



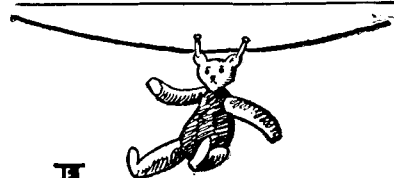
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The Sidney Colvins

By MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD

SIR SIDNEY COLVIN died in May of last year, and his wife in the summer of 1924. It is almost curious how great a blank is left in purely literary London by the death of these two. He, of course, will best be remembered by his admirable life of Keats, and by his friendship with Louis Stevenson. The publication of his correspondence with the Colvins, while it did not greatly enhance his fame, gave us a new and vivid conception of him. No doubt Sir Sidney Colvin's scholarly and critical friends gather round his memory, considering the work he did—it reached in many directions—perhaps appraising it. Mr. E. V. Lucas is known to have a book in hand concerning him, but as this will not be ready till later in the year, something about the human side of him, and about his wife too, for it is impossible to separate them in one's thoughts, may interest those who did not know them personally.

In the mid 'eighties he settled down as keeper of the Prints at the British Museum in one of the large houses within the gates; and Mrs. Sitwell, for it was many years before their marriage, was living in a flat near the Regent's Park, writing occasionally for *The Manchester Guardian*. I remember thinking in those early days how good-looking they were. He was thin, which made him look taller than he was, dark, with a neatly trimmed short beard and good complexion: he suggested a Frenchman or perhaps an Italian, rather than an Englishman. She was dark haired too, soft voiced, magnetic, and especially attractive to the other sex. Stopford Brooke told me that more men had been in love with her, most of them distinguished, than with any other woman he had ever known. She and Sidney Colvin were great friends, had been for years, and everyone recognized their friendship. They saw each other constantly, and there were many little dinners at the Museum, larger ones sometimes, at which she was always one of the guests. He was an admirable host, with a slightly old-fashioned manner that had in it a charming deference to women. His talk was chiefly about art and literature, though he took an interest in politics, and was proud of being a good Tory: he belonged to a class that is fast disappearing.

They had many tastes in common which made them excellent companions. He did

not care for music and she did, but on all other matters they were agreed. They were both enthusiasts and delighted in coming upon the work of an unknown genius in any direction, and having made one of their discoveries, were urgent and anxious to illumine the world with it. Louis Stevenson was, of course, in full vigor, famous already, and the story of his discovery some years before by Mrs. Sitwell is well known. She was in the country on a visit to his cousin, Mrs. Babbington: there a young Scotsman, "a gawky youth," sat at her feet and tried to prove his devotion by reading his poems and essays. She struggled against them for some time, but one day, when she failed to escape, he read—and read—she listened, was charmed, and wrote at once to Sidney Colvin the news that she had found a genius. I think it was Sidney Colvin who proclaimed him first to Leslie Stephen (then editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*); anyway he proclaimed him everywhere; for he was the most generous of friends—over generous occasionally: a good fault and one that helped some lights that, but for him, would have been speedily extinguished, to shine in strange atmospheres—at least for a time. To give an instance: There was a young writer many years ago, with whose anonymous short stories he was delighted; they were powerful and unusual. No one knew anything about her except Sidney Colvin, who declared that a great literary star was about to arise. One day when I was staying at Hindhead he wrote telling me that she was lodging in a lonely cottage near by; I was to go and see her, to insist upon seeing her, she would probably shut the door in my face, but I was "to get in somehow and to make her human." A difficult commission, and I shirked it; but one evening I came upon the cottage, at the edge of a wood. It was nearly dark, through an open window I could see a woman leaning over the fire with her back towards me; I put my head in and said that Sidney Colvin had ordered me to come and see her, and as she would probably want to shut the door on me I was trying the window. She laughed and I climbed in. She was young, beautiful, and unkempt, so far as I could make out in the dim light. We had a long talk; she was a mystic and dreamy, but strange and bitter, with a haunting voice that suggested memories of pain and disappointment. I never saw her again. She put forth a book a little later; it had some *succès d'estime*, but not much else I am afraid, and nothing else was heard about her.

Reputations rose and fell, but still the generous two went on with their delight in the achievement of others. His modesty was extraordinary; for he had, of course, his own special work and never flagged at it; his keenest interest was in it, but always there was an undercurrent concerning the big bit of work, the work of his life, that he meant to begin when he had more leisure. For though Louis Stevenson was his great discovery, and he proclaimed it with ringing of bells and waving of flags from the beginning to the end, when in his will he left his hero's cap and spurs to Edinburgh, all the time there was Keats. Keats was his religion, his sanctuary, and, he was firmly convinced, the greatest poet that England had possessed in the last two hundred years, or at any rate since Wordsworth. Of course there was Shelley, he duly recognized him, and was glad to remember that his heart was buried near Keats in the cemetery at Rome, it was so appropriate, so right. But if one was too enthusiastic about Shelley the air became a little chilly. He had already in 1887 contributed a volume about Keats to John Morley's *Englishmen of Letters* series, and edited the *Keats Letters*. This satisfied him for a time, but deep down the great work was waiting.

The 'nineties saw the advent of Stephen Phillips. This was a really considerable find for Sidney Colvin, and he was among the first to recognize the possibilities of the new poet's future. The house within the precincts of the Museum was a good one for entertaining, a little bleak perhaps, but the drawing-room especially was large and pleasant, and many distinguished parties were given to Stephen Phillips as there had been to lesser and greater lights. It was a downright triumph when his poems were crowned by the Academy in 1897, and a little later when "Paolo and Francesca" was a success at the St. James's Theatre.

In 1903 the obstacles had been cleared away and it became known to their many friends that Sidney Colvin and Mrs. Sitwell were engaged and would shortly be

married. The bleak house took on fresh life, new friends and old gathered round them, and wedding presents poured in. The marriage itself was a very quiet, almost secret affair: only half a dozen people knew the exact time and day. It took place at Marylebone Church where two other great lovers, the Brownings—they had both known Browning intimately—had been married in the years long gone. It was a fine morning, but dull and gray with not a hint of sunshine. We were told to take ourselves at half past twelve to the side door of the church. I met Henry James on the door-step, for we were both invited. We entered together to find beautiful floral decorations. "Are these for Mr. Colvin's wedding?" Henry James asked the verger. He was answered with a snort and, "No, they are for a fashionable wedding at half past two." The little group consisted of the Bishop who married them, bride and bridegroom of course, her greatest friend, Mrs. Babbington (who was appropriately Louis Stevenson's cousin), his greatest friend, Basil Champneys, Henry James, and myself. A favorite niece was the only other witness, but she sat far down in the church and did not in any way join the wedding party; she vanished quickly, and had perhaps stolen in unawares. When the ceremony was over we were asked to take ourselves to the Great Central Hotel (a quarter of a mile off), but not in a group, lest anyone should wonder what it meant. So we walked there on different sides of the way, though no one would have suspected six sedate middle-agers, as we were in our everyday clothes, of anything unusual. We sauntered casually into the Hotel, where a quiet little luncheon party had been arranged. It was very quiet indeed; the Colvins were obviously full of happy embarrassment, the guests were afraid to laugh, and spoke only in low tones lest the waiter should suspect it was a marriage feast. We did not even drink their health till someone, Basil Champneys, I think, suggested that it ought to be done. A bottle of still white wine was brought, our glasses were filled, and when the waiter was out of sight and hearing we drank to the bride and bridegroom with little nods and whispers. In the afternoon they started for Porlock on their honeymoon.

It lasted just twenty-one years, and was the happiest marriage possible. They were devoted to each other and what they were to their friends will in some measure be shown by the letters that are left for Mr. E. V. Lucas to use later. But more than this, they tried to shed happiness among those whose share was less than their own. She especially had sympathy and a persuasive manner that gave courage to difficult natures, or to newcomers who stood on the threshold of the world they most desired to enter—the world of intellect and that most maligned word, culture. But if she was sometimes the discoverer in the first instance it was he who, to use his own word, promptly became an inspiring "godfather." Sometimes they made mistakes and reaped only disillusion or brought obligations on themselves, but they had also their reward. When the time arrived for his retirement from the British Museum they took a delightful house in Palace Gardens Terrace, Kensington.

There in the new house were more gatherings, fresh stars appeared in the firmament; one of them, Joseph Conrad, was greater than all the others and a lasting joy to them. Sidney Colvin was knighted when he resigned his official work, and a public or semi-public dinner was given to him. It was felt to be, not only a recognition for his services to art and literature, but of his kindly selfless nature, and of all that he had done for others. Then it was that his big life of Keats was taken seriously in hand, published, and a great success; it remains a standard work and a monument to his name.

About five years ago she began to fail, and gave up going out, even to private views or to the music that delighted her, and he had warnings and threatening heart attacks. They recognized the inevitable and faced it bravely, cheerfully and still delighting in their friends, but they knew. . . . In the summer of 1924, gradually, very gradually she slipped away, and he was left desolate—desolate and finished so far as the world was concerned. He cared for nothing but to see a few of the friends who had known them both. He begged these to come often and welcomed them with the affectionate and formal little manner of old, but he was tired, his waning capacities worried him, and he could not disguise his impatience for the end. Those who loved him best were thankful when at last it came—as gently as it had done to her—and she and he were together again.

The New Books

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

Belles Lettres

ENGLISH LITERATURE IN ITS FOREIGN RELATIONS. By LAURIE MAGNUS. Dutton. 1928.

This is a most pedestrian treatise. Although the ambition to write a history of English poetry and prose in terms of comparative literature is a worthy one, Mr. Magnus is not the man to do it. His book is one more proof of the unaccountable unfitness of some English critics to write a history of their own literature.

One example of the critical method of the author may suffice. He says that when the Parson of the "Canterbury Tales" in his prologue declared,

I am a Southren man

"I cannot geste" rum, ram, ruf, by letter. "Chaucer meant by these verses that he could or would not tell tales in the old alliterative manner of the Northern singers." Of course, Chaucer meant nothing of the sort, any more than he meant by the next line, which Mr. Magnus does not quote:

Ne, god wot, rym holde I put litel bettre that he was opposed to the principle of rhyme. It is not at all unlikely that Chaucer intended that his yeoman should give a version of the story of Gamelyn in alliterative metre. Perhaps the sentence following the above quotation from Mr. Magnus should be added as a sample of the style of the volume, "As mariners, extending the map, sailed westward—ho a few years later, so English poets, extending the resources of language and metre, turned the head of their Pegasus to the south."

The book suffers not only from faulty critical judgment and poor style, but from a quite unscholarly arrangement of material, which renders it unreadable. The lack of design would seem to indicate that it may be a compilation of separate lectures. If so, the title is not deserved. Such a field, for example, as the ballad, the type most international of all its relations, is not even referred to.

SOME GODDESSES OF THE PEN. By PATRICK BRAYBROOKE. Lippincott. 1928.

The fears aroused by the meretricious title of this book are confirmed by reading it. It would be hard to name a duller, more worthless collection of essays. There is not, in the entire book, one illuminating remark about any writer whom the author attempts to criticise. Furthermore, to take but two examples from the essay on Rose Macaulay, Mr. Braybrooke makes absurd remarks: "Women seem to have no sense of tact, they are probably too sincere!" "Religion is the one great theme to bring out the worst in a woman writer."

In his preface the author says that he is not attempting to compare the eight writers, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Rose Macaulay, Ethel Dell, the Baroness Orczy, Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick, Cynthia Stockley, Mrs. Henry De La Pasture, Mrs. Baillie-Reynolds; and that comparisons not only are nasty but also violate the sanest principles of Literary Criticism—"that a thing should be judged in so far as it achieves that which it has attempted to achieve."

It is incredible that any writer, and Mr. Braybrooke calls himself a professional critic, should have the temerity to offer these eight pieces as criticism. The book's one commendable feature is its brevity.

Biography

PORTRAIT OF PASCAL. By MARY DUCLAUX. Harpers. 1927. \$4.

This volume by the author of a delightful "Life of Racine" is, in comparison with that earlier volume, somewhat disappointing, due to the immensely greater difficulty of its subject-matter. Racine graciously welcomes a biographer; his crystalline mind is easily encompassed; there are no tortuous by-ways in his character to embarrass and perplex; every avenue leads beautifully to the temple of some god. Pascal, by contrast, is the intricate Hercynian forest. A mathematician aloof from the affairs of men; a polemicist, in their midst, striking mighty blows for freedom of conscience; a fanatic seeking to impose his own cheerless austerity upon others; the inventor of such domestic comforts as the omnibus and the invalid's wheel-chair; the most subtle of skeptics, yet turning every skeptical argument to the ultimate glory of God; his intellectual integrity most dear to him, yet, in his famous "Wager" inculcating the sacrifice of just

such integrity;—Nature in compounding such a character refused to be followed by a mere biographer.

Miss Duclaux does not even make the attempt. In all that concerns Pascal's external life, his family and friends, and even his more simple religious experiences, her book is admirable. Her account of the "Lettres Provinciales" and the whole Jansenist controversy, while not exactly impartial, is lucid and instructive. It is only when she reaches the crown of Pascal's work, his chaotic "Pensées," the admiration and despair of critics, that the biographer's limitations become particularly apparent. Here she is content to follow tamely the exposition of M. Fortunat Strowski, itself more scholarly than profound. Mary Duclaux has perhaps become so intimate with Pascal's outward personality that she has neglected to meditate sufficiently upon the qualities of his mind. Taking those, as it were, for granted, she has drawn an artistic portrait of the man as he appeared when he walked the earth. To do that alone is to do much, and the author herself modestly disclaims to do more.

Fiction

THE LONE HAND. By Harold Bindloss. Stokes. \$2.

BLACK VALLEY. By Hugo West. Longmans, Green. \$2.50.

THE FACETIAE OF POGGIO. Dutton. \$3.

UP COUNTRY. By Donald and Louise Peattie. Appleton. \$2.

THE HOUSE ACROSS THE WAY. By Foxhall Daingerfield. Appleton. \$2.

THE SEVEN LOVERS. By Muriel Hine. Appleton. \$2.

SHAKEN BY THE WIND. By Ray Strachey. Macmillan. \$2.50.

A CORNISH DROLL. By Eden Phillpotts. Macmillan. \$2.50.

THE BONDWOMAN. By G. N. Ellis. Doubleday, Doran. \$2 net.

THE MURDER AT FLEET. By Eric Brett Young. Lippincott.

NOT MAGNOLIA. By Edith Everett Taylor. Dutton.

"2 L. O." By Walter S. Masterman. Dutton. \$2.

THE TICK OF THE CLOCK. By Herbert Asbury. Macy-Masius. \$2.

AT THE HOUSE OF DREE. By Gordon Gardiner. Houghton Mifflin. \$2.

THE TIRED CAPTAINS. By Kent Curtis. Appleton. \$2.

WATER! By Albert Payson Terhune. Harpers. \$2.

THE ISLAND WITHIN. By Ludwig Lewisohn. Harpers. \$2.50.

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THE SPELLBINDER. By Leonard Rossiter. Dutton. \$2.

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THE TRIAL OF MARY DUGAN. By William Almon Wolff. Doubleday, Doran. \$2 net.

LEAVE ME WITH A SMILE. By Elliott White Springs. Doubleday, Doran. \$2.50.

MR. BATTLE PAYS THE BILLS. By Mary Imlay Taylor. Crowell. \$2.

UTHER AND IGRAINE. By Warwick Deeping. Knopf. \$3.

MANY LATITUDES. By F. Tennyson Jesse. Knopf. \$2.50.

OVERLAND. By Dorothy Richardson. Knopf. \$2.50.

DUST. By Armine von Tempiski. Stokes. \$2.

THE MORGAN TRAIL. By W. C. Tuttle. Houghton Mifflin. \$2.

WHILE THE GODS GRINNED. By John Hastings Turner. Putnam. \$2.

LOVE'S MAGIC. By Louise Gerard. Macaulay. \$2.

DESERT MADNESS. By Harrison Corrad. Macaulay. \$2.

THE RIVER RIDERS. By Walter W. Liggitt. Macaulay. \$2.

SEVEN FOOTPRINTS TO SATAN. By A. Merritt. Boni & Liveright.

AN ARTIST IN THE FAMILY. By Sarah Gertrude Millin. Boni & Liveright. \$2.50.

(Continued on page 691)

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