

Books and Things

GIVEN an author whom you like, and a book of his which is easy to read, and which makes you like him less, are you glad or sorry to have read it? If you are glad, your gladness is not necessarily malicious. In youth I was unduly influenced by George Eliot, who kept me on moral tenter-hooks during several months, imprisoned in her conviction and Miss Prism's that "as a man sows so shall he reap." Without malice, with innocent pleasure at being untied and let out, I read her official Life, by the light of which I saw her no longer as a stern daughter of the voice of God, but as a rather solemn and elderly lady, capable of calling something "half unveracious," a letter-writer with a heavy hand.

By how much was I glad to have read George Eliot's letters, by so much was I sorry to have read a few essays by Henry Fielding. My liking for Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones had not been a bondage. Fielding imposed upon me no vision of the world which I had to get rid of, to unsee and forget, before I could look at the world again with such eyes as God had given me. His novels had left me free, pleased, incurious. So do Mr. Arnold Bennett's. No contemporary whom I rate anywhere near so high inspires me with less curiosity about him. And this is but half the truth. I suspect him of certain traits which I had rather not face. Unlike Mr. Bennett himself, who has said that "above everything else I prize intellectual honesty"—is "intellectual" just what he means?—I am often a coward "intellectually." Rather than see him as he is, as his Maker sees him when He looks his way, I accept my blindness. I refuse to behold again the amusement, the exhaustive and systematic skittishness, of Mr. Bennett when he is contemplating, for example, nausea. Strange to think that at some time or other, while man was still as primitive as the anthropologists would have us believe, just as there was a first murder, a first adultery, a first bad check, so there must have been a first joke about nausea. Had the first been the last I should have uttered no complaint. There are in A Great Man certain chapters I shall never reread.

There are no jokes about nausea, to the best of my recollection, in *The Human Machine*, *How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, or *Literary Taste and How to Form It*. Yet I was sorry I had read them. Openly and unashamedly and emphatically they did a little to lessen my liking for Mr. Bennett. They instigated, echoes of them still instigate, me to unreasonable and querulous fault-finding. Now, Mr. Bennett says in *Literary Taste*, Chapter IX, "now, the pleasurable sensations induced by the fortieth chapter of Isaiah are among the sensations usually induced by high-class poetry. The writer of it was a very great poet, and what he wrote is a very great poem." Rather too easy, rather too merely assertive, don't you think? Compare it with Donne: "So that if all those manifold and fearfull judgements, which swell in every chapter, and blow in every verse, and thunder in every line of every Booke of the Bible, fall upon all them that come hither . . ." Mr. Pearsall Smith's selections from Donne's *Sermons*, p. 19.

Or, taking a much less flagrant instance, let us go differently to work. Instead of choosing a poor passage from Mr. Bennett and contrasting it with what he might call a "high-class" passage from Donne, let us contrast Mr. Bennett when he is good with something better. From *Things That Have Interested Me*, Second Series (Doran, .50 net): ". . . and the panorama from the summit at

dusk is of a magical beauty. The time to see the romance of Lisbon is after the glare of the sun on the white, pink, and yellow buildings has begun to fade, when the washed clothes that flow down on poles from the windows of every storey in the quieter streets have lost their intimate detail in the twilight and become mysterious." From Mr. Whistler's *Ten o'Clock*: "And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us—then . . ."

Is it unfair thus to remind a writer of occasions when earlier writers have beaten him? It is. Then why do some of Mr. Bennett's books provoke me to this particular kind of unfairness? Things That Have Interested Me, because he has found many of these things interesting enough to be called good or bad, and not much else. The description just quoted is one of the least lazy. Often he puts us off with such loose-fitting epithets as unique, grand, inspiring, sublime, simply prodigious. And his competence as a giver of good marks and bad is too ubiquitous to be credible, too unhumorously complacent to be persuasive. And to be interested is for Mr. Bennett, if we had nothing to go by but *Things That Have Interested Me*, to be pretty monotonous. His tone is much the same whatever he is greeting, whether a fine wine, a bridge without a rival, the finest modern English prose, a perfect cigar, or the finest restaurant in the world. I feel as if he had learned in night-school, for we all know there is a night-school side to Mr. Bennett, to regard a raised voice as a good substitute for more specific response. With him on his travels I feel as if my fellow-traveller, when looking at the finest sunset in Europe, and when eating the finest soup in Europe, signified his pleasure by making the same kind of noise.

Suppose a competitive one man show, and that man Arnold Bennett, which of his books would get first prize? I should vote for *The Old Wives' Tale*, if I were one of the judges. Admitting that its best parts are not better than the best of Clayhanger, I should explain my vote, if asked to, by asserting that nowhere else in fiction, so far as I know, is the passage of time so like the passage of real time; that the book has a beautiful and a new shape of its own, for the sake of which Mr. Bennett has made no compromise, sacrificed no lifelikeness; that its design, although actually the result of sustained imaginative effort, appears to be the result of mere faithfulness to time and change. Nevertheless, *The Old Wives' Tale* is not the best of Mr. Bennett's books. Still unpublished, perhaps still unwritten, his best will be a cross between *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Denry*. It will contain, among other good and great things, his humor, his perception of anomalies and incongruities, his laughter at himself. Here a great moment, falling short of greatness, will achieve something different and better. Here a habit will knock an important occasion into a cocked hat. Everywhere the unlikeness of what happens to what was expected will tell us to keep an eye on life if we would enjoy and understand it. Here, too, we shall have Mr. Bennett's ingenious, his inventive, his imaginative cheek. How inexhaustible will be the overflowing granary, almost bursting the covers of how thick a book! In length and breadth, in height and in depth, it will be built to the scale of Mr. Bennett's genius. He will begin it, I think, without prayer but after fasting for a few months, after learning *How To Live For Awhile on Twenty-Four Words a Day*. P. L.

Fifty Years of Europe

Old Diplomacy and New, by A. L. Kennedy. New York: D. Appleton & Company. \$5.00.

"THE general public," says Mr. Kennedy, with regret, "seems hardly to consider the vital importance to its daily life of Foreign Affairs." It is the British general public that he is talking about; but he would have no occasion to revise his remarks if he were talking of America. Ruhr news is doing very well, in the great provincial press outside of the big cities, if it can climb aboard the second page; Bishop Manning, Fatty Arbuckle's reinstatement (pro and con), Dr. Coué and the McCormicks have won more favor in the first-page headlines. Interest in "foreign affairs," in both Britain and America, it seems, is still at low ebb. Mr. Kennedy deplors that fact—and writes his book expressly with the hope of waking up some portion of the populace. He is especially interested in attracting the attention of the British Labor party. "Its leaders should and will be called upon, before many years are past, to direct the foreign policy of the British Empire."

Mr. Kennedy's own interest in foreign affairs is possibly an inherited rather than an acquired characteristic. For both his father and his grandfather were members of the British diplomatic corps. He himself has campaigned all over Europe as staff correspondent of the London Times. His convictions, judged by the barometer of the Versailles Treaty, are definitely liberal. That Treaty's boundary lines he regards as "neither just nor politic" in certain instances; its economic basis is flimsy; its reparations items are open to the charge of "bad faith"; "a peace imposed is not a peace of equity"—and peace with a new Germany can be won only through a Treaty "freely discussed and unreservedly accepted."

What Mr. Kennedy has done with his interest in foreign affairs has been to write, with a style that swings along almost as easily as Mr. Strachey's, and imparts impressions often just as vivid, a history of British diplomacy from Salisbury to Lloyd George. Sometimes the story throws new light on Europe's darker corners; Mr. Kennedy tells us, for instance—and it is news at least to the present reviewer—that after idealism had failed to bring Bulgaria into the war beside the Allies, Sir Edward Grey dispatched a certain "Mr. F." to Sofia with two million pounds, to see what that sum, skilfully employed in high political circles, might accomplish. On the other hand, there are parts of the story where Mr. Kennedy handles his material as if he were afraid it might explode. One sentence suffices for Britain's secret pact with Russia. Another single sentence disposes of Britain and her French ally cutting up the spoils of western Asia in 1917, lifting their heads occasionally, between successive lunges with the knife, to proclaim themselves the friends of freedom and the smaller nationalities. Surely a consideration of such events belongs in any treatise that attempts to handle *Old Diplomacy and New*.

As the story of the last fifty years unfolds in Mr. Kennedy's narrative—Salisbury, Lansdowne, Fashoda, Algieras, and the rest of it—there are two points above all others that come home to roost. One is the frequent fashion in which "liberal" governments turn "imperialist" once they get the taste of power: Mr. Gladstone, for instance, having denounced imperialism, proceeds, as Prime Minister, to annex Burma, the Somali Coast and the Oil Rivers, and to charter the British North Borneo Company and the Royal Niger Company. And the other is the way in which

"historic policies," today decked out with sentimentalism, date back to quite unsentimental bargains. The famous Entente Cordiale that lined up Britain with France in the last war goes back to 1904, when M. Cambon and Lord Lansdowne swapped Egypt for Morocco. The celebrated "rapprochement" between Russia and Great Britain (1907) was predicated on an agreement as to just how they would cut up the state of Persia, an innocent bystander throughout the whole proceedings. Italy, bursting into the war on the Allied side in 1915, first sent her terms to the Central Powers. The story of the last fifty years in Europe is a succession of highly self-enlightened counter-moves.

"Old Diplomacy and New." Just where, in this welter, the "new" diplomacy appears, it is difficult to gather. "To the public eye," says Mr. Kennedy, "the difference between the old diplomacy and the new seems to consist in doing business at conferences instead of in the chanceries and anterooms of professional diplomatists." That, however, is only a surface view of things, Mr. Kennedy believes; but it is hard to tell where, in that case, he does think the "new" diplomacy begins. For the last few chapters of his history are overcrowded with the "old."

It is only by inference that Mr. Kennedy suggests what he means by a new order. From his salute to President Wilson, when that statesman arrives in Paris with twelve of his first fourteen points, it is to be judged that Mr. Kennedy regards a disinterested consideration of international political and economic aspirations as one item in the "new" diplomacy; from his comments on Lord Salisbury it appears that he regards a certain openness of method as another: "Diplomacy was the closed preserve of the professionals in the Victorian age, and few persons then questioned the desirability of complete secrecy."

It happens that Mr. Kennedy's book is prefaced with an introduction by Sir Valentine Chirol; and the notion that there is any established "newness" in contemporary diplomacy Sir Valentine effectively explodes. There is a new conception of conduct between nations, he suggests; but scarcely a new diplomacy—unless it be in the sense of a diplomacy with new faults. Diplomats seem less ready to take the advice of experts. That is something new. Diplomacy is also controlled in more cases by great financial and industrial interests. That is also something new. And then diplomacy has acquired something new in the line of hypocrisy. The Treaty of Berlin, the last great achievement of the "old" diplomacy, was far from an ideal achievement; but at least it was straightforward. "It scarcely professed to have any loftier aims than a distribution of territories in accordance with the reputed interests of the Great Powers." Compare it with Versailles.

Mr. Kennedy does not touch upon the point so explicitly, but it is the impression of the man who writes his introduction that Versailles has its excuses. "If the Paris Peace Conference is to be taken as a criterion of the 'new diplomacy,' we must admit in mitigation of its partial failure that it had to deal with a cataclysm such as the old diplomacy was never called upon to face."

Versailles had too great a task before it. And the fact is, that in any real emergency the task will always be too great—until the same inventiveness has been applied to politics that has been applied to the modern industry which sets the pace for politics. The "new" diplomacy is not primarily a matter of right-mindedness and conviction. It needs machinery for a more realistic grip on facts, a more realistic appraisal of them, and a more workable subdivision of them into units men can handle. CHARLES MERZ.