How early in the game would he have us begin to consider the public? While we are deciding what book to read and review? While we are reading? When we are trying to define our impressions of the book, if we had the luck to be impressed? When we are trying to compose our impressions into a picture or a judgment or an explanation or what not? Who would read at all if he had to stop and consider the public before picking a book off its shelf? Who could read at ease if tormented by fear that the book might do harm to Dr. Henry van Dyke?

But suppose these questions attacked and sent to the bottom. A more distant difficulty pokes its masts above the horizon. If I try to think of the public as a herd of reading animals, the first thing I see is a crowd on Michigan Avenue. Involuntarily my imagination chooses a Chicago crowd. Perhaps because I wrongly or rightly deem a Chicago crowd likely to contain more readers, what you would really call readers, than the same number of men and women in Denver or New York. Next, descrying face after individual face, I come at last upon a mask I recognize, the mask of a distinguished visitor to Chicago, of Mr. Andrew Carnegie. To me, as to many other Americans, the word "literature" is apt to suggest Mr. Carnegie. He likes Shakespeare well enough to do duty as a specimen of the reading public.

Having found Mr. Carnegie, and fixed his image, my task would be clear if only my subject were Shakespeare. All I should have to do would be to mediate between the Shakespeare-mind and the Carnegie-mind. Unluckily my subject is not Shakespeare but August Strindberg. What shall I tell Mr. Carnegie about Strindberg? Shall I do my utmost to bring these disparate minds within signaling distance? By remarking, perhaps, that they are in non-competing groups, that their minds are complementary, that each, if Strindberg were living, might learn from the other? Or would it be more useful, while admitting that Strindberg may serve as a corrective of our American sentimentalized view of women, frankly to throw him overboard, to inform Mr. Carnegie that he can do as well or better by patronizing American authors? Shall I repeat for Mr. Carnegie's benefit this acute remark from "Impressions and Comments," Havelock Ellis's new book: "And one wonders why Americans, anyway, should go to this distinguished Swede for such a 'corrective,' when in their own country, to mention but a single name, they have a writer like Robert Herrick, whose novels are surely so admirably subtle and profound an analysis of the position of womanhood in America," and—unlike Strindberg's books—"quite reasonably sane."

And here a suspicion, long creeping nearer and nearer, pounces. When I am writing about August Strindberg

asperated sensitiveness of either. Somewhere in one of his houses there is an unique Carnegie library, his own, consisting of books that have helped him. Let me enter, in deferential fancy, this place of helpful books. Let me find, after the shortest of searches, the table where those volumes are which friends who know what he likes have given him. My expectation is not disappointed. Here they lie—"From a College Window," "The Upton Letters," "Beside Still Waters," "Culture and Meekness," this last in page proofs, still unpublished. Now my task is over. I have gained the knowledge I sought. If I yearn to serve the public, conceived as Mr. Carnegie, I must write about the books he has read, is reading, or might conceivably like to read. Unless I see my duty thus, no attempt to do it will pay.

Is this task all? No, there is more. For what should I say of the books on this table if I said what I felt? I should burst into a subdued song of changing fashions, of waxing and waning popularities, of gift-books that flourish and die and make room for their successors. And after this manner would I end my song:

There, where our mothers gave away "Lucille"
Bulbously bound in alligator skin,
Our wives and sisters give the still small voice
Of blameless Benson, Arthur Christopher;
Christopher to discover blameless truths,
And Arthur to proclaim them blamelessly.
Between the truths, almost as meek as they,
Lie tracts of lowliest self-portraiture,
Glimpses of Arthur's fluent ordered life,
The running pen and sedentary mind,
Tea and Te Deums, evensong and walks,
With many a distant prospect of a duke.

Not that Mr. Benson, so far as I remember, ever talks about dukes. Yet subtly he persuades me, without mentioning them, that dukes are. Were I designing arms for his universe I should draw a duke, immanent. Even if I left out my last line, however, my remarks would not interest Mr. Benson's admirers. What can the matter be? What is the rest of the truth that Professor Perry started me in chase of? Am I ready to formulate it? I am. The literary critic who wishes to serve the public will be most likely to succeed when he writes about books that he likes. No gift is more useless to one's readers than second-hand disdain. Here is the kind of truth that makes us free—free to talk about what interests us, though nobody listen.

So I am at liberty, now, to serve the public by writing about books I like. Not forgetting meanwhile, but sedulously sidetracking that other truth, earlier discovered, according to which the public and I ought to have the same tastes. Well, we have. The public is capacious enough to hold many readers, thousands of them, who like what I like, in the same way, for the same reasons, for the same lack of reason. Thus have I won another freedom, freedom not to think of the public at all. If I care to criticize impressionistically, I shall put down whatever occurs to me while I am actually reading. Do I wish to test a book by universal standards? I have only to wait until the beat of recollection has grown fainter, until the book I've lately read is no fresher in my mind than the great, unforgettable books I forgot years ago. That is the formula, is it not, for authoritative criticism? And the reward? What did Professor Perry promise? That literary criticism, if it served the public without fear or favor, would "make sooner or later the astounding discovery that the public is on

Holy Poverty

The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists, by Robert Wells. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co. \$1.25 net.

A BOOK like "The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists" reveals rather startlingly the class-bound nature of our English literature. We have no Zola, and we have practically nothing similar to that interesting autobiographical proletarian literature which one finds in France and Germany. It needs the strong, rank odor of a book like this to show us how incorrigibly "genteel" our fictional writing is, and how impossible it is for an Englishman, except at the risk of vitiating sentimentality, to interpret the life of other social classes than his own.

This book, written with the bitterness of relentless realism by a socialist house-painter in an English city, who himself struggled to the inevitable bitter end, bears in every line the stamp of autobiographical exactness. It is a little history of a short campaign in the eternal conflict between needy labor and shoddy capitalism. The wolfish competition of the workmen, the constant terror of unemployment, the petty tyranny of the foreman, the cringing servility to the employers, the secret betrayals, the speeding-up, the mean little frauds, the skimping of work—all are pictured with a remorseless veracity that is actually appalling.

The bitterness of mood in which such a book must have been written by a man who saw so intelligently the stupidities of the life around him and yet was completely unable to find any other milieu, produces fierce touches of satire. But like all good satire, its exaggerations are really searing truths. Neither his irony, nor his bitterness blinded the writer to seeing the world as it really was. That the book is veracious in atmosphere and expression, no one who has seen the deplorable frowziness of English proletarian life, or tasted that peculiar quality which makes British squalor the filthiest in the world, can doubt. This is no book for the squeamish. And yet the coarseness of British working-class life is sketched in broad strokes and outlines, rather than plastered on the canvas in the manner of a Zola; and there is a British silence as to sexuality.

If the book is not for the squeamish, it is not for the tender-hearted either. From an artistic standpoint or view, the absence of sentimentality is one of the most admirable features, but those who are accustomed to have their literature of poverty and misfortune sugared with pity and sentiment will find this unadorned veracity repulsive. The book must therefore depress and then outrage our comfortable classes. We are not accustomed to see the life of the workingman from his own point of view. Our literature is carefully insulated from the economic interpretation of life, with its sense of the bestial struggle for existence and its slow and interminable fight against filth and disease. It must make our comfortable class uneasy to see the whole remorseless mechanism of shoddy capitalism so unsparingly revealed, and to see men so palpably the victims of economic forces. Even the most woolen-headed of our reactionaries can hardly fail to feel the ironic sting of the phrase, "ragged-trousered philanthropists."

Such a story is a scathing critique of the whole of British civilization, and incidentally of our own individualistic and plutocratic democracy. He must indeed be a tough Englishman who can eat a good dinner after finishing it. For the insistent fact remains that the Englishman is a creature of his class, and that his class is a creature of his class.

gence and personal idealism of her directing classes, her free government and humanitarian religion, has failed to secure for more than a minority of her people anything more than a filthy caricature of human life. Up through the beauty of park and palace rises the stench of proletarian poverty.

It is a very good thing for the world to smell that stench. For if our directing classes and our democracy can only once feel that evilness strongly enough, they will begin to find it intolerable, as they have found it in Germany, that classes should exist below a minimum standard of life. And if we once find it intolerable we shall set to work to make it unnecessary.

R. S. B.

Self-Defense and Self-Delusion

Des Deutschen Reiches Schicksalsstunde, by H. Frobenius, Berlin: Karl Curtius.

FROBENIUS'S little book, "The Illusion of Self-Defense," published many months before the outbreak of war, reveals that curious and terrible state of mind of Europe, and especially of Germany, which made war and will again make war inevitable. It is not a great book nor even a good book. It is not original, nor brilliant, nor profound. It is not in the fullest sense even truthful. But it does portray, without, perhaps, intending it, the convictions, sentiments and ideas which were last year in the minds of Europe's ruling classes and are this year in the minds of the peoples of all the belligerent nations. The book is an appeal to fear. And fear, as has been said, is an endemic latent in every heart, which sometimes rises to an epidemic. It is fear more than any other passion which drives peoples into war.

It was long believed that our great modern democratic peoples could not desire war. Emperors and financiers might be ever so belligerent, since whichever way the battle went their skins remained whole. But the ordinary run of people, the men who starved and froze in the trenches, the women who bore the undistinguished millions, and were bereft and beggared by war, what were glory and conquest to these? How much fighting was Morocco worth to the Paris cabby, or Serbia to the Silesian peasant? What interest had the Leipzig bricklayer in German acquisitions in Europe or Africa? Yet if anything is certain about the war of 1914, it is that the impulse came from the peoples. Each nation was willing to fight because it believed that it fought in self-defense.

It is this persistent illusion that people are fighting only for their hearth which converts peace-loving populations to the most aggressive campaigns. Even pacifists usually believe in a man's protecting his own home. So vague, however, is the boundary between defense and aggression, so subtle and unconscious are our national preconceptions and prejudices, that the plea of self-defense is stretched until it covers the most trivial pretexts and justifies punitive expeditions and the sending of armies to conquer distant lands. The Germans honestly believed that to defend their own German homes they had to lay waste Belgium. The English believed that a war against Germany was necessary to the defense of British villages and homes. Self-defense becomes constructive self-defense, and between this and naked aggression it is difficult to draw a line.

A part of this universal illusion of self-defense is the belief that the nation is surrounded by envious and treacherous enemies. Serbia fears that Austria will swallow her