

## Books and Things

YOU remember, no doubt, the question put by Miss Elizabeth Bennet to her father, after he had read out the first letter ever received at Longbourn from the Reverend William Collins: "Can he be a sensible man, sir?" Part of Mr. Bennet's answer is not relevant here, but you recall the beginning: "No, my dear, I think not; I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse."

When I picked up *Sixty Years of American Life*, by Everett P. Wheeler (Dutton, \$2.50 net), my ignorance knew nothing about Mr. Wheeler excepting what any one may learn from those anti-suffrage letters which he contributes, at seemly intervals, to the New York Times, and from his eminence at the New York bar. What can you infer about a man from his eminence at any bar, however keen the competition there? Ability he must have, to be sure, for without it he could not have gained and kept such a position. You can infer little else. The color of his character may be anything between hottest scarlet and the most tepid gray. He may believe that this is the best of all possible worlds or "*que le bien public est formé d'un grand nombre de maux particuliers.*" His life may be lived either in humility and self-tormenting or "stately in quiet high-bred self-esteem."

More revelatory than Mr. Wheeler's professional egotism were his anti-suffrage letters. Read now and then, on the days of publication, and neither collected, I am sorry to say, nor perfectly remembered, they left an impression that is still distinct. Their author, it seemed to me, must be a man who has heard himself called to a round of triumphs over the suffragists. The terrible ease of these triumphs does not provoke him to mistrust their genuineness. On the contrary. He is tempted to celebrate every letter as if it were a real victory, to beam mildly upon the spectators with a kind of thin geniality.

"Can he be a sensible man?" My answer, with nothing but those letters to go by, was no. I began his *Sixty Years of American Life* with some hopes of finding him quite the reverse. Before long every one of these hopes was extinguished. I lost first the expectation and then the desire that Mr. Wheeler should provide me, at his own expense, with ill-natured amusement. When I came to his account of the signing of the call which led to the organization of the New York Bar Association, the only passage that almost satisfied my malice, I almost wished that Mr. Wheeler had worded it differently: "Besides the names already given, A. J. Vanderpool, Dorman B. Eaton, F. N. Bangs, Luther R. Marsh, Charles F. Southmayd, F. R. Coudert, and E. W. Stoughton were among the signers. These all have passed to their reward. Among the few founders who remain are Joseph H. Choate, William G. Choate, Julien T. Davies and myself." Yes, the unintentional implication does raise a smile, but this is the only passage of its kind in the book.

How Mr. Wheeler's narrative will strike a reader already familiar with the ground covered I, of course, cannot say. To me, whose memory is such that history is always fresh and new, Mr. Wheeler is very readable. His book is the record of a persistent fight against the spoils system, a high tariff, sloppy and thievish municipal government, the free coinage of silver. It took brains and public spirit and hard work to make these fights count, and some of them could not be made at all without physical courage. A passion for businesslike ways, a hatred of fraud and waste, a determination to supply poor folk with baths and fire escapes—these were among the motives of

the early Reform Club reformers. The tasks they set themselves did not call for very speculative minds. In their world it was not difficult for an industrious man with a level head to reach definite conclusions. For them in the midst of their problems the labor of forming an opinion was less than the labor of making it prevail.

Mr. Wheeler is very much at home in this Reform Club world. He has its clear perception of definite things to be done, its readiness to sacrifice time and money, its belief in the efficacy of argument, whether as speech or pamphlet or editorial article. Do not misunderstand Mr. Wheeler when he says "the political experience of New York for fifty years has shown the falsity of the phrase that 'the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy.'" He is speaking for a short ballot and for giving public officials large powers and responsibilities. Any man who thinks the majority will listen to reason is in his way a believer in democracy. No member of Reform Clubs, no organizer of Bar Associations, can be said to distrust the electorate if he thinks he can persuade it by fair argument to draw its decisions from these respectable wells.

In the Mr. Wheeler who wrote this public-spirited and virtuous book I can see no resemblance to the writer of Mr. Wheeler's anti-suffrage letters. He says nothing about suffrage. He mentions fifteen women in all, and always without a suggestion that their sphere is the home, preferably their own homes. What he says about one of them, who appeared before him in a posture likely, one would have supposed, to give him pain, is even surprisingly sympathetic. He is describing an open air meeting where he made a tariff reform speech: "In front of the platform there had found her way a young woman riding astride on a beautiful black mare. Her riding dress was appropriate. She sat the horse to perfection and managed to keep her steady in the midst of the shouts of the crowd and the music of the brass band." Not one reproving word, please notice, although this young woman was at a political meeting, far from the domestic hearth, and appropriately dressed for straddling. Men have been called tolerant for less notable silences.

No, this Mr. Wheeler is not like the anti-suffrage letter-writer. What is he like? Denied by an inscrutable Providence the privilege of meeting him in the flesh, I can only chance a guess. He is not a writer who leaves a vivid record of himself. If you put him near the Charles Francis Adams of the *Autobiography* he looks colorless. But would such a juxtaposition be fair? Would not Adams lose a good deal of his color if you put him next to Saint Simon? Nevertheless, if one isolates Mr. Wheeler, and compares him with nobody, his plumage is by no means gay. Its predominant tone is straw color.

In the preface to *You Never Can Tell* Mr. Shaw tells us that Finch McComas, lawyer, has "a brow kept resolutely wide open, as if . . . he had resolved in his youth to be truthful, magnanimous and incorruptible, but had never succeeded in making that habit of mind automatic and unconscious. Still, he is by no means to be laughed at. There is no sign of stupidity or infirmity of will about him. He would pass anywhere at sight as a man of more than average professional capacity and responsibility." Of Mr. Wheeler I should say that his incorruptibility and truthfulness were not quite unconscious, and his magnanimity not quite automatic. His book is not unlike that which Finch McComas might have written, if Finch had been an American, a believer in the Christian religion, and had felt as sure as Mr. Wheeler feels of his position at the bar.

P. L.

## After the Play

IT is much to ask, yet I crave a few moments' attention while I sketch an exotic tale of domestic complication and infelicity. I present for your inspection a good business man, hearty, robust, with unclouded mind and unjaded senses. He owns a wife who is compact of enthusiasms and whims and megrims. She is very expensive to keep, but our business man can afford her, and by George, she's a daisy! Like King Ahasuerus, the husband loves to display his lady unveiled before the assembled guests, that they may admire and yearn in vain. This adds piquancy to his sense of possession. Nothing exotic in the story as yet. We all know the husband if our power of observation is good, and some of us might even find a clue to him through introspection.

As for the lady, flattered as she ought to be by her prominent position in her lord's inventory of properties, none the less she is often unaccountably restless. She has headaches at will and repulses the kindest and most comforting caresses with a peevish "If only I could be let alone! I'm so tired! I only want rest." Of course the husband knows that this is not what she really needs. She needs to be amused, diverted, and if there is any amusement or diversion to be bought, by George, she shall have it! Such a superb woman, all his own! It goes without saying, all the spinster aunts and pillars of morality in the neighborhood have very definite ideas of this menage. They are all for the husband, such a fine, vigorous, devoted fellow, and against the wife who doesn't know how well off she is. She was doubtless spoiled in her father's home, and has become still more spoiled in her husband's. What she really needs is a taste of hardship, sorrow. Fortunately there is a child, as an additional guaranty to her husband's title. But do you know, she hardly ever pays any attention to the child? It loves its nurse better than its mother. This story is still not exotic, you say. But it is tending toward the unwholesome.

Now I introduce a third character. We'll have him a poet, though I'm sure I don't know why we should represent poets as the chartered wreckers of propertied domestic felicity. The lady's soul opens like a flower to the poet, who is champion of the new morality that renounces property rights and repudiates personal responsibilities. It is a scheme of morality very conducive to vigor and variety of poetic composition. Not a very nice story this, but yet not exotic.

The lady's proprietor, naturally, does not relinquish his rights without a struggle. The traditional morality is hurled at the poet, who coolly parries with the new morality. Physical force is tried, but physical force never leads to conclusive results. The poet would like to effect a rational arrangement by the terms of which surface conditions would remain in status quo and scandal be avoided. The poet, you see, is a prudent, if courageous modern, and while willing to risk an advance beyond the firing line, would prefer to utilize all available cover. The husband might be induced to make this poor best of a bad bargain. At least the form and outward glory of proprietorship would be preserved. But here everything is thrown into confusion by the lady's neurotic whims. She is done with proprietorship, form and substance. She has no respect for firing lines and the greatest disdain for cover. It is a hideous situation for the husband, and as for the poet, rather embarrassing. For responsibility seems about to grip him by the throat.

Let us hasten discreetly through a brief period in which

poet and lady drown past and future in present happiness, the poet gradually going over to calculations as to the length of time this sort of thing can still yield literary inspiration, the lady gradually attaining to a knowledge that the new morality is only the negative of the old, equally a man's world product, equally heedless of the depth and delicacy and purity of a woman's soul. In the meantime something like moral evolution is going on in the deserted husband. There was really more in him than proprietary instinct, after all. He has swallowed his humiliation and all he wants is to get his wife back. On her own terms; she may keep her poet, if she desires, he will remove himself from his own home if she demands. Only let her pride not stand in the way. He tries to work on her through the child: to deprive her of it does no good; well, he will be generous and arrange to leave it with her every other day.

"What an exasperating fool that fellow is," comments the poet. "Good Lord, after eight years of married life what more could he have to say to you?" Two months have about exhausted all the poet has to say, and there is new inspiration somewhere else. "But if he really wants you back, why not?" Why not? And why? These two questions, each unanswerable, subsume the whole universe as it presents itself now to the lady. Next morning she is dead, and husband and poet are buying wreaths for her, the one pathetically striving to extend a shadowy proprietorship into the world beyond, the other striving tastefully to express the appropriate emotion.

The foregoing is the theme of Ossip Dymow's *Nju*, presented at the Bandbox theatre by Urban and Ordynski. I've interpolated the spinster aunts and pillars of morality, partisans of the wronged husband. They really belonged in the play, but they happened to be in the audience instead. The whole tribe of dramatic critics have fled from *Nju* in horror. And yet it presents a serious dramatic problem of general interest, sincerely handled. It is an interesting production, although far from a finished one. The text really needs further adaptation to the American stage. The acting is uneven, and there may even be some question as to whether Mr. Urban has reached a final distribution of his wonderful lights. But it is not on points of detail that capital charges have been brought against this play.

In their amusements men are more likely to display reactionary tendencies than in any other department of their lives. The theme of *Nju* is revolutionary and might therefore be expected to arouse the antagonism of the public's accredited representatives. The spectacle of a woman's life crushed out between the old morality of proprietorship and the new morality of irresponsibility is unsettling. It is much more unsettling than a play openly vicious. After all, property is attended in the world by theft. In a sense, theft is a kind of homage to property. Therefore a broad-minded proprietor may laugh indulgently over a bit of thieving, so long as his own possessions are under lock and key. He can have no indulgence at all for the crime of attempting to reconstitute the basis of property. The peccadilloes celebrated in the more or less pornographic plays on Broadway depend for their savor upon the acceptance of a general scheme of proprietary morality. There is, therefore, nothing subversive in them. *Nju* neither accepts the proprietary morality nor does homage to it by conduct that any discriminating observer would characterize as vicious. This is the exotic, alien, murky, dank, unwholesome thing in the play against which the critics cry out in dismay and rage.

A. S. J.