

A Letter from England

By J. B. PRIESTLEY

THESE last two or three weeks, the spotlight has been on Somerset Maugham, who has brought out both a new play and a new novel. The play is "The Breadwinner," a very sardonic comedy of a stockbroker who allows himself to be "hammered," that is, publicly cast out of reputable business, because he is bored with his wife, his son, and his daughter, and sees no reason why he should go on working for them. He has twenty thousand pounds—it really should go to his creditors—and he gives his wife and family fifteen thousand and keeps the remaining five for himself. It is a clever, cynical little piece—with one or two awkward patches of sentiment in it—and represents, of course, a reversal of the conventional revolt-of-youth theme. Indeed, I think the best passage is that in which the defaulting father calmly points out to his astonished son and daughter that they bore him, with their tedious chatter. But I agree with the dramatic critic who wrote that this was not a complete rounded comedy but only the beginning of one. Instead of three acts (the action is continuous throughout the play), showing how father left home, there ought to have been only one, the first, and then there ought to have been two more acts showing us what happened afterwards. How did the wife and children behave with their fifteen thousand pounds? What became of the former stockbroker after he retired to the continent on an income of five pounds a week?

The novel has attracted more attention than the play in literary circles. I am surprised, though, that there has not been a bigger rumpus, for when I read the novel before publication I anticipated a colossal row. "Cakes and Ale, or The Skeleton in the Cupboard," is the title of this novel. It is told by a writer, one Ashenden, who has figured in Maugham's fiction before and bears a very close resemblance to Maugham himself. Ashenden describes his relations with Edward Driffield, a very distinguished novelist who lived to become the Grand Old Man of Letters. When Ashenden was a mere boy and Driffield was a struggling writer, recently married to an ex-barnmaid who was anything but faithful to him, the two became acquainted. Later, in London, when Driffield was beginning to make a name, they met again, and Ashenden, like several other young men in the set, made love very successfully to Mrs. Driffield. Then Mrs. Driffield ran away with an old flame of hers to America. Driffield, after some years, married again, this time with the nurse who had looked after him, and settled down, not always very comfortably, to become a Grand Old Man. At the end of the book, we have a last glimpse of the first Mrs. Driffield, now a widow in America and as sprightly as ever, though a very old woman. This first Mrs. Driffield seems to me the only real character in the book, and she is an interesting study of the easy-going a-moral woman, who out of good nature allows any friend to enjoy her beautiful body. Driffield himself is a far more shadowy figure, and not very successful. For the rest, there is, as usual, some very good writing in the book, and some amusing and sardonic comments on the literary life.

But why should there be a rumpus? For this reason, that it is impossible to escape the feeling that Driffield is intended as a portrait of Hardy. The reader who jumps to this conclusion has every excuse. Hardy, like Driffield, was born and bred in the country, was fond of cycling and rubbing old church brasses, was a long time before he received adequate recognition, had one of his best novels banned, married twice, returned to the country to be a Grand Old Man, was given the O. M. On being taxed with this, Somerset Maugham has declared that he did not intend this to be a portrait of Hardy, that he only met Hardy once and knew very little about him, and that he had a perfect right to invent a distinguished novelist and give him any traits that he pleased. And here, it seems to me, is revealed a very pretty little problem in literary ethics, and one that is likely to become more and more important as the tendency to find material for fiction in real life increases, as it seems likely to do. Maugham's case is simple enough. He would say that no reader has any right to decide that Edward Driffield is Thomas Hardy and then to attack him, Maugham, because Driffield has certain unpleasant characteristics not found in Hardy. It is the reader and not Somerset Maugham who has turned Driffield into Hardy and Hardy into Driffield. That sounds convincing, but I for one do not

think the matter is so easily settled. While deploring this habit of finding "keys" to characters and actions in fiction, I think the novelist must take upon himself a certain responsibility. If, for example, Maugham did not intend his readers to be reminded of Hardy, then he acted with a strange stupidity (and a less stupid man than Somerset Maugham never put pen to paper) when he set to work to create the figure of Edward Driffield. There are far too many coincidences of fact.

Suppose that I wrote a rather scandalous story of contemporary literary life, and made the chief character in it a distinguished novelist and dramatist, a man who lived in a beautiful villa on the Riviera, who had once been a medical student, and who in many other ways had a curious resemblance to Mr. W. Somerset Maugham. I think Mr. Maugham would protest, or if he did not, his friends would. I could reply, with perfect truth, that I had simply written a novel, that I had never exchanged a word with Mr. Maugham and had only set eyes on him once, and that if people were foolish enough to think that I had been writing about Somerset Maugham when I had been merely writing about my fictitious Aloysius Jones, it was their affair and not mine. But I do not think that Mr. Maugham or his friends would be satisfied. He and they would feel that I had started something unpleasant that I could not stop, and that my lack of tact—to say the least of it—looked like working a good deal of mischief. For once, Sir Toby's sublime retort does not convince me: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" I think it would be better if there was no more of this "Cakes and Ale."

Two of our most distinguished novelists, both senior to Maugham, were agreeing in my presence the other day that Maugham was greatly undervalued as a novelist here. In America, where "Of Human Bondage," his most ambitious novel, has long commanded a huge public (and I have heard it maliciously stated that this is because it is a study of an inferiority complex), I fancy that he enjoys the reputation he deserves as a novelist. If he does not here, I do not think it is from any failure to appreciate the individual worth of any of his stories, though it may be that his somewhat dry, hard manner, more French than English in its fine frugality, is not quite to the taste of the general English reading public. (I think the English, even at this late date, still prefer a copious gusto in their novelists, for that is the tradition.) I should say at a venture that he is undervalued as a novelist simply because he has been so successful as a dramatist. Versatility in an art is always regarded with slight suspicion in England, unfortunately, and some writers—Maurice Hewlett was one and Hilaire Belloc is another—have paid dearly for their interest in many different forms. And it has always been especially difficult for a writer to command equal attention and respect both inside and outside of the theater. Thus, once Barrie was accepted as a dramatist, people lost interest in him as a novelist. Arnold Bennett has always been seriously accepted as a novelist but not as a dramatist. Galsworthy has combined both reputations, but I fancy that even he has been rather "out" in one capacity when he has been very much "in" in another. St. John Ervine and Clemence Dane have both written some excellent fiction, but nobody bothers about it much. Now Somerset Maugham's stage successes have been enormous, and I think they have overshadowed, by the sheer glare of theatrical publicity thrown on them, what seems to be the far more solid merit of his fiction. He himself, I understand, takes his novels and other non-theatrical prose work (for "The Gentleman in the Parlour" showed him to be an essayist of travel of extraordinary merit) far more seriously than he does his plays. His comedies are astonishingly clever, but the best of his fiction is more than clever and I think it will be enjoyed and studied long after his plays have been swept from the stage by some succeeding fashion in drama, less brilliant than this work perhaps but at once more robust and truer to ordinary life.

Victor Gollancz's scheme for bringing out new novels at three shillings in paper covers has been given very wide publicity in the press, which seems to regard it as a bolder and more revolutionary move than it actually is. It has been tried before here, though not recently, and the book trade in general, though looking on with interest, is not wildly excited about it. American

readers should remember that nearly all books of any merit in this country very soon find their way into cheap editions. My own objection, as an author, to the cheap new book is that the author receives a disproportionately small royalty and thus has to sell not merely two or three times the old number but five or six times that number, and this has to be done very quickly. I will let you know what happens with this experiment.

Experience and Dogma

(Continued from page 287)

is likewise capable, as Verlaine showed on occasion, of being treated poetically.

Then there is the utilitarian meaning of the word "life." Ask the ultra-modern pedagogue what his aim is, and he will reply that it is to prepare his pupils for life, by which he means economic success. He often indulges in various fads and fancies in the name of a shallow practicality, and at the same time neglects almost completely the training that would be necessary for the humanistic or the religious life.

It should surely be plain from all I have said that those who recognize the different types of experience that have been summed up in the varying meanings of the word "life" are less open to the charge of narrowness and dogmatism than those who still wear the blinders of a dogmatic naturalism and so recognize only one type of experience. Mr. Elmer Davis accuses me of rejecting Mr. Walter Lippmann because "he crosses himself with two fingers instead of three,* but the issue that divides Mr. Lippmann and myself, that, namely, of a dualistic versus a monistic philosophy, plainly involves first principles and so is not subject to mediation or compromise. It does not follow that intolerance should be displayed on either side of the debate or even that one should lose one's temper. Mr. Davis, leaving "Humanism and America" half read in order to discharge a volley of angry epithets, may recall to some the seventeenth century viscount who went to one of Molière's plays but, as Boileau relates, "rushed out indignantly in the midst of the second act."

Announcement has been made that henceforth the Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowships, granted to assist scholars and artists to carry on research and creative work, will be open to citizens of Argentina and Chile. The foundation, for a time, made its grants for work abroad only to citizens or permanent residents of the United States, but one year ago the founders of the Fellowship added one million dollars of endowment to set up a plan of Latin American Exchange Fellowships to be additional to the work of the Foundation in the United States.

* See his letter to the *Saturday Review of Literature*, March 8, 1930.

The ART of THINKING

By Abbé ERNEST DIMNET



Believe It or Not!

By RIPLEY

70,000 copies sold at \$2.00. From original plates. These books now on sale at \$1.00 everywhere or direct from the publishers.

SIMON and SCHUSTER, Publishers
386 Fourth Avenue New York

"There is nothing quite like it in modern American fiction. It is an attempt to work out a problem of adolescence in terms of a myth... The language with its constant pantheistic fervor is beautiful."
—N. Y. Times

THE ERL-KING

by Edwin Granberry
author of
STRANGERS AND LOVERS

"An admirably done novel, in which the craftsmanship is sure, the sense of form unflinching, and the quality of prose steadily lovely."
—N. Y. Herald-Tribune

\$2. MACAULAY
257 FOURTH AVENUE • N. Y.

WHEN PEACE COMES

By FRANK O'CONNELL

"A powerful war novel with an altogether new theme... a story that will lead to no little controversy."

Published October 20th and priced at \$2.00

BURTON PUB. CO.
3629 Central KANSAS CITY, MO.

BOOKS TO BUY
BOOKS TO READ



BOOKS TO KEEP
BEAR THIS LABEL

"Scarcely Surpassed in our Generation"

G. B. STERN'S MOSAIC

A NEW COSMOPOLITAN NOVEL
BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE MATRIARCH"

"No one, not even Galsworthy, has better succeeded in handling a vast and crowded canvas, or has marshalled so many various and living characters into a single scene. With a few strokes, a detail of costume or a trick of speech, Miss Stern paints a character indelibly upon her reader's memory... Mosaic is a remarkable achievement... It has scarcely been surpassed in our generation." —THE NEW YORK TIMES

\$2.50 AT THE BETTER BOOKSHOPS
ALFRED • A • KNOPF • PUBLISHER • N • Y.

Margaret Kennedy

... Can her new book about the Sangers be as good as

THE CONSTANT NYMPH?

• This time Miss Kennedy tells the story of Caryl, brother of Teresa ... the constant nymph. Once, playing for a movie, he broke into fiery music — shocked and terrified his audience ... as his father, Albert, might have done. But just *once*. Caryl himself is “not enough a Sanger.” Even in love he holds back—lets Sebastian’s dark, bold eyes play havoc with hearts. Caryl has common sense instead of genius. He is the fool of the family. • For us there is no question of “better” or “best.” It is enough that Miss Kennedy has written

THE FOOL OF THE FAMILY

another novel, as great as *The Constant Nymph*, as irresistible as her first chronicle of these astonishing, turbulent children of a genius.

\$2 at all bookstores

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN

