

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME V

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JUNE 29, 1929

NUMBER 49

### Thunderstorm

IT is getting darker. All the awnings on the big office building across the street are beginning to slap and rattle. At last there is a breeze blowing. Yes, there must be a storm coming, for the sky is dirty gray and the desultory musketry of the awnings goes on. We had been sitting here in the mental doldrums, longing for a bathing-suit, or better still a bathing-pool; thinking how much poundage we have exuded in the last two days. But it may pass, at that,—it may pass,—though we hear a distant, mumbling grumble that is surely thunder. Still, we can almost taste that rain already. It must come.

After a fashion this is an analogue of the mind benumbed with incessant reading. Words begin to weigh upon it as the darkness weighs on the senses through a hot, airless night. Not only words; writers' stereotyped impressions of life; so many situations carefully set up and prepared for, so much pawing of the emotions, so much long-drawn-out analysis of the perfectly obvious, so many stock characters mopping and mowing in one's brain. The intellect becomes sodden and sultry with it all. O for the detonation of true power, the lightning thrust of true intelligence. And—ah, at last,—there's the rain!

A slant, thin rain, at first,—and a flicker-flicker against the further windows. Not the drench, as yet, that we had hoped for, gushing, driving, cleansing, chrismal. But it must come as surely as the incubus of the heavy atmosphere has oppressed us. And it will bring fresh colors and the clear air.

Under the burden of other men's thought, the murky canopy of congested imaginings of other minds, it is for something akin to a flashing, lashing silver torrent that editors and publishers, as well as readers, eternally wait. And when genius, begotten between the thunder and the lightning, suddenly freshets through the murk of contemporary pondering with its dazzling clearness and thirsty haste, how the colors of our scene quicken, how our hearts lift, how the air clears to crystal.

For a long time and a long time contemporary thought has, perhaps, been building above us its gloomy thunderheads. There was a brooding, sullen quarrel in heaven among the gods. There was busyness in the clouds, in the murk, mixed mayhap with skyey portents. But there was nothing resolved, nothing shown, nothing clear. Now the flood of true imagination is sluiced upon us. When the language of genius visits earth in this fashion, we should bless it as we bless the rain.

But now, as we look from our window, no more rain falls. "No promise of relief" was in the papers this morning. Well, we had a little, even if a very little. And all through a year of books we have a little, if only a very little, now and then. We are grateful for so much. In fact we are very apt to say "What a refreshing flood that was!" but a flitting shower.

Yet if a great many of us feel that way, is it not a good sign? We may vastly overrate the refreshment we receive; but it shows how deeply we recognize our need for it. For subconsciously we are all aware of the strange benefice the language of genius can bestow; subconsciously we realize that our minds are choked and clogged, as it is, with words of little meaning.

What of that ancient lavish gift, however, of which our legends tell? Well, sometimes—as sometimes the floods fall—it is upon us like a desolation. We are not prepared for such a spate from on high. We quail and cower. We lock ourselves up in our

### North to South

By LOUIS UNTERMEYER

FORWARD magnolia buds that think  
To shame my nothern reticence,  
Posturing Judas-tree whose pink  
In March is an impertinence,  
You cannot rouse me anymore  
With your inveterate civil war.

When you are done, no longer willing  
To trust one jessamine to the cold,  
My hardened maples will be drilling  
Dark caverns for a deeper gold;  
For every strident mocking-bird,  
Ten quiet phoebes build unheard.

Flaunt your azaleas, preen your feathers,  
There's something you can never mock  
In one whose heart is not the weather's,  
Whose flower is snow, whose heart is rock;  
Whose faith, more green than growing green,  
Is vivid with the thing unseen.

### This Week

"The Plays of Sir James Barrie."

Reviewed by DESMOND MACCARTHY.

"Pierre, or The Ambiguities."

Reviewed by LEWIS MUMFORD.

"Salt Water Taffy."

Reviewed by DR. WALTER E. TRAPROCK.

"The Wave."

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS.

"The Life of Charles Doughty."

Reviewed by EDWARD GARNETT.

"Adventure Calls."

Reviewed by KERMIT ROOSEVELT.

Truant Reading.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

"The American Caravan."

Reviewed by LOLA RIDGE.

"Cotton Mather."

Reviewed by KENNETH B. MURDOCK.

### Next Week, or Later

The Sagas and Ourselves.

By GARNET SMITH.

houses and prowl in our darkness. We wished relief from the oppression of the heavens, true—but not, if you please, such a terrible thunderstorm. And when we emerge to a clearer light on our problems, we are very unlikely to place the credit where it is due. For civilized man is an essentially timorous animal.

Nevertheless the greatest fascination to those who inhabit the appanages of literature is this bright expectation of genius. But like the lightning we are now again awaiting, with its promise of the rain, we must remember that it never strikes twice in the same place. And it is never quite what we expected. In fact, we are extremely likely to glance up as we scurry to cover, and exclaim, "Why, but it is simply raining cats and dogs!" Yet thereafter—perhaps a long time thereafter, if we have been so stupid,—we shall know the air cleared, all life's true colors a little brighter; be aware of a Man's stature again, significant and inspiring even against the cold, remote glitter of the stars.

### A Present-Day Dramatist\*

By DESMOND MACCARTHY

EVERYONE is aware that Sir James Barrie possesses an extraordinary sense of the stage. That is to say, he knows to a hair's breadth the effect of a situation when it is apprehended by the eye as well as the ear, and of words when they are spoken with gesture. He understands the stage so well that he knows what liberties the dramatist can take with impunity, and how suggestible an audience is. There is legerdemain in all art, but it is far easier to watch the conjurer at his tricks in print than when you are actually listening to his patter. Shakespeare was aware of the latitude the stage allows, with the consequence that his work contains many passages, many barefaced devices for holding attention and intensifying emotion, which it has required the utmost ingenuity of commentators to interpret in a sense worthy of their conception of his intellect and the consistency of his characters. For instance, he will not scruple to make Hamlet speak of death as a bourne whence no traveller returns, though Hamlet has just been talking to his dead father; or to make a character utter some magnificently appropriate sentiment regardless of his being the kind of man he is. Of course, this must not be done too often, otherwise "character," upon which drama also depends, is lost, but the occasional sacrifice of character to immediate effect has been the mark of most dramatists who have had a strong sense of the stage. Ibsen is perhaps the most striking exception. The born dramatist thinks in scenes. If profound thought, if unforgettable and self-consistent human beings also emerge for us in the course of the play, the greater dramatist he; but his first care must be to see that the audience is feeling at each given moment, and his skill directed to achieving that end first.

The above remarks are intended to lead up to a warning. Sir James Barrie's greatest strength lies in this sense of the scene—invisible, of course, to a reader; not in his thought or in character drawing, though that is often subtle and always clear. And although there are many passages in his plays which in print deliver up completely their content, there are many others which not only require acting to carry them off, but without it strike the reader as mere exposures of the manner in which the dramatist had proposed to move us. We watch him coldly at his tricks. Sir James has helped, it is true, our visual sense by frequent and admirable stage directions, and, thanks to these, the reader can certainly apprehend in part the effectiveness of, say, the opening scenes of "Dear Brutus" and of "Mary Rose." You see again, while reading "Mary Rose," the dark, dismantled drawing-room of a bereaved, uninhabited house, and the shivery old caretaker who starts at every creak of the dusty boards. The dialogue, too, between her and the Australian soldier is self-supporting. But the full effect of her *absence*, when she leaves to make him a cup of tea, of the other door which slowly opens and closes behind him, of the movements of the actor, which will suggest that some presence there in the dusk is making signs to him out of its own darkness or horror, must, of course, be before one to make their full effect. The fact that the optic nerve is inevitably starved in reading a play, makes, in the case of "Peter Pan," an even greater difference. Few readers, I think, would anticipate that its fantastic, charming whimsicalities and dangerously tender sentimentalities would "come

\* THE PLAYS OF J. M. BARRIE. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1929. \$5.



off" in the marvelous degree to which they do upon the stage.

But Sir James Barrie has known exactly what he was about. His instinct for the stage has been so sure and subtle that he has enlarged its possibilities, gradually making room for his own peculiar imagination, one which before him would have been considered as "undramatic." If you read the plays in the volume here under review in the order in which they were written you find him first applying this sure sense of the stage to the staple kind of story, and of these long ones "The Admirable Crichton" is probably the best, though not up to "The Twelve Pound Look," which is a little masterpiece, and only later, as in "Dear Brutus" and "Mary Rose," applying it to strange themes. He has, however, by no means abandoned the earlier kind of subject. "Old Friends," for instance, is a poignant study in nemesis—drink overcome in a father cropping out again in his daughter. But neither "Old Friends" nor "The Will," nor "Half-an-Hour," which are extremely adroit examples of dramatic foreshortening, proving incidentally that the best way of writing a brief play is to choose a subject large enough to fill three or four acts, possess the qualities most original in him.

When "Dear Brutus" appeared the fastidious and discontented had been proclaiming for years that we must get away from realism, and that adherence to the facts of life was becoming boring on the stage. And behold! it was Sir James Barrie, the popular, airy, sentimental playwright, whom no one considered a pioneer, who was the first to produce such a play! And he was simply exercising his gift of original invention and his talent for interweaving recognizable sentiment and make-believe incidents.

\* \* \*

It has been easy for critics to overlook Sir James Barrie's originality, partly because in other respects he is the least original of gifted writers. His criticism of life contains nothing new. No one ever got fresh light on ways and means, or on morals, or on human nature from him; only delightfully odd, slight, and sometimes surprisingly penetrating, confirmations of indulgent current judgments. No one ever came away from a Barrie play convinced he saw the Devil's horns sticking up in unexpected quarters, or that he had noticed for the first time the reflection of a star in a puddle.

Of course, he was far saner than many intellectual people in whose heads a few modern bees buzz in a vacuum of common sense. Yet the backgrounds which his arrangements in human nature—black and white and pink—demand, in order to justify them and set them off, is a strangely nebulous one. It seems to amount to a suggestion that life is a romantic, straightforward adventure, and that to be lived well it must be taken as such. Yet that view is not firmly enough apprehended to amount to a faith in him—as it did, say, in the case of Meredith or Stevenson. But it is not make-believe either. It is, in his case, something betwixt and between.

The characters to whom his heart goes out are those he conceives as holding it with a more whole-hearted simplicity than he can himself encompass; consequently, he writes about such characters, at once very sentimentally and very penetratingly. This is the secret of his adoration of youth (for youth has often the air of taking life on trust as a romantic adventure), of his capacity for drawing young creatures, of his insight into them, and of the limitations of that delightful insight. It also accounts for his happy touch in drawing old people, in whom there is often not exactly a second childhood but a second innocence, and granted a certain easiness of circumstance and heart, a disposition to make of life in retrospect a pretty, simple picture. The sympathy of such old people for the young is a boundless tender admiration—provided that the young consent to being figures in that picture and remaining in it! Sir James Barrie's attitude towards youth in his writings strikes me as being a mixture between that of a grandfather and that of a young girl. Crossjay, in "The Egoist," is boyhood seen through Clara Middleton's eyes, and Crossjay is delightful. But those who have been boys themselves know that a good deal is left out of the picture; and not merely unaccommodating, harsh facts, but virtues inextricably connected with those facts; indeed, almost all the growing principle, the very sap by virtue of which the creature becomes at last a being "looking before and after." A boy is not only a right little, tight little fellow with nothing incongruous to him, but an adorable affection of premature manliness. But

Sir James Barrie does not like growth. He likes people who do not grow up best, who remain—even at an advanced age—boys and girls, and in a static state of harmony with the world. Judging him then as an artist, he strikes me in general as beautifully unshockable, most wisely indulgent; but there is one thing I think would shock him artistically—a youth who did not take an enthusiastic, trusting attitude towards the world, who was savage, though not personally persecuted, sceptical, self-withdrawn, world-questioning, disillusioned. There is no sympathy in his work with that pimpled and sullen spiritual gawiness which, it seems to me, youth's true lover must also possess. Youth is essentially the thinking time. It is an enjoying time, too; but compare the process of thinking in later life with the really anxious, sensitive, bebothered search for explanations and sympathy characteristic of early years. Why afterwards thinking becomes, in comparison, a mere accomplishment, and friendship an art, only needing a little care and patience like boiling an egg. It is no longer a crucial, personal experiment. Sir James Barrie deals as a dramatist with that aspect of youth which is most delightful to those of advanced years. What I miss in his drama, and much of it deals with youth, is interest in the questioning, crude, spring-like temper of growing beings, which if it has some beauty has also the drizzling, uncomfortable rawness of actual springtime. His is a world in which the most jarring note of all would be the one which hums through nearly everybody's twenties—the pathetic, unsolvable conflict between the young and old generation. He stops his ears to that—and the public love him for it. He is very fond, on the other hand, of depicting shyness between young and old, the undemonstrativeness which is itself a demonstration, the reserve which is (almost painfully) unreserved. *Vide* the scene between father and son in "The New World," and between a father and his son's ghost in "A Well-Remembered Voice." Like all writers to whom tenderness and affection are very moving and beautiful (Dickens, for example), sentimentality as an artist is his greatest danger; and he is never more sentimental than when he is depicting those who are concealing what they feel. He is so anxious that they beautifully betray themselves that he overdoes it, and a scene, the point of which is its delicacy, tips over into one of spiritual indelicacy. Of course, a playwright is in such cases at the mercy of his interpreters. Remembering the love scene in "Mary Rose," I was astonished to find on reading it how inadequate its interpretation had been.

\* \* \*

Coleridge, generalizing partly from introspection, once declared that every man of genius was half a woman. The generalization does not hold good: Coleridge himself remarked at another time that Wordsworth was "all man." Nevertheless, in creatively imaginative men a strong streak of femininity is often noticeable. In the author of these plays, for instance, it is most marked. It may be said that in his imagination woman, leprechaun, and boy meet together, and that the masculine element is almost entirely absent. His femininity enables him to draw women with a simple subtlety most remarkable, and with what may be called (if a bull is allowed) a peculiar kind of merciless sympathy. And it is also nowhere more noticeable than in the ambiguity of the dramatist's attitude towards life of which I spoke above; in the desire to have things somehow both ways—to respond to life as though it justified the most romantic trust, and yet the next moment to see any part of it with a disillusioned matter-of-factness, the reports of which insight are never, however, permitted to modify the fundamentally comforting interpretation; to reach the consolation of the mystic, not through faith or intuition but through sentiment; to believe that somehow or other there is deep wisdom in pretending.

Sir James Barrie's subjects are often at bottom grim, but the effect of his treatment is to make them very much the reverse. There is a curious contradiction often between the substance of his plays and the manner in which it is presented. He is a baffling subject for criticism, partly for this reason. The public always think that he is presenting them with sugar and spice and all that's nice; the critical public, indeed, find the flavor of it frequently too sugary, yet the analyst discovers that the actual ingredients used are often bitter. Not is it merely a case of powder in jam; the powder is made to taste like jam. Sometimes this transposition of flavors is more than a critic can stand; sometimes, as in pas-

sages of "Dear Brutus" and of "Mary Rose," for example, it strikes him as a delicate miracle.

Because Sir James Barrie has so tender a touch he can portray facts which would wound if he were not. His audiences will take from him what they would not take without wincing from another. One dominant emotional note in this play is, after all, that struck by the recognition of the fact of human forgetfulness.

There are no fields of amaranth this side of the grave,  
there are no voices that are not soon mute, there is no name,  
with whatever emphasis of passionate love repeated, of  
which the echo is not faint at last.

Is not Mary Rose's return to life as dismaying as death itself? We grow old, too; the heart becomes like an old bird's nest filled with snow, and the mind trivial.

And yet how ambiguous "Mary Rose" is! Is it fairyland or Heaven into which the tired ghost is finally received? Both. You can take the play as fantasy; you can take it seriously. The infection which the play communicates is the desire to take fairyland religiously and religion wistfully as though it were a fairy story. This is an attitude sympathetic to many today. The dramatist is never more deft than when he is playing thus with the iridescence of that emotional ambiguity. The closing passage in the preface to "Peter Pan," in which he is speaking out of himself, also discloses that ambiguity. He tells us that he watched sadly the five boys who had inspired the legend outgrowing their faith in it. Once at this period in their lives he was with them at a famous wishing place. With difficulty he persuaded one of them to wish. He did so contemptuously, wishing that his favorite ghilly should appear on the landing-stage, whom the boy himself believed to be far away. And behold he was there!

I know no one less like a fairy than Johnny Mackay, but for two minutes No. 4 was quivering in another world than ours. When he came to he gave a smile which meant that we understood each other, and thereafter neglected me for a month, being always with Johnny. As I have said, this episode is not in the play; so though I dedicate "Peter Pan" to you I keep the smile, with the few other broken fragments of immortality that have come my way.

What was the significance of that smile? I interpret with diffidence: I conceive it to have meant to him who received it, first the recognition on the boy's part of the love which had divined what was most desired at the moment and provided it. But also it may have been precious as suggesting that a symbolic hint had been taken: that though this is not a magic world, and far from being one in which what is longed for is miraculously given, fairy stories are not altogether nonsense, for there may be a Love which provides.

Eighteenth-century critics used to praise authors for their "invention"; we talk chiefly about "creative" power—a different thing. Sir James Barrie has the most surprising and easy "invention." At every turn he can supply some ingenious, entertaining incident to carry on his stories. This faculty works so spontaneously that it gives an air of extreme lightness to his best plays. He seems sometimes to have made a play out of nothing, which is due to the machinery of narration being so supple that he has time to be apparently inconsequent by the way. Compare him with others who attempt the fantastic: how stodgy and over-solemn they appear when they introduce the playful supernatural!

Mrs. Kate Perugini, the only surviving daughter of Charles Dickens, who died in London the other day in her ninetyeth year, inherited many of her father's gifts. "She was a witty conversationalist, wrote as well as she talked (says *John O'London's Weekly*), although she published only a few articles and poems, drew and painted with distinction, and had hosts of friends. She was christened Katherine Elizabeth Macready—the third name being in honor of her godfather, the famous actor—but her father, with his fondness for nicknames, used to call her 'Lucifer Box' because he said she had a 'lurking propensity to fieryness.' When she was about ten, Forster tells us in his *Life*, she and her elder sister Mary 'had taken much pains to teach their father the polka, that he might dance it with them at their brother's birthday festivity . . . and in the middle of the previous night, as he lay in bed, the fear had fallen on him suddenly that the step was forgotten, and then and there, in that wintry, dark, cold night he got out of bed to practice it.'