

Books and Things

ONCE in a while, when I feel old and remorseful, I am conscious of a wish for another life and a fresh stack of chips. To one or two persons, who died years ago, I should be glad of a chance to explain that my behavior to them never meant what in fact I suppose it did mean. But in general, when I look back over my life in this world, I can find among my more persistent regrets few that life in any next world would be likely to set right. In no next life by me imaginable do I see myself learning to read Greek about as easily as I now read French, or changing from an awkward and dizzied climber into a fair mountaineer, able to do without disgracing himself the Zinal Rothhorn or the Aiguille Verte. In the next world, you know, people don't do such things. Perhaps that is why my hunger and thirst for immortality is intermittent and undevouring. Perhaps that is why, as I wait here in Carnegie Hall for Sir Oliver Lodge to begin his lecture on the evidence for survival, my curiosity is so much stronger about the lecturer than about his subject. I am here because, having read *Easy Mathematics* once upon a time, I am keen to see the author of that wise and civilized book. A state of mind which he would think paltry in any hearer of his glad tidings.

Sir Oliver, when at last he makes his appearance, looking perhaps five less than his sixty-five years, surprises me by his height and mass. He must be well over six feet, and is saved from stoutness by a noble frame of bones. He stands almost still, his left hand on the desk, his right on his hip or in his hip pocket. His few gestures, made without swing-back or follow-through, seem to express quite naturally some irrelevant feeling, slighter than the feeling he is expressing at the same instant in words and tones. His intonation is so little English that you would never guess by it what country he hails from. His articulation has here and there a nicer precision than ours—there is no sound of sh in his mode of saying "issue" or "crucial", and his "crucial" is almost a trisyllable. He accents one or two words as we mostly don't in this country—"purporting" for example on the first syllable. The first e in "telepathy" is long. But one notices these unfamiliar things only because they are so few.

Once or twice he uses the word momentous, but his manner is not momentous at all. It is as little apocalyptic as the style of his *Easy Mathematics*. Nothing could be simpler. It is a manner aware that a grave decision is to be taken, a choice of great moment to be made, it expresses his sense of this with sincerity, and at the same time it implies a repugnance to convincing us against our wills. He wants his appeal to be to our reason only, wants us to use our minds, wants us first to hammer-tap every wheel that carries his train of reasoning and then to listen, after each blow, so critically, for the sound. How scrupulously he abstains from heating our hopes until they become ardent, burn away our demand for evidence, and make us eager to accept assertions we have not tested. Deeply though he believes, devoutly though he wishes us to be partakers in his healing faith, he would no more have us come to his conclusion, save by the way of proof that to us is urgent, than he would have us take his word for it that the cube root of 5832 is 18.

What he has said so far, now when his lecture has fairly started, is perhaps a little more general than you had hoped, than you had expected, amounting indeed, so far as I remember, to little more than a statement of his reasons

for regarding our survival of bodily death as not more improbable, antecedently, than several other things that all civilized mankind now assumes to be true. More important, much more important to his hearers than to Sir Oliver Lodge himself, is the fact that he who did not believe in human immortality, who did not even wish for it on his own account, came at length, after scrutiny of the evidence, to certitude. By this mere fact, much more than by the arguments which he obviously thinks more weighty, he has surprisingly aggravated our unwillingness to disagree with him. It is our minds that he wishes to persuade, yet his persuasiveness, without his knowledge and against his will, comes from his voice, his bearing, his honesty of intention.

Then follows the proof, which we approach via telepathy. A, whom the medium never saw before and never heard of, gets a message from B, who is dead—a message of references and allusions to things known only to B and A. May not this be a case of telepathy, of thought transference as it used to be called, of the medium's reading A's mind? Yes, it may be, no doubt it often is. But suppose the dead tells the living not something which only they two know, but something which the living didn't know and which is afterwards ascertained to be true? Sir Oliver cites cases in which precisely this has happened, cases which, if no one has lied or been deceived, are inexplicable upon any hypothesis except that of survival. A soldier who was killed in France, and of whom neither the medium nor the person consulting the medium had ever heard, sends a message. His luggage is on its way home. In a certain place in one of his bags are certain letters. If they get to his wife and family they will do harm. He asks that his luggage be intercepted, that the letters be destroyed. The letters are found where he said they would be, the dead soldier's wish is fulfilled. To Professor Richet in Paris, some years ago, just before Queen Draga of Serbia and her brothers were murdered, came a message from their grandfather—*la mort guette famille*—death is lying in wait for the family. Upon investigation Professor Richet discovered that the message arrived at exactly the moment when the murderers were setting out for the palace.

Well, the lecture is over. On my way home I try to account for my disappointment. The nature of the evidence? Not altogether. I did not expect Sir Oliver Lodge's cases to be different in kind from the few I had read in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*. Perhaps I had expected the lecture to be an exposition of the difference between the operations of a sceptical and those of a credulous mind. I had expected the narrative of a more rigorous scrutiny. I had hoped for a sight of the sceptic at work, testing and rejecting and refining, reaching at last a certitude made contagious by his demonstrated expertness and thoroughness as a weigher of evidence. What I had heard was a few anecdotes, told by a man whose good faith was beyond question, and whose personality was so winning that one would be glad to oblige him by believing anything he chose to say. He had appealed to everything except one's mere mind, the only thing he cared to appeal to.

My dissatisfaction, however, is not all with Sir Oliver Lodge. Some of it is with myself. Am I one of those men, hateful to John Milton, who will neither answer solidly nor be convinced? And perhaps, if the choice between belief and disbelief in survival were to me a "living option," or if my not extinct ambitions were such as a conceivable future life might encourage, I should not now be coming so empty away from Carnegie Hall.

P. L.

After the Play

HARDLY ever does a dramatist start absolutely from scratch. He tries, if he can, to steal a patriotic lap or two; or to gain ten yards because he is willing to josh the highbrow; or to inch ahead because he is all for mother-love or because he is strong for the Down East Yankee or because his heart is somehow inevitably where the audience wants it to be, viz. in the right place. Not to give a hoot for this tyranny of the audience, not to beg one bit of indulgence or to sneak one moment of favor—that is unusual, and the play that starts from scratch in this spirit stands an excellent chance of going to the warehouse in a week.

But this can hardly be the fate of St. John Ervine's new play at the Garrick Theatre. Jane Clegg is too well performed, too well set on its feet by the playwright, not to triumph over the predilections of its public. And if it does master those predilections in the first instance, it has the stuff in it to run through the season.

There are only five adults in Jane Clegg; and the main gentleman of the play, Henry Clegg, is not what you would call a hero. The play is an English play and Clegg is a small clerk whose household consists of his mother, his wife and the two children. It is immediately made obvious that the head of the family, Henry Clegg, is the moral objective of the drama. Henry "don't behave proper." He is, outside the drab respectability of his home, something of a sport, and his sportiness and rakishness are regarded with grimly sober concern by the wife who chooses to endure him. Henry has a partisan in his mother. Mrs. Clegg is a fond mother, quick and contentious in her favoritism and mentally about as diverting as the drearier patterns of linoleum. She admits that Henry is a guilty sinner. (There was one episode of infidelity that Henry could not dispute.) But Henry's mother confides to Jane Clegg that this is the inevitable. "Men's guilty sinners." And Jane is felt to be a stiff-necked woman because she does not submit. To Jane the matter presents itself differently. Jane suffers from intelligence. She is no longer illusioned. She is no longer young. Henry is important to her because he is part of the children's milieu, and she wants to believe in Henry so that she can keep the milieu as it is. But Henry is poor stuff and she knows it, and her own small fortune of a few hundred pounds she is keeping intact for her children against the time that Henry goes to pot.

Starting with this state of affairs, certainly not too exhilarating, Mr. Ervine proceeds with a soundness and ingenuity of invention that deserves all sorts of praise. He makes Henry—cheap skate, light weight Henry—come blowing in with that Oh Man verve which is the pre-Freudian sign that someone has a complex. Jane gives Henry his supper, his bottle of beer, his cold meat, his napkin. And after the feast Henry discloses the fact that he has a grand mysterious opportunity to invest some of Jane's legacy. Jane seriously asks for particulars, which the strong man—pledged to secrecy by his "friend"—is compelled to refuse. Jane exhibits a sad distrust of her husband. She wants the money for her children's education. She won't hand it out in the dark. Henry perceives that he is not trusted, that he is slighted. So does his mother. And the happy home once more goes under a cloud. Jane and the mother take their unhappiness to bed with them, leaving Henry to brood over his lost sovereignty and the incalculable capriciousness of woman.

Light is soon shed on Henry's need for capital. A book-maker calls, to demand twenty-five pounds that Henry

owes him. He is a nasty little bookie. He needs the money badly himself and he doesn't care how ugly he is to his client. Henry tries to bluster, tries to placate. Then he confesses, what the bookie has suspected, that there is a woman to explain Henry's shortness of cash. Her name is Kitty, Henry fatuously expands. Yes, and Kitty is in the devil of a stew. They've been that afternoon to the doctor, and the doctor thinks . . . Which only means that the bookie gives Henry unwilling grace till Thursday.

The good solid fact of Kitty's pregnancy is now before Henry. As an outside order-clerk he has possession of the firm's check for enough money to take Kitty and himself to Canada. He cashes the check, hoping to get away before the firm finds out. He is not the sort that stands the racket.

But the godly cashier of Henry's firm learns that Henry has not turned in his check, and he comes to Henry's home to make a solemn inquiry. This gives Mr. Ervine a delicious chance to show how differently, in the absence of Henry, this news of the missing check affects Henry's mother and Jane. Henry's mother snaps unpleasantly at the cashier. Henry's mother is a disciple of Decatur: my Henry, right or wrong. Jane suspects the truth. She assures the cashier that the money shall be returned. What disturbs her is the implications of Henry's need for money. Has he been gambling? Is there another woman? What does it mean?

Henry bluffs on his return, then sees that Jane will back him and confesses to having used the money to pay his gambling debts. His lie is almost successful but the bookie turns up snarling for his money. This brings out one discrepancy after another. Henry is cornered and Henry squeals.

The really brilliant interpretation of Jane Clegg comes at this point. Cornered at last, Henry seeks to explain himself to Jane. Is he, as the bookie sneers, an "absolute rotter"? He admits he's a rotter, yet he tries to make Jane see that she was too good for him. She forced him to live beyond his moral means. With Kitty, the cushioning Kitty, he has struck his level—he can make good with her. But he couldn't live up to Jane. This, of course, is Henry's exit. Jane is left minus a minus quantity which, in a way, is a plus. But it is the end of an imperious expectancy, which is the tragedy of Jane.

In having Miss Margaret Wycherly for Jane and Mr. Dudley Digges for Henry Clegg the play is immensely fortunate. Mr. Digges showed in John Ferguson his capacity for revealing without sentimentality and without glamour the true lineaments of a weakling. In Jane Clegg he paints a somewhat similar figure. He exhibits human meanness in a manner that would earn the hisses of any unsophisticated audience, and he does so with an amplitude of observation and perception for which Mr. Ervine must surely be thankful. Miss Wycherly is a similarly candid artist. Her Jane Clegg is acted with a firmness and a secure reality that make the performance completely distinguished. It might be called a repressed performance, but only if the word is meant to imply that in its repression there is the whole history of Jane Clegg's handling of life. Miss Wycherly's portrait is full of dignity, power and intelligence and adds immeasurably to the pleasure of Jane Clegg. Miss Westley is more than capable as Henry's mother, and Mr. Henry Travers and Mr. Erskine Sanford do as much for the rather static bookie and cashier as their parts permit. The two children are no better and no worse than we are now hardened to expect. They lead one to believe that children's place is in the home.

F. H.