

An Engrossing Tale

THE OLD DARK HOUSE. By J. B. PRIESTLEY. New York: Harper & Bros. 1927.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

THIS is a good book, which is not surprising, for Mr. Priestley is an English critic and essayist of competence and real distinction. It is also an interesting, indeed an engrossing, story, which is more surprising for critics usually do not make good story tellers. And it is a book with qualities which should recommend it to a circle of readers far wider than a critic as critic could ever hope to reach.

For "The Old Dark House" is that combination of mystery story and character novel which we are always hoping to find, and so seldom do find excellently written, as this is, well-conceived, and carried through its climax to a fitting end. The Brontës could write such curious books, and in this story of wayfarers caught by swirling floods and tempests in a house full of folks mad, or once mad, there is some of the dark tempestuousness and some of the hard clear vision of Emily Brontë, who, like Mr. Priestley, was bred on the Yorkshire moors.

It is just a young couple, fine, sensitive, admiring, yet at the point in marriage when inexorable divisions, petty but tangible, begin to warp two minds apart. They are driving with a guest through a tornado by night in the Welsh hills—and come to the house. Then the flood maroons them with another couple, casually related for the week-end, and upon all of these, the house and its people, the storm begins to work a spell. There are confessions, there is danger, there are love making and love fulfilment, there are horror, conflict, humor, and sudden death.

Well, you can write of a hundred mystery stories in this way, and justly convey an interesting story, but no more. There is more here. The scene, the night, the house, the burnt-out family, rotting in this pocket of the hills, the inner despair, luminous hopes, magnetisms, bright flashes of life from a hard modern world—all these, if you please, are but the symbols of experience through which the severed couple must go to be reunited. I do not know. It would seem so, for this fine story comes to rest in tranquillity and confidence at the end. But not until, after the manner of Arnold Bennett, it has set types of the London world revealing themselves, not until it has solved a mystery, and run through an exciting plot.

If you can tell a story—and Mr. Priestley can—it is a great advantage to be an essayist, to be *fine*, to be reflective, to have an eye for the comic spirit, an ear for the grotesque, a taste for the subtleties which lie behind action. And it is a great thing to have that sense of the unity of experience which minor story tellers so notably lack, to be able to build storm and haunting mystery and personality and incident into a whole like a fine play adequately staged. This is the achievement of "The Old Dark House." Take it any way—as a "thriller," as a character study, as a *tour de force* of style and setting—it is good.

A complete and textually accurate edition of the writings of Landor is about to be issued by Chapman & Hall of London. The need for such an edition requires no demonstration to students of Landor. The general reader, however, may be reminded that the authorized "Works" of 1876, edited by Forster, omitted no less than ten "Imaginary Conversations," ignored a great mass of miscellaneous prose, and in respect of a single volume of Landor's verse left out 195 pieces. A more scholarly edition issued from 1891 onwards omitted three "Imaginary Conversations," passed over much miscellaneous prose, and excluded some even of the verse given by Forster. The present edition will include every extant work by Landor. It will give readers for the first time the entire body of the "Imaginary Conversations;" it will reprint the "Commentary on Trotter's Memoir of Mr. Fox," the claims of which were justly and vainly pressed on Forster by Lord Houghton; it will, for the first time, reprint the whole of "High and Low Life in Italy;" it will reprint the hitherto neglected, and often important, letters which Landor wrote to the Press on a great variety of subjects; and besides including much other neglected or carelessly edited matter, it will find a place for the whole of his verse. So far as can be at present foreseen, the edition will occupy sixteen volumes in all. It is sold in sets only, and is limited to 525 sets, of which 500 will be for sale in England and America.

Mr. Moon's Notebook

February 1, 1928. *The Last Minute Men.*

HAVE you a little clock inside you? Oh, indeed! Who are you, then—Captain Hook's crocodile? I myself, no more than averagely a crocodile, go around exasperatingly ticking to my own perpetual discomfiture. There are always things to be done, things that ought to have been done long ago (that would have been so awfully easy to do days ago), that aren't done, that must be done, that most imperatively must be accomplished upon this very instant; and here you behold me, the eternal Last Minute Man, sprinting desperately along the treadmill of dilatory recollection in the vain endeavor (ever, forever!) to catch up with myself!

That old talk about the panorama of one's past life that occurs to the drowning—it isn't a circumstance to the the things that occur to you in the Last Minute. What a feverish activity seizes the brain! If you have ten blocks to go, being already twenty minutes late—if you have three columns to write, your copy being already an hour overdue at the printer's—if the dim doze of your happy-go-lucky existence is suddenly blown to multicolored bits by the remembrance of the important errand forgotten—my word, how the little, old bean does begin to hum! Meanwhile life around you becomes so nerve-rackingly deliberate and slow-motion-picture-like that the handkerchief stuffed in the mouth to prevent screaming seems almost a necessity. "Late again, late again, late again," briskly whisks the little interior metronome. And the imagination whirls frantically with prayers for Seven League Boots, soaring airplanes, self-propelling pencils, wizards' wands and what-not. Were there a block the less or only fifteen minutes more, what miracles might not be accomplished! How much time there is in a minute, in ten minutes, what an infinity of things could be done in twenty minutes—when you are bounding along your Last Minute without another minute to spare!

There is an exhilaration, the exhilaration of desperation. One crowded minute of inglorious frenzy. Why live this way? Why develop the fine art of dawdling to such a point, at the expense ultimately of one's peace of mind, of one's screeching muscles, of one's gasping breath, almost of one's precariously seated reason? Are hours of pattering worth this final tension, this maniac lunge to accomplish the impossible, this stricken dive after the thing forgotten? Well, on the whole, yes—I think so.

There were golden idle hours; there will be golden hours again. In the meanwhile one struggles briefly in a vortex. And the essential earnestness of life is borne in upon one with a vengeance. Those who never forget, those who are never late, those who prepare their copy days ahead and always have the proofs neatly corrected and back at the printer's long before they need—what do they know of living!

The question is rhetorical, and the chances are that they know a good deal. But don't spoil my point! We dilatory ones must believe ourselves more familiar with the true zest of existence, being more closely acquainted with the bright eyes of danger. And the infinite self-pity that surges up in us upon recognition of our fantastic plights, how it enriches our personalities to ourselves! In what superb sable cloaks of tragedy we rush enwrapped, with what piteous daring we hurl ourselves forward with bared rapier against unnumbered foes! We are in the last ditch—or trying to scramble out of it; we are at the last stand with feet hobbled as in a nightmare dream. The reproach and the criticism that waits at the end is so enormously unfair (since in this Last Minute we have been making such superhuman efforts) that upon our tumbled and tousled locks descends from heaven the true martyr's crown. And never have we lived at such a pitch as in this instant. The world summons up infinite devilry to delay us. Crowds jostle us, swarms of visitors immediately rush up in elevators and precipitate themselves upon us as gay beves of callers, somebody catches us by the buttonhole and begins a long story, the typewriter jams, the ribbon ties itself into a knot, there is no copy paper, the crosstown traffic (a close succession of ten thousand lumbering trucks) begins the moment we reach the crossing on our way uptown, we trip over a blind man selling pencils,

thunderstorms or snowstorms burst from the heavens, rain descends in torrents, a blizzard whirls blindingly, it wasn't 49th Street, it was 59th Street (or was it 56th Street?), the subway-express doors slam the moment we reach the foot of the stairs, we have nothing but a twenty-dollar bill at the elevated ticket window, the telephone rings a long commanding trill just at our elbow, two buttons fly off our overcoat, somebody has borrowed the book we had to review, the taxi moves two inches and then halts stolidly for half an hour—but you all know these things. Meanwhile the mind races out of control. "Oh God, oh God, oh God," is a continuous ejaculation interspersed with bits of "I want to be happy," "The Two Black Crows," "Halleluiah, Halleluiah!" "Then I sez to him (overheard)—but I sez right back to him—an' then I sez—," "There is a happy land—," "I'm terribly sorry, but, you see, it was a most important conference—," "But you can't have any idea of how hard I work!" and so on. There are all the old excuses hastily to be passed in review; there is the excessive strain on one's invention to invent spur-of-the-moment new ones. The Spur of the Moment! Ah, it is plunged, indeed, deeply into one's quivering flank! And there is a long queue of people reaching for one hundred yards between one and the ticket window!

Well, the efficient executive and the man with a memory know nothing of our fiend's tocsinclang disaster. Little they reck of the nightmare-land through which haste apoplectically the phantoms of those always too late. They are unacquainted with our crags in the mind's Caucasus where remorse sinks its reeking beak in our liver and lights. Sweat never suddenly starts from their brows, doors never bang behind them, they never spring galvanically from their chairs, they never get jammed in steel lattices or wildly leap from the inexorably parting flanges of sidewalk elevator-covers on the trail of the bus just passing the corner. They never jibber! They never miss trains by a second's margin. At least, I don't suppose they do. These be our honorable spiritual scars. We are the more dashing responsible citizens—for at least we are held equally responsible and hardly ever excused.

I happen to be writing this entry in my notebook at the Last Minute, and so I can speak feelingly. We late ones, we sometimes accomplish prodigies; at least, we get words on paper, weave intricately through masses of people in motion at incredible speeds, practice a ready and flexible invention in explanation and excuse that might make the fortune of many a writer. Mentally and physically we keep unusually fit because fate is forever upon our trail and we have to become agile in our dodges. Grudge us not, then, our hours of ease, our golden slumbers, our day-dreams so soon evanescent, so startlingly dispersed! True, while you are toiling upward through the night we are either at a late party or toping merely with Morpheus. When you are briskly tripping the pave at eight o'clock we are tiger-shooting in the vales of Kandahar (though only in a splendid dream). When we somnolently raise the shade and draw back the curtains, you have already dictated a dozen letters to a ruminant stenographer. While our feet are on our desk in our private office and our thoughts lost in ephemeral and highly-colored sentimental speculations, you are successfully talking turkey to a big prospect about an air-tight proposition. Everything about you is docketed, pigeonholed, to be found immediately in the files or to be on the other end of the wire in a split second. You go through wire baskets like rain through a screen. Your watch is always set by Western Union. But we are the darlings of romance and tragedy, we are the desperate defeated continually rising on those well-known stepping-stones of our dead selves, we are the sparrows of the gods that keep on climbing up that blooming spout, we are the Last Minute Men—and we who are just about to forget the most important engagement yet, to lose a principedom by five minutes, to be handed our final pay envelope on account of a certain destiny-directed omission—we salute you. At least I suppose we ought to salute you. If you want to be saluted. We live too close to the palpitating heart and soul of things to care whether you salute us or not. Leave us to our intermittent delirium and our gaudy dreams!

WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

The Play of the Week

By OLIVER M. SAYLER

STRANGE INTERLUDE, A Play in Nine Acts. By EUGENE O'NEILL. Produced by the Theatre Guild at the John Golden Theatre, New York, January 30, 1928. Publication by Boni & Liveright, New York, impending.

MARCO MILLIONS, a Play in Prologue, Three Acts, and Epilogue. By EUGENE O'NEILL. Produced by the Theatre Guild at the Guild Theatre, New York, January 9, 1928. New York: Boni & Liveright. 1928. \$2.50.

OUR foremost playwright is still on experiment bent. Having convinced Broadway producers that he can write plays which appeal to their circumscribed mental outlook, he leaves them staring in amazed confusion at his serene refusal to continue doing so. Until the Theatre Guild volunteered to serve, we had the prospect of Eugene O'Neill without a producer—the outstanding contemporary contribution of America to the esthetic world without a laboratory, a home for the realization of his difficult and unconventional dreams. Without denying the probability that O'Neill would continue to write—laboratory or no laboratory, it is just possible that his sponsorship by the Guild has occurred at as crucial a moment in his artistic development as the ministry of the old Provincetown Players to his early one-act plays.

If I have a divided mind on O'Neill's experiments, I do not fail to recognize the necessity of a stage on which to give them trial. I can admit that need and still wish that he would linger with a new form, at least until he has perfected the union of form and substance, before he plunges on to fresh adventures.

The impulse of an artist like O'Neill, however, may be criticized but not controlled. It is more important that he continue to experiment, no matter how irresponsibly, than that he become disheartened and cynical through lack of interpretative outlet and of the opportunity to check himself by trial and error. Experiment is the life-blood of the theatre, just as of the other arts. But theatrical experiment is more costly, requires greater vision, broader confidence, than in the other arts. And the Theatre Guild, a native art theatre with an organized audience but without a native playwright, is O'Neill's logical laboratory.

The resources of this laboratory are convincingly tested by the simultaneous rehearsal and quickly successive production of two O'Neill plays. Members of the Guild's permanent acting company form the backbone of both casts, Alfred Lunt leading the one and Lynn Fontanne the other, without disturbing the position of "The Doctor's Dilemma" in the repertory. Lee Simonson is the viceroy of the board of directors as designer of "Marco Millions," with the young Russo-Armenian, Rouben Mamoulian, fresh from his rhythmic achievements in the Guild's "Porgy," as marshal of the pageant's multitudinous scenes and players; while Philip Moeller, for the board, exerts a powerful centrifugal force as viceroy and director of the nine sprawling acts of "Strange Interlude."

As an experiment in playwriting, the ironic epic of Venice's star traveling salesman pales into child's play beside the expansive, yet intensive, life story of Nina Leeds. O'Neill might have written "Marco Millions" with his left hand, although it must have required both hands and a score of blue pencils to cut it down from the interminable form in which I first read it. Compression is the soul of common sense in the case of "Marco." Originally intended to run two evenings, this exotic romance, tinged with wistful beauty and crossed with a sardonic satire on young Polo and his complacent heirs of today, has a scant evening's real substance. As cut, it reads now without boring, but it still leans heavily on producer, player, and designer. Fortunately, these anchorages are secure. Aristocratic, not garish, munificence is the key-note of the succor extended by the Guild to this lordly but somewhat enemic manuscript. The wealth of rhythmic variety, of skill in the handling of grouped players, of instinctive and racial sympathy with the Orient, on the part of the stage director; the versatile acting talents of Alfred Lunt and his associates, commonly attuned through prior common endeavors; and, most of all, the fecund and resourceful imagination of the stage de-

signer. If Lee Simonson has leaped to more piercing beauty and vision in setting Werfel's "Goat Song," spurred by the exalted and ecstatic genius of that drama, neither he nor any other designer of our times of whom I know has achieved more suggestive and stimulating variety or more plastic, fluid and unbroken continuity within the unity of a permanent skeleton setting.

The experimental desiderata of "Strange Interlude" differ as widely as the intrinsic merits of the two plays. Here, instead of beguiling visual and tonal diversions, the need is for a watchful impassivity on the part of the direction. In contrast to the tenuity of idea in "Marco Millions," this patient, tireless, ceaselessly inquisitive and richly illuminating chronicle of the love life of an erotic woman and of the four men—youthful ideal, husband, mature lover, and consoling friend—who are all necessary to her to complete the concept "man," tells itself. It needs only to be entrusted to intelligent, perceptive, and sympathetic hands and permitted to run its five hours' course. The amazing skill of Philip Moeller's direction consists in keeping obtrusive hands off Lynn Fontanne's subtle and sensitive portrait gallery of Nina Leeds in the manifold crises of her tortured life, as well as off the symphony of devoted males from whom she draws weirdly fascinating but inevitably discordant harmonies; while, at the same time, the eye of the regisseur, or rather his instinct, preserves the tense pace of it all in the face of O'Neill's revolutionary expedient of making his characters think out loud.

Extreme caution is necessary in judging "Strange Interlude." There are so many evidences of genuine greatness in the play alongside so many lapses in execution, and O'Neill calmly—and often successfully—flouts so many traditions which we had thought impregnable, that those who admire it will tend to grant it more than its just deserts, while those who are offended or merely irritated by that to which they are not complacently accustomed may reject it with as little discrimination. Unquestionably, it is a *tour de force* of sustained creation in the field of the spoken and visualized word. O'Neill has proved to me, at least, that the human attention (rather, the Occidental attention, for the Oriental is inured to the test) can be held absorbed in a theatre for five hours. I am not so sure, however, that the theme of "Strange Interlude" irrevocably requires such intensive-extensive treatment, that it could not be split up into several plays. In the theatre, if not on the printed page, O'Neill and the Guild manage to give an iron-clad unity and indivisibility to the performance. Whatever the long view and the ultimate verdict on the play may yield, whatever its reception may be at the hands of O'Neill's international audience, the writing and the production of "Strange Interlude" is a memorable moment in the history of our expanding theatre, proving that the vitality which dares the unknown and the difficult and the forbidden still runs strong in our esthetic blood.

(Mr. Sayler will review next week the American Laboratory Theatre production, "The Bridal Veil," by Arthur Schnitzler).

PLAYS OF THE SEASON

Still Running in New York

BURLESQUE. By Arthur Hopkins and George Manker Watters. Plymouth Theatre. The personal equation beneath pink tights and putty nose.

THE GOOD HOPE. By Herman Heijermans. Civic Repertory Theatre. A European repertory veteran ably revived on our only repertory stage.

PORGY. By Dorothy and DuBose Heyward. Republic Theatre. The rhythms of Negro life interpreted in pulsing drama.

ESCAPE. By John Galsworthy. Booth Theatre. Leslie Howard *et al.* in the dramatist's latest—and last—play.

THE IVORY DOOR. By A. A. Milne. Charles Hopkins Theatre. An ironic and whimsical fairy tale for grown-ups.

AND SO TO BED. By J. B. Fagan. Bijou Theatre. A satiric and pungent comedy based on a presumable day in the amorous life of Samuel Pepys, Esq.

THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA. By Bernard Shaw. Guild Theatre. A debated and debating play set squarely on its feet at last by sound acting and discerning direction.

BEHOLD, THE BRIDEGROOM. By George Kelly. Cort Theatre. Dying for love explained by modern psychology.

A Great Library

LETTERS OF SIR THOMAS BODLEY TO THOMAS JAMES, First Keeper of the Bodleian Library. Edited by G. W. Wheeler. New York: Oxford University Press. 1927. \$7.

Reviewed by ARTHUR W. COLTON

THE typical medieval and renaissance founder or great donor was a royal, noble, or ecclesiastical millionaire. The present day foundation is more apt to come out of fortune newly acquired in business. The motives moving men then and now to this action, how circumstantially different and how often fundamentally alike, would be a curious study for some psycho-sociologist. Has any book been written on "Foundations, their Causes and Effects, Past, Present and Future"? I probably ought to know, and do not. It would seem to casual observation an enormously important phenomenon to all three tenses. The medieval donations were mainly to churches and monasteries; the modern are educational, or to hospitals, or increasingly now perhaps to scientific research.

Sir Thomas Bodley was not the usual modern type of wealthy donor. He was originally an Oxford don, learned in Greek and Hebrew. But at the age of thirty he left Oxford for the Continent in order to acquire French, Italian, and Spanish. Some years later, in 1585, he was given a diplomatic mission by Elizabeth. In 1587 he married a rich widow. From 1589 to 1596 he was the English representative in Holland, and then retired to take up the scheme of restoring Duke Humphrey's Library at Oxford, which had largely disappeared. He paid all the overhead expenses himself, but the books seem to have been in part, if not largely, gifts that poured in from all directions. He hunted donations assiduously and had a wide acquaintance.

He kept the general and rather particular oversight in his own hands, and these letters are written to his librarian at Oxford from 1600 to 1613, the year of Sir Thomas's death. He left nearly all his property to the Library and to Merton College, and left a number of relatives disgruntled on that account. Fundamentally it sounds quite modern, but circumstantially the differences are entertaining. Anything below a folio seems to have been, to his taste, a light and rather negligible matter. "Of your lesser books," he writes, "I know not and make doubt of their goodness." One of his early expenses was for chains for the security of these folios. He objected strongly to Mr. James's marriage, but had to yield. In general he preferred a Latin translation of an English work to the vernacular original.

"With 1,500,000 volumes," Mr. Wheeler remarks in his Introduction, "the Bodleian now takes rank as the greatest among university libraries." On the ground of numbers the claim might be questioned. On the ground of value—if value means rarity and difficulty of replacement—the claim could hardly be questioned at all. In that respect the greatest library in Europe is perhaps the Vatican, which is not large. But how far is that the meaning of "value"?

To judge from Sir Thomas's letters, his original 6,000 volumes must have been largely Greek, Latin, and Hebrew texts and commentaries; and still more works in Protestant controversial theology. Most of it must be of very little value indeed to any modern scholar. Sir Thomas excludes with emphasis practically all play books, much as a modern founder excludes current novels, and 6,000 volumes of the contemporary drama of his age would be of far more value today, either for scholarship or at auction prices, than Sir Thomas's 6,000 of superseded texts, obsolete commentary, and divinity happily forgotten. Nevertheless the claim of the Bodleian to be the greatest of university libraries, in general terms, is probably sound.

It was, moreover, the first modern public library in point of date, though there was one founded in Rome shortly after. Its first printed catalogue of 1605 was the first general catalogue of any European library. The pregnant idea of getting a copy donated of all books printed at the Stationers Company occurred first to Bodley. Although the foundation was not wholly his personal gift, it was wholly due to his activities. It was the chief interest of his later years: "It doth greatly surpass all my other worldly cares."