Books and Bookmen

"A DARK LANTERN." Elizabeth Robins; William Heinman, London.

That this novel has been written by one of the feminine sex is written large all over it. Yet it is so admirably written that one regrets that the writer, like so many of her sex in the literary field, should (to use a nautical phrase) sail the boat "Reserve" so close to the wind as to make it an almost impossible feat for it ever to make port again. The sensational, problematical, and analytical novel we have had ad nauseam, the vivisectional is a little too much. The story opens where Katharine Dereham, fresh from her French Convent, is making her debut in society at a large party given by Lady Peterborough, her godmother, with whom she has lived as an adopted daughter since the death of her mother, and during the protracted absence of her father, Colonel Dereham, who is stationed with his regiment in India. Lady Peterborough is a great leader of the society known in London as the Upper Smart Set. Several Royal ties have honoured Lady Peterborough with their presence on this occasion; amongst them Prince Anton Waldenstein, who is presented by Lady Peterborough to Katharine.

"My god-daughter, your Highness," Lady Peterborough had said hurriedly, and turned to see who next, after her Grace of Lancaster, should be allowed a word with the Princess.

The foreigner, hardly looking, bowed with German military precision, and then his eye suddenly fixed. "Oh," he said, "did I see you—weren't you at the last Drawing-Room?"

"Yes," answered the girl.

"Of course you don't remember me——"

"I do remember you."

"No! where was I?"

"You stood behind the Princess Marie, and your uniform was——"

"So"—which he pronounced "Zo;" with that exception his English was quite unforeign—"So! you did notice," he laughed. "Was that because I stared so?"

"Not all because of that," she smiled back, "though it made me more nervous than ever."

"Were you nervous, then?"

"You saw that I was more nervous than anybody—that was why you——" she hesitated.

"Why I stared so?" he asked, amused.

"——why you laughed. It wasn't very nice of you."

"Upon my word, I didn't guess the least in the world that you were nervous. You seemed unusually composed."

"Then why did you laugh?" she demanded.

As he stood silent looking at her and still smiling, "Ah!" she said quite low, flushing on a sudden—— "Something was wrong! Of course I thought of that. But it was too late to help it. . . . and I've never known what it was." She seemed to wait.

"What it was?" he repeated.

"Yes, what was wrong."

"Will you dance?" he asked, quickly looking round as the first bars of a waltz sounded from the ball-room.

"No, I won't dance. Nor laugh, nor speak, nor eat ever again!" she said tragi-comically.

"What! You don't mean to take me to supper?" He leaned against the wall and contemplated her. While one of the suite, also detached, stood near talking with Bishop Brailton, the crowd round the rest of the royal party—little inner circle and larger one outside—all moved slowly away towards the small drawing-room off the ball-room, and the unfeatured mob flowed in between.

"It was something—something"—she was very serious now, and the school-girl look was gone, but school-girl words were on her lips—"something you don't like to tell me." As still he made no answer: "Something too dreadful to put into words."

"Quite too shocking," he assured her.

But the brutality of that nerved her. "Nobody else seems to have noticed that I did anything odd."

"Oh, they spare your feelings." She glanced up at him half laughing, half dismayed. Then, gravely recalling other testimony—"They said my curtsey was all——"

"Oh, yes, that was all——"

"And I didn't get tangled up in my train!"

"No-o," he said, still seeming to enjoy some malicious remembrance.

"Which was it?" she said uncertainly, "my feathers or my hair that was wrong?"

"Nothing wrong with your hair," he said, looking at it in such a way as to recall her from that wonderful day of the Drawing-Room to the yet more vivid present. She grew a little confused under his bold admiration, but making a clutch at self-possession

"Come, then," she said, seeing that the royal party with Lady Peterborough and a favoured few had disappeared in the direction of the music—"after all, I see it will be best to drown the memory of that Drawing-Room."

"I shall remember it always," he whispered, as they joined the dancers.

He had to take a lady of high degree down to supper, but audaciously he telegraphed "be sorry for me," and though the young debutante smiled back radiant, she felt the occurrence to be in the nature of a loss almost too heavy for "seventeen and a bit" to bear.

And still the pain of it was a thing nearer far to joy than any other gladness she yet had known. For did it not have its centre and its source in this gay and gracious, gently mocking, utterly beguiling soldier, who smiled your heart out of your breast, and left in its place a strange sharp rapture that now and then, as you tested its edge, took the breath like a rapier thrust—pricking you to a sense of life, beside which all the days before were as dead, and confined and without memorial?

The night wore on in a dream. The debutante danced, and laughed, and learned through one avenue and another that no coming out for "long and long" had been so brilliant. Lady Peterborough was told that her god-daughter would be the rage—"She has a something——" "She is apart——" "She will set a new fashion in beauty." And all the while the little school-girl, who should perhaps have been tucked up in bed, was thinking with thumping pulses, "Does he like my hair? Will he ever forget whatever the dreadful thing was at the Drawing-Room? Yes, he certainly likes my hair—— Oh, but when he smiles!"

He danced only once again with her, and at the cost of Bertie Amherst's waltz, too, so slow had this Prince Anton of Breitenlohe-Waldenstein been to realise how all the men were asking her "keep one for me."

While they danced, he asked her if she was to be at the State Concert. And he looked as if life hung upon her "yes."

She was coming? Ah, then, "at the Concert——"

Was it a great swelling roar of music and of laughter, that filled her ears like the sea—no, hush! it was the sound of her own blood beating in her ears.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Say?"

"Yes, about the Concert."

"Why, that we shall meet." Then, as she kept looking down and said no word: "I suppose you don't care about that?" Still the eyelids were unlifted, and the waltz swayed them like an outside power to which neither in the least contributed, only lent themselves in a mood of rapturous yielding. "But I care," he whispered, as if the long pause had not been.

And at the end he only said: "Auf Wiedersehen."

After what seems an eternity to Katharine, the night of the State concert arrives, where, instead of the tete-a-tete she has hoped for she gets only a glimpse of him and a stately bow, and two days later reads in the "Morning Post" that Prince Anton Waldenstein had returned to Schloss-Waldenstein in the Riesengebirge. Soon after this Katharine pays a visit to her father Colonel Dereham, who is now retired and living in London in chambers, and is taken by him to an "At Home" at Lady Wick's, the widow of the Mayor of a provincial town who had received Knighthood. Here she meets Garth Vincent, who tells her he has seen her at the opera a year before. Garth Vincent is totally different to any man she has ever met, and while Katharine does not exactly like him, thinks him interesting, and likens his face to a dark lantern. She is rather disconcerted when Vincent asks her for her town address, which she gives as Hill-street, Colonel Dereham's address. Vincent calls, and is told by the servant that Katharine's real home is with the Peterboroughs. He calls there, and is made to feel keenly the distance between the Peterborough's world and his, and is dismissed, seemingly, finally. There is an amusing description given of the society at Lady Wick's, which is a good many stratas below that of the Peterboroughs. Three years later Katharine (who has never forgotten him) meets Prince Anton in Rome, where he renews his suit so publicly and persistently that society begins to couple their names adversely, there being no announcement of their engagement. Prince Anton then makes a proposal to Katharine, which she in her innocence does not understand, and asks for time to prepare her trousseau. A day or two later comes a note of farewell, "I must report myself at Berlin."

She wrote to him anxious but trusting little letters, and got back tardy, noncommittal answers that any eye might see. Without a doubt, Kitty thought, he was in some trouble, family or State. Being who he was, he was one of those few to whom no general rule applies. This thought was the key to her whole relation to him.

But, oh, the waiting was hard. Eight months dragged by.

She wrote to him, enclosing her latest photograph. Was he going to Rome again this spring, or would London see him? And would he send her the long-promised picture of himself?

He would "bring it," came the glorious answer.

And in April he did. If he had had "trouble," no hint of it hung about him now. Nor yet about his picture, a delightful water-colour sketch doing the Prussian uniform gay justice, and the handsome face no less.

And he was just the same. No, more adorable—and again the sun shone and all the waiting and the Winter were forgot.

Just one cloud on the horizon that Kitty's eyes could see. Colonel Dereham was ill; certainly too "seedy" at present to pay his respects to, or even to receive the Prince of Breitenlohe-Waldenstein. His old occasional headaches were grown chronic. There were times when the girl became a prey to fears too dark for formulating—days when he shut himself up and refused to see her, or even Mrs Heathcote. For as time went on there was less ceremony about this friendship. But when he did re-appear, although he sometimes looked ill enough, still he was usually cheerful, in his old light way, and his daughter would be reassured. He had an inveterate dislike to explanations, or any sort oof soul-searching. If he resented the asking of questions, even by Kitty, he certainly seldom put them himself. The more striking, therefore, his unprefaced demand one day—

"When are you going to marry?"

"Why, I . . . I don't know."

"Don't they ask you?—the idiots."

"Not all of the idiots, father dear."

"Humph! I know of three who do."

"Do you?" a little wickedly. "I wonder if I know them."

"Bertie Amherst, Sir Philip Craybourne, and Hastings."

"Oh, those——"

"Well, what are you waiting for? Aren't they splendid enough for you?"

"They aren't so very splendid."

"They're three of the best matches in England."

"Y-yes, I suppose they are."

"You're waiting to fall in love, I suppose."

"Oh, no"—a little guiltily—"I'm not waiting for that."

"For what then?"

She stood silent.

How could she say for what she was waiting?

"I don't think it will do you any good, Kitty" (he was uncommonly serious for him)—"to have people saying you are keeping up a desperate flirtation with Breitenlohe-Waldenstein."

"Do you hear people say so?" Unconsciously her emphasis measured great distance, for the Heathcote woman held the farther end of the tape.

"Well, they do. And it's the second season they've said so. Won't do you any good, my dear."

Another time when some society paper reported at length a bal masque at Peterborough House, with a significant reference to Prince Anton and Miss Dereham as Lancelot of the Lake and the lily maid of Astolat: "I don't know what that old Peterborough woman is thinking about," repeated Colonel Dereham with an ill-humour very unusual in the most amiable of men.

More to the point was what Lord Peterborough thought. For the first time in thirty years he precipitated a scene with his wife. It ended stormily. He would speak to Waldenstein. That threat reduced Lady Peterborough to terms. Let him wait for twenty-four hours. It was far easier to wait than to forge ahead. The huge effort had exhausted the old man's scant energy. Yes, he would wait twenty-four hours.

He and Katharine avoided each other. She knew he disapproved of her, and he knew she knew. No need of words there.

But between Waldenstein and Lady Peterborough, a long conference behind closed doors. Again after dinner she took him away to her boudoir to show him some of her new findings. But almost at once a servant came to Katharine in the drawing-room: "Her ladyship asks you, please, to bring her your book, miss—the book that came home from the binders yesterday."

"Which one? Oh, the Prosper Merimee?"

"Yes, miss," said the footman, relieved at not having to tackle the name. Kitty went with the volume in her hand to the pink and white room opening on to the conservatory. Only Anton was there. She hesitated on the threshold.

"I had a message from——"

"Yes, it's all right." He drew her in and shut the door—looked at her a moment, coming closer as he did so, till suddenly he caught her to him. His action had the air of an overmastering impulse. Yet he was not so carried away but he could wonder, as his arms closed round her, where she got her flame-like uprightness—there seemed nothing firm enough in her physique to serve as framework for so tall, reed-straight a creature. She was one of those girls whose slender bones seem to lack hardness while they have elasticity. He laid a hand on her waist—absurdly small. Wrists so slight; and all so pliant. The youngness of her was like the youngness of a child. He kissed her.

"Why did you leave me, if you love me like this?" she whispered. "You've never told me why."

"It was because I loved you like this that I left you."

"I don't understand the least in the world."

"No, dear angel, of course you don't. Dear, dear little innocent!" He kissed the hand on his sleeve, lifted the other, took the green and silver book out of her grasp, laid it on the writing-table, and fell to kissing the small fingers that had held it, kissing them one by one. "But Lady Peterborough understands perfectly. Ah, that's a clever woman. But then she knows the life. You see, my beautiful, there have been great difficulties." Just as she had guessed: "You can't conceive what huge difficulties—Lady Peterborough realises."

"Yes, yes," the girl protested, "I can understand all that better than you think."

He had put her into a great chair and sat upon the arm, drawing her close against him. "Well, if you can understand, so much the better. It hasn't been easy. Far from it."

"Dear Anton," she murmured. He had gone through harassing scenes at Waldenstein for her sake—perhaps, who knows, they are making him leave the army; even give up his rank! "Tell me about it," she whispered.

"Well——" but he fell to murmuring endearments in caressing German. Suddenly he got up and ran his white fingers through his upstanding brush of yellow hair. "I'm frightfully in love, you know," he said argumentatively. She smiled. Did he think it necessary to point that out? "They'll say I've lost my head." (Poor Prince! to have even at this moment to think of "they.") "My only defence is: I can't help it. C'est plus fort que moi. I can't let you go."

"Of course not."

"No, it isn't exactly 'of course,'" he said, smiling; "but I can't let you go." Again he kissed her: brow, eyes, "Mondwinkel." "But you'll understand and make things easy—help me all you can."

"Indeed I will."

"You won't forget that I've made great sacrifices for your sake——"

"I will never forget that."

He stood directly under the electric light by the great green marble mantelpiece. His fine fresh-coloured complexion steamed pink and satiny in the strong illumination; his hair looked like spun glass, and the defiant upturned moustache, catching the downward flooding light, seemed more metallic-golden than ever.

And he loved her—he was her knight, this splendid creature.

"The great thing (you'll agree with me in this, my beautiful) is to have no delay."

"No."

"And you—you'll like living in Hungary?" he asked, after a second's hesitation.

"I shan't mind where we live." As he looked at her reflectively she added: "But it would be delightful to be part of the year at Waldenstein, wouldn't it?"

"No," he said with decision. "It's no use to begin that——"

"Our English Princess is so seldom there."

"But my mother is always."

"Won't she like me?"

Transported to the Waldenstein circle, he answered absently, "She may not care about—about this kind of arrangement."

The girl half rose. "What is it you mean, what 'arrangement?'"

"Why, a—what I'm proposing. A private marriage. Something in her eyes made him add hurriedly: "You said you could understand my position."

"You—you mean 'private' just for the present—till you are able to announce it?"

"My dear child, you see unfortunately, you aren't—you have every grace except rank. We can't get over that."

"Can't get over it?"

"No. And we, in Germany, are great sticklers for——"

"But you said—oh, what was it you said?—the great huge difficulties were got over. What did you mean? Please, please speak plain. I—it hurts me so dreadfully——"

She stood up, facing him with bewildered eyes.

"It's all right," he said soothingly, with a hand out to bring her back: "I shall always love you best."

She drew away shaking with a sudden cold excitement. "Does a private marriage with me mean——"

"Everybody will understand it's all right," he repeated. "Nobody will think any the less——. Why, it's been done in your own Royal Family."

"You don't mean—Anton, say you don't mean I may live to see another woman your real wife."

"If ever—probably never—in any case you would be my real wife, too."

"Too! Too!"

Devil take the unlucky little word, he thought. It stung like a wasp.

She had shrunk back from it away, away to the middle of the room, with both hands up, barrier-wise, to shield her wound; and a pitiful young face looked over, only half crediting the extent of her hurt.

"Don't look like that," he prayed; "you make me miserable."

As slowly, doubtfully, he came towards her with out-stretched hand, his signet caught the light. Her wide eyes fixed upon it. Old words rose up above the chaos in her mind: "Knight, thou hast done thyself great folly, for this shield ought not to be borne, but by him that shall have no peer that liveth."

"—— you make me miserable," he was saying.

"I—I don't want to make you miserable 'too.'" Her voice was so faint, he was afraid she was going to faint. "Don't," she cried, shrinking, and with eyes still fixed on the ring, as though it emitted an evil spell newly apprehended. "I—I was 'all right,' as you're learned to say—I—I—— Oh, I wish I had died last year."

She fled from the room.

Next day Prince Anton calls. Katharine refuses to see him then or ever again. The following summer a marriage is announced between Prince Anton and his second cousin, Duchess Margaretha of