

Books and Bookmen

"THE ELIXIR OF LIFE," William Satchell. London: Chapman and Hall, Limited.

The declining birth-rate, together with the recognition of the heroic efforts that scientists are making to stamp out hitherto incurable diseases, would seem to have furnished the subject for this remarkable book, which readers will find difficult to take seriously, though it is sufficiently evident that the author intends the book to be taken seriously. From time immemorial the inventor or propagandist of a new thing, idea or scheme, has been deemed by his fellows as more or less mad, yet has lived to find that judgment revoked. And he would, indeed, be a foolish man that would declare positively that it is outside the realms of possibility that an antidote should be discovered that should not only wipe out hitherto incurable diseases, but should render man hereafter immune from that and lesser diseases. But an elixir that shall give immortality to man is beyond man's skill to discover. And in this assumption madness lies. Immortality belongs to the gods, and is in no wise a human aspiration, and especially a sexless immortality on earth. The scenes are laid partly on the high seas, on which the *a. a.* Waima was ploughing her way from England to New Zealand, via Teneriffe, the Cape and Tasmania (having on board a full complement of passengers, chief amongst whom were the characters of this story), and partly on a fictitious island somewhere between the Cape and Tasmania. The voyage had been an eventful one, what with the death of a consumptive saloon passenger, the suicide of his brother—who had also inherited the fell disease, and had deemed it less cowardly to die by his own hand than to live a burden and a menace to the living, though his death left his only sister and relative alone and comfortless—and a case of insanity in the steerage. After leaving the Cape the Waima had met with bad weather, the violence of which had caused the destruction of her propeller. After drifting for some weeks, during which some very pretty comedies had been taking place on board, the Waima goes ashore on the island before mentioned, and during the enforced stay on this island the climax of the story is reached. The ship's doctor, Alan Vincent, had long been conducting a series of experiments on bacteriology with a view to the perfecting of a serum which he claimed would render humans immune from disease. While on the island several of the passengers had trapped some little animals which Vincent recognised as being marsupials. Singularly enough the animals proved to be neuters, and though a great many others were found, not one of them proved to be perfect male or female. Vincent then proceeded to experiment on them, and finding them immune from disease, though he injected the most deadly diseases into their bodies, came to the conclusion that as death and disease came in with sex, so will disease cease to be when humans become sexless. And in the declining birth-rate he assumes that nature is preparing the way for a sexless population who, through immunity from disease, shall become immortal.

"Just now," he said, apparently going off at a tangent, "you spoke of the serum as a universal germicide, but it is only incidentally a germicide; that is, perhaps, after all, one of the least of its functions. You know that in the old days of chivalry it was the practice of knights to champion certain persons, even occasionally ideas; you remember the case of the champion of the crown, who throws out his challenge at the coronation. Well, that is the idea I derive from the vital principle in this serum—a champion of life; something that is not merely capable of annihilating the creatures who make for death, but is itself beneficent, even life-giving. We know that there are many forms of bacteria which are innocuous to the human body, and that there are some, perhaps many, whose action is wholly beneficent. It is only a few steps forward to the conception of an organism immunitarily destructive of disorder, found to order as the planets are found to their spheres. There is nothing outrageous in the theory; nothing even improbable. How does the embryo in-

ally the same for several thousands of years, then, unless there was a time when these animals displayed to one another a ferocity they do not now possess, how rare must have been the happening of an accident sufficient to cause death. For, Philip, these creatures are not easily destroyed; their flesh heals with marvellous rapidity, and even the injection of poisons has no effect on them. However, that is the case as it stands for the indestructible virtue of the champion of life—at all events in their bodies. There remains the question of disease, if there be really such, which are not due to the presence of humical organisms from outside, but either to a sort of rebellion or inertness of the natural cells; and here all we have to get upon is that significant little variation between your temperature and the normal. There may have been a rise of my own temperature, but, if so, it was of short duration and unnoticeable; the effect, therefore, is not a general one. Something must cause a variation in your case; something must be going on in your body, quietly and unobtrusively, yet persistently. What is it? Is it not possible that long dormant cells have been re-awakened with that spirit of order which they have inherited; that they are building up starved nerves, toning and tuning the whole body into the major key of life? Philip, do not build too strongly on the word of one who has ventured to dream beyond the limits of his reason, yet I will tell you now what I believe to be in store for you; weeks, probably months, perhaps even years, during which your temperature will remain as it is now; then, a gradual subsidence to the normal. But when that time is reached, there will not be a cell in your body that does not work in complete subservience to the well-being of the whole, and you will enjoy perfect health."

"Well, there is the theory; time only can prove it; but in the meanwhile we are not without evidence that is, at least, significant. In the first place, there is the complete, almost instantaneous, sterilisation of all disease cultures I have been able to experiment with; in the second, there is the rapid subjugation and ultimate annihilation of disease germs strongly established in a human body; in the third, there is the immunity, I might say, conferred by one injection of the serum."

Westland arrested him with a motion of his hand.

"What evidence is there of that?" he asked.

"Let me ask you a question in turn—Whence do you suppose I derived the serum injected into your veins a week ago?"

"From the little marsupials, certainly."

"You are wrong; it was prepared from my own blood. I took you I and experimented with disease cultures, previously sterilised with the serum. I told you that disease had failed to appear, but I did not add that the vital principle of the elixir had come into my body. I repeat that omission now. I say that one inoculation gives immunity, because it was the impossibility of getting a reaction in my own person that drove me to experiment with another; life-long because unless the organisms are capable of losing their vitality, they receive no power able to eliminate them from my body or yours."

"That is the most astonishing thing yet," Westland remarked.

"But now is the organism capable of losing its vitality because, if it is not, there must follow a consequence beside which the elimination of the disease—itsself a tremendous issue—falls into insignificance. The only answer we can get to this question is derived from an examination of the little marsupials; a consideration of the one singularity which distinguishes them from all other animals. We have found no perfect females. We have found no males. Why? Because in all probability there are none. Even if there be not absolutely the truth to-day, it will be so eventually, because Nature, lavish as she so often appears, is at heart a niggard. She never yet gave anything for nothing, and the moment the imperious need for any faculty or functional organ ceases, that moment does she begin to remove it. Consider the case of the banana: for unnumbered ages man has propagated the plant solely by seeds, and nature has repaid by removing the seed, but for the determination of man she would also have removed the fruit. Nature may be dull of sight for things near at hand; she looks only sidles towards a far horizon; but she is infinitely wise, and in the end nothing escapes her. These animals have not escaped her. What, then, is the interpretation of their physical peculiarity, their, probably universal, incapability of being offspring? The answer lies in one word—they are immortal."

Westland gave an exclamation of incredulity.

"Immortal, of course, in the restricted sense that they can only be destroyed by physical violence or starvation, itself a kind of violence," Vincent continued, calmly. "If there be on this island a curious, almost animal capable of catching and devouring them, we might have found the asexual union in exact proportion to the cunning of their enemy; but they have probably never known enemies, and for the work of nature may therefore have been comparatively rapid, and, as I say, it is in all probability completed. But if it be so, if there be no longer a creature amongst them capable of reproducing its kind, then we are only to expect a few, how long has it been so? Is it a matter of years or of centuries? Go back in your mind to that period in their history when nature's work, consequent on the development of the marvellous organisms in their blood, was only but completed; as many perfect animals were born as there were centers. The rest is a simple matter of the calculation of the chances. If all alike were only to be destroyed by violence, what kind of a period of time would have elapsed before every one of those perfect creatures had ceased to exist? Are we not forced to the conclusion that the age of every one of these animals now alive on the island must be reckoned, not in centuries but in thousands of years?"

"It would seem so," Westland admitted. "If the premises are correct, they may perish in the winter from the severity of the weather, but if that were so one would hardly expect to find them in numerous numbers as they actually are. No; unless for some reason the perfect animals were destroyed by the neuters, your conclusion seems inevitable; and in any event, whatever may be the age of the youngest, there must be some who were born in the beginning."

"Exactly; and if we suppose—which is not an unreasonable supposition—that the conditions of this island have been prac-

tionally the same for several thousands of years, then, unless there was a time when these animals displayed to one another a ferocity they do not now possess, how rare must have been the happening of an accident sufficient to cause death. For, Philip, these creatures are not easily destroyed; their flesh heals with marvellous rapidity, and even the injection of poisons has no effect on them. However, that is the case as it stands for the indestructible virtue of the champion of life—at all events in their bodies. There remains the question of disease, if there be really such, which are not due to the presence of humical organisms from outside, but either to a sort of rebellion or inertness of the natural cells; and here all we have to get upon is that significant little variation between your temperature and the normal. There may have been a rise of my own temperature, but, if so, it was of short duration and unnoticeable; the effect, therefore, is not a general one. Something must cause a variation in your case; something must be going on in your body, quietly and unobtrusively, yet persistently. What is it? Is it not possible that long dormant cells have been re-awakened with that spirit of order which they have inherited; that they are building up starved nerves, toning and tuning the whole body into the major key of life? Philip, do not build too strongly on the word of one who has ventured to dream beyond the limits of his reason, yet I will tell you now what I believe to be in store for you; weeks, probably months, perhaps even years, during which your temperature will remain as it is now; then, a gradual subsidence to the normal. But when that time is reached, there will not be a cell in your body that does not work in complete subservience to the well-being of the whole, and you will enjoy perfect health."

So ingenious are Mr. Satchell's theories that the reader (Agrippa-like) will be "almost persuaded" to believe. But man, in the aggregate, lives in the present, and a sexless world bereft of sweet chubby faces and the pattering of tiny feet, will have no charm for him, however the biped of the future may view sexlessness. The story closes with the safe arrival in port of the Waima and her passengers, half a dozen of whom, being inoculated with the perfected serum, or "elixir of life," are doomed to immortality, on this planet we presume, since Mr. Satchell does not promise them deportation. Of the principal male character, Vincent, the less said the better, except that he is patently an immortal as evinced by his absolute lack of morals. "Westland," who allowed himself to be experimented upon at the risk of his life, in order to benefit suffering humanity, is worthy enough, though decidedly eccentric in other matters, as is also "Street," the steerage passenger, who proved himself to be "the man of the hour" after the accident to the Waima. The rules framed by Street for the government of the settlement on the island are admirably conceived and as admirably carried out. In Street, Mr. Satchell has created a type which true Socialists are trying to discover. It is not possible to withhold a strong need of admiration for the ingenious arguments Mr. Satchell has adduced in favour of his theories. Nor has he neglected to point out the power for evil the possessor of an "elixir of life" would have if he were inclined to evil. In no case is the suggestion to be commended that life, even though burdened by disease, may be brought to an end untimely. Of the desire for premature death, Sir Edwin Arnold has said:

"Lest one long over-much to die,
And so lose purpose of earth."

Nor is the idea to be tolerated for a moment that because a man or woman has mated unwisely, that it gives him or her any right to break down the laws of God and the laws framed by man for the protection of society by the taking of another mate while the first is still alive, even though the consent of the first has been obtained, and to justify such second union in the name of love is to add insult to injury. Such specious argument as the following carries its own condemnation on the face of it: "To deceive the world where the deception involves no injury is the prerogative of the individual." Mr. Satchell will doubtless have read, "Our acts are our witnesses are." If the principal female characters of this book are the type Nature is going to choose as the pioneers of the new immortality, well they deserve it! It is greatly to be regretted that a writer of Mr. Satchell's talent should not employ that talent to more useful purpose than the arrogating of the divine power to man, indicative though it may be of the trend of the thought of the age we live in. We are indebted to Messrs. Wildman and Aray for our copy of this extraordinarily interesting though untenable book.

DELTA.

"THE COMPANY'S SERVANT," B. M. Croker. London: George Bell and Sons.

Mrs. Croker has given us nothing better than this book, the plot of which, while not new, is admirably and naturally developed. The principal scenes are laid in Tanu-Kul and Ootacamund, Southern India, whither the hero, John Vernon, had drifted, hopelessly enough, after being banished from England, home and fortune with a charge of theft hanging over his head.

At the time the story opens, Vernon had been stationed for some years at Tanu-Kul, first as porter, but latterly as head guard on the Government Railway, and had earned the respect both of his superiors and his subordinates by the conscientious performance of his duties. He had at first hoped against hope that his cousin Lucilla, who was the real culprit, would clear his name and give him that chance he so longed for of entering the army. But Lucilla had made no sign, and Vernon had, as was usual with him, thrown all his heart into his work, displaying the same esprit de corps that had characterised his demeanour at Charterhouse and later at Sandhurst.

How Vernon narrowly escapes an unfortunate entanglement with a Eurasian, and how he makes the acquaintance of Beatrice Arminger—who he eventually marries—is brightly and succinctly told by Mrs. Croker, from the beginning of the book to the end, where Vernon returns home, completely exonerated, and as the prospective heir of Lord Rotherham, his uncle.

Beatrice Arminger is an exceedingly pleasing creation, whether as the willful runaway from her frivolous stepmother, or as the defender of Vernon's honour. How far a man is justified in taking another's sins on his shoulders is worked out in this story, which must be read to be fully appreciated. Mrs. Croker is never more felicitous than in the depiction of Anglo-Indian life, and in "The Company's Servant" her readers will be more than satisfied that her pen has not outstripped their interest. Our copy is from Messrs. Wildman and Aray.

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