

The BOWLING GREEN

MY inquiry for information about Charles M. Barras, the author of *The Black Crook*, has brought in a number of interesting letters but mostly based on hearsay. The general purport of these testimonies is that Barras was a man of considerable eccentricity. According to these accounts he was born in Philadelphia on St. Patrick's Day, 1820 or 1821, and was killed by a train at Cos Cob, Connecticut, in 1873. Many thought that this fatal accident was really suicide. He left no will, and much attention was attracted by the number of claimants to his estate. The enormous success of *The Black Crook* came too late in his career to bring him any happiness: his wife was already dying of disease.

One correspondent sends a copy of an old clipping from the New York *Sun* of May 6, 1873, which contains some curious anecdotes:—

Mr. Charles M. Barras, who was killed on the New York and New Haven Railroad at Cos Cob, Mar. 30 [1873] and about whom much interest is excited on account of the claims made for his property, had a very romantic history.

Very little is known of his early life except that he learned the carpenter's trade and served three years in the U. S. Navy, but he is known to have engaged in the theatrical business as manager, actor and dramatic author for the greater part of his life.

In his service in the navy, on the west coast of Africa, he lost all his hair by the heat. He was first manager of Pike's Opera House in Cincinnati and in that city he married Miss Sallie St. Clair, a well-known actress. After his marriage, he and his wife travelled and played together. As an author, he achieved great success in only one piece, but that one, "*The Black Crook*," brought him a large fortune. He had always lived exceedingly well, but prior to this success he had accumulated little or no property.

After living in Cincinnati, Buffalo, and New York, he settled in Portchester, where he lost his wife about five years ago.

Soon after this he built an elegant country house on the banks of the Mianus River near Cos Cob railroad station. He superintended the building himself and quarrels with the workmen were numerous. On one occasion, he had a fight with a carpenter which came near being serious, but turned out amusing. Finding he could not control the carpenter, he lost control of himself and had a rough and tumble fight on the top of the house. He was knocked down, losing his wig, hat and eye glasses and he was only saved from rolling off the roof by the carpenter grabbing his coat-tails.

In this house he lived with his wife's mother and sister until last year when they both died within a week's time. He then sold the house and grounds (about 2 acres) to Mr. Edwin Booth.

After this he boarded at the St. Nicholas and was in the habit of visiting the house of Mr. Lane of Cos Cob every Sunday night. It was on one of these weekly trips that he lost his life.

He was in many respects a man of unusual character, very reserved, haughty to strangers, punctilious, honorable, passionate, sometimes violent, always ready to fight anybody and very generous to friends and the poor. He always welcomed visitors, but was opposed to trespassing. A Cos Cob villager said with a sense of injury, "He had placards all over his place warning people not to trespass; wouldn't even let 'em fish along the river where folks had fished ever since the world was made. That's the kind of a man he was."

It is not known where all his money was invested. He sold his house for \$49,500 and it was mortgaged for \$25,000. He owned a piece of land worth two or three thousand dollars and was seen to have, a short time before his death, a diamond pin worth \$5,000 of which there is no trace now.

He was an intimate friend of the late S. N. Pike of Opera House fame and used frequently to give him a few thousand dollars to use for a time, instead of letting it lie idle. It is said the Pike Estate is indebted to his estate about \$10,000.

No correct estimate can be made of his wealth. He was known to speculate some in stocks and said last fall that he had made \$45,000 in Erie, but even the broker's name is not known.

Clara Morris in her memoirs tells a very touching episode of her youth when she was playing a small part in a company in Columbus. Miss St. Clair, Barras's wife, was the guest star. Going to the star's dressing room to return a costume, she found Barras acting as both dresser and nurse to his wife, who was playing in spite of illness. Miss St. Clair's earning power was greater than that of her husband; she was supporting her mother and sister; and though he struggled bravely, acting, writing, translating, adapting, acting as agent, he bitterly felt the sting of his unsuccess. And Clara Morris, with the quick sympathy of her profession, tells that after this dressing-room glimpse she no longer smiled at the oddity of his appearance and speech:—

"Poor Mr. Barras! I could laugh no more at his heel-less boots, at his tummy half-stammer, at his ancient wig, not even when I recall the memory of that blazing Sunday in a Cincinnati Episcopal Church. The stately liturgy over, the reverend doctor ascended the pulpit and, regardless of the suffering of his sweltering hearers, droned on and Mr. Barras leaned over, and drawing a large palm fan from the rack of a neighboring pew, calmly lifted his wig off with one hand, while with the other he alternately fanned his ivory bald head and the steaming interior of his wig. The action had an electrical effect. In a moment, even the sleepers were alert, awake, a fact which so startled the preacher that he lost his place—hemmed—and ran down, found the place again, started, saw Barras fanning his wig, though paying still most decorous attention to the pulpit, and before they knew it, they were all scrambling to their feet at "*Majesty Might and Power*!"—for Mr. Barras had shortened the service with a vengeance; hence the forgiving glances cast upon him as he replaced his wig and sauntered forth.

Several years after that night in Columbus, when I had reached New York and was rehearsing for my first appearance there, I one morning heard hasty, shuffling footsteps following me, and before I could enter the stage-door, a familiar "*Er-er Clara!*" stopped me and I turned to face the wealthy author of "*The Black Crook*!"—Mr. Charles Barras. There he stood, in apparently the same heel-less gaiters, the same empty looking black alpaca suit, the clumsy turned over collar that was an integral part of the shirt and not separate from it, the big, black satin handkerchief tie that he had worn years ago, but the face, how bloodless, lined, shrunken and sorrowful it looked beneath the adamant youthfulness of that chestnut wig!

"D-don't you know me?" he asked.

"Of course I do," I answered as I took his hand.

"W-w-ell then, don't run away—er—er—it's against law, decency, or religion to turn your back on a rich man. D-dodge the poor, Clara, my girl! but never turn your back on a man with money!"

I was pained. Probably I looked so. He went on: "I—I—P'm rich now, Clara. I've got a fine marine villa, and in it are an old, old dog and a dying woman. Both belonged to my Sallie, and so I'll keep hold of them as long as I can, for her sake. A-after they go, w-w-we'll see what will happen then. But, Clara, you remember that time when money could have saved her? The money I receive in one week now, if I could have had it then, she, Sallie, might be over there on Broadway now, buying the frills and furbelows she loved and needed, too, and couldn't have. The little boots and slippers—you remember Sallie's instep? Had to have her shoes to order, always," he stopped, he pressed his lips tight together for a moment, then suddenly burst out, "By God, when a man struggles hard all his life, it's a damn rough reward to give him a handsome coffin for his wife!"

A queer sense of reality rises from these old clippings and anecdotes, even if only hearsay of hearsay. They have the right troupers' flavor. Only a rather desperate old trouper would have been likely to write such a play as *The Black Crook*, that farrago of fustian with pilferings from every tradition of stage lore and yet with such good theatre sense in it. To the modern reader it has the almost unbearably nostalgic charm of an old lace valentine, a mid-century mezzotint, a tune on the old music box in the attic. It is a typical paradox that while the name of the spectacle still is so famous, one recovers the identity and quality of its author only from echoes of echoes. From the very beginning the réclame of that piece was one of those queer chances that make the theatre thrilling. Mr. Barras who attended church even on the hottest Sundays became the target of violent sermonizers, whose denunciations of the production were so explicit that the congregation could hardly wait for Niblo's Garden to open on Monday. The lapse of sixty years has added curious sentimental and ironic ethers to its elderly bouquet. And somehow lately I have been seeing the tragic and preposterous figure of Charles M. Barras, even whose name sounded like a pun, coming down the darkened aisle.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Country Annals

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR. By SHEILA KAYE-SMITH. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GRACE FRANK

THE titles of Sheila Kaye-Smith's novels have the honesty and directness of the stories themselves. Here, they seem to proclaim, is no wool mixed with shoddy, no glossy, plausible silk fashioned from the cellulose residue of our disappearing forests. "*The Village Doctor*," like the earlier tales, is a straightforward narrative of the lives of recognizable human beings. The author studies these people conscientiously, yet unobtrusively, and she sets the facts about them before her reader simply and with effortless skill.

The novel takes us into a small community of Sussex farmers and tells the story of a young physician, fresh from a London hospital, who settled there some fifty years ago. In those days many of

the villagers drank from the streams that drained their lands, and, when typhoid came, did their best to kill the sufferers by denying them fresh air, cooling drinks, and effective nursing. Naturally, Dr. Philip Green was lonely enough during his first year in Speldham, and when the daughter of one of the farmers—a girl educated in the city and taught by a city-bred mother to consider herself superior to other farmers' daughters—set her cap for him with a winning display of maidenly boldness, he married her. He could not know that, lured by his air of gentility and her own social ambitions, Laura had jilted a yeoman lover whom she really loved in order to achieve this marriage, or that the contrast between the rougher man's passionate wooing and his own patient tenderness would turn entirely to his disadvantage whenever Laura could not have what she wanted. What man she obtained in the end, which love proved strongest, and what happened to her meanwhile, must be left to the author and her readers. There is more than a touch of old-fashioned sentimentality at the end, and the conclusion, though convincing enough, adds little to the merit of the book.

"*The Village Doctor*" indeed, for all its competence and honesty and facility, seems slight in substance when compared with the author's best work. Perhaps it possesses a smoother texture, as it undoubtedly possesses considerable surface charm. However, it lacks not only the ambitious design of "*Iron and Smoke*" and the penetrating characterization of "*Joanna Godden*," but also the bigness of intention of their earlier predecessors. It remains a small thing, well done.

Rollicking Satire

SHADOWED! By HILAIRE BELLOC. With illustrations by G. K. CHESTERTON. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1929. \$2.50.

I AM as profoundly attached to Anarchy and to all the principles of Anarchy, as any woman or man here present. But the only Anarchy I know is an Anarchy to be achieved by Constitutional Means." Thus Lady Caroline Balcombe, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of the England (in 1979) of Mr. Belloc's fancy. Lady Caroline is nevertheless holding portfolio in the Cabinet of the Communists, headed by Mrs. Mary Bullar, and including, for the Home Office, Mrs. Bullar's cousin, a gentleman, with six generations of squires behind him, who was "therefore, naturally of the Communist party, the spiritual descendants of the old Moderates, themselves the spiritual descendants of the old Unionists, themselves the spiritual descendants of the old Tories, for, thank Heaven," cries Mr. Belloc, "there is no breach of continuity in our institutions!"

This continuity is further suggested by the fact that all these people are involved in an effort to wring from the representative of West Irania, a radical little state under the ægis of Moscow, a concession to exploit his country's valuable minerals before the concession can be bought by either of two groups of capitalists, one headed by a millionaire peer and journalist, the other by a canny Scot. And perhaps it also indicates what seems to Mr. Belloc merely the continuity of tradition that all these three rival groups start in full cry after the wrong man, an innocent, timid colonial on his first visit to England, whose protestations are taken merely to indicate "deepness," and who is hounded through a series of adventures by a consistently wrong-headed persecution which reduces him to violence and the reader to helpless mirth.

The comment of Mr. Chesterton's illustrations enriches the text every few pages, and Mr. Chesterton's rollicking pencil has never been so happy. As a burlesque mystery story, a gorgeous, breathless farce, a good humored (or usually good humored) satire on politicians, millionaires, detectives, and the devious ways of high finance, Mr. Belloc's book leaves nothing to be desired. And if one detect satire on personages and events less remote than 1979, and even find in the pudgy, bucolic Mrs. Bullar and the adventurous Lady Caroline suggestions of contemporary Titans, Mr. Belloc's inner intention and the reader's consequent unholy joy is a matter entirely between them.

It is reported that the British Poetry Society recently withheld the award of a gold medal on the ground that the twenty-three competitors for it—all young poets—had submitted poems that were far too melancholy and gloomy.

Easy Reading, Hard Writing

WHILE I write, the money articles tell us that, after an Arctic Winter, investment stocks are catching the first tepid rays of what looks like a sun. To bask in the coming warmth, along with these treasures, there comes a near relation of theirs, a new stock that may justly appeal to uninsured fathers of families. It is a massive edition of R. L. Stevenson's works, "collected," "limited," freshly prefaced, bound in fair blue buckram, lettered as nobly as a Georgian tombstone, gilt-edged beyond even its brethren the gilt-edged securities.

These are the things to buy, to support your old age. Good, canny layers-down of books to ripen still talk about the first collected "R.L.S.," the "Edinburgh" one, with the honest emotions of wonder, gratitude, and reverence which fire those of their fellow investors who shared in the blessings of the upright, the noble flotation of Guinness's Brewery. Then, when the Edinburgh was approaching twice its published price, there came the "Pentland" Stevenson, rich above even the Edinburgh codex in enshrining that horrific yarn, "The Body-Snatcher" (the mere advertisement of this, along the London gutters, in its first youth, is rumored to have led to the arrest of sandwich men). On eagle pinions the Pentland soared above par. You can still purchase a Pentland, as you can purchase a British gold pound, or the egg of a Great Auk. But you have to be rich and to know where to go. And so, to appease the unsated hunger of the lettered public, there comes the new thing of beauty. No doubt the thousand copies allotted to Europe were all bought up by the wise at the first whisper of their conception, as whole crops of cotton are bought by thoughtful men while the seedlings are only just blinking up into daylight. That is why one unstained by the guile of the tipster is venturing now to point to this surpassing "good thing." The tip is innocent, because too late, though even now you might possibly mark down one of the fortunate thousand, one of those who had "got in on the ground floor"—some oldish man—and settle somewhere near him, to wait till he dies.

But why this steady, lasting boom in Stevenson? The pink, square-backed "collected" Meredith did not go off with any such rush. The "New York" edition of Henry James went notoriously slowly, although it was beautiful too, and although the prefaces written for it by James divulged the closest workshop secrets that any novelist has yet confided to non-novelists. Both Meredith and James had minds of firmer and loftier build than Stevenson's. Meredith had newer, more momentous things to tell you. James, in a life of austere artistic integrity, carried the exploration of the technics of his craft into depths and recesses almost as fascinating as Leonardo da Vinci's abstruse, inspired-looking speculations about his. And yet Meredith and James lie a-mouldering, more or less, at least for the moment, while Stevenson has, so far, discomfited time and its little changes of critical fashion. Like John Brown's soul he still goes marching on, from edition to edition.

Is it that he recognized, more freely than those other two, a writer's obligation to please us all the time that we read him? Whatever Stevenson lacks, all his writing has an engaging surface. As he would have said, it arrides you; wherever you open him—novels, essays, letters, or verse—and read a sentence or two, the texture of the stuff has sparkle; whatever he means to convey at the time is being vivaciously put; the wordage is like the paint of some painters who may not be great but are always witty and winning, and treat you as no blind horse, but a man, who has some wit of his own, and takes a thing in, and knows quality when he sees it.

It is a discourtesy common in writers to tackle the reader as if he had to read them and need not be wooed—as though they were preachers in some garrison church where troops must sit it out to the end, however they may suffer. Carlyle and Ruskin, in their less inspired hours, practiced this incivility freely. Like a reader of the lessons in the services of the Church of Scotland, they challenge your at-

tention with a prefatory "Hear now the Word of God as it is written, etc.," and then plunge straight into some knotty matter handled with less charm than that which almost always graces the pencil, as Bacon calls it, of the Holy Ghost. Some of these uncivil writers are prone to aggravate their offense by the sophisticated plea that matter is more important than manner, and that if your heart be sound you need not mind how you splutter it out. They feel they are so wise or so good that they need not be urbane.

The better-bred writer begins and goes on in the faith that this is a free country where no adult need read a line that he feels to be dull; every sentence of every page is, to the writer's prescient mind, a place at which one or another reader may take his spectacles off and protest that these are no sort of victuals to offer to a free white man. A godly fear of such incidents makes him treat every sentence he writes as a possible occasion for tedium. Through each he must wile the reader unbored, remembering that one dull paragraph may rob a whole book of its chance in life. He may even tend to think of each of his longer sentences as if it were a whole book, only writ small—an organism, an affair of structural and decorative parts; he feels it should work to a climax, tie, like a tragedy or comedy, its little knot, and then untie it, and slope fascinatingly down from its meridian to its setting, ingeniously making the reader expectant while it rises to its zenith, and then amusing him with something piquantly unexpected, and yet satisfying, in the dénouement.

To the mind of such a writer clearness in the narrow sense—the thin lucidity of what passes at times for scientific statement—is not enough. He seeks to raise more logical precision to higher powers of veracity by mobilizing the subtler evocative values of words, their richness in secondary suggestion, their capacity to stimulate in the reader intuitive faculties more penetrative than formal reasoning. In his intercourse with readers he will satisfy Newman's famous definition of a gentleman as one who never inflicts pain; he will always try to be good company, to make you at home and at ease and pleased with yourself. To this end he will practice the light urbanities and coquetties of eighteenth century essayists—the allusion not made too explicit; the points only indicated, not pressed; the humorous turnings-back from the very verge of set eloquence, the headings-off of any overstrained feeling; the current implication that you are a choice spirit, quick at the uptake, and do not need to have every point stressed. Perhaps he will not quote many things in the formal way that uses the inverted comma; but he is likely to make play with the submerged quotation, the turning of some phrase of his own in a way that seems almost to wink at the reader, as though he would say, "Of course, being as well-read and bright as you are, you know what I have in mind." Whatever your own degree of education may be, you feel, as you read him, that you are getting good value for any trouble you took, or pangs you endured at school: now it is all coming in; it is fitting you to embrace this agreeable chance of consulting with the elect. There may be nobler modes of appeal, but few are more winning.

You may come to feel like Falstaff: "If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I'll be hanged: it could not be, else: I have drunk medicines." So you have, and the philtre that has won you is compounded of many simples, some of them far from being recondite, some so obvious that if you analyze the potion you may feel you have been taken in too easily. One minor ingredient often in use is the juxtaposing of words of dissimilar origin and tradition, the long Latin adjective like "incomparable" or "invulnerable" standing up against some monosyllabic Saxon noun, with a lively effect of harmony got surprisingly out of discord. Another little recipe for vivacity is a manner of calling half-dead words back to life, reviving by dexterous use the original metaphors now petrified—for most of us—and forgotten in words like "aspersion" and "suspicion"; a lively writer calls a shower bath a light aspersion, or says of

boating renewed after a frost "Again the stream suspects the keel," and, behold! the educated mind of you is pleasantly tickled; the little trick has re-animated for you the whole figurative element in language, so much of which is always tending to fade and lose vividness.

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He who writes to please is apt to be drawn further and further into the exploration of the mechanics of beauty, as you may call them. Readers there are who take it ill if you suggest that beauty requires some measure of engineering. Such readers are like the old-fashioned lovers who shuddered to think that the lady should have any digestive system. They want their poets to "sing but as the linnets sing," as Tennyson audaciously suggested that he did in "In Memoriam"—Tennyson who wrote such lines as "On the bald street breaks the blank day," with its deftly bald and blank breaking of b's and l's and k's on your ear; Tennyson, who filled his "Charge of the Light Brigade" with artful imitations for the mind's ear, of the noises of rumbling guns and of galloping hoofs heard at distances that change as the astute performance goes on.

You can seldom be sure how far the maker of any particular piece of literary beauty knows—consciously knows—all the means that he is taking. When Coleridge composed—in a dream, as he alleged—

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree.
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea

was he aware that, as Stevenson showed later on, he was running hard, all through, a certain group or chord of letters—KANDLSR, the first line being built on a kind of framework of KANDL, the second on KDLSR, the third on all the seven letters of the chord, the fourth on KANLSR, and the fifth on NDLS? Did he chop and change words in his dream, perhaps using at first the word "sombre" in the third line and then saying: "No, I *must* work in that K and that D," and so substituting the word "sacred"?

We may well doubt it. Quite as probably he just kept turning each line over and over in his mind in some form which it took first, felt something gritty or obstructive here and there—perhaps in "sombre"—mused over possible alternative words, and feeling, when he tried "sacred," that the grit was gone, popped the word in, and there an end, without any consciousness of having stuck stoutly to the chord KANDLSR and escaped the seductions of the rival chord SMBR (which sounds like a useful dominant group for an "Ode to September.") But there the strong consonantal skeleton is, however it came in.

After dissecting many winning passages of Shakespeare and others, Stevenson convinced himself that the consonantal chord PVF was a kind of beauty-secret, and that in certain pieces of writing, like Milton's "praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue," Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's barge, and the lines in "Troilus and Cressida":

But in the wind and tempest of her frown
Distinction, with a loud and powerful fan
Puffing at all, etc.,

the author was feeling his way, consciously or unconsciously, towards graceful clusters of these mellifluous consonants. Certainly your V and your F have an easily slipping or gliding way with them.

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever Gods may be
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

The charming thing slides round full circle like a vane that revolves on ball bearings, and all the V's and F's are the balls.

But what about P? Very hard things have been