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Foreign Literature

Tragedy and Poetry

MARCELINE DESBORDES-VALMORE:
A Life. By STEFAN ZWEIG. Leipzig:
Insel-Verlag. 1927.

Reviewed by AMELIA VON ENDE

THAT Stefan Zweig as a subject for a biography chose the woman who has been called the greatest woman poet of France is probably due to the fact that he is keenly sensitive to the suffering of human kind and that the tragedy of the woman affected him as deeply as did the poetry born of it. For the life of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore has no parallel in the biography of famous women for unmitigated cruelty of fate. She seemed to be predestined to be the victim of circumstance throughout her life.

The initial chapter is very properly entitled "Die Verlorene Kindheit" and gives a graphic account of the unheard-of hardships which she had to suffer at an early age. The French Revolution had by its abolition of the aristocracy deprived of employment her father, who was a noted heraldic painter. Out of comfort and ease suddenly plunged into poverty, the mother thought of a relative in Guadeloupe, of whose wealth news had reached them and for two years she and Marceline, her youngest child, traveled throughout the country with theatrical companies in which the girl of twelve danced and sang in order to earn the necessary traveling expenses. The forty days' voyage, the arrival just after the cousin had been killed in a revolt of the negroes, the mother's death from yellow fever, the girl's return on a merchant vessel, the only passenger of her sex on board, these were experiences sufficient, to use an expression of Zweig, "to smother her childhood."

In the following chapter he relates her struggles on the stage. Without being really beautiful, her features had an appealing delicacy and sensitiveness, and suffering having left its imprint, she was chosen to play the rôle of the injured orphan, of innocence pursued, of the love-lorn shepherdess, of a Cinderella—types, as Zweig remarks—then much favored by the art and the drama of the period. Members of the Opéra Comique, hearing her sing in a theatre in Rouen, were struck with her loveliness and her expression and called the attention of the composer Grétry to her unusual personality. Although her voice was hardly strong enough to fill the house, he engaged her. Perhaps it was the memory of his gifted daughter Lucile, who had died at the age of twenty-four, after having composed several operas that were performed in Paris and having been married, that made him open his home to Marceline and call her his "chère fille." Though not spared the pin pricks of jealousy on the part of some members of the company, she won the affection of others by her childlike frankness and simplicity.

At twenty-one fate dealt her the blow from which she was never to recover. A young Greek actress in the company had become the object of her worshipful friendship, such as often in adolescence precedes love. Whether from jealousy or deviltry, the woman induced her own lover, a poet known to his intimates as "Olivier," to win Marceline's affection, merely to try her. The young girl, suddenly matured, abandoned herself to the passion which he aroused—only to be left by him when her child was born, registered in Paris as "father unknown." The name of this man was never divulged by her.

It is under the stress of this emotional catastrophe, the memory of which ever haunted her, that her tortured soul began to sing. Marceline had had no regular schooling. Her knowledge of the rules of language was scanty and her vocabulary very limited. It was said that the "unknown" had corrected the spelling of the poems written in the first ardor of her awakened passion. But these technical deficiencies of her verse were more than balanced by a genuineness of feeling and a frankness of expression found perhaps only in folk-song. Her poetry owes nothing to imagination; it deals with her experience alone. Her love for her betrayer is the endless source from which her verse flows. It is amazing what variations she builds upon that one theme. Sometimes her song suggests the soft cadences of a whispered monologue, in which she recalls to herself some incident of her

love. At other times it bursts forth in outcries of despair. But whatever the mood may be from which they sprung, they always came to her with an ease and a spontaneity, as if they were the direct language of her heart.

Stefan Zweig justly quotes as a gem among poems of this kind "Ma demeure":

*My home is up high,
Close to the sky—
The moon in the west
Its pale, solemn guest.*

*The bell rings below—
What of it now?
Who can it be,
Since it is not he!*

*Opposite mine
Is waiting a chair.
Once it was thine—
One moment ours.*

*A ribbon knot
Marks it as thine.
Resigned to its lot—
As I am to mine.*

Most remarkable is the fact that Marceline was barely conscious of being a poet, of having accomplished something that differentiated her from other women. She had no conception of what the word "fame" meant. When her poems were hailed with hymns of praise by men like Sainte-Beuve, Victor Hugo, Lamartine, and others, when Balzac panted up the one hundred and thirty steps to her lodging to tender his homage, she was overwhelmed with a sort of wonder that anybody should be interested in her. She never dreamed that posterity would cherish her name.

The excerpts from her letters show that she did not become self-centered and embittered by her misfortune. Her heart was too big to feel only her own sorrow. She had an infinite compassion for the poor, the lonely, the abandoned, the disinherited of this world. When after years of courtship she yielded to Valmore, an actor in the company whom she had known as a child, and life seemed at last to smile upon her, in spite of the never ceasing struggle with poverty, she deprived herself of necessities to help others. Her family, her friends always appealed to her and never met with a refusal. Zweig points to the fact, that when the company played in Italy, Marceline never, as did Stendhal and others, dwelt in her letters upon the splendor of the palaces and the sensuous atmosphere of the country, but spoke of the many beggars hovering at church doors, of ragged children, of wretched hovels in side streets.

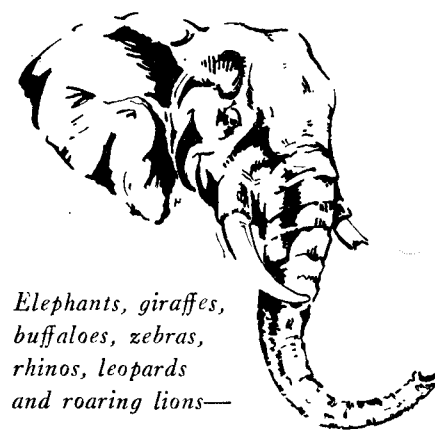
The style of this book is admirably adapted to its subject. Stefan Zweig recreated the very atmosphere in which Marceline lived, the *tempo rubato* which sent her wandering from one place to another. At times he becomes too emotional and rhetorical, as do many German writers who have not yet succumbed to the tendency of ruling sentiment out of art. He piles epithet upon epithet in the urge to convey his feeling to the reader. No doubt the subject lent itself to such treatment. It would be almost inconceivable to write of this life in the rationalistic, matter-of-fact manner of some modern biographers. As a contribution to the history of French poetry and to the literature about woman, the book is of documentary value.

Foreign Notes

THE Hungarian playwright, Franz Molnar, has recently published one of those long short stories which in German countries go by the name of "Novellen" and which, according to accounts, is an admirable work of art. "Die Dampfsäule" (Vienna: Zsolnay) is the account of an adventurer who called himself an army captain, and who through his irrepressible powers of imagination succeeded in persuading himself of his exploits and his standing. The tale marches to its tragic conclusion with certainty and economy of means.

The Rinascimento del Libro of Florence has recently published two volumes that should be of interest to students of art. Both books are edited by Antonio Maraini, a sculptor and art critic who is the organizer of the International picture exhibition to be held next year. One is a reprint of the life of Michael Angelo by his contemporary, Condivi, and the other is a volume entitled "Goya Incisore," containing reproductions of his etchings.

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The Child's Library

By ALICE I. HAZELTINE
Columbia University Library

CHILDREN'S libraries are an expression of community responsibility to boys and girls, placing within their reach a means by which they may become increasingly aware of life in its fullest and richest aspects. For the printed page conveys to children, as to us all, much that our own experience and that related to others does not touch or does not fully interpret. The growth of this idea of joint ownership of books for children is an indication of our appreciation of their power for good or for evil in the lives of boys and girls. The mediocre in literature, as in life, has a way of making itself appallingly easy to find. Children's libraries offer an answer to the question of how to make equally or more attractive and accessible the books which children acclaim as "good" whenever they have an opportunity to become acquainted with them, and which also satisfy adults as to their worth.

Library service to children was of comparatively slight importance in the early days of the library history of America. Yet the very fact that some rivalry exists as to which library was the first shows that in more than one place there were those whose vision of book service was comprehensive enough to include the needs of boys and girls.

It was only in the 90's, however, that public libraries, to any number, began to set apart special shelves and special tables and chairs for children. With the turn of the century came a considerable impetus through the establishment by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh of the first Training School for Children's Librarians under the direction of Miss Frances J. Olcott. About this time also, public libraries showed increasing recognition of special service to children as an educational opportunity, as

well as a means of making the use of the library more comfortable for adults. Children's corners, children's rooms, children's departments were multiplied. School libraries were no longer looked upon as mere collections of books, but as book laboratories planned to meet the needs of new curricula and of new methods. From that time until now a steady development may be observed. School libraries have come to be considered necessary to the program of modern schools for children of all ages. Many public library systems now appoint a director or supervisor whose business it is to plan and to supervise all divisions of library work with children. Comfortable and artistic rooms are set apart in school and in library, with furniture built especially for children's bodies, and with adornment planned for esthetic effect. Here boys and girls of all ages come freely to read or to consult books, or to borrow those which they may read at home.

These libraries for children are built upon two ideas,—first, that the art of reading is best fostered through voluntary use of books, and, second, that every child should have the opportunity to find a bit of desired information at the time when he needs it most.

Neither school library nor public library can ever take the place of a child's own bookshelves. Yet very few children have the run of a large enough collection of books so that ample choice is afforded. Development of discriminating taste, a slow growth, can best be furthered by life-long experience in comparison and in choice. Among the books of a collection wisely provided any child may safely browse and learn for himself the best that he is capable of enjoying at any given time. This is far more effective than any effort to induce children to read books that "every child should know."

The past thirty years have been characterized by experiment in library work

with children and by the development of certain policies of administration. Nearly every public library reserves a corner, or an attractive room for children's own use. Separate buildings are used in some instances, as in the Toronto Public Library. An unusual and delightful example of a separate children's library is that at Westbury, Long Island. School libraries are just coming to be fully appreciated as an integral part of school life. The next thirty years may reasonably be expected to bring about an even greater growth in book service to children. It is not true that children's libraries with high standards and adequate book collections are to be found everywhere, even in America, where they have been more highly developed than elsewhere. It is probable that we have just begun to appreciate values in voluntary reading, and to understand the recreative value of books in establishing habits of the wise use of leisure.

A generally accepted idea in library work is that the librarian for children should be a specialist, who by reason of endowment of personal characteristics and by virtue of specialized education is able to help children to learn to know the books which are theirs by inheritance and to find the information they most need at any given time. Both in school library and in public library the ideal of children's librarianship is to place personal contact with individual children above all methods and devices. However, in many institutions groups of children come to listen to stories from literature, to attend clubs organized to present programs relating to books and reading, or to learn how to use catalogues and books of reference. Anything which contributes directly to greater appreciation of books and reading may be included in the program of a children's library.

Five library schools now offer special courses in library work with children or in school library work. The Carnegie Library School in Pittsburgh, the School of Library Science at Western Reserve University, the St. Louis Library School, and the School of Library Science at Simmons College all offer work leading to a certificate or to a bachelor's degree. This year, for the first time anywhere, advanced work leading to a Master's degree is being given. This is in the new School of Library Service at Columbia University.

The modern children's library is, then,

a twentieth century institution. Its relationship to children's reading and to the production and distribution of children's literature make it one of the most important factors in the education of children.

Reviews

TOLD AGAIN. By WALTER DE LA MARE.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1927.

Reviewed by LEE WILSON DODD

IN this handsomely contoured and amusingly illustrated volume, I believe the parents of younger children will discover something they have long looked for and, perhaps, despaired of finding. They will find there a score of the famous old fairy-stories and folk-tales "told again," as only a poet (whose Fairy Godmother presented him at birth with an invincible key to Fairy Land) could tell them. Here, at last, are the histories of Cinderella, of Little Red Riding Hood, of Sleeping Beauty, set forth simply, imaginatively, in terse, rhythmical English embellished with many an odd endearing quip of humor. With his perfect literary tact Mr. de la Mare has resisted the temptation to even elaborate these stories; he found them simple, though permanent things and left them so. But while, in our customary printed version, these tales are simple, thought-powered narratives, they are usually written in a stodgy, heavy-quoted prose—entirely inappropriate to the poetic content. It is no secret by now that Mr. de la Mare has the secret of style; and while reading these famous old tales to children as he has retold them, parents will have the added satisfaction of knowing that their children's ears are, all unanimously, being moved to an appreciation of a pure, though picturesque and living, English. Here, certainly, is a book that no shelf for "reading aloud" should be without.

THE YOUNG FOLKS' BOOK OF FISHES. By IDA MELLE. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company. 1927. \$2.

Reviewed by JOHN T. NICHOLS

American Museum of Natural History

WITHOUT the fish there never could have been any higher animals, and so there never could have been any human beings; and that is, to us, the very important "why" of the fish. Fishes were the first animals to have backbones, and frogs and snakes and birds and four-footed animals, all of which have back-bones, all came directly or indirectly from the fishes in the beginning.

The smallest of fishes are less than an inch long when full grown, the largest is probably the whale shark of the Indian Ocean which is thought to reach a length of sixty to seventy feet. The eggs and young of different fishes have very unlike histories. The young of many of the big sharks are born alive, as are also those of many top-minnows, little fishes found in warm fresh waters which eat mosquito wrigglers. On the other hand many fishes like the cod lay innumerable small eggs which float unattached in the sea and take their chance of hatching and growing up, a very slim chance for any particular egg. Other fishes again build nests, sometimes nests of bubbles at the surface, sometimes nests of pebbles at the bottom, or of bits of weed and sticks,—and guard their eggs and young. Some hatch their eggs in their mouths. The little sea-horse is a true fish, though it has a head shaped like that of a "knight" in the game of chess, and can hold on with its tail like a monkey. Father sea-horse carries his eggs in a pouch, much as a mother kangaroo does her young. The waters are so wide, there are so many things true about fishes, that it is hard to say anything is impossible. There is so much to know about them, and their life is so largely in a world that is not our own, that for one person to tell even a part of the story and not make the least mistake seems almost impossible. Miss Mellen of the New York Aquarium has brought together in this book many interesting facts, just a very few of which are here mentioned. We are grieved to see that a picture of a big ray which she calls *Myliobatis*, is really of its first cousin, *Manta*, and very likely other people with other special knowledge about fishy matters will find other items to disagree with. However, the book is not only interesting reading—it gives a very excellent bird's-eye view of an immense subject. Its author's wide experience makes her advice about keeping aquarium fishes of especial value. She has learned, furthermore, what questions naturally occur to the uninitiated, and she answers them admirably.

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BY J. FOWLER WRIGHT

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