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The Book Table

Edited by EDMUND PEARSON

Saints and Sinners

TWO large volumes of the letters of Queen Victoria¹ furnish entertainment, if taken in moderate doses. Historians may find in them what they like to call side-lights. That much-talked-about but elusive person, the student of human character, should not neglect them. These letters to and from the Queen and the entries in her journal cover the period from 1862 to 1878; the Prince Consort had died but recently, and the Civil War was raging in America. The kindly Prince, almost on his death-bed, had done a wise and statesmanlike act in softening the phraseology of the note to Washington and making possible a settlement of the Trent affair.

The sorrow of the Queen at the death of her "beloved Albert" was overwhelming, and many of her references to it must be read with pity. Nevertheless it is apparent that she took a woman's advantage of the situation, and used her grief-stricken widowhood without scruple to bully every one into doing her will. The text is given of the letter to Mrs. Lincoln at the time of the assassination of the President, and of Mrs. Lincoln's equally simple and noble reply. We learn that the impulse for the Queen's letter came originally from John Bright; we wonder if the real author of the reply may have been John Hay.

This was the age of Gladstone and Disraeli; Gladstone's letters are always stiff and correct, while Disraeli's had an occasional gleam of irony and almost waggishness. One extraordinary letter is from Lord Grenville to the Queen, describing the sudden death, while riding, of Bishop Wilberforce (Soapy Sam). Certainly, the demise of a distinguished prelate is a grave topic, but Lord Grenville has so phrased his communication that it is difficult to read the letter and keep a perfectly serious countenance.

The great Duke of Wellington comes from the pen of the Hon. John Fortescue² with his prestige in no wise diminished. It is an admirable biography, which could well be even longer. Some of the extraordinary events of the campaigns in Spain could be agreeably

expanded. Simplicity, energy, and iron devotion to duty were his characteristics. The conqueror of the greatest soldier of all time, he was by no manner of means to be compared with his antagonist as a statesman. Neither had a positive aversion to the society of ladies. His punctiliousness led him into much tiresome detail in civil life; he was an easy prey to autograph hunters, as he answered every letter. There are pathos and great beauty in the story of his later days.

There is pathos, too, in the story of Beatrice Cenci,³ although this book again explodes the legend of her saintliness. The supposed portrait of her is one of the most familiar in the world, and it is not Beatrice at all. That she and the other members of her family had a cause for the murder of her father which would secure sympathy for her to-day, even if it did not justify her act, seems to be undoubted. A nasty wretch perished when Francesco Cenci died. But there seems to be no foundation for the traditional charge which she made against him, and it is also apparent that Beatrice herself was a daughter of her time, no better and no worse than other ladies of the Renaissance. This is a detailed investigation into the manners and customs of a period which we are apt to look at through rosy glasses. Much of its hideousness is revealed by the unsparing researches of Signor Ricci.

This edition of the "Travels of Marco Polo"⁴ is attractive in appearance and fascinating to read. Mr. Komroff has written an Introduction in exactly the right spirit; it seizes one's interest from the opening sentence. One of the enthralling questions which is raised is whether the Church of Rome missed a great opportunity to convert China or escaped the danger of itself being Orientalized. Marco Polo viewed a wonderful section of the earth and looked upon marvels and oddities beyond compare. He might have corresponded with Queen Victoria on equal terms in one respect: there was not enough of the sense of

³ Beatrice Cenci. By Corrado Ricci. Translated from Italian by Morris Bishop and Henry Longan Stuart. 2 vols. Boni & Liveright, New York. \$10.

⁴ The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian. Revised from Marsden's Translation and Edited with an Introduction by Manuel Komroff. Boni & Liveright, New York. \$3.50.

¹ The Letters of Queen Victoria. Second Series. Published by authority of H. M. the King. Edited by George Earle Buckle. 2 vols. Longmans, Green & Co., New York. \$15.

² Wellington. By the Hon. John Fortescue. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York. \$3.

humor in the two of them together adequately to furnish a child of six.

With humble apologies to the great Queen and the great Duke, I am going to close these few remarks with a brief reference to one of those extraordinary Americans hight Billy the Kid.⁵ Born in New York not so many years ago and christened William—I forget his last name—he transferred his activities to New Mexico, where he died with his boots on and twenty-one notches on the butt of his gun at the early age of twenty-one. Universally lamented—with certain exceptions. The twenty-one notches stood only for white men; he did not count Mexicans nor Indians, nor possibly Chinese, Zulus, or Eskimos. He was not a good gun-man, like Wild Bill Hickock, who killed only in self-defense or in line of duty as an officer of the law. He was a bandit, with certain limitations and ideals, and, as Mr. Burns points out with refreshing avoidance of sentimentalism, he was a murderer. Mr. Burns tells the story well, and must have done no small amount of original research.

When the guests move out to dinner, Marco Polo will have to walk by himself. The Duke will naturally escort his Gracious Sovereign, while Billy the Kid will give his arm to Beatrice Cenci, and I think they will find topics for conversation. All the ladies liked Billy, and he is mourned by them even to this day.

⁵The Saga of Billy the Kid. By Walter Noble Burns. Doubleday, Page & Co., New York. \$2.50.

E. P.

Fiction

MOTE HOUSE MYSTERY. By Archibald Marshall and Horace A. Vachell. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York. \$2.

This novel is now wending its serial way through the pages of the London "Graphic" under the title of "Mr. Allen," a fair name for the book, which "Mote House Mystery" is not. There is no mystery about it. As soon as the story gets going (after the first hundred pages) we learn that the arch-villain is attempting to poison his stepdaughter in a most insidious manner, and the rest of the book explains how he is frustrated in this attempt and what eventually happens to him.

All this is well enough, but the eminent authors seem unable to decide whether they are writing one of those succulent truffles that keep England's lady novelists from the poorhouse, all about the dear sweet old bachelor who collects prints and loves to romp with the kiddies, and how he gives up the golden-haired lassie to the young fellow with the chest expansion; or whether they were



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