

## Books and Things

ONCE an aged man from Salt Lake City, after listening to the story of my life, countered by telling me the story of his. He said one thing that I remembered. When a boy at college he earned money in his vacations by being a waiter at summer resorts. During the summer after his sophomore year he became so proficient in his art and gave so much satisfaction that a man from Utah asked him to spend the next vacation at a large country place. "All that summer I waited," said the autobiographer, "and the dinners were many and large. The family was numerous. Although the incessant talk was evidently successful I never found it funny or even interesting, and used to wonder how these people could stand it. But later in life, when I was no longer a waiter, when I had become intimate with this same family, and had even married a few of its members, when I sat in the very chairs I had once stood behind, I found the talk most acceptable. The jokes that once had flattened themselves against my ears became good jokes. Queer thing, isn't it?"

Very likely I thought it rather queer at the time, for I hadn't then read the cases Bergson uses as illustrations, in his book on Laughter, of the law by which A, who is inside a given circle, laughs or weeps at things which leave B, who is outside the circle and therefore only an overhearer, quite unmoved. See for example the story of the French peasant who sat stolid through a funeral, although the preacher made everybody else cry, and who said simply, when asked why he wasn't crying too, "I don't belong in this parish." I was reminded of this story, which I'm not sure I've quoted correctly, a few days ago, on a sleeper from Chicago to New York. Two or three sections ahead there was an elderly New Yorker with a clear voice and leisure to use it. He was talking to a young man who sold typewriters in Duluth. "We have flattered ourselves," said the New Yorker, "that the barbarities of the wars of two or three thousand years ago would not be repeated at the present time because of the elevation of the sentiments which during the last century or the last half century have generally obtained. We have flattered ourselves that enlightened diplomacy as practised by those statesmen of various nationalities who are known as diplomats had devised certain general propositions known as international law which would prove adequate to the task of restraining what was left of those barbarous impulses which we have partially inherited from our ancestors within certain fixed or shall I say measurably fixed bounds." Here a passing freight put out all other noises. The young man from Duluth drew a cigar from his pocket. "Shall we go and smoke?" he asked, when the freight was over. "I no longer smoke," said the New Yorker. "The sensitiveness of my nervous organization has compelled me to discontinue the practice." Naturally I expected the younger man to make a break for the smoker, but he didn't. For three-quarters of an hour more he sat tight, his cigar in his hand, and listened while that endless New Yorker talked on about the war. The Duluth young man was really attentive. "I have been very much interested," I heard him say. "You've made a wonderful study of this subject. I appreciate it very much."

When at last the young man took himself off, and the car was as quiet as a car can be, I had leisure to reduce the incident to law. The best I could do was this: Had I been sitting in the same section with the elderly New Yorker I

should have been as interested in his talk as the young man from Duluth was. Had the young man from Duluth been in my section and merely overhearing he would have been neither more nor less bored than I. For convenience, you see, I am assuming that the young man and I are interested by the same things and bored by the same things, that the only difference between us was in our geographical position in the sleeper. Unless one makes assumptions like this it is sometimes hard to find in what happens illustrations of the laws one has read about.

In the evening, however, after the young man from Duluth had gone to bed, I came upon a truth slightly different and I think more important. While the porter was making up my berth I sought asylum in the smoker, where two stricken passengers, weary and kindly, were listening to the New Yorker's talk: "This war may perhaps be described most aptly as a war of attrition, a term that does not seem to be generally understood. Attrition signifies the using up of a nation's store of men and money and food. It is derived from a Latin word which means to diminish by rubbing. Bearing this in mind, I can interpret the action of Bulgaria only by supposing her statesmen are convinced that the progress of the German arms will have been sufficient to bring about a peace which might be called favorable to the Central Empires before that process of attrition or lessening by rubbing away has reduced Germany's supply of money and food and especially men to a point where she may be compelled to make peace upon terms more favorable to the Entente powers in order to avert a disaster which, if we estimate its effects upon the domestic economy of the great Teutonic Empire, might well be deemed irretrievable. In other words, I can interpret Bulgaria's action only by attributing to her titular or actual leaders a belief either that this process of attrition will operate in a sense more favorable to Germany than to the Entente Powers or else that the process which if allowed to proceed uninterruptedly might well exhaust the resources of Germany at a date anterior to the ultimately inevitable exhaustion of her opponents will nevertheless be interrupted by some decisive military achievement on the part of Germany's forces in the field."

After he had gone to bed one of his hearers said to the other, with bitter gratitude: "That's over, thank God!" And by dint of a little meditation I perceived that the reason I had been less bored than they by the old gentleman was that they were more directly exposed to his fire, that they had now and then to make signs of interest, while I could lie back and be as inattentive as I pleased. That the feelings of A, inside the circle, are more acute than the feelings of B, who is outside, is true no matter whether these feelings are of pleasure or of pain—this truth became clear when I looked back to the sleeper, thought of the young man from Duluth, and called my feeling not the opposite of his but merely less pleasurable. Next morning I heard the old gentleman at it again. "That doesn't seem to be generally understood, but it's like this. You are a wheat merchant in Minneapolis. I am a miller at Liverpool. . . . Re-discount under our new or federal reserve system. . . . Since the amount of gold shipped to the United States from foreign countries during the past year is in excess of three hundred millions, and therefore approaches without quite equalling the amount of the original. . . ." But I didn't look at the young man from Duluth, so I don't know what law he was illustrating.

P. L.

## Husband and Wife

*These Twain*, by Arnold Bennett. New York: George H. Doran Co. \$1.50 net.

WHERE Arnold Bennett achieves greatness in his conscientious fiction is in his resolute fidelity to common human beings as they are. In one American novel, "The Rise of Silas Lapham," there was a full anticipation of his method and spirit, but it is difficult to find anywhere else another complete example. Greatnesses of a different order, greatnesses which cannot be compared, are to be found in Mr. Bennett's contemporaries, but he above the rest has mastered the art of preserving in fiction the color, the tone, the flavor, the odor, the surface, of provincial urban usualness. Such usualness has been approached in varying moods by numerous English and American novelists. Moore and Gissing have attempted it. Frank Norris and Henry Fuller and Edith Wharton have come at it. It has been part of the problem of every modern bourgeois novel. But no one has succeeded as well as Arnold Bennett in giving it comprehension and proportion. What it is, this routine bourgeois life, most of us know only too well. It is immensely that familiarity which breeds disregard. But so powerful and miraculous is art that as soon as this life is presented to us by one to whom it has appealed, presented with acute and exquisite fidelity, it becomes poignant and beautiful. No matter how the thing in itself may estrange us, no matter how we may despise and rage at its conditions, we are enabled by the artist to come into full understanding of it, and we are grateful to the core of our being for the honesty that retained every tedium, every banality, every inadequacy, for our understanding. To give the sanction of art to the nobility of human nature is precious, but it is no more precious than to bring into the sanction of art the unremitted commonplace. For it proves that there is no such thing as commonplace, that where there is truth there must be beauty.

And in his account of the married life of Edwin Clayhanger and Hilda Lessways Mr. Bennett has adhered to the veracity that implies beauty. No one who read "Clayhanger" or "Hilda Lessways" could suppose that the truth of their marriage would be romantic. It is not romantic. It is, in the conventional sense, desperately unromantic and disillusioning. But it is full of an assuaging comprehension and an illimitable tenderness. To be tender over unusualness is possible to almost every imagination. Women who tritely accept tuberculosis in negro tenements can weep with Stevenson over the lepers. Men who are bored to death by the hardships of scrubwomen can blaze with sympathy for a prostitute. Sedentary people of every description are exalted at the thought of war. But it needs genuine imagination to remain responsive in despite of repetition and custom, and this imagination Mr. Bennett possesses. The younger novelists strive as a rule to present situations that are complicated by some piquant irregularity—an illicit lover or two, a brilliant youth horribly addicted to heroin, a millionaire disciple of the I. W. W., and other exciting exhibitions of the orchid in Kansas. But the material that Mr. Bennett takes is the material of disregarded and unsensational lives, showing by the aid of his devoted imagination the depths in the stuff of which those apparently ordered lives are made.

To those who met Clayhanger and Hilda Lessways before, the task of depicting their union seemed formidable. Hilda Lessways was an inexplicable creature, and in

marriage she was bound in some degree to be explicated. The limitations of Edwin, on the other hand, presaged an attitude as husband which could hardly fail to impede that swinging step. And then there was the child. Could Mr. Bennett domesticate Hilda in the Five Towns without losing her magic? Could he sustain without wearying us the patient chronicle of confined and dutiful lives? For some, perhaps, the answer will not be favorable to Mr. Bennett. Admitting, as all must admit, the incomparable resources of his intimacy, the triumphant fertility of his invention, there will be readers to miss in Mrs. Edwin Clayhanger the impetuosity and glamour of the girl whom Edwin loved from afar. These readers will question whether Hilda is the same Hilda. They will believe that somewhere, somehow, Mr. Bennett's divination has faltered. For my own part, I am not sure. The fragrance which permitted Hilda to deviate from Edwin without a word—that fragrance which he was once so falsely represented as accepting entire—seems to disappear into her character unelucidated, and with it some of her salience. She began as mountain torrent. The sweep of her personality in marriage is the sweep of a channelled stream. That a woman of such brilliant and dashing gesture should so subside, that she should attune herself so readily to a marriage so signally without ultimate confidence, is a great deal to concede. That there should be so few attempts at ultimate confidence is, perhaps, too much to concede, especially as the marriage is rather unwittingly concentrated on the standpoint of the man. But the change seems to me for the most part greatly credible. Hilda's taming, her acquiescence, seems to me very much "like life."

"The fact was that she had married him for the look in his eyes. It was a sad look, and beyond that it could not be described. Also, a little, she had married him for his bright untidy hair, and for that short oblique shake of the head which with him meant a greeting or an affirmative. She had not married him for his sentiments nor for his goodness of heart. Some points in him she did not like. He had a tendency to colds, and she hated him whenever he had a cold. She often detested his terrible tidiness, though it was a convenient failing. More and more she herself wilfully enjoyed being untidy, as her mother had been untidy.... And to think that her mother's untidiness used to annoy her! On the other hand she found pleasure in humouring Edwin's crotchettiness in regard to the details of a meal. She did not like his way of walking, which was ungainly, nor his way of standing, which was infirm. She preferred him to be seated. She could not but regret his irresolution, and his love of ease. However, the look in his eyes was paramount, because she was in love with him. She knew that he was more deeply and helplessly in love with her than she with him, but even she was perhaps tightlier bound than in her pride she thought."

So far from knowing Hilda's mind about himself, Edwin goes through a long and harrowing process of what is euphemistically known as "adjustment." And the complementary process is necessitated for Hilda not so much on account of her ignorance of Edwin's processes, though that is profound, as on account of the exactions of her contrary will. Judged by some marriages, this conflict may seem unusual. There are persons who inform you that never in their married life have they heard a cross word. But, outside such feastings on angel-cake, sharply and touchingly typical is the Clayhangers' alternation between sacrament and sacrilege. Not by words do the Clayhangers reach comprehension. Hilda is curiously more ready to surrender her body than to surrender her mind. She never foregoes