

Books and Bookmen

THROUGH THE MAGIC DOOR:
Arthur Conan Doyle. (London:
George Bell and Sons.)

Nearly every author, sometime or other during his literary career, vouchsafes his readers a peep into his private life, or writes a book that is indicative of his private opinions or convictions. "Through the Magic Door" Conan Doyle has ushered his readers into his study to take a peep at the books that have best pleased, instructed, comforted, or assisted to form his own inimitable style. On the perfect companionship of books, he waxes eloquent.

I care not how humble your bookshelf may be, nor how lowly the room which it adorns. Close the door of that room behind you, shut off with it all the cares of the outer world, plunge back into the soothing company of the great dead, and then you are through the magic portal into that fair land whither worry and vexation can follow you no more. You have left all that is vulgar and all that is sordid behind you. There stand your noble, silent comrades, waiting in their ranks. Draw your eye down their files. Choose your man. And then you have but to hold up your hand to him and away you go together into dreamland. Surely there would be something eerie about a line of books were it not that familiarity has deadened our sense of it. Each is a munificent soul enshrouded in cerecloth and patron of leather and printer's ink. Each cover of a true book enfolds the concentrated essence of a man. The personalities of the writers have faded into the thinnest shadows, as their bodies into impalpable dust, yet here are their very spirits at your command.

It is our familiarity also which has lessened our perception of the miraculous good fortune which we enjoy. Let us suppose that we were suddenly to learn that Shakespeare had returned to earth, and that he would favour each of us with an hour of his wit and his fancy. How eagerly we would seek him out! And yet we have him—the very best of him—at our elbows from week to week, and hardly trouble ourselves to put out our hands to beckon him down. No matter what mood a man may be in, when once he has passed through the magic door he can summon the world's greatest to sympathize with him in his thoughts, to be thoughtful, here are the kings of thought. If he is dreamy, here are the masters of fancy. Or is it amusement that he lacks? He can signal to any one of the world's great story-tellers, and out comes the dead man and holds him enthralled by the hour. The dead are such good company that one may come to think too little of the living. It is a real and a pressing danger with many of us, that we should never find our own thoughts and our own souls, but be ever in the company of the dead. Yet second-hand romance and second-hand emotion are surely better than the dull, soul-killing monotony which life brings to most of the human race. But best of all when the dead in their wisdom and the dead man's example give us guidance and strength in the living of our own strenuous days.

Of English essayists, he places Macaulay first.

If I had to choose the one book out of all that line from which I have had most pleasure and most profit, I should point to yonder staid copy of Macaulay's "Essays." It seems entwined into my whole life as I look backwards. It has no wonder in my student days, it has been with me on the sweltering Gold Coast, and it formed part of my humble kit when I went a-whaling in the Arctic. Honest Scotch harpooners have admitted their brains over it, and you may still see the grease stains where the second engineer grappled with Frederick the Great. Tattered and dirty and worn, no gilt-edged Morocco-bound volumes could ever take its place for me.

What a noble gateway this book forms through which one may approach the study either of letters or of history! Milton, Machiavelli, Hallam, Southey, Bunyan, Emerson, Johnson, Pitt, Laing, Clive, Hastings, Chatham—what auctorial thoughts!

To Boswell is given the palm, as being the ideal biographer, and incidentally is pointed out the several points that go to the making of an ideal biographer. Gibbons is the historian whose books Conan Doyle would choose were he condemned to spend a year on a desert island. Pepy's Diary is pronounced the greatest autobiography in the English language, its greatness being in its absolute lack of affectation. The following extract will show the extraordinary fascination the Napoleonic era has had for writers:—

Now you see that whole row of books which takes you at one sweep nearly across the shelf? I am rather proud of those, for they are my collection of Napoleonic military memoirs. There is a story told of an illiterate millionaire who gave a wholesale dealer an order for a copy of all books in

any language treating of any aspect of Napoleon's career. He thought it would fill a case in his library. He was somewhat taken aback, however, when in a few weeks he received a message from the dealer that he had got 49,000 volumes, and awaited instructions as to whether he should send them on as an instalment, or wait for a complete set. The figures may not be exact, but at least they bring home the impossibility of exhausting the subject, and the danger of losing one's self for years in a huge labyrinth of readings which may end by leaving no very definite impression upon your mind. But one might, perhaps, take a corner of it, as I have done here in the military memoirs, and there one might hope to get some sanity.

The extraordinary graphic description of fights and fighters, often retailed in Conan Doyle's romances, will be better understood after his reader has seen the amount of literature he possesses on the noble art of self-defence, and from which he quotes enthusiastically. Authors ancient and authors modern, authors English, and authors foreign, authors didactic, and authors witty, are in turn introduced to the reader, a great many of whom will be found old friends and acquaintances. And he is no book-lover that cannot echo the sentiments of the author as he bids them good-bye at the exit of the "Magic Door."

And now, my very patient friend, the time has come for us to part, and I hope my little sermons have not bored you overmuch. If I have put you on the track of anything which you did not know before, then verify it and pass it on. If I have not, there is no harm done, save that my breath and your time have been wasted. There may be a score of mistakes in what I have said—is it not the privilege of the conversationalist to misquote? My judgments may differ very far from yours, and my likings may be your abhorrence; but the mere thinking and talking of books is in itself good, be the upshot what it may. For the time the magic door is still shut. You are still in the land of faerie. But, alas, though you shut the door, you cannot seal it. Still come the ring of bell, the call of telephone, the summons back to the sordid world of work and men and daily strife. Well, that's the real life after all—this only the illusion. And yet, now that the portal is wide open and we stride out together, do we not face our fate with a braver heart for all the rest and quiet and comradeship that we found behind the Magic Door?

THE FRUIT OF THE TREE: Edith Wharton. (Macmillan and Company, Limited, St. Martin's-street, London.)

Like "The House of Mirth," this novel is chiefly characteristic for its morbidity, but unlike that book, it lacks vital interest. The responsibilities of capital towards labour is the theme that has inspired Mrs Wharton's pen to such pessimistic eloquence. And the question will naturally arise in the reader's mind whether there is any end to the Capitalists' responsibility, as there does not seem to be any limitations laid down in the scheme propounded by Mrs Wharton. The reformer is seldom a lovable type, and Mrs Wharton's creation is no exception to the rule, whether as the philanthropic employer, or in his marital relations. It is also unfortunate for the sake of the moral example that the philanthropist of this story should not be its Capitalist, philanthropy at another's expense being no virtue, but rather an opportunity for self-glorification. But in justice to Mrs Wharton it must be conceded that John Amherst was very much in earnest in his efforts for the betterment of the workers. But like many other reformers, and easily understandable, John Amherst failed in other duties that should have lain as near or even nearer his heart, the story of his failure in the marital relation being anything but pleasant reading. To the suggestion, which is gaining vogue, that it is justifiable to shorten great suffering by ending life prematurely, there can be but one answer, and that in the negative—or what availed Calvary. Mrs Wharton has proved that she has good stuff in her. But what her readers want is the depiction of high human ideals, and not a rechauffé of life's failures, which are to be met with everywhere to the undoing of the unstable. Our copy has been received through the courtesy of the publishers: MacMillan and Co. DELTA.

OUR LADY OF THE MISTS: M. Urquhart. (London: George Bell and Sons.)

The novel which provides reincarnation for its readers' delectation is hardly likely to have a great vogue. But "Our Lady of the Mists," though dealing with a subject that has no absorbing interest for those who are non-believers in the doctrine of reincarnation, is beautifully written, though rather too lengthy. The theory of reincarnation has the merit of being both feasible, reasonable, and comfortable. Feasible because so many things, otherwise unexplainable, can be explained by it; reasonable because there is nothing improbable in the idea of a soul inhabiting a fresh tenement after being released by death from the tenement it has hitherto occupied; and comfortable in its promise of ultimate salvation for man, however vile. It has also the merit of antiquity, the doctrine of Metempsychosis being preached as early as 539 B.C., by Pythagoras, of Samos, who, in his turn, had imbibed the doctrine from the priests of Egypt. The scene is laid in Cornwall, the little fishing village of Penros, where "Genefer Tredegan" (the heroine) was residing with her nurse. "Kate Richards," To Penros came "Burke Anketyl," artist, who, while having in his composition the makings of a great artist, had failed because he had remained too purely self-centred. Some months before going down to Cornwall, a vision had consantly presented itself to him. The face of this vision he had repeatedly tried to transfer to canvas, but so far he had not been able to catch its wonderful expression to his satisfaction, and becoming disheartened he had ceased to try. At Penros he had come face to face with the embodiment of his vision, only to find her looked upon by the fisherfolk of Penros as not only deficient in intellect, but steeped in witchcraft. How this mental aberration had been brought about, and how Anketyl, through the wisdom that was born of the great love he conceived for her saves her from a violent death at the hands of the ignorant fisherfolk, and how Genefer, whose reason had been temporarily eclipsed through shock is again restored to sanity, makes up a romance of more than ordinary interest and charm. Marching along with the love story is the developing of the theory of re-incarnation as regards Genefer. Murder was the crime she had been guilty of in her former life, and loss of reason the penalty in this. The saving of Anketyl's life in the scuffle between Genefer and her chief tormentor was held by the powers that be expiatory of her former crime. It seems incredible that in the Nineteenth century there can still be found a peasantry credulous enough to believe in witchcraft. But there is no county in England so steeped in superstition, legend, and romance, or so conservative in its beliefs, loves, dislikes and customs. It is curious to note that the affliction that renders a person sacred in the eyes of a dweller in the East, and amongst the least civilized of peoples, should render them objects of scorn and ill-usage in the West. Independent of the theory of incarnation of which the author has made out but a very poor case, the book will be found exceedingly readable. Our copy is from Messrs. Wildman and Arcey. DELTA.

MRS. VANNECK: G. Acetuna Griffen. (London: George Bell and Sons.)

Mrs. Vanneck is a quasi-adventuress, with whom the reader first makes acquaintance in the entrance hall of the Mena House Hotel—"which lies, as everyone knows, almost in the shadow of the Great Pyramid of Gizeh." Of Mrs. Vanneck the only positive thing known is that she was the widow of an English canon who left £70,000 to charities and £25,000 to his wife, which fact spoke volumes to her detractors, who were many. An extraordinarily attractive woman, declared the men of her acquaintance! No better than she ought to be, was the verdict of the women. That she was in a great many respects better than her detractors availed her nothing. At the time this story opens she had made the acquaintance of "Richard Roper," and through him that of Lady Beatrice Hadleigh, Roper's betrothed, and Lord Innesborough, Lady Beatrice's brother, to the

undoing, temporarily, of Roper, and incidentally of Lord Innesborough, who richly deserved his undoing. So absorbedly interested will the reader be in the doings of Mrs. Vanneck, that Lord Innesborough will never enter into his head as being the intended victim of the scheme of revenge planned by Mrs. Vanneck at the opening of the story, and he will be at an utter loss to account for her incomprehensible treatment of Innesborough. And the reader will agree with Roper, who is the chronicler of this narrative, that this is a story without a moral. We are indebted to Messrs. Wildman and Arcey for our copy of the book. DELTA.

THE SECRET AGENT: Joseph Conrad. (Methuen's Colonial Library, 36, Essex-street, London.)

To Mr. Conrad's previous popularity, chiefly owing to the superlative excellence of his style, which, though decidedly un-English, has won for him a great number of English admirers, of the purely realistic school of literature, must be attributed the fact that this book has already passed into its third edition. Any book less elevating or more revolting in detail could not well be cited as emanating from the pen of a writer of distinction. In "The Secret Agent," Mr. Conrad is said to have made his first essay into the abyss of Anarchy, and the better class of his readers will fervently hope that it will be his last, Anarchy being a subject that lends itself only too readily to sensationalism, even in the hands of the most discreet of writers; and discreet on any topic, except ideals, the realistic writer is not. Mr. Conrad is a Pole, and to his nationality may be attributed his evidently intimate knowledge of Anarchy in all its phases. The book is not so much a condemnation of Anarchy and Anarchists as a condemnation of the Government who are morally and politically responsible for the existence of this modern pest of society, and an ever-growing menace, not only to life, but every recognised law of order. In "The Secret Agent" the reader is shown four distinct types of Anarchist—the purely visionary, the scientific, the mercenary, and the sensually torpid. And so skillfully and exhaustively has Mr. Conrad detailed the virtues, vices, general characteristics, and idiosyncrasies peculiar to his several types, that his readers will be thoroughly convinced that they have nothing more to learn of the precise constituents that go to the making of an Anarchist. To further heighten the uneasiness of the reader, the mercenary Anarchist is shown to be in the pay of a foreign Government, which the reader will have no hesitation in placing as the Russian. What the precise reason this Government could have in thus deputing one of its agents, domiciled in England, to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, will be difficult to guess, unless the idea could be to so attract the attention of the English Government to the peril in its midst as to cause it to expel all suspects from its territory, or to distract its attention from the spectacle of the inhuman methods that are being used to stamp out Anarchy in its own midst. The delineation and analysis of the character of Verloc, "the secret agent," is superb. Irreproachable in his domestic relations, magnanimous to the last degree in his conduct towards his wife's aged mother and idiot brother, cheerfully charging himself with their support, he was in every other relation of life utterly despicable, lacking both moral perception and initiative. The pitiful tragedy of Winnie Verloc's life must be read to be realised in all its horrors. No more pitifully sordid tragedy was ever conceived by author. Mr. Conrad permits himself some hard knocks at the English impatience of detail. But it is precisely this impatience of detail, in its realistic sense, that has ever placed England first as the moral mentor of nations. And she possesses instinct, which ranks higher than the gift for detail. That a great many of the outrages that are perpetrated in the name of Anarchy have for their origin causes other than revolutionary, is easily believable, and must ever remain a cause for grave apprehension. But novels of "The Secret Agent" type are as mischievous in their tendency as Anarchy, for reasons that will be obvious to the intelligent reader. We are indebted to Wildman and Arcey for our copy of this book. DELTA.