

What to Read

One Hundred Best Books, by John Cowper Powys. New York: G. Arnold Shaw. 75 cents.

YES, it is quite true that no one is qualified to pick out the best hundred books. Nobody has read all the likely candidates for places on such a list, and to one form or another of greatness everybody turns a blind side. Yet the game is worth watching whenever it tempts the spectators to read and reread, or to ask themselves whether they really like what they thought they liked. This may be the happy effect even of a list whose compiler has been made insincere by his determination to be catholic.

It is to Mr. Powys's credit that he has not tried to be catholic. Nor has he tried to compile a list of the best hundred books. His title, "One Hundred Best Books," was no doubt carefully chosen for its implication that the world of the best is wide. His principle of choice has been "shameless subjectivity," tempered by the feeling which instigated this sentence: "It seems to me that nothing is more necessary, in regard to the advice to be given to young and ardent people, in the matter of reading, than some sort of communication of the idea—and it is not an easy idea to convey—that there is in this affair a subtle fusion desirable between one's natural indestructible prejudices and a certain high authoritative standard . . ." In other words, while making a list which records his preferences, Mr. Powys has wished to keep in mind the fact that his own preferences are not the whole show. The reader he has had in view is "the young person anxious to make some sort of a start" among books.

While reading Mr. Powys I cannot help trying to distinguish the places where he has remembered his "certain high authoritative standard" from the places where he has just naturally let himself go. The standard must be responsible for the presence of Miss Austen, whom he calls "full of tender understanding," and whose charm he describes as "the very epitome of maternal humor." It is hard to believe a man can enjoy Miss Austen and say such silly things about her. I am bound to add, however, that this is a lonely instance, and after reading Mr. Powys on the other writers I am most surprised to find in his book, Milton, Cervantes, Scott, Emerson, Bernard Shaw, I am convinced that his liking for them is not second-hand.

The task of distinguishing his deepest "natural indestructible prejudices" is much easier. Rabelais, for example, whose "noble buffoonery gives us back the sweet wantonness of our youth." Heine, who "sticks the horns of satyrish 'diablerie' in the lovely forehead of the most delicate romance." Strindberg, especially his "Confessions of a Fool," where "the woman implicated surpasses the perversities of the normal as greatly as the lashing energy with which he pursues her to her inmost retreats surpasses the vengeance of any ordinary lover." D'Annunzio, with "the purple and scarlet splendor of his imperial dreams" and his "fierce smouldering voluptuousness." Sterne, whose "digressive and wanton pages" are "to be enjoyed slowly and lingeringly, with many humorous afterthoughts and a certain Rabelaisian unction." Oscar Wilde, whose name "thus becomes a name 'to conjure with' and a fantastic beacon-fire to which those 'oppressed and humiliated' may repair and take new heart." Oscar Wilde, whose "Salome" is "the most richly colored and smoulderingly sensual of all modern tragedies." Oscar Wilde, in whose "De Profundis" we "sound the sea-floor of a quite open secret; the secret namely of the invincible attraction of a certain

type of artist and sensualist towards the 'white Christ' who came forth from the tomb where he had been laid, with precious ointments about him; by the Arimathæan."

Oscar Wilde reminds me of a remark made in "Lady Windermere's Fan" by Mr. Dumby: "Awful manners young Hopper has!" It is when Mr. Powys's literary manners are most awful, as in the preceding paragraph, that I am most sure he is genuinely in love with the author he is writing about. But there is variety even in his bad manners. What I have been quoting is not a bit like this, on Guy de Maupassant: "His racking, scooping, combing insight into the recesses of man's natural appetites will never be surpassed." Or this, on Stendhal: "No writer has ever lived with more contempt for mere sedentary theories or a fiercer mania for the jagged and multifarious edges of life's pluralistic eccentricity." When he is not pretending to energy, and when he is a mile or so away from sex, which has always a disastrous influence on his style, Mr. Powys is capable of admirable writing, as when he speaks of "the smell of rain-drenched moors, the crying of the wind in the Scotch firs, the long lines of black rocks drifting across the twilight," as things having a symbolic value in "Wuthering Heights." Or again when he says of the Thackeray who wrote one "Henry Esmond": "Dealing with the eighteenth century he escapes not only from his age but from himself." Or in a good many other places.

Much as Mr. Powys has irritated me, I have read his book without being bored, except by pages 19, 20 and 21, with a growing interest in what he has to say, with a growing desire to read the authors he mentions, whether I already know them or not. I should think his "One Hundred Books" would increase the love of letters.

Also, though my dislike of Mr. Powys as a writer has been aggravated page by page, he rouses my curiosity. I imagine him a pretentious, emphatic, talkative man, sincerely loving many good books, a little inclined to suggest that he knows well certain books that he knows slightly, terribly inclined to over-value his interest in sex and to mistake it for a sign of mental freedom, an utterer of sensible and stupid things with about the same eagerness, eager to sow the seed of his enthusiasms on minds which it is just like him to call "such provocatively virgin soil." I imagine him as half a quack and very much in earnest, with a streak of poetry in him.

Q. K.

Tchékov Realism

The Three Sisters, by Anton Tchékov. Translation by Julius West. London: Duckworth.

"THE Three Sisters" is the most characteristic of all of Tchékov's plays, for here, even more than in "Cherry Orchard," he has set himself to overcome the difficulties of realism in their most treacherous forms. In "Cherry Orchard" the theme is relatively simple and touched with the pathos and symbolic beauty of the doomed and blossoming cherry trees. But in "The Three Sisters" he must raise interest in a play whose main theme is dreary monotony, force one to like the most futilely ineffective group ever gathered on the stage, make harmony out of the clashing confusion of three plots, two of which come to their violent climax at almost the same moment, and after emphasizing empty loneliness and discontent in every character and from as many angles as possible, send the audience home at least artistically reconciled with life.

Three sisters and their brother live together with the usual complications of servants, a dependent, a boarder and informal neighbors. They are distressed to the point of despair with their restricted environment in a small provincial town. Their dream is Moscow. Masha, the heroine—if such a conventional designation may be allowed—is married to a pleasant, trivial school teacher of no particular personality. She is mature, contained, full of observation, but restless. The oldest girl, Olga, a cordial masculine type, is an overworked district teacher. The youngest, Irina, at first does nothing, then becomes a clerk in the local telegraph office, later shifts to clerical work, and finally plans to teach. She is almost pretty and the most distressingly lonely of all. Two men want to marry Irina, neither of whom she loves. For lack of anything better to do, she reluctantly becomes engaged to the Baron, who is the better mannered of the two, but she is far from satisfied. Her spirit is a "locked piano" and the key is lost.

The ineffective well educated brother, who is the hope of the family, falls a victim to the calculated charms of an empty-headed, dowdy young girl who marries him and brings to the household fresh ennui. A brigade quartered near the town boasts a handsome and loquacious lieutenant-colonel, Vershinin, who used to know the sisters when they were little girls. He calls one evening and a new interest in things awakes in Masha. From gradual beginnings and casual happy talks in the midst of a complex family life, their sense of understanding pierces to a deeper and deeper fusion. It is almost wholly inarticulate until one day when she happens unexpectedly to enter the room during one of his philosophic disquisitions to inattentive companions. He is quite unconscious of the fact that one by one his audience has drowsed into complete unresponsiveness. She, unobserved, is his only listener. He looks up, grasps the situation, glances at the inert faces on the sofa and in amused triumph presumably continues as before, yet with what a ringing difference! Now and then he inserts the rub-a-dub-dub of music that she answers in suppressed antiphony. The exhilaration of these responses, kept almost within compass of a sleep-producing monotone, beat in a rhythm of hushed, excited poetry.

That little song recurs again and again for Masha. It will not down nor recede, as later she pretends to read in the midst of a general hubbub. Once she stands alone by the door after the culmination of Irina's grief over her own futility and their brother's tragedy, and it surges again through all her being, as with wide or half-closed eyes she hums it in unsuppressible ecstasy. Then on the mad night of the village fire he calls to her in that imperious meter, and she answers, leaving everything.

The brother's lot is perhaps the most miserable of all. His wife has presented him with a baby which she leaves almost wholly in his care while she flirts vulgarly with the head of the district. She asserts her ill bred little self to everyone's dismay, even forcing the sisters from their rooms and at last crowding them out altogether. Her husband clings pitifully to his belief in her honesty and refinement, but his ambitions fade, he mortgages the house that is only partly his, and gambles away the money that should have taken them all to Moscow. He pours out his griefs to the deaf messenger who carries his papers. Olga, the school teacher, has more philosophy and less emotion, perhaps more philosophy because less emotion, than her sisters, and the immunity and unhappiness of no history. But even for her life is wretched. Her very promotion, which

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she did not want and was too tired to take, precludes her chance for Moscow.

Finally the brigade, the one brilliant, if disconcerting, spot in their desolate lives, is ordered to leave, and tragical problems collapse into tragical emptiness. That last scene of separations and loneliness, loneliness that such people could not possibly hope to fill, is perhaps the dreariest in drama. Goodbyes, some of them ordinary, but none the less wrenching, follow one another with reiterating pain; the old army doctor, for instance, the young sub-lieutenants who are always taking snapshots, culminating finally in the dreaded parting of Masha and Vershinin. While this is impending, Irina's rejected lover challenges the Baron to a duel and kills him. Irina's last hope of Moscow expires. Then Vershinin comes to say goodbye. Masha's control almost holds, then suddenly breaks into ungovernable grief. Vershinin goes, and the brother wheels his squeaking baby carriage back through the autumn woods. The dead leaves fall, a presage of the closing darkness and cold of the interminable winter. One more sound is heard, the approaching strains of a military band which nears the gate where the three sisters lean, crying. As handkerchiefs of passers wave, its brazen music passes, diminishes, blends into the silent air, silent but for the weeping. The model Russian husband tries to divert, by trivial antics, Masha's passionate despair. His kindness is hopeless and grotesque. The school teacher tries her typically Russian comfort of, "Never mind, people will be happier a hundred years from now." And again the creaking baby carriage—the falling leaves. . . .

No other dramatist has used such conflicting plots, each enough for a separate play, not according to accepted dra-