

Books and Things

DURING the past week many of us have waited breathlessly for news from Verdun. The possibility that this time a German army would be thrust deep into the side of France has had fear's power to shake us. Although we wish the Allies to succeed, and although we are not blind to the harm their cause will suffer if the Germans break the French line, yet this larger anxiety has been for the moment put aside by an intenser anxiety for France herself, so exposed and so resolute. We love France as if the country were a person. You may tell us that to care so much where knowledge is so slight is to be sentimental and unrealistic. That may be true. But realism is only one need of the spirit. It is not the sole need. If some of us are right in thinking we have a liking for realism, and if we do not choose to be realistic about France, then it is as plain as platitude that the causes of this choice lie deep, that we make it because we are grateful for pleasures we have really had. Our acquaintance with France and the French is imperfect and superficial. Our ignorance is great. But objects quite as imperfectly understood have inspired some of the most genuine affections in history.

No man understands friendship who can explain his choice of friends on merely rational grounds. It is just as hard to explain one's liking for French landscape, which may easily seem insipid to eyes blinded by delight in the gorgeous improbability of the tropics, and in which you miss that sense of something over, of acreage to spare, often given by landscape in the United States. Yet a few springs ago, while we were travelling south from Paris, I wondered how anybody could fail to enjoy a landscape so accessible to man. We went at a gentle pace, according to modern notions, through miles of faint greens turning vivid, following the river along shaded roads, down wide valleys cultivated everywhere, giving one a feeling that everything had long been put to human uses. Everywhere was the touch of orderly, diligent, waste-hating French hands. Then came a welcome breath of the north before the real south, when we looked at the high-lying spring snows on the mountains about Grenoble. Through the colored windings of a gorge with no one in it we came out upon windy Provence, into a country of plain and low hills as fine as etching. After all this wind the stillness was very still at Valescure, where we woke up one morning with the Mediterranean light in our eyes.

In almost all this landscape, in the way we had taken from Paris to the Côte d'Azur, there was an economy, a terseness, that made one think of an orderly mind. Knowing so little French, one saw, in the people along the route, who are so different here from there to anybody who quite understands, only the traits common to nearly all, the faces alert with something which is at first almost suspicion, which changes easily into a self-respecting courtesy, and which takes equality as a pleasant matter of course. Being on the move all day, however, and mostly shut up through all this French scenery to the sound of our own voices, one didn't hear enough French, enough of that voluble speech in which every sentence is somehow concise. Perhaps this was why our journey, lying mostly through such accessible landscape, left an impression of the inaccessibility of France? This illusion did not survive a return to Paris, where French speech flooded in again as

one did the usual pleasant things. It is because one understands French so ill, and speaks it worse, that the French seem inaccessible when one is among them, remote in their long tradition and their present habit. In the country one is brought to think of this tradition by the many signs of that long patience which has had its way with the soil. Here in Paris it is the older streets, the narrow passages below crenellated towers, that waken sleeping memories, that give one a sense of tradition, of time, of a country which has been great for so many years.

The interest on these visits to France, although when I am there I am conscious of the isolating power of an inaccurate ear and a stumbling tongue, is paid when I get home again and take up a French book. I hear French voices as I read, and some of them are so kind as to speak now and then with a French accent. My eye remembers too, after its fashion, and my pleasure in reading is heightened by this presence of a visible and audible world. The very journey which made me realize the inaccessibility of France now makes French books more accessible than they had been. Somewhere in this universe I sit and read. What is this universe? "C'est une sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part." To say with a talker's ease things as difficult as thought—what an art of prose! To give to calculated order, to hard intellectual structure, such an air of naturalness, almost of improvisation! To confine a richness of varied elements into sentences as simple as poverty! With a casual hand to place each of these sentences where it can look backward and forward! Here are closeness with ease, with profundity, gaiety that diffuses light. How lurid Latin luridity is, and how Latin! By its side our English prose looks turbid and slipshod.

A bookish pleasure, people may say who insist upon distinction between literature and life. But even when we are tasting, smelling, touching the most real of real worlds, our life is only something that goes on inside us. It does not require that the stimuli we are responding to should have animal or vegetable life of their own. Life can be better measured by the intensity of that process which is going on inside the man or woman who is doing the living. Often for days on end I am asleep in life and only wake up when I begin to read. Sometimes I am exhausted by the society of persons who think they can open their closed minds by taking them to walk through a museum of modern topics. After such an experience it is a relief to read Montaigne, to remember that nobody, in any of the three centuries since his time, has had a mind more free, to feel a deep gratitude to the nation of whose free spirit his genius is the most complete expression.

Free minds are not possible to most of us, but a belief in their existence is possible, and it was from France that some of us first got this belief. From France, too, we first learned, although never before so solidly as in the past year and a half, that qualities we had been taught in youth to look upon as mutually destructive, could exist side by side in one nation, that the light hand might be strong, and the laboring mind take its ease. Of France we may know little, yet our affection is real. It springs from gratitude for qualities we wish the world to keep. Gratitude is at the bottom of the anxiety we have felt, for a week past, while listening for news from Verdun.

P. L.

The Upstart

The Belfry, by May Sinclair. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.35.

MISALLIANCE of the social sort is a good theme for Miss May Sinclair. Her acuteness is just right for the situation of a well-bred woman in love with a brilliant *parvenu*. She is enough in a tradition to account for that tradition gracefully where Mrs. Humphry Ward would account for it obsequiously. She is enough of an adventurous soul to fling open magic casements on a perilous marital sea. But rewarding as Miss Sinclair's past performances have been, "*The Belfry*" has an unusual quality. Crisp, sure, incisive, it shows full command of a drama and it has a full drama for command. A word like hysteria is a dangerous word, but there have been novels of Miss Sinclair's in which her nervous energy was certainly all too nervous. Here there is a firmness of touch and tone. She has an exacting subject. She manages it with a surprising and delighting verve.

And besides this magnetic quality, there is, for the peculiar purpose of this narrative, an extremely skilful contrivance of the plot. Everyone knows how hard it is to convey the brilliancy of a fictional "genius." The bald assertion, the painstaking substantiation of genius are all to no good. But Miss Sinclair has here, to my mind, shown her greatest tact as a novelist. The story is told by the genius's gentlemanly rival for Viola's hand. Just by the degree that we accept the rectitude, the propriety, the slight priggishness of the narrator, we feel Jevons all startling and stunning. He stuns the narrator. He does him up. And, since we judge by relativities, we are able to conceive of him as really doing up someone besides an infatuated creator. The testimony of the rival goes a long way to make the genius valid.

In attempting to speak as a man Miss Sinclair dared greatly. Her narrator is not serenely in male character all the time. It is a feminine eye that is charmed by Jevons' vivid flush, his "two rather prominent white teeth pressed down on his lower lip." It is a woman who feels: "if he'd been handsome he'd have been dreadful," "I may say at once I was prostrated as any slave before his conversation." But these are trifles, and disputable. The main thing is the value and the success of the invention. Especially as it involved the vast difficulty of justifying the relations between the bounder who wins and the fair gentleman who loses, punctilious where punctilio seals his doom.

The romance of Miss Sinclair's rumpled little *parvenu* is the romance of the will-to-power. "I know I am writing about a man whom many people still consider a great novelist and great playwright," the narrator says. "God knows I don't want to disparage him. But to me what he has written matters so little; it has no interest for me except as his vehicle, the vehicle in which he arrived; which brought him to his destination quicker perhaps than any other which he could have chosen. His talent was so adroit that he might have chosen almost any other; chance and a happy knack and a habit of observation determined his selection of the written word. Compared with the spectacle of his arrival, what he has written is neither here nor there." It is this "arrival" for which his genius was most complete. And where he wanted to arrive, "most awfully," was not merely at reputation. He had the necessity all the more to arrive at the citadel of Viola's heart.

For the ultimate censorship is the woman's, and if Jevons could not win against that he was still an illegitimate. A single man of any origin may go far against any set of traditions. He may disrupt legislatures and judiciaries and universities and academies. He may conquer clubs and secret societies and homes. But whom may he marry? And who, after he has married, will know him, will frank him from one inside circle to another as a person who understands the inexplicable, a person with the right shibboleth and the *convenance*? Does he come with an expectancy that he is to rub noses? In itself an amusing habit, but it suggests possibilities. If too many such possibilities are suggested, society will make his marriage morganatic. He may make what he likes of his overt successes. There is no court to which he can appeal against the *moue*.

It is this Jevons knows, and it is this Miss Sinclair dramatizes. But she shows that for the woman, too, there is a counterbalancing problem. To the making of her family may have gone "great streams of empire and of race, streams of august tradition, of sanctity and heroism and honour, and beautiful looks and gentle ways and breeding." The eruptive gestures of a Jevons may break out like a rash on this surface, but—"bursting, as he was, with vitality and invading with the courage and energy and genius of a conqueror a world that was not his"—his campaign could become the woman's, providing his fire was for her a divine fire. And Viola does make the bounder's campaign her own, up through his triumphs of watchful sensitiveness and conciliation, up to the awful efflorescences of prosperous self.

One admires so much the turn of episode in this novel, the drama itself shouldering and swinging forward the characterization, that one regrets at the end to demur. But in spite of the skilful sanction given to Jevons by the war, the question does arise as to the price of the sanction and the quality of the "arrival" that he makes. This excellent novel is not the creature of a moment. It must have been deep in Miss Sinclair for a long time before the war. But the war swept her to a climax that, whatever its eloquence, is full of a particular ideology, and one cannot help marveling a little at this ideology, though it is projected with such art.

When Jevons precipitates his marriage with Viola by going madly off with her to the continent, people suspect that Viola is "horrid." It is essential to the story Miss Sinclair is telling that Viola and Jevons should not be "horrid"—that they should have spent their time consumed with the outdoor beauty of the belfry at Bruges. Similarly, when the war comes, it is essential that Jevons should be equally intelligible—not as an artist, a man of ideas, a genius, but as a socially conceivable mate. And he seeks himself in the war to make good with Viola by making good with her own tradition. He gets immunity for jerking his thumb by literally losing his hand. This does round up the romance of his "arrival." But that arrival requires profound conformities. Against these conformities there is, of course, nothing to urge. One does not propose seduction and "cowardice" as the only choice open to Jevons. But one perceives that in avoiding seducing and cowardice Jevons avoided the real crux—the crux that is suggested to snobs when a man drops his aitch.

Of course Miss Sinclair has a right to make her bounder do nothing to contravene the ultimate requirements of Reggie, Viola's beloved ramrodded military brother. But doesn't Jevons' satisfactoriness about chastity and courage beg the whole question? The test of a society's radicalism is the basis of sexual selection. What is the range of the