

LATELY having been fortunate enough to inhabit a little bark house on the outskirts of a green wood, with a view of quite as green a field from the other side, I have been wondering in intermissions between the industrious rattling of my typewriter keys, just what Nature really does with herself all day. I know what I do with my time. I work ahead upon the imaginings of my futile yet interested brain. Nature outside, meanwhile, keeps up certain small noises, in deep essential idleness. It has been like that all summer, with Her, I suppose, and will be like that all winter, till next summer. The grass and the trees go on growing in a doting doze, the chipmunks keep on chipping and monkeying and the insects must daze themselves with the continuity of their persistent pecking at the silence.

In Nature everything happens slowly and there is always plenty of time. I hurry to my work and hurry away from it. I throw myself into it with gusto or with desperation. And every time I cease for a breather, there is Nature's entire indifference outside doing absolutely nothing. Sometimes it is infuriating.

My mind revolves many domestic and financial problems. My mind vibrates with worry over my work. I am constantly lecturing myself about what I ought to do and ought not to do. None of which interests Nature. She sprawls out there sleepily in the sun, and if she could talk probably all she would remark would be, "Well, what does it all matter, anyway?"

"You fool yourself, my little man," Nature would probably lazily advise me. "You write at one of those agglomerations of ink and industry that you call a book. In spite of the fact that most of your year is spent in cursing other people for writing so many books you seize the first opportunity when you are alone with yourself to go and do likewise, to make more work for other people. You are entirely insincere and paradoxical. And the net result of all your imaginings that go into this book will probably, in the long run, do more harm than good. Look at me. I do nothing, or at least nothing that you would call anything. I merely have a simple, vast concern with general growth and decay. And the growth that I am concerned about is not the growth of thought. For thought at its furthest growth merely reaches the conclusion that everything is futile, a conclusion that I myself reached long ago. So I confine myself to watching the old humdrum pageants of the seasons, and the mere fact that a tree grows up out of an acorn and flourishes its leaves for a little while and then rots again into the soil is a spectacle that contents me. It means essentially nothing. It is merely a phenomenon. But a soothing one. I feel no sympathy for the tree. I feel, in fact, no sympathy for anything. Certain people have written about finding healing on the breast of nature. I can assure you, on the other hand, that nothing has so desperately bored me as the times when the futile little ants of human beings have flung themselves upon me with their empty sighs, their silly tears, or their ridiculous anger. These are all entirely futile manifestations. Why should anyone expect anything, strive for anything, or be disappointed if nothing happens? I am not. I am simply receptive. I suppose you will say that I have my thunderstorms and my earthquakes, — yes, and my volcanoes. But these are in no sense personal demonstrations. They simply serve to vary my fundamental tedium. I exist, in profusion, in passivity, in entire stupidity. That is my great blessing."

And I, of course, get extraordinarily irritated with Nature when I fancy her talking like this, and rush back to my work with a renewed and extravagant zeal. It seems to me that I am in dreadful danger of slipping into this awful inertia of hers. The stillness and permanence of a rock, the flat unresponsiveness of the earth under my feet, rather scares me. I want to put fire-crackers in tin cans and set them off all over the place. Make a big racket! Maybe that will wake up Nature!

But in Nature's ear it would be less

than the frail whining of a distant mosquito at night. "The nice ear of Nature," indeed! What was Lowell thinking off! I sometimes think that Nature is as deaf as a post. She is certainly as dumb as a fish.

Well then, idiot, why try to personify her? Nature is a great many things, not one. Nature has no personality. I suppose the reason is that when the little restlessness of man is alone by itself, the surrounding carelessness of Earth so annoys him that he tries to make it into a personality that he can attack. Nature is femininely personified because Nature means birth and growth. But then there was the great god Pan, who has so long been dead and is so often resurrected. But there was something demonic and mischievous about Pan that I myself do not find in Nature. Nature seems to me a vast somnolent giantess rather than a goat-footed fluting god. There is something restless in the conception of Pan that does not suit with the entire carelessness of Nature. Man created Pan as a symbol that does not truly symbolize, although I do not know what the poets would do without him.

And yet there is another voice in me that says, "Let the Silence sink in. It will heal. Let this inertia relax all your mortal nerves. You are still full of the induced vibrations of sterile towns, you are a squirrel in a cage. Yet the door of the cage is now open. Only you still revolve your cage with furious industry, and are, in reality, getting nowhere."

So insidious is the influence of Nature. I may be getting nowhere, but there are certainly several very definite things to be done and duties to be performed.

"Duties!" echoes Nature with slow amazement. "But I have no duties? What are duties? I have never undertaken to fulfil any obligations. I am here. I do not know why any more than you, but I have never been so utterly foolish as to try to inquire. While you and all your kind have built around yourselves a great complexity of necessities and duties and rules and regulations, I have done nothing whatever to justify myself. Why should I? I cannot possibly justify myself, since I do not understand anything except birth and brief life and the death of everything in its time and season, and the new birth of everything else on the heels of it. So I simply exist and observe. Which is the only thing that is at all sensible!"

"Nonsense, Nature!" I say briskly and emphatically. "Perfect nonsense!" But I am disturbed, and I sit for a long time thinking of nothing. Then I get furiously to work upon this futile article trying to mock away an influence that I cannot help feeling is entirely pernicious to a busy editor, even on a vacation!

W. R. B.

Foreign Notes

IN HIS "Das Haus am Ballplatz" (Munich: Verlag für Kulturpolitik), Baron Musulin, who drafted the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia which set the world on fire, presents the record of a well-meaning man whose capacities were not equal to a great emergency. His Memoirs are in a way an apologia, but they are not convincing when they come to the matter of the fateful events of July 1914. The defense he presents in that connection is that he acted merely as an amanuensis, the tragedy of his career having been, as he writes, "to have risen sufficiently high to see how things happened, but not sufficiently high to have a share in the decisions." According to him, the statesmen who decided upon the ultimatum fully expected it to be accepted by the Serbian Government, and were greatly surprised at the storm of criticism it aroused in the world at large. His book, aside from this portion of it, is a valuable work, presenting much information of interest to the student of Austrian politics and diplomacy.

The second volume of "Die Schlacht bei St. Quentin, 1914," edited by Kurt Heydemann (Oldenburg: Stallung), is like the first official monograph on the subject, a vivid picture of a modern battle. The narrative makes no attempts to conceal the shortcomings of the Germans, and presents a chronicle of confusion and lack of coherence and coordination.

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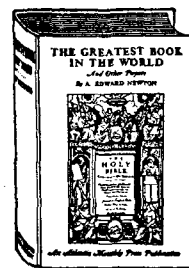


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The New Books

The books listed by title only in the classified list below are noted here as received. Many of them will be received later.

Belles Lettres

WHAT A MAN TOLD HIS SON. By ROBERT TORRINGTON FURMAN. Les Penseurs. 1924.

This small volume contains a series of short essays written as from father to son and dealing with various phases of modern life and thought, particularly with the religious, philosophic, and economic problems underlying society. At best experience is a difficult commodity to pass on to others, especially to the young. It is almost certain to become a drug on the market unless it happens to be concealed with enough humor, charm, and individual flavor to make the reader forget that a moral is being continually pointed. One is rather too conscious of "purpose" in this small volume, though much could be said for its sincerity and the conciseness with which the different problems are stated and discussed.

Biography

PRESIDENT WITHERSPOON. By VARNUM LANSING COLLINS. Princeton University Press. 1925. 2 vols. \$7.50.

John Witherspoon, like some of the other early American college Presidents, lived on two continents, and he wove himself into Scottish Kirk polemics, New World education, and Revolutionary politics. So versatile a man makes a hard subject for the biographer, and still more for the student of character. Mr. Collins has earned credit in that being secretary of Princeton University, he has written a great deal more than simply the story of a President of that institution. There seems to have been one master trait in Witherspoon that took the lead in all his diverse activities, and that held the other components of his character much in subjection. Witherspoon was inspired by a keen Scots critical faculty that took the direction of dissent. During his earlier years, he fought the Moderate Presbyterianism of Scotland in pamphlet and pulpit. He developed a mordant gift of satire, such as survives sometimes in Puritan souls that have suppressed in themselves both the softer emotions and the franker graces of expression. Yet when the offer of the Princeton Presidency came to him, the broader kindness of the men cropped but in spite of him, and though eager to go, he deferred to the objections of a timid wife, and would have stayed in Scotland, had she not ultimately overcome her fears. Once in America, he became an advocate of Scottish colonization, an earnest partisan in Continental politics, and at the same time, a college head of the most modern type, traveling, speaking, "doing publicity," hunting funds and students. Full of affairs and full of fight, whig and member of the Continental Congress, he kept his lofty contempt for the pleasures of life; found time to write on the sinfulness of the drama; and told a lady who found no flowers in his garden: "No Madam, I have no flowers in my garden, nor in my discourse either." Mr. Collins gives us a vivid picture of him: a strait, doughty man, a dissident by nature, and yet by force of circumstances a builder when he found constructive work immediately to his hand.

ARNOLD BENNETT. By Mrs. Arnold Bennett. Adelphi Co. \$2 net.
MAKERS OF NAVAL TRADITION. By Carroll Storrs Alden and Ralph Earle. Ginn. \$1.25.
H. L. MENCKEN. By Ernest Boyd. McBride. \$1 net.
MY EDUCATION AND RELIGION. By George A. Gordon. Houghton Mifflin. \$4.
SAMUEL PEPPYS. By J. Lucas Dubretton. Putnam. \$2.50.
NAPOLEON AND MARIE LOUISE. By Walter Greer. Brentanos.
WHAT I HAVE SEEN AND HEARD. By J. G. Swift MacNeil. Little Brown. \$4.00 net.
FROM IMMIGRANT TO INVENTOR. By Michael Pupin. Scribners. \$2.
THE LIFE OF JOHN BRIGHT. By George W. Trevelyan. Houghton Mifflin. \$2.50.

Drama

25 SHORT PLAYS (INTERNATIONAL). Edited by FRANK SHAY. Appleton. 1925. \$4.

This volume is merely another indication of the fact that the English-speaking races have surpassed all others in

their mastery of the technique of the short play. The play from Australia, "The Accomplice," by A. Marshall, is good but would be better if "Soul" were renamed "Conscience" as the two are certainly quite distinct. The Canadian representative: "Brothers in Arms," by M. Denison, is a delightful little skit of an "efficient" man who tries to hurry a lazy backwoodsman. England's play: "Pan in Pimlico," by Helen Simpson, is a charming bit, concerned with the eternal element in love. "The Marriage," by Douglas Hyde, is a typical Irish whimsy about a fiddler who wheedles gifts out of stingy neighbors for the new bride who has been kind to him. The play which represents America is certainly not America's best effort. The same might perhaps be said of all this collection. In striving to publish new plays, the editor has not been able always to choose the best.

Fiction

FAME. By MICHELINE KEATING. Putnam. 1925. \$2.

Her publishers announce that Miss Keating was 18 at the completion of her novel, thereby affording us an explanation of certain characteristics which are often the accompaniments of literary immaturity. These are most conspicuously evident in the youthful author's susceptibility to massive rococo interiors, extravagant and barbaric costumes, exotic scents and weird eccentricities of person, her awed wonderment over the physical and aesthetic charms of her characters, a naive enthusiasm for the life of the theatre as it does not exist, and the creation of exaggerated surface contacts whose psychological sources are never penetrated. Miss Keating's work seems to follow the conviction that, in order to prove interesting, fictional people must be abnormally brilliant, or appallingly sinful, or artistically eminent, or immensely rich, or fearfully notorious. By carrying out this theory each one of her vague, but towering, personages becomes a super-this or-that which bears no distinct semblance to a reality in the mind of the reader.

Briefly, the tale is the story of Namour, the illegitimate daughter of a celebrated actress who until her late teens has been safely reared in a convent, untouched by the pernicious atmosphere of her mother's world. The girl comes home to live permanently with the still gay and amorous *artiste*. Here a general bedlam of chaotic emotions and heart complications is let loose. Namour's hectic and incredible experience of love, sorrow, disillusionment, marriage, wealth, achievement and happiness fills the balance of the tale. Miss Keating seems to have gracefully mastered some of the difficult first steps of her craft and despite her crudities shows enough aptitude to warrant a hopeful view of her future.

THE FIRE WOMAN. By W. P. LAWSON. Boni & Liveright. 1925. \$2.

Mr. Lawson, in selecting for the materials of his story a fanatical religious sect of primitive, Mexican flagellants, the "Penitentes," said still to survive in the Truchas Mountains of Arizona, gave himself an enviable opportunity for the manufacture of gripping, imaginative horrors. But he has missed grasping his chances by a wide margin, for instead of producing something unusual, he exhibits merely a conventional lurid melodrama with a brave American heroine, fiendish Mexican ruffians, and a stalwart forest ranger hero. It is true that in the course of the narrative we are given several "close-ups" of the "Penitentes" celebrating their dread torture rites with whips, crucifixions, and mystic incantations, but even these unpleasant high spots moved us to no responsive creeps.

THE SECRET OF BOGEY HOUSE. By HERBERT ADAMS. Lippincott. 1925. \$2.

Although Mr. Adams's mystery novel seems to us a minor member of the populous tribe, he has known how
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