

The Poet at the Movies

The Art of the Moving Picture, by Vachel Lindsay.
New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.25 net.

THIS is a joyous and wonderful performance. It is not a rhapsody or diatribe about the moving picture. It is not an autobiographical chronicle. It is an argument founded on plain facts and happy interpretations, rising to mysticism, a meeting place of the people capped in cloud. Only a corn-fed poet could have written it. It talks in terms of Mary Pickford, Blanche Sweet, Henry Walthall. It places John Bunny and Sidney Drew. It introduces Cabiria, The Birth of a Nation, Who's Who in Hogg Wallow, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, Your Girl and Mine, Judith of Bethulia. It is steeped in the present and the actual. But Vachel Lindsay has undertaken the fundamental brainwork necessary to an understanding of the moving picture art. He has done his heroic best to bring order out of aesthetic muddle and bewilderment. He has articulated a theory of beauty on the basis of the photoplay as we know it. Whether the theory stands or falls eventually, it is a bold and brilliant theory, really bold and really brilliant, and takes first place as an interpretation of the greatest popular aesthetic phenomenon in the world.

Mr. Lindsay is no worshipper of popular mechanics, no apostle of "a tin heaven and a tin earth." He is no demagogue. ("Our democratic dream has been a middle-class aspiration built on a bog of toil-soddened minds. The piles beneath the castle of our near-democratic arts were rotting for lack of folk-imagination.") Nor is he the kind of man who is dazzled by the plunderous profits and potentialities of photoplays. He respects the enterprise without adoring the exploitation. He respects the *vulgus* without adoring the vulgarity. He respects the mechanism without adoring the machine. He does not see "the redeemed United States running deftly in its jewelled sockets, ticking like a watch." He assents to America as it is, "the steam-engine, the skyscraper, the steam-heat, the flying machine, the elevated railroad, the apartment house, the newspaper, the breakfast food, the weapons of the army, the weapons of the navy." But his assent carries with it no subjection. "It is only in the hands of the prophetic photoplaywright and allied artists that the kinoscope reels become as mysterious and dazzling to the thinking spirit as the wheels of Ezekiel in the first chapter of his prophecy. One can climb into the operator's box and watch the sword-like stream of light till he is as dazzled in flesh and spirit as the moth that burns its wings in the lamp. But this is while a glittering vision and not a mere invention is being thrown upon the screen."

But it is unfair to Mr. Lindsay to suggest his glittering vision at first. He himself does not come to it until he has written out with the extremest simplicity and clarity his own conception of the moving picture art, its classification and the basis for its criticism.

The art exhibition, plus action—that is his underlying conception. "Whatever the seeming emphasis on dramatic excitement, the tendency of the best motion pictures is to evolve quite a different thing; the mood of the standard art gallery." There are three kinds of pictures—action pictures, intimate pictures, splendor pictures. "Action pictures are sculpture-in-motion, intimate pictures are paintings-in-motion, splendor pictures are architecture-in-motion." A deaf and dumb art, its limit is the limit of the picture. "But the limit of pictorial beauty cannot be reached."

The action film is based, according to Mr. Lindsay, on

the out-of-door chase. It gratifies incipient or rampant speed-mania. Its principal resource is inventiveness. It is falsely advertised as having heart-interest. "In the action picture there is no adequate means for the development of any full-grown personal passion." It provokes "the ingenuity of the audience, not their passionate sympathy." It is "impersonal and unsympathetic." But its "endless combinations of masses and flowing surfaces" appeal to the sculptor. It can represent bronze elasticity, wave-beaten granite, living ebony and silver, the majesty of dancing, galloping or fighting figures. It is this artistic element that the producer has "allowed to go wild."

The intimate film, his next classification, "has its photographic basis in the fact that any photoplay interior has a very small ground plan, and the cosiest of enclosing walls." "It is generally keyed to the hearth-stone and keeps quite close to it." Intimate and friendly, the effect of this film should be delicate. And "it must first be good picture, then good motion." The pictures should "take on motion without losing their charm of low relief, or their serene composition." It should be possible to say: "This photoplay was painted by a pupil of Gilbert Stuart." Enoch Arden, as Mr. Lindsay sees it, is the most successful drama of this kind. "Melodramatic interruptions or awful smashes" add nothing to such dramas. And it is the pictorial charm, the "fine and spiritual thing that Botticelli painted in the faces of his muses and heavenly creatures," which accounts for the popular love of Mary Pickford.

To photoplays of splendor, architecture-in-motion, Mr. Lindsay gives his greatest attention. The fairy splendor of non-human objects "is fundamental in the destinies of the art." It is to be found in "furniture, trappings, and inventions in motion." People become tired of mere contraptions. But they never grow weary of imagination. Crowd splendor, patriotic splendor, religious splendor, further entice him. "While the motion picture is shallow in showing private passion, it is powerful in conveying the passion of masses of men." He illustrates from the Battle, an old Griffith biograph. He analyzes the spectacular symbolism of Cabiria. He conceives a motion picture akin to By Blue Ontario's Shore. He imagines a photoplay of Pericles, of Jeanne d' Arc, and of his own Springfield in symbolism.

Assuming with Mr. Lindsay that "the keywords of the stage are passion and character; of the photoplay, splendor and speed," and accepting the wide suggestiveness of his classifications, the question remains whether he has been sound, in the first place, to minimize pantomime, and wise in the second to force so strongly the parallelism of the photoplay to sculpture, painting and architecture. In his chapter on hieroglyphics he certainly indicates his appreciation of pictures as a means of conveying ideas. But he does not dwell sufficiently anywhere on the possibilities of pantomime, and he strains his theory of photoplays as primarily plastic art. His terminology, moreover, is open to criticism. The word action is not in the same plane as the word splendor. And a word less loose than action could be found. But these objections are not meant to be inhospitable. No one could be inhospitable to a book so vigorous and creative and fertile. It goes, to my mind, to the root of the matter. It reveals vividly where the limitations and the opportunities of the moving pictures lie. There is nothing fanciful about it. There is nothing chimerical. It states and argues its position, and opens up the hope for beauty in a form of expression that has been enormously misunderstood.

In reporting this book it is impossible to preserve its savor. It is equally impossible to indicate its pregnant opinion on

the many distinctions between plays and photoplays, between photoplays and motion pictures, on the censorship, the orchestra and conversation, on the plebiscite and criticism. The book itself must be read by all who are aware that "the photoplay cuts deeper into some stratifications of society than the newspaper or the book have ever gone," and who believe that "the destiny of America from many aspects may be bound up in what the prophet-wizards among her photoplaywrights and producers mark out for her." The mystic ecstasy of this belief will not be general. There will be many, even, to halt superciliously at the very conjunction of the moving picture and art. But Mr. Lindsay need not care. He has initiated photoplay criticism. That is a big thing to have done, and he has done it, to use his own style, with Action, Intimacy and Friendliness, and Splendor.

F. H.

As a Realist Sees It

Of Human Bondage, by W. Somerset Maugham. New York: George H. Doran Co. \$1.50 net.

SOMETIMES in retrospect of a great book the mind falters, confused by the multitude and yet the harmony of the detail, the strangeness of the frettings, the brooding, musing intelligence that has foreseen, loved, created, elaborated, perfected, until, in this middle ground which we call life, somewhere between nothing and nothing, hangs the perfect thing which we love and cannot understand, but which we are compelled to confess a work of art. It is at once something and nothing, a dream, a happy memory, a song, a benediction. In viewing it one finds nothing to criticise or to regret. The thing sings, it has color. It has rapture. You wonder at the loving, patient care which has evolved it.

Only recently I finished reading Mr. W. Somerset Maugham's "Of Human Bondage." It was with some such feeling as this that I laid it down. In recent years, and quite definitely, we have been getting on in a literary way. Despite our complaints as to the intolerance of a philistine age, many interesting things are being done. In England particularly in the last few years (though France has produced "Jean Christophe") we have had George Moore, all of him; "The New Machiavelli" of Wells, "Fortitude" by Hugh Walpole, "The Old Wives' Tale," by Arnold Bennett, "Sinister Street" by Compton Mackenzie, "The New Grub Street" by Gissing, "Joseph Stahl" by J. D. Beresford, and also such minor volumes as "The Rat Pit" by Patrick MacGill, and "Mushroom Town" by Oliver Onions. (What a name!)

In America, on the other hand, we have lagged. There have been "Predestined" by Stephen French Whitman, "Quicksand" by Hervey White, "The Story of Eva" by Will Payne, "The Turn of the Balance" by Brand Whitlock, "With the Procession" by H. B. Fuller, and "McTeague" by Frank Norris, but all of these, transcendent as are their narrative merits, are lacking somehow in that vast undercurrent of which these newer and more forceful writers seem cognizant.

Here is a novel or biography or autobiography or social transcript of the utmost importance. To begin with it is unmoral, as a novel of this kind must necessarily be. The hero is born with a club foot, and in consequence, and because of a temperament delicately attuned to the miseries of life, suffers all the pains, recessions, and involute self tortures which only those who have striven handicapped by what they have considered a blighting defect can under-

stand. He is a youth, therefore, with an intense craving for sympathy and understanding. He must have it. The thought of his lack and the part which his disability plays in it soon becomes an obsession. He is tortured, miserable.

In pursuit of his ideal from his earliest youth he clings to both men and women in a pathetic way, a truly moving spectacle. The story begins at the home of his mother in or near London. She is dying, and among the last things she does is to feel the deformed foot of her son, with what thoughts we may well imagine. Later in the home of his uncle, William Carey, vicar of Blackstable in Kent, we find him suffering for want of sympathy and concealing his shyness and desire behind a veil of assumed indifference. By Carey and his wife he is fostered in a somewhat stern way until his schooldays at Tercenbury begin. There he is tortured by unfeeling playmates, unconscious of the agony which his deformity causes him, until he is ready to leave for a higher school, and presumably prepare himself for the ministry.

Study, and an innate opposition to the life, decide him to leave and go to Heidelberg, Germany, where apparently he remains for a year and rids himself of all his early religious beliefs. A little later he returns to England uncertain as to his career, and enters the office of a chartered accountant in London, for which privilege he pays. If anyone has ever given a better description of English clerkly life I am not aware of it. After a year he gives this up, finding himself unsuited to it, and essays art, the suggestions and enthusiasms of certain friends impelling him to it. Two years of the Latin Quarter, Paris, and the fierce discussions which rage around the newer movements in art make it clear to him that he is unsuited for that field, and with a sense of defeat he gives it up. A few months later he enters a medical school in London with a view to becoming a physician. It is here that his loneliness and his passion for sympathy drive him into a weird relationship with a waitress in an A B C restaurant in London which eventually eats up the remainder of his small fortune of twelve hundred pounds. Finally, penniless and destitute, sleeping on park benches for days, he is compelled to enter a London shop as a clerk at six shillings a week "and found." Those who place so much faith in the intellectual supremacy of the English and their right to lead the world on to Elysian fields of perfection might study the picture which he gives of underworld clerk life with profit. There is no more degrading form of wage slavery practised by any nation, civilized or uncivilized.

Two years of this and then the vicar of Blackstable dies, leaving him a competence of six hundred pounds wherewith he is able to restore himself to his medical studies. In four years more he has acquired his diploma, and is now ready to become a general practitioner. Curiously the story rises to no spired climax. To some it has apparently appealed as a drab, unrelieved narrative. To me at least it is a gorgeous weave, as interesting and valuable at the beginning as at the end. There is material in its three hundred thousand and more words for many novels and indeed several philosophies, and even a religion or stoic hope. There are a series of women, of course—drab, pathetic, enticing as the case may be—who lead him through the mazes of sentiment, sex, love, pity, passion, a wonderful series of portraits and of incidents. There are a series of men friends of a peculiarly inclusive range of intellectuality and taste, who lead him, or whom he leads, through all the intricacies of art, philosophy, criticism, humor. And lastly comes life itself, the great land and sea of people, England, Germany, France, battering, corroding, illuminating, a Goyaesque world.