

Books and Things

ONCE in a while I have heard elderly persons regret that Theodore Watts-Dunton did not keep a diary. Who else, they would ask, knew so well so many of the greater men of his letters in his time? For thirty years he lived in the same house with Swinburne. He was an intimate friend of Rossetti, William Morris, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. Only a few men knew George Borrow as intimately. He could see the contemporary poets who were his friends against a background of great poetry, for he was a lover of Greek poetry and of English, of Dante and Virgil and Goethe. He had read the greatest French and Spanish and Portuguese poets. It would be hard to say whether his interest in imaginative literature was a little more or a little less intense than his interest in gypsy life. A biography of him in the Britannica says he was "originally educated as a naturalist," and in his writing about English poets the nature-lover is revealed. For several years of his early life he was a London solicitor. Few men so thoroughly soaked in poetry have had so many other interests.

Since reading "Aylwin" I have had small share in this wish that Watts-Dunton had kept a record of his friend's doings and sayings. One of the characters in "Aylwin" was suggested by Rossetti, by all accounts a very colored talker. In the book this character's talk is praised, and specimens of it are given which make one marvel at the praise. Watts-Dunton, judged by "Aylwin," was not a competent reporter of brilliant talk. When I took up "Old Familiar Faces" (New York, E. P. Dutton & Company, \$1.75) and read the names of the persons Watts-Dunton had written about, Rossetti, Miss Rossetti, Tennyson, William Morris, Borrow, Gordon Hake, Lord de Tabley and F. H. Groome, I therefore did not look for talk set down by a portraitist's hand.

No one will find this in "Old Familiar Faces," or any of the other gifts by which men and women we have not seen are made to live for us. Watts-Dunton was not a character-drawer. In this book, though, he has drawn that part of his own character which explains why he had so many good friends. Evidently his interest in other men's work and plans and sorrows and joys was keen and persistent and unobtrusive. When this interest is only a little less keen than a man's interest in his own affairs he has a capacity for friendship, and when he can unconsciously represent his own concerns as a little less interesting to him than other people's he has mastered the art of making and keeping friends. Watts-Dunton never felt like treating other people as means to an end of his own. He would have thought such conduct hateful.

"Old Familiar Faces" does not, however, explain the real Watts-Dunton mystery. It does not explain why his friends, many of them the best judges in England, thought so highly of his taste. Rossetti, I have read somewhere, did not believe that "on a question of this kind"—the comparative merit, I believe, of two versions of a poem—"Watts could be wrong." The more one reads in Watts-Dunton the more mysterious this mystery becomes. He calls "Sister Helen" "that poem which is, on the whole, Rossetti's masterpiece." Of Tennyson he says: "As a metaphysician none comes so near Shakespeare as he who wrote these lines:

And more, my son! for more than once when I
Sat all alone, revolving in myself
The world that is the symbol of myself,
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed
And passed into the Nameless, as a cloud
Melts with Heaven. I touch'd my limbs, the limbs
Were strange, not mine—and yet no shade of doubt,
But utter clearness, and thro' loss of Self
The gain of such large life as matched with ours
Were Sun to spark—unshadowable in words,
Themselves but shadows of a shadow-world.

And Watts-Dunton comments on this passage: "We admirers of Tennyson must content ourselves with this thought, that, wonderful as it is for Shakespeare to have combined great metaphysical power with supreme power as a dramatist, it is scarcely less wonderful for Tennyson to have combined great metaphysical power with the power of a supreme lyricist."

Watts-Dunton was familiar with a very large body of the best poetry in seven or eight languages, to read poetry was to him a joy, he had a nice ear for verse, he liked to think and write and talk about poetics. That was his equipment as a critic. Some of his generalizations shed light. "Indeed," he writes in the Britannica article on Matthew Arnold, "the difference between those who have and those who have not the true rhythmic instinct is that, while the former have the innate faculty of making the emphasis of sound and the emphasis of sense meet and strengthen each other, the latter are without that faculty." In the Britannica article on "Poetry" he says: "This literary life, while it is only bipartite in prose, seems to be tripartite in poetry; that is to say, while prose requires intellectual and emotional life, poetry seems to require not only intellectual life and emotional life but rhythmic life." . . . And again: "While, however, the great goal before the poet is to compel the listener to expect his caesuric effects, the great goal before the writer of poetic prose is in the very opposite direction; it is to make use of the concrete figures and impassioned diction of the poet, but at the same time to avoid the recognized and expected metrical bars upon which the poet depends. The moment the prose poet passes from the rhythm of prose to the rhythm of metre the apparent sincerity of his writing is destroyed." As a theorist he made a few hits and many misses.

A very comfortable moral may be drawn from Watts-Dunton's life, namely this, that with friendliness and industry a man may in his day gain a notable position as a critic without having a first-rate critical nose, that a man may live a full and blameless and respected life without having a first-rate head. By keeping at the thing one cares most about one may end by compelling people who ought to know better to mistake one for an authority in one's subject. One may end by this achievement, please observe. I do not say that one must. More often the achievement and its reward will not be quite like Watts-Dunton's. Innocent of intent to deceive anybody, he succeeded in deceiving those who were least easily deceived. Such a performance will probably always be rare. What we may all hope for, without undue conceit, is that if we devote our lives to reading books and writing about them, and if we let people know that this is our chosen life-work, we may some day persuade those who are easily persuaded that we are good at our own game.

P. L.

Fallacies and Follies

Feminism, Its Fallacies and Follies, by Mr. and Mrs. John Martin. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. \$1.50.

ABOUT twenty years ago one master of English comedy took another master of English comedy to task. Sitting off by himself in Hampshire in the year 1877, George Meredith had generalized about the public. "The English public," he meditated, "have the basis of the comic in them: an esteem for common sense." "I take leave," retorted Bernard Shaw, "to say that Mr. Meredith knows more about plays than playgoers. . . . If it were to be my last word on earth, I must tell Mr. Meredith to his face that whether you take them generally or particularly—whether in the lump, or sectionally as playgoers, churchgoers, voters, and what not—they are everywhere united and made strong by the bond of their common nonsense, their invincible determination to tell and be told lies about everything, and their power of dealing acquisitively and successfully with facts whilst keeping them, like disaffected slaves, rigidly in their proper place: that is, outside the moral consciousness."

Here were two conflicting versions of the British public, one a high and delightful version, the other brusque, critical, rude and low. As a satellite of George Meredith, I remember feeling enraged on first reading this passage. Shaw had no right, so far as I could see, to assume that he knew more about anything than Meredith. Meredith had a finer conception of comedy, a finer imagination. He therefore knew more about the public than Shaw. But that was before I realized a man of imagination like Meredith could fall into the familiar error of imagination, the assumption that the facts of life have some correspondence to one's valid ideas. As to the validity of Meredith's ideas Shaw raised no question whatever. He considered Meredith's ideas excellent, even superfine. All he disputed was the existence of that public which Meredith conjured up in his mind. It was modest of Meredith to assume such a public. It was genial and natural. But Shaw was too busy being accurate to be modest and genial and natural. And Shaw happened to be right.

This mistake of Meredith's is one of the commonest mistakes of the imagination. It consists in supposing that one's own excellent, even superfine, conclusions as to the world as it might be are a clue to the world as it is.

If any feminists have been getting a similar illusion that their own accepted ideas can be assumed to be current, that the world as it is has begun to correspond to their conclusions as to the world as it ought to be, they should purge themselves by reading the Martins. In proceeding toward feminism they will undoubtedly have encountered and demolished most of the ideas that are dear to the Martins. They will have refuted, disowned or discounted practically everything that the Martins have to say. But does that mean that a vast number of people are not still going on in precisely the same habits of thinking and precisely the same habits of arguing? The emergence of the Martins in 1916 is a sufficient rejoinder. It rectifies any light Meredithian supposition that we can conduct ourselves in this world as if its feral inhabitants were as large-minded and "advanced" as ourselves!

It is not because of their arguments that the Martins can be taken seriously. It is altogether because they prove the existence of a viewpoint that one might too easily forget or ignore. When brewers' associations or knitting circles denounce "feminism," one smiles. It seems negligible.

But the Martins are not grossly ignorant. They have a certain resourcefulness in debate and a certain limited sophistication. They are entitled to be inspected because they represent an influence that survives. It is hard to believe people can be without basic candor, that they fear, hate and resent freedom so much that they can write a tortuous book in tirade. But such people exist. The Martins prove it. And it is important to pass back of their fanciful "humanism" and their digs at Ellen Key and Mrs. Gilman to realize that ugly prejudices may be obvious and yet decisive, that ugly taboos may be fully exposed and yet passionately retained.

In Mr. Hecker's book on "Women's Rights" there is one 'orrible example in the person of a Philadelphia clergyman. It appears that far off in the dark ages, in 1880, the Rev. Knox-Little got off the following words: "God made himself to be born of a woman to sanctify the virtue of endurance; loving submission is an attribute of a woman; men are logical, but women, lacking this quality, have an intricacy of thought. There are those who think women can be taught logic; this is a mistake. They can never by any power of education arrive at the same mental status as that enjoyed by men, but they have a quickness of apprehension, which is usually called leaping at conclusions, that is astonishing. There, then, we have distinctive traits of a woman, namely, endurance, loving submission, and quickness of apprehension. Wifehood is the crowning glory of a woman. In it she is bound for all time. To her husband she owes the duty of unqualified obedience. There is no crime which a husband can commit which justifies his wife in leaving him or applying for that monstrous thing, divorce. It is her duty to subject herself to him always, and no crime that he can commit can justify her lack of obedience. If he be a bad or wicked man, she may gently remonstrate with him, but refuse him never. Let divorce be anathema; curse it; curse this accursed thing, divorce; curse it, curse it! Think of the blessedness of having children. I am the father of many children, and there have been those who have ventured to pity me. 'Keep your pity for yourself,' I have replied, 'they have never cost me a pang.' In this matter let woman exercise that endurance and loving submission which, with intricacy of thought, are their only characteristics."

Do you think this is all out of date? Ingenuous citizens, it is the attitude that the Martins preserve in almost every essential respect. "Man's moral duty to woman is to prevent her destroying herself by jumping her track." "Womanhood is an infirmity from which women rarely, if ever, wholly recover." "It is woman's way to get along somehow, from hour to hour, compromising with each difficulty as it arises. And there is much to be said for this method." "Voting is just like writing a letter to Santa Claus." "Women's minds seem to move rather in curves and circles, following lines more beautiful, perhaps, but more irregular and more disconcerting. And thus it arises that when one woman's mind comes in contact with other women's minds, all equally erratic in their orbits, there results a certain mutual bewilderment." "To the maintenance of her power for healthy, happy motherhood, every other factor in her life must be subordinate." "Physiologically, socially and morally it is advantageous if she marry by twenty-three." "Never can [women] be prosperous, happy, contented and healthy in industry." "Child rearing is the noblest work an intellectual woman can do." "The only ultimate justification of all material things is that they contribute to the maintenance of 'healthy, happy, bright-eyed human beings.'" "No