

# THE BOOK TABLE

## SOME REFLECTIONS ON MIRRORS<sup>1</sup>

**A**MONG the recently published books that have been most talked about are three volumes of personal gossip and criticism which are related through marriage to one publisher and have a strong family resemblance, although two of them were written in England and one in this country. Nobody except the publishers knows who the authors are, although many people claim to have discovered them by the internal evidence of style and circumstance.

The first of these volumes, entitled "The Mirrors of Downing Street," appeared four or five months ago. It consists of a series of pen portraits of thirteen distinguished British statesmen who were prominent in the conduct of the World War. This brilliant, readable, frank, and sometimes cutting book prompted some American author to write a series of pen sketches of American statesmen connected with the World War. The American volume is called "Mirrors of Washington." The third and latest born of the triplets is called "The Glass of Fashion" and is written by the author of "The Mirrors of Downing Street." It is also very personal and very critical of certain phases of English society.

I have read these three volumes with unusual interest and discussed them with various friends and acquaintances. They belong to that category of books which are talked of in the lounging-rooms of clubs or at the afternoon-tea table. They gratify that incurable love of gossip with which all mankind is afflicted. I say all mankind because the love of gossip or of knowing what your neighbor says and thinks and does is a male as well as a female trait. All biography and autobiography is a kind of glorified gossip, unless we accept as axiomatic the fact that meanness, spitefulness, or backbiting is an essential element of gossip.

The root of the old middle English word gossip was God, and the word originally meant sponsor or godfather or godmother; it then came to mean a friend or neighbor; and then confidential or intimate information about neighbors; and it finally degenerated into meaning tattle or scandal. Of course gossip of the "I says" and "he says" variety is cheap and futile, but when it rises to the height of well-constructed reminiscences it may become great literature. The most famous, if not the finest, piece of biographical writing in English literature, Boswell's "Life of Johnson," is almost wholly gossip or the narration of gossip, and the letters of James Howell, which flowed from a gossipy pen, are a classic.

Neither talk nor writing is to be condemned because it is gossip, but only when it degenerates into malicious or biting gossip.

"The Mirrors of Downing Street," "The Mirrors of Washington," and "The Glass of Fashion" are certainly not malicious, although they are frequently biting. The trouble with them is that they are one-sided. They tell the truth, but a kind of distorted truth. They are like those mirrors in penny arcades and amusement parks which send back extravagant and exaggerated reflections that make the thin and gaunt man twice as thin and gaunt as he is in real life or the fat man twice as round and squat as nature made him. The figures in these mirrors are recognizable and life-like in some particulars, but they are distorted.

The author of "The Mirrors of Downing Street," who has chosen for his pen-name "A Gentleman with a Duster," has undoubtedly written his book not merely to be readable (although it is decidedly readable) nor to gratify personal resentment (although there are some phrases in his pages which lay him open to that suspicion), but for a very serious and very commendable purpose. He thinks that political morals and political standards have fallen to a very low ebb in England; that its great statesmen are becoming petty politicians. "Where is there now," he asks, "among the possessing classes an example even of simplicity in dress, modesty in behavior, temperance in conduct, and thrift in living? As for any higher example—an example of wisdom, duty, self-sacrifice, and moral earnestness—it is nowhere visible in our national life to those who look upward. Until we recover this ancient spirit, our politics must continue their descent to the abyss and democracy will listen to the corrupting delusion of the economic Socialist." The author maintains this thesis by his pen portraits. Lloyd George is a man without culture, whose morality, once passionate, has become purely conventional. The author quotes with approval the saying of an English wit who remarked: "I believe Mr. Lloyd George *can* read, but I am perfectly certain that he never does." Lord Northcliffe is a man of great gifts, but of equally great shortcomings; "he is a boy full of adventure, full of romance, and full of whim, seeing life as the finest fairy tale in the world, and enjoying every incident that comes his way, whether it be the bitterest and most cruel of fights or the opportunity for doing some one a romantic kindness." "The truth about Arthur Balfour," he quotes George Wyndham as saying, "is this: He knows there's been one ice age, and he thinks there is going to be another." "Mr. Asquith, both by inheritance and temperament, was designed for a strenuous life, a strenuous

moral life. He was never intended for anything in the nature of a *flâneur*. If he had followed his star, if he had rigorously pursued the path marked out for him by tradition and his own earliest propensities, he might have been an unpleasant person for a young lady's tea party, and an unsympathetic person to a gathering of decadent artists; he might indeed have become as heavy as Cromwell and as inhuman as Milton; but he would never have fallen from Olympus with the lightness of thistle-down."

These quotations fairly indicate the brilliant but sorrowful pessimism of the book, and the author continues it in his second volume, "The Glass of Fashion." Indeed, he is almost a second Jeremiah, and jeremiads, while lively reading, sometimes become boring. He takes Mrs. Asquith's autobiography as a text for an essay in denunciation of modern English gay society. As a matter of fact, we like the spirit and manner of Mrs. Asquith's book better than that of "A Gentleman with a Duster." He condemns Mrs. Asquith for her smart repartee, and then proceeds to say himself very smartly that Mrs. Asquith "may be called the grandmother of the flapper." There is such a thing as a too passionate morality.

"The Mirrors of Washington" is simply an imitation, although a very clever one, of its English prototype. It is really quite full of clevernesses, but it is a cleverness that palls on the taste. It is quite full of amusing and often witty gossip, such as the statement that Mr. Wilson has recently said that Mr. Harding has "a bungalow mind;" or that the late Senator Knox explained Mr. Harding's choice of Senator Frelinghuysen, Senator Elkins, and Senator Hale as his companions on a vacation trip in the South by saying that the President needed "relaxation—complete mental relaxation."

Those who want relaxation—complete relaxation—may find in books of this character a temporary and entertaining use, but they are mirrors which are apt to reflect the weaknesses and pettinesses and vanities of the authors quite as distinctly as they do those of their subjects.

LAWRENCE F. ABBOTT.

## THE NEW BOOKS

MUSIC, PAINTING, AND OTHER ARTS

**LOOKING AT PICTURES.** By S. C. Kaines Smith, M.A., M.B.E. Illustrated. The George H. Doran Company, New York. \$1.75.

This is a capital little book. It tells about the purposes of pictures. It gives more than a hint at some principles of art upon which the untutored sightseer in a gallery may dwell. But not all sightseers are wholly untutored. Some may understand Raphael, yet Giotto or Giorgione not at all. Mr. Kaines Smith knows how to help both the wholly un-

<sup>1</sup>The Mirrors of Downing Street. By A Gentleman with a Duster. G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$2.50.

The Glass of Fashion. By A Gentleman with a Duster. G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$2.50.

The Mirrors of Washington. Anonymous. G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$2.50.

tutored and the partially untutored sightseer.

## FICTION

**KIT MUSGRAVE'S LUCK.** By Harold Bindloss. The Frederick A. Stokes Company, New York. \$2.

Largely a tale of sea adventure and about illicit trade in guns and munitions with Arabs on the West African coast. The Canary Isles are the center of action, and there is a tacit rivalry in love between two girls over Kit, who is an honorable seeker after fortune.

**QUIET INTERIOR.** By E. B. C. Jones. Boni & Liveright, New York. \$2.

Miss Jones's novel has won high praise from excellent critics, Hugh Walpole and a writer in the London "Athenæum" among them. "Quiet Interior" takes as a theme the love of two sisters for the same man. The renunciation of the one is a fine, spiritual bit of heroism. Characters and setting are pleasing.

**THREADS.** By Frank Stayton. The Century Company, New York. \$1.90.

An Enoch Arden, or, perhaps better, Ulysses and Penelope, story in prose. An innocent convict (they usually are innocent in fiction) is suddenly released and returns to embarrass his family, and especially his "widow," as she has in his absence called herself, and in consequence is worried by suitors. How he routs his rival and wins his wife makes a good tale.

**THREE SOLDIERS.** By John Dos Passos. The George H. Doran Company, New York. \$2.

So-called realism—a string of incidents, each of them perhaps as real as a photographic print or a phonographic record, but together the most unreal of unreality. It may please a few who came out of the army with a grouch, or who went into it as unconscientious objectors, or who gloat over goddams. What it reveals is not the life of the men who fought in France but the mind of the author—and that proves neither agreeable nor interesting.

**WITHIN FOUR WALLS.** By Edith Baulsir. The Century Company, New York. \$1.90.

A murder mystery story. The main point in such stories is to conceal the actual criminal from the reader's view to the last minute, and in this the book is ingenious. If the author knew more about criminal law, she would not talk about coroners' juries finding indictments.

## POETRY

**DIVINE COMEDY OF DANTE ALIGHIERE (THE).** Vol. III. *The Paradiso.* By Courtney Langdon. The Harvard University Press, Cambridge. \$5.

Doubtless the author and his publishers wanted to make the present volume similar in size to the already published "Purgatorio." But Dante students would, we think, gladly pay more for a thicker book or for two volumes, provided the author's 140 pages of valuable interpretation were printed in really readable type. The type's small size is the more noticeable contrasted, as it must be, with the superb printing of the text and preface. The book appropriately comes to us in this sixth centenary year since Dante's death. We

are glad that it appears in such a year, not so much because the "Paradiso" is the "Commedia's" crown as because this is a special year of inspiration in which to explain and expound anything from Dante, particularly the least known and the least understood of the three parts of his immortal poem. A reading of the present volume should make many a man who now does not appreciate the "Paradiso" say, with Lowell, that "nothing in all poetry" approaches "its imaginative grandeur."

## RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

**UNTRIED DOOR (THE).** By Richard Roberts. The Woman's Press, New York. \$1.50.

Jesus said to Himself, "I am the door." In this volume Dr. Roberts endeavors to lead his readers through this Door into the domain to which Jesus is the entrance. This is "The Untried Door." His little volume is practical rather than theological; suggestive rather than comprehensive; lucid rather than brilliant. It should be instructive reading to all who are endeavoring to find and follow the way of Jesus and to all ministers and teachers who are endeavoring to point that way to others.

## TRAVEL AND DESCRIPTION

**LAND OF HAUNTED CASTLES (THE).** By Robert J. Casey. The Century Company, New York. \$6.

This is a delightful book about Luxemburg, telling of its ancient strongholds, its quaint people, and of the little country's background as a barrier between perpetually warring neighbors. History and romance are well intermingled in a spirited narrative that tells of recent personal experiences as well as of the stirring records of past times. Many attractive photographs embellish the clearly printed pages.

## ESSAYS AND CRITICISM

**FRENCH ESSAYS AND PROFILES.** By Stuart Henry. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York. \$2.50.

Another volume from Mr. Henry dealing with Paris literary folk and its salons, theaters, and ballets, is sure of a welcome from all interested in French literature and French life. Our author has enjoyed personal acquaintance and friendship with the persons he describes; for instance, among others, Coppée, Coquelin, Dumas, Pierre Loti, Mistral, Rod, Rosny, Sardou. After reading about these worth-while folk, we feel as if, with the author, we had been actually calling upon them.

**TUDOR IDEALS.** By Lewis Einstein. Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York. \$3.50.

When we reflect that at the beginning of the Tudor reigns in England the country was inferior to other European countries, and when we consider what England meant at the end of those reigns, a book like the present volume becomes one of instant interest. The reader says to himself: "What were the Tudor ideals that transformed England into the British Empire?" To be sure, as Mr. Einstein admits, some of the stimuli to world activity and exploration came from without. There was, we believe, a certain consciousness of the age reflected by the Gothic impetus

in more than one direction, by the Reformation, and by the Renaissance. But there were also distinctly English ideals of life, philosophy, politics, religion, society. It was a great thing for those ideals and for the tendency of the age to transform a country rent by internal dissension to one second to none in Europe and out of which an overseas empire had been created.

## MISCELLANEOUS

**MEDICI (THE).** By Colonel G. F. Young, C.B. Illustrated. 2 vols. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York. \$15.

The latest edition of this work emphasizes anew the facts that it is the story of the Medici family as a whole (the history of no less than nine out of thirteen generations having hitherto remained unwritten); that the author takes a somewhat different view of the Medici from the general opinion, and that the volumes explain for the first time the meaning of certain contemporary pictures.

**PROBLEMS OF A NEW WORLD.** By J. A. Hobson. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$2.

The value of this book is that it enables us to see ourselves as others see us. It is neither a criticism nor a eulogy of American democracy; nor is it the author's personal view. It is chiefly a collation of opinions by thoughtful writers sympathetic with democracy, but not blind to its faults and its shortcomings. The author has evidently been an extensive reader of modern books and has shown wise discrimination in his selection and classification of their impressions.

## BOOKS RECEIVED

## TRAVEL AND DESCRIPTION

**PEEPS AT MANY LANDS: Australia and New Zealand,** by Frank Fox and P. A. Valle; **China and Japan,** by Lena E. Johnson and John Finnemore; **Italy and Greece,** by John Finnemore and Edith A. Browne; **Norway and Denmark,** by Lieut.-Col. A. F. Mockler-Ferryman and M. Pearson Thomson. Illustrated. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$1.50.

## RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

**LIFE OF CHRIST (THE).** By the Rev. R. J. Campbell, D.D., author of "A Spiritual Pilgrimage," etc. D. Appleton & Co., New York. \$3.

**NEW WORLD (THE).** By G. Murray Atkin. The Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York. \$1.75.

**OPINIONS OF JOHN CLEARFIELD (THE).** By Lynn Harold Hough. The Abingdon Press, New York. \$1.25.

**SPIRIT.** By E. P. S. H. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York. 75c.

**WORLD OF GOD (THE).** By Monsignor Francis Borgongini-Duca. Translated by the Rev. Francis J. Spellman. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$2.

## SCIENCE

**CONTROL OF LIFE (THE).** By J. Arthur Thomson. Henry Holt & Co., New York.

**TREND OF THE RACE.** By S. J. Holmes. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$4.

## MISCELLANEOUS

**ANGLO-SOUTH AMERICAN HANDBOOK.** Edited by W. H. Koebel. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$7.50.

**DYNASTIC AMERICA AND THOSE WHO OWN IT.** By Henry H. Klein. Henry H. Klein, New York. \$2.