

## A Positive Squire

COME TO THINK OF IT. By G. K. CHESTERTON. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ARTHUR COLTON

MR. CHESTERTON'S feeling about Macaulay and about Dean Inge is the respect of a positive man for positive men crossed by the displeasure one naturally has for biases at positive angles with one's own. But we have read him now for so many years that we can draw back and look at him distantly enough to see that he is in line with a tradition of English character and English letters to which Macaulay, and to some extent Dean Inge, do also contribute and belong. For the matrix of the type one thinks of a country squire treading flat-footed his ancestral acres; a portly man probably, with a loud voice and stout legs, sensible and not sensitive, honorable and something of a crank, outspoken, domineering, prejudiced, and notable for the possession of idiomatic and effective speech; a sort of blend of Squire Western and Sir Roger De Coverley. Ben Jonson, John Selden, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Cobbett, Borrow, Macaulay—through all their contesting politics and contradicting points of view, one seems to hear the well-lunged voice of the squire, to be aware of his solid legged security in whatever opinion he entertains. His epitaph, if written by his neighbors with Spoon River candor, might run as follows: "An Odd Stick and a very Decent Sort—He was Loaded with Prejudice and Labeled it all Reason—Dense to Objection He was never Dull in Reply—An Honest Man, Courageous, Contentious, and No Fool—We who Quarreled with Him shall Miss Him."

When positive squire differs with positive squire, there is no doubt about it; they differ. It would be a pleasant fancy to imagine Dean Inge holding that office in St. John the Divine instead of St. Paul's, and what might happen there to one so candid and independent. It were good, too, to harken what dry or grim comment he might make on the essay here "On Ingeland," where a recognition of his good points is contrasted with "his really rabid and ridiculous prejudices—there is no interval between the things he understands excellently and the things he refuses to understand at all." He, the dean, is, in fact, exactly like a chess board, all squarely black or squarely white. Another speculation full of happy thoughts would be the way Macaulay would "rip up the back" of the author of the essay "On the Innocence of Macaulay," or stamp on the assertion that the Revolution of 1688 was made by "cynical Whig aristocrats," who "merely betrayed and deserted their king for their own glory, or more often for their own gain."

Speaking of "The New Poetry," Mr. Chesterton marks his divergence in fundamentals from Macaulay in this: that Macaulay believed in a progress which never stops; "What was its goal yesterday will be its starting point tomorrow"; whereas Mr. Chesterton has achieved a theory of novelty quite different and as follows:

Current culture is always talking our heads off about psychology, and then it entirely leaves out the most elementary facts about psychology [How curiously alike are the Macaulayan and the Chestertonian manner!] such as the fact of fatigue. . . . If a man is made to walk twenty miles between two stone walls engraved on each side with endless repetitions of the Elgin marbles, it is not unlikely that by the end of his walk he will be a little weary of that classical style of ornament. But that is because the man is tired, not because the style is tiresome. . . . It is necessary to have novelty, but novelty is not necessarily improvement. It does not give the man for whom the old things are stale the right to scorn the man for whom the old things are fresh. And there are always men for whom old things are fresh. Such men, far from being behind the times, are altogether above the times. They are too individual and original to be affected by the trivial changes of time.

The novelties of these cycles are largely old things refreshed by lying fallow.

The doctrine of fatigue is not a novelty either, but it is freshened by vigorous statement. It ought to be joined with a theory of disillusion: every era of novel ideas opens with promises that it is unable to keep; one is not only tired but disappointed. And the theory does not apply only to literary history and its cycles. It applies as well to social and religious history. It applies even to the social and religious outlook of Mr. Chesterton. People at one time get fatigued with feudal barons, foreign popes, and undomestic monks; hence absolutism, Protestantism, national churches, and subsidiary sects; until, fatigued with absolute or would be absolute kings, divine

rights and other compulsory rituals, they betake themselves to Puritans and Protectors. Out of fatigue with these comes a Restoration, and gaiety is the vogue; until fatigue with the whole Stuart dynasty, added to an older but still unrefreshed fatigue with something they call "popery" introduces the long chapter of Hanoverians, Whigs, Age of Reason, fox-hunting clergy, laissez faire, political economy, commercial empire, free trade, mechanism, industrialism, ten pound franchise, a proletariat, and a church that does not know "where it is at," science groping after certainty and religion fading into doubt. The chapter is unusually long, and signs of fatigue have been evident for several generations.

Well, then why do not anti-Protestantism, anti-industrialism, anti-liberalism and all the argumentative convictions of their advocates, come under the same theory? Men to whom "the old things are fresh," who are not behind the times but above them, "too individual and original to be affected by the trivial changes of time"—such men may just as well be those to whom the old liberalism, the old faith in social progress and the march of knowledge, is fresh;



Photograph by Berenice Abbott

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

(Miss Millay is shown wearing a necklace presented to her by the late Elinor Wylie to whom "Fatal Interview" is dedicated.)

just as well as those to whom the old church with all its visions and dogmas has remained, or has become again, a vivid reality. The theory of fatigue is sound, but it is not partisan. That the ideas of Bentham and Mill are stale to Mr. Chesterton, "does not give him the right to scorn those to whom these old things are fresh," even if they are not yet old enough to be novel. Staleness for staleness, what age ever expressed more vigorously than the Renaissance its sense of utter staleness with the old, of utter joy in the new? For twenty miles of Greek gods in marble, read a hundred and twenty miles of saints on panel, plaster, and canvas; or ten miles of statistical Whigs in bronze effigy. It may be that humanity can stand more miles of scholastic theology than of political economy; and its eventual dislike may be only the more profound. Is it too much to ask of man to prove his faith in his formula by applying it to his own state of mind? I suspect it is. We are too "human, all too human," to see our own opinion, as well as other men's, conditioned by time and tide, especially tide.

In discussing a recent English book of reminiscences by Mr. Kinsey Peile, actor and playwright, *John O'London's Weekly* tells how when Mr. Peile was visiting Rudyard Kipling he discovered "a large deal table, which had evidently been most carefully planed down to ensure a very smooth surface. On this surface I saw numerous scraps of writing, notes and scribbles in pencil—the entire surface was almost covered. I concluded that Mr. Rudyard Kipling used this table as his writing block, and I presume that when it was covered entirely with his writing it was planed down again for further use."

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## The Reascending Sonnet

FATAL INTERVIEW. By EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY. New York: Harper & Bros. 1931. \$2.00.

Reviewed by O. W. FIRKINS

WHEN one finishes Miss Millay's volume, it is hard to believe that the frame or casing of this rare experience has been an ordinary book, in familiar type, on conventional paper. For this is a work that obliterates types, printing, publishers, reviewers, abolishes even writing and reading, and conveys us into a world of primalities and finalities, a world in which the fountains of the great deep of human possibility are broken up, and the windows of heaven—or some contrasting, equally unearthly spot—are opened up.

Yet the keel that steers into this unknown sea is of an old and simple make. The volume contains fifty-two sonnets. The type is Shakespearian and unexacting. There is no tale, no sequence; but the sonnets all deal with love, and refer to one woman and one passion. The passion is vehement and insurgent, whether it exults or despairs, or—still more characteristically—exults in despair. The unique thing in the psychology is the ascendancy of resolve.

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The word "greatness" should be cautiously and rarely used, but the time comes when even Durandal must be unsheathed. I think that time has come. Greatness is present in these sonnets. It is there as *presence* even more distinctly than it is there as agency. It is the voice rather than the speech that uplifts and subdues us.

Il vous a parlé, grand'mère,  
Il vous a parlé.

The sonnets, taken singly, are admirably made, but the power is more strongly felt in a smaller or in a larger unit than in the fourteen lines. Nevertheless, the reader must not be mulcted of his quotation:

My worship from this hour the Sparrow-Drawn  
Alone will cherish, and her arrowy child,  
Whose groves alone in the inquiring dawn  
Rise tranquil, and 'their altars undefiled.  
Seaward and shoreward smokes a plundered land  
To guard whose portals was my dear employ;  
Razed are its temples now; inviolate stand  
Only the slopes of Venus and her boy.  
How have I stripped me of immortal aid  
Save theirs alone,—who could endure to see  
Forsworn Æneas with conspiring blade  
Sever the ship from shore (alas for me)  
And make no sign; who saw, and did not speak,  
The brooch of Troilus pinned upon the Greek.

Some shorter things are worth transcribing. In the lovely line, "Moon that against the lintel of the West," slenderness and tenderness are equally characteristic of the sounds in "lintel" and of the image in "moon." Or take "When rainy evening drips to misty night"; or, for a line hardly surpassable in the Shakespearian cluster, "Whom earthen you, by deathless lips adored"; or

What time the watcher in desire and fear  
Leans from his chilly window in the dawn;

Or, for sheer heartbreak:

I had not so come running at the call  
Of one who loves me little, if at all.

Miss Millay can use classic imagery with the measured spontaneity of Landor, and she can use rustic, low-life, American imagery with the native touch of the authors of "Raggedy Man" and "Barefoot Boy." Never before perhaps has the sonnet profited by the convergence of these two accomplishments.

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There is one last thing to be said. Poetry conducts us to new lands. But travel is one thing; migration is another. Great poets lead us to undreamt-of shores; but the greatest of poets lead us to lands where we can found a hearth and rear a dwelling. There is no evidence that the view of things which somewhat obscurely underlies these poems is a view that is finally favorable to rational, reverent, and wholesome life. One suspects Miss Millay of "wasting Christian kisses on a heathen idol's foot" in the dusk of her half-lighted sanctuary. It is part of her supreme poetic tact that she has kept the idol's foot in the fringe of the temporizing shadow. Worshipers of other faiths are free to enter that temple and to rejoice their eyes in the solemnity and suggestiveness of the pile.



## The Unlikely Lovers

THE TWO CARLYLES. By OSBERT BURDETT. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1931. \$4.

Reviewed by CHARLES FREDERICK HARROLD

"CALVINIST by inheritance, peasant by blood, inarticulate by some inhibition, Carlyle was a man for whom the life within had become damped down to the point at which it must collapse and surrender, or else, in such a nature, defy." Such, says Mr. Burdett, was Thomas Carlyle between 1821 and 1826, when he was grimly making his terms with the skepticism, the turmoil, and the "soul-murdering Mud-gods" of his epoch, and, as an unlikely lover, was courting the witty, ironic, black-eyed Jane Welsh. He was to defy to the last. Something was to cripple the inner life of Carlyle and make his long career one of spiritual defiance rather than of integrated moral power. Mr. Burdett, seeking to understand the natures of the two Carlyles rather than to reiterate the opinions of either Froude or his detractors, finds the implicit tragedy of their marriage to lie in the fact that in neither nature were the discords ever to be resolved. They were to extend beyond the brilliant argumentative letters of courtship, beyond the final desperate years at Craigenputtock, on through the famous and unhappy years at No. 5 Cheyne Row.

It was not the disharmony of the relationship which Mr. Burdett regards as memorable, for that was to be expected of a couple with a "mutual ability to confuse each other," since "there was genius in both"; it was rather that the disharmony was to last so long. Carlyle's spirit was never to know that jubilant calm which comes to the man who perfectly fulfils his purpose, finding attainment both in the moment's labor and in the ultimate accomplishment. He was to the end "a strange cross between two temperaments and two traditions, in which the shepherd used his crook for a pencil, and the scholar used his pen like a spade." In matters of the heart it was inevitable that Jane Welsh, in whom the author discovers a curious potential "resemblance to Madame de Sevigné," should at first regard the brilliant awkward peasant as an ironic substitute for Saint Preux, whom she loved, rather languidly, in the pages of Rousseau's "La Nouvelle Héloïse." With clay in his blood, Calvinism in his head, and dyspepsia in his stomach, he was to pay the penalty for "deliberately shutting his eyes to the truth of Chesterfield's maxim: before all else, remember the graces." Harmony, either for the heart or for the head, was to be denied him. It had already failed him when, on that journey from Templand to Comley Bank, he had his new wife at his side and Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" in his hand. He was destined to understand neither of his companions very well.

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It may be significant that before he was six, Carlyle had been badly frightened by fire, had seen his uncle "ghastly in death," had proved his susceptibility to violent emotion, and had absorbed the "atmosphere of Fear" by which his father both attracted and repelled his children. Later, as a young man, under the influence of Gibbon and dyspepsia, he had seen his spiritual and physical health ebb away. Then, for five years, while he struggled with hack work, with ill health, and with the uncertainty of his future, he sought with alternate hope and quiet despair to find the promise of marital love in letters so arch, so "sprinkled with satire," so laughing with comedy, and so masculine in their overtones, that he wondered "that a woman could be so much concerned about a man whom she did not intend to marry." It is in the interpretation of these troublous and pregnant years that Mr. Burdett displays a remarkable insight. Admitting that "Carlyle could have done without Jane, and that Jane, if her circle had been wider, might have turned to some one else," he shows that there was a substantial fund of affection and character upon which to base hopes for their future. On the other hand, he points out that until late in the courtship she was more interested in the future of Carlyle's genius than in becoming his wife. In the union that did occur, then, "parts of this pair were incompatible, while the word love implied a unity still lacking." Both in their temperaments and in their backgrounds there was "a disguised sense of misalliance." The Carlyles at this period "were one generation behind"; and Carlyle himself had become "a man of typically bachelor tastes and habits, yet . . . brooding on a wife as

if his housekeeper must necessarily be married to him."

On the other and more controversial questions of their union, the author shows an admirable combination of detachment and sympathy. He thinks it probable that Jane was at one time, as she herself declared, "passionately" in love with Edward Irving; he balances the joys and the despairs of the Craigenputtock period to indicate that the loneliness and hard work which fell to her lot would in themselves have been easily borne if she had not been "a disappointed mother as well." He suggests that their childlessness was due probably to barrenness in Jane rather than to impotence in her husband. He shows, with the quiet weight of careful and restrained interpretation, how during the first years in London it became clear to both of them "that he was to remain tormented to the last," and that her "hopes of motherhood were to be disappointed permanently."

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As Carlyle retired more and more into himself, eating alone, working alone, sleeping alone, Mrs. Carlyle chafed under the Victorian notion that "the duty of young women was to be unoccupied; and the duty of young wives was to be obsequious; that ability . . . in women were defects to be hid; that to listen was more becoming than to talk. . . ." Her chief mode of self-expression was letter-writing; "a day to her was wasted in which she had written to nobody"; in a sense peculiarly her own, "she became a woman of 'letters.'" That she resented Carlyle's readiness to bask in the pleasure of Lady Ashburton is another difficult subject on which Mr. Burdett shows both candor and intelligence. "Carlyle was happier than he deserved to be when his wife's heart was comparatively empty, and that she was not the source of his new happiness explains the jealousy that Jane, always possessive, was too fond of her husband not to feel." On the whole, their life together was the exasperating combination of success and failure which most marriages are. Throughout, and beyond, the fourteen years of what they both called "the Nightmare of Frederick," each sought an inner equilibrium and an outer harmony which eluded them to the end. "Being a man, he complained of the universe. She, being a woman, complained of him." It was natural that "the affection which united them without solving their problems . . . embittered her while she lived and her husband when he had lost her."

Most readers will no doubt be thankful that the absorbing story of the Carlyles has fallen into such skilful hands as those of Mr. Burdett; he has resisted the temptation of caricature, of sentimentality, of melodrama. In their place we have the most sensitive, balanced, and human treatment which the delicate and formidable subject of Carlyle's married life has so far been accorded. Without attempting a biography, endeavoring only to portray the inner lives of the Carlyles, he has dealt but briefly with Carlyle's work and reputation. Yet, if the early German period of Carlyle's intellectual life receives inadequate interpretation, there are penetrating passages on Carlyle's method in "The French Revolution," on the origin and nature of his style, on the little-known weaknesses of "Cromwell," on "Frederick the Great" as revealing how "Force had always attracted Carlyle's weakness," and how, in his "vast popular success," he "did not overcome the world but was corroded by it." The final chapter is devoted to "Carlyle and his Executor," to answering an earlier question, raised in Chapter VI, "What is the use of meeting one exaggeration by another, of Mr. Wilson being nearly as 'reckless' as 'Mr. Froude?'" One thing becomes clear: that Froude, who "alone of these biographers seems to have been equally attached to both the Carlyles" has written the book most nearly indispensable to an understanding of their lives. Mr. Burdett's own book, however, will be regarded as ranking close to Froude's. For, like Froude's memorable biography, it leaves us with the consciousness that "these two beings, who charged each other's lives with so much electricity, were equally rich in friends; and, even at this distance of time, they tempt us, for all their angularities, to enroll ourselves in the charmed company which was drawn to the far cottage at Craigenputtock, or gladly invaded the cozy, curious household which, when all is said, managed to survive, there and in Cheyne Row, for forty chequered years."

Edward Arnold & Company in London have now issued in a collected volume all the famous "Ghost Stories" of Dr. M. R. James contained in his former books.

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## Ironie Melancholy

THE ORCHID. By ROBERT NATHAN. New York: Bobbs-Merrill. 1931. \$2.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

M. R. ROBERT NATHAN, as has been said before, is unique; and it is almost impossible to give an idea of the quality of his books to the unfortunate people who have read none of them. To say of "The Orchid" that it is the story of a number of people who are stirred by the coming of spring to the city to some restless wish, and they all either get their wishes or something they recognize as better, and to add that the solution of every problem is found as a result of a spring party on a carrousel—all this makes it sound like the worst passages of "Pollyanna" or "The Wishing-Ring Man." Yet that is what "The Orchid" is, and it is a wise, tender, and humorous book. It contains a popular actress who is growing tired of the stage and is tempted to accept the protection of a wealthy manufacturer; the manufacturer's wife, whose position involves her in so many women's movements that her husband thinks her hard and efficient, but who wishes only to depend on him; and the proprietor of the carrousel, who wishes to be an operatic tenor.

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What is the secret that makes this book so different from others? Essentially it is incommunicable, but one can explain parts of it. There is the delicate, pervasive satire, which seems to come, not from savage indignation like most satire, but from a mind so just that it necessarily sees the ridiculous for what it is. For a single example, listen to the owner of the carrousel:

When I see the improvements all around me, I am ashamed for my carrousel. One hundred children visit it in an afternoon, and because of me they still believe in the lion, the camel, and the giraffe. . . . I will take out these lions and tigers, I will subtract these animals, and in their places I will put automobiles and flying machines and steam engines. That will be an education for the children, it will be modern, it will be of today.

One could name half a dozen books telling what is wrong with America that do not say so much as that.

There is also a gentle melancholy running through the book, in spite of, or rather because of, the humor; for everything that makes the vulgar laugh cannot but make the judicious grieve. At the beginning of the book, Mr. Nathan sets the key of "his dry regret about the race of men," when he describes the coming of spring, the children in the park, and says:

It would be a mistake to imagine that these children are happier or more friendly than their elders. It is only because, like the birds, their shouts are so piercing, that one does not hear the groans, the sobs, and the outbursts of despair to which their own brutality causes them to give way from time to time. Fortunately, their anguish does not last; soon they are making plans again as though there were no such thing as sorrow in the world.

It is not of children only that Mr. Nathan wrote those words; whether his characters get their wishes or not, he regards them all in the same way.

But though the human race is so ridiculous and disappointing, there is no need to despair. There is an underlying philosophy of endurance, for the sake of mere self-respect, voiced by one of the characters, Professor Pembauer. He is the "point of reference" that some critics find in each of Shakespeare's plays; he is a poor piano-teacher, and he wishes nothing except that the actress should continue to serve art. He may be known by his advice to his pupils:

You must learn to control yourself, you must have a little repose. If you have emotions, you should do something else with them, not play the piano.

And

He wished his music to be thoughtful, and clear, and not too full of pity for himself or for others. One must have faith, he liked to say, if one is to be an artist. But he did not know how to explain what he meant by faith.

Professor Pembauer, with his fragmentary philosophy of courage and common sense and the great importance of art, is a valuable acquaintance. So indeed is "The Orchid" as a whole. It is one of the very few books that are both ironic and melancholy, both melancholy and dignified.