

Books and Things

OF all ways of reading a novel the worst, I suppose, is to read with the intention of reviewing it. Unless it is a great work of the imagination, or a thriller, you never quite lose sight of your intention. Part of your mind is on what you can find to say about what your author is saying. You fasten on details which are unimportant to the author, and which would be to you if you were not reading to write. The page out of which you can make your own kind of copy acquires an artificial value, and you neglect all the impressions which cannot be defined in your words. Out of the dozen impressions you are capable of receiving you select the two or three you are capable of talking about intelligibly.

Various ambitious plans took shape in my head a few days ago, while I was reading Mr. J. D. Beresford's new novel, "These Lynnekers" (New York: George A. Doran Company: \$1.50 net). When bent upon pleasure I am a slow reader and a passive, who seldom finds out his opinion of a book except by accident, later, long after the reading is over. When reading to review I make a conscientious effort to be brisk-minded, to react sharply, to sit up and take notice. I went at "These Lynnekers" resolved not to use in my review either "life" or "world" or "real," all three of which words it struck me that I had been overworking. I was almost resolved to do a short definition of realism, a little different from other definitions, and then to detach Mr. Beresford's realism from its background, to bring it forward and show its three dimensions and its particular tints. One paragraph was to begin like this: "Mr. Arnold Bennett's belief that everyday life is endlessly and always exciting is in danger of getting petrified into a dogma. One reads 'Hilda Lessways,' for example, in a condition of nervousness lest Hilda shall be unable even to drop her handkerchief on the floor without savoring the wildness of reality." Quite unavailing did I fire the starter's pistol: The paragraph would not get off its marks. Just as well, perhaps, especially as this beginning contained two of the words I had determined to avoid.

Here is a third paragraph of that unwritable review: "Nothing is easier for a novelist, provided he does not understand his business, than to copy or exaggerate the realist's gestures without getting the realist's result. In vain does such a novelist choose his events for their drabness and his settings for their familiarity, or exclude with the last rigor from his dialogue all that a stenographer or a phonograph could not have put there. In vain does he study his men and women from living specimens of the various average. The end of all his labor is our incredulity. Lacking talent and craftsmanship, he fails to achieve that wonderful credible texture for which infinite pains are necessary and inadequate."

Having described in these words what Mr. Beresford is not, the transition to what he is would come of itself: "Mr. Beresford has mastered the difficult art of making us believe in the probable and realize the everyday. While showing us places as unfamiliar as London boarding-houses, characters as unfamiliar as rural minor canons, he manages to give us an acute pleasure of recognition. When we lay down his book we are confident that we can match its colors from our own experience, if we are a little sensible in picking the proper counter in the proper shop, and we are right. Few living novelists are better than Mr. Beresford at life-imitation."

You can see why all this would never do in a real book

review. Scarcely a word of it that would not apply quite as accurately to some realist who was not Mr. Beresford. I struck a more promising lead when I asked which was more difficult for a novelist—to make the probable seem probable? or to make improbable seem probable? In the days of Oedipus any oracle had authority. But if Oedipus was to realize how terribly his special case was involved in the threat he heard at Delphi, his own past must be revealed to him suddenly as the exactest preparation for the fulfilment of just this threat. He tells in the first act of Hofmannsthal's "Oedipus und die Sphinx" how this revelation was made, and we realize as never before how at Delphi, in old days, a man might easily be shaken by a vision of his lurking wishes brought to light and fulfilled. Was Hofmannsthal's feat more difficult or less than Mr. Beresford's cumulative success in compelling every-day things to make their own lifelike droning noise? The question was all well enough, barring the fact that I could not give any answer.

Mr. Beresford's estimate of Dickie Lynneker's ability, or perhaps I should say the difference between Mr. Beresford's estimate and my own, sent me up another promising blind alley. The central figure in the Jacob Stahl books was not what is usually called a successful man, and there was something very lifelike in the contrast between the modesty of his success and the undoubted fact of his intelligence. In "These Lynnekers" I was struck by the contrast between Dickie's moderate ability and his immoderate success, and for a while I hoped this contrast had impressed Mr. Beresford, that he would present it to us as a criticism of success. But he did not. He believes in his hero's ability. Suppose White, Weld & Company had a branch bank at Litchfield, Connecticut, took a twenty-two or twenty-three year old clerk out of it and into their New York office, kept him there five years and then offered him a junior partnership, the young man having, you understand, no pull whatever. Something like the English equivalent of this experience happens to Dickie Lynneker, who rejects the offer, choosing instead to become an assistant to the Astronomer Royal. I remain incredulous, convinced that the Dickie Mr. Beresford shows us had just ability enough to become, at the age of thirty-five perhaps, a division superintendent with a future. Here, very obviously, was the place for an aesthetic question. Why is it so much easier to believe that a hero can run a hundred yards in ten seconds than to believe that his brains are superlative? Partly, of course, because he runs no risk of shaking our belief that he is fleet of foot. And partly—but at this point I stuck fast.

Of course I could mention other bad starts, but I have said enough to illustrate the foolishness of reading a book to review it. Now if I had read "These Lynnekers" innocently, and if a friend had asked me what I thought of it, I could have answered unlaboriously. It is as real and as readable as the Jacob Stahl books, I should have told him, the setting is more agreeable and just as amusing, more of the characters are clear, particularly the clergymen, the women are like the Jacob Stahl women, mostly faint or blurred. And there's something new in the new book—an extraordinary talent for doing family tradition and family likeness, and for making Dickie Lynneker both differ from his tribe and also keep a few tribal markings.

As a matter of fact, I did get as far as this in my answer to an inquirer. I should have gone on, too, if he had not said, "Look here, I didn't ask you to review it, did I?" So I merely told him it was able and not exciting and miles ahead of the ordinary novel.

P. L.

An Inquiring Tale of the Great War

The Dark Forest, by Hugh Walpole. New York: George H. Doran Company. \$1.35.

IN this story of the great war we go with the Russians to Galicia. The characters belong to the Red Cross. Two of them are Englishmen; Durward, who purports to tell the story, is a psychologist and analyst. He burrows deeply into the penetralia of persons and things. The obvious scene he does not neglect; he describes it with vigor and imagination; but what is below the surface draws him irresistibly. The soul is the element that he is after; and when the pursuit is for soul the reader needs to be both patient and unexacting. The soul of Russia—how considerable a problem is projected in those few words! Tea, vodka, enigmatical fair women, despair, suicide—this is the interpretation of Russia in some Russian novels lately published here. We recall also from the fevered pages of one of them a roast sucking pig with a sauce of sour cream, devoured gluttonously by a fat physician in piping hot weather. This war tale from an English hand catches something of the dark shade that overspreads many of the Russian philosophic novels. Both Durward and Trenchard, the other Englishman, here have an intense curiosity regarding death. Both of them are mystics, and so is Dr. Nikitin, the giant member of this Red Cross group, who cherishes through many silent and morose hours the memory of the wife of little Vassilievitch, a lady who remained entirely dear to her husband notwithstanding that he knew her affections were divided.

Trenchard was quite unlike the Englishman that we are accustomed to find in novels. He is pictured for us as standing under a murky light in the vast and gloomy railway station at Warsaw in company with the large-eyed and romantic Marie Ivanovna, another of the Red Cross people. The pair had become engaged in Petrograd twenty-four hours previously in a moment when Marie had been betrayed through building for herself a mistaken ideal. Her romantic eye in that enchanted Petrograd moment had deemed poor Trenchard to be an adorable figure. The impression was fatuous, the results were painful. Bathed now in the cold realism of the Warsaw station Trenchard stood revealed for what he outwardly was. He was a weak, a timid figure. In every awkward movement a boyish embarrassment made itself visible. He stammered, he blushed, his hands wandered stiffly and convulsively as they sought to hang in graceful unconcern. Poor devil! Poor Marie! She sought to restore the shattered ideal. She was hurt because it was shattered. In vain the efforts of this conscientious girl. Dr. Semyonov joined the Red Cross group. He was a figure of strength. On the battlefield by his side Marie, who in Trenchard's company knew herself for a coward, walked without a tremor. How should the romantic heart choose? Marie, because absolutely she could not help it, chose the tremorless and reassuring Semyonov. Trenchard's heart protested. He suffered. But he was as faithful as little Vassilievitch. There were still objects to be pursued with interest in the world. Death, that very curious manifestation and transition, was one of them. We have no desire to be flippant, but Trenchard kept one eye upon Marie and the other upon a matter that had always interested him.

There is clear and excellent description in some parts of the chapter upon "the invisible battle." Galicia has been a place sorely disturbed in recent days. On the night before

the invisible battle Durward slept in a peasant kitchen. His mattress was spread on the rough earth. His feet were extended under the huge black oven. Over his head hung a gilt picture of the Virgin and Child. They bowed and smiled in the candlelight. "It was a terrible night," says the story. "On a high pillared bed set into the further wall an old Galician woman, her head bound up in a red handkerchief, knelt all night and prayed aloud. Her daughter crouched against the wall, sleeping perhaps, but nevertheless rocking carelessly a wooden cradle that hung from a black bar in the ceiling. In this cradle lay her son, aged one or two, and once and again he cried for half an hour or so protesting, I suppose, against our invasion. There was a smell in the kitchen of sour bread, mice and bad water. The heat was terrible, but the old lady told us that the grandchild was ill and would certainly die were the window opened. The candle we blew out, but there remained a little burning lamp under the picture of the Virgin immediately over the old lady's bed." Perhaps an invisible battle should not be described with the clearness that marks this introduction. As we come to the battle we find the narrator filled with fancies. He was whispered to by "Something"—with a large first letter. Perhaps the whisperer was a dark green oak that bent down and said: "You're drawing near—you're close—you're almost there. In a moment you will see—you will see—you will see." A "Creature" obtruded itself—a personification of a bomb-shell. The roar of it seemed to lift the narrator far into the sky, hold him there, rock him, then drop him gently. He repeated to himself stupidly, "What? What? What?" The shell destroyed part of a barn. In this battle Durward's feet did not "touch the enchanted ground." He appears to complain of this. The meaning seems to be that he was bothered because he was not killed.

The dark forest was an uncanny place. It had thick leafage but afforded no shade. Trenchard explored it and made horrible acquaintance with the Austrian dead. It embosomed a village that had been smitten with cholera as well as torn by the shells of the contending armies. These matters are described with a realism that does not spare. The mating of Marie and Semyonov was not written in destiny. Trenchard proceeded to the end in his investigations of death. As for his ultimate relations with Marie, it is for the reader to determine the possibilities in the case.

E. D. BEACH.

Utilitarianism

From Bentham to J. S. Mill, by W. L. Davidson. (Home University Library.) New York: Henry Holt & Company. 50 cents net.

UTILITARIANISM is the most recent of philosophic memories; and it is well that it should have found in Professor Davidson so able and so sympathetic an historian. His book, indeed, is perhaps of more narrative value than of critical importance. He is concerned rather with the delineation of a portrait than the discussion of its meaning. But he writes always with a bright clarity that is pleasing and informative. I know of no small book on his subject that so admirably fulfils its purpose.

It is good that we should have the means of seeing Utilitarianism in its historical perspective. We have been a little too eager to accept the current opinion that its doctrines have lost their efficacy. It is true that the fundamental assumptions of its psychology are now known to be