

Books and Things

AMONG my books I have just come across a mutilated volume of plays—an act and a half of *Man Marks the Earth*, and a nearly complete last act of *Room at the Top*. I seem to remember buying the book, five or six years ago, at a second hand shop, and putting it on an unfrequented shelf. The title page is missing. No printer's name appears anywhere, but from internal evidence I put the author down as American. I quote a few scenes from the first act of *Man Marks the Earth*, in the hope that somebody will tell me who wrote it. My curiosity is not acute, yet I should rather like to know whether my guess is correct as to the date of the play, which I assign to the nineties of the last century.

The scene shows a two storey room in a New York apartment house. It is after dinner. The men have not yet come in. The hostess, a young woman called Penda Beeching—wasn't Penda, by the way, the name of an early king of Britain?—is sitting with her mother, who seems to have taken an Englishman for her second husband, and with two friends, May Wheatley, conventionally conventional and rather prim, and Mrs. Arden, very low-necked and preternaturally calm.

May is surprised to hear that Mrs. Arden, who has seven children, wants more.

Lady Merriam: Why should you be surprised, my dear? One has only to look at Beatrice Arden. An excess of temperament, decidedly an excess of temperament. Of course she will continue to have children. Where there's so much fire there must be some smoke.

May, frankly disgusted: Upon my word, Lady Merriam!

Penda, bending affectionately toward her mother: You're feeling very fit tonight, aren't you, mamma?

Lady Merriam: Dear me, I suppose what I said *was* clever. All my life I've lived in terror of bright old ladies and now I *am* a bright old lady. It's most annoying.

Mrs. Arden, a little wistfulness showing through her almost opaque serenity: I wish my husband could hear you, Lady Merriam. He always says I'm a bit of an iceberg.

Penda: Not an iceberg, Beatrice. Only one-ninth of an iceberg shows.

Mrs. Arden, after a moment's thought, simply: I'm glad you like my dress.

Nothing much happens in the first act. Lady Merriam says to Penda, of her husband: "That reminds me, my dear. Beeching's manners have improved since my last visit to New York. But still I wonder who he *could* have known before he knew *us*." Later, when the men have come in, and are talking of a Swiss peak some of them intend to climb in the summer, Beeching says of mountaineering, with what the playwright calls devastating oratory: "No doubt the danger attracts minds of a certain stamp. Personally, I have never undergone the fascination of danger, although I am in no sense of the word a timid man. I neither court danger nor shun it. And, after all, there is danger everywhere. Under the polished surface of modern life there is still the wild beast in each of us, capable of being deadly to his mates." Beeching's pompous silliness points to a husband-wife-lover play, yet I am not sure. One of the men, May Wheatley's brother,

unmarried, does make a mild brand of love to Penda, when she and he are alone, but she more or less laughs at him:

Wheatley: Don't laugh, Penda. You make me feel that you don't really care two straws.

Penda: Not half a straw, Lewis. No—listen. I like you very much. But not "too well," as you call it. Not in that way at all.

Wheatley: You've made that clear enough. As clear as your eyes.

Penda: And I've a piece of advice to give you—from an old friend *to* an old friend. If ever you care about a woman—really care, I mean—either keep the fact to yourself, whether she's married or not, or else say so straight out. Don't go about, as you've been doing the past few weeks, letting her know in little treacherous ways.

Wheatley, deeply hurt: Treacherous? I don't much like that.

Penda: Well, what else would you call it?

Wheatley: You make me feel all kinds of an ass.

Penda: And that's often a tonic feeling, isn't it? Anyhow, more bracing than the way you've been making me feel, lately. For although I've not thought much about your behavior—I've been fearfully busy—yet it *has* given me a curious self-consciousness, so that being with you isn't so pleasant as it used to be.

Wheatley, gratified: So it *was* pleasant? Really?

Penda: Yes, yes, of course. But lately you've made me feel as if—well, as if the air about me were heavy, languid, enervating, tropical. So much so that at one time, if you had come to me and said "I love you"—like that, you know, frankly, stupidly—I should have welcomed the words like a breath of the north in the south.

Wheatley: But how could I say it before I knew how you felt? And I'd say it like a shot now, if you only cared.

Penda: Oh, now! It doesn't matter what you say now.

Wheatley: You really care as little as all that?

Penda: That's not the reason. It's merely that I've found the key to your behavior. It's your confidence, your absolute confidence that no matter what you said to me you would still be safely talking to the wrong woman.

Wheatley: The wrong woman, Penda? The woman I've loved so long across the seas?

Penda: Well, a woman whose indifference you could rely on, if you like that better. You see, I had a sudden vision of you, Lewis, I saw you talking in the same strain to a woman who loved you, and who was unwise enough to believe you meant all you implied. And when you found out what you were in for—when you made the shocking discovery that she was the all-or-nothing sort, with all her hopes on all—well, you got a nasty jar, Lewis. I could see you pull your moustache, the way you're doing now, and I could perfectly hear you say, "H'm! That's damned awkward."

After a scene between Penda, her husband and her mother, a scene in which we learn that Penda wants a divorce, that he is dead against it, Penda and Beeching are left alone, and the act ends in unexpected and irrelevant violence, which I won't go into. The impression left, as I said before, is of an author who wrote in the nineties, when lively old ladies trying to shock us were in fashion, and who touched his manuscript up, who put in words like "uplift," several years later. Some day I hope to learn whether I have guessed right, and whether anybody else ever heard of these plays.

P. L.

Out of a Bygone Age

Diplomatic Days, by Edith O'Shaughnessy. New York: Harper & Bros. \$2.00.

IF you pick up two books on the same subject, one written just before the French Revolution, the other after 1795, you are pretty sure to be impressed by a subtly pervading difference, as if the books had sprung from fundamentally different civilizations. I am not speaking of books dealing with history or political science, whose subject matter would account for the change, but of books on such subjects as music, belles lettres, or natural history, upon which the enthusiasms and agonies of the Revolution could have had no direct bearing. After the Revolution there was a new tone in men's thinking. Perhaps it was because they were less disposed to take anything for granted. Old values had been challenged, and even men who regarded those values as unshaken felt the necessity of offering a formal defense of them. Is a similar change silently working its way over the thought of today? Sometimes one gets an inkling that this is the case. These letters of Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's, for example, written between May, 1911, and October, 1912—what is it that makes them sound like a voice from the dim past?

Mexico, to be sure, is still the same land of wonder and beauty and passion; why should an obscure change in world thinking alter the values in Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's beautiful pictures? Will any political change in the world abate the enthusiasm with which one first beholds "the two great volcanoes, high, rose-colored, serene, ineffably beautiful against the sky, still a pale tint of bleu de nuit?" And will any age fail to respond to scenes like the following?

"The lakes were yellowish silver mirrors, the eternal hills swam in their strange translucence, the great volcanoes pierced a lovely sky; all quite relatable, except just what it is that pulls your soul out of you as you look upon the deathless beauty and think of the dark, restless, passionate races whose heritage it is. As we turned to descend the old stone way, the shining city afar was as if suddenly dipped in purple, but the sky above was of pure and delicate tints, lemon, saffron, and pale pink. We drove silently home in a many colored twilight."

Mexico has never been so gorgeously painted in words; one is tempted to quote indefinitely. But what we are now trying to puzzle out is why even the author's landscapes date themselves as of an earlier era. Perhaps there is a clue in this: "There was an immense exhilaration in the fitting of the mind to such a remote and gorgeous horizon, and suddenly I found it did not matter if it were peopled or not." To the diplomatic mind of other years, the population was a more or less negligible encumbrance that went with the land. "In the tropics the white man is king, be he Yankee, Spaniard or Northman, and it is part of the lure. The abundances of Mother Earth are for his harvesting; a strange native race seems there to do him honor, render him service, asking only in return enough of the abundance to keep soul in body for the allotted span. Exploiters, some would call them; but it seems to me they gather up all this vague splendor, this endless abundance, with benefits to the greater number." And just one more quotation to clench the point: "But now, with disorders menacing huge foreign interests a new element of discord and complication comes in. As the generations renew themselves with certainty and promptness, in the end the blow to things industrial is the most

serious; and don't think me heartless for stating this simple, cruel truth."

Men and women massacred do not count for much, but alas for the railways torn up, the mines sealed, the oil wells set ablaze! There used to be such a point of view. It would not greatly interest us if it had been the point of view of an individual, but it was that of a caste, the international diplomatic corps of an age which had never thought of democratizing this fraction of its life. It was the point of view of Americans as well as of British, Germans, Japanese. Did this greatly matter? We must bear in mind that the diplomatic corps at Mexico City represented in Mexico international public opinion. And Mexican events could not move wholly without regard to the public opinion of the world.

Mrs. O'Shaughnessy arrived in Mexico City near the time when the Diaz régime gave way to that of Madero; and her volume reflects the opinion of the diplomatic corps almost up to the Huerta revolution. There was naturally great regret over the fall of Diaz. The memory of Diaz transmitted by Mrs. O'Shaughnessy is that of a strong man, upright, intelligent, who gave Mexico order and prosperity, and encouraged taste and culture. Her attitude toward Madero is at first one of open minded curiosity. He struck her as a type apart, not specially Mexican, such a type as appears rarely in history. She noted the illumination of his plain, indefinite features, "he seemed scarcely to be walking with the sons of men." He had been dubbed the Apostle, and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy was apparently not absolutely certain that the title might not have mystic significance. This, however, was an individual variation of opinion. It is worth noting that while Mrs. O'Shaughnessy was thus groping for the essence of the man, her husband, our efficient secretary of the legation, was trying to get Madero as presumptive presidential successor to commit himself to the settlement of some rather exorbitant American claims for injuries inflicted in border affrays. Mr. O'Shaughnessy was not very successful in this, and apparently formed an unfavorable opinion of Madero in consequence.

As time passed diplomatic opinion set steadily against Madero. He was "wrapped about with illusions and dreams." "His glance was more than usually introverted and speculative, his unacquisitive hands were behind his back; but can Mexico be governed by a well disposed President from Chapultepec terrace?" So the author writes on March 7. On April 26 she writes, "That dreamy face of his makes me think of the schoolboy's definition of an abstract noun, 'something you can't see,' and those hands, with their soft and kindly gestures, are so unfitted for grappling with this special Leviathan—and consequences are pitiless. Alas for the peu de politique et beaucoup d'administration of Diaz." On May 5 she notes that the "Apostle" is beginning to feel the need of armed forces at his back; "appeals to virtue are not proving more sufficient for government here than they would be elsewhere." On May 7 she sets forth that "all business enterprises are deadlocked, and many dark, as well as light complexioned ones, having things to put through, doubtless long for intervention." And on September 16 she reports the caustic remark of the French ambassador, "Il veut gouverner avec des vivas." Diplomatic opinion had tried Madero and had found him utterly wanting. It had also reflected upon the merits of possible successors, De la Barra, man of the world, Lascurain, shrewd and energetic, Huerta, *muy hombre*. It had speculated upon the possibility that Madero might be removed