

The Academy

A Weekly Review of Literature and Life.

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The Literary Week.

MARCH 31 is the latest date for receiving MSS. for our Special Prize Competition, particulars of which will be found on page 2 of the cover of this number. Judging by the number of MSS. we have already received, the task of selecting the winners will be a heavy one. The awards will be made in our issue of April 21, on which occasion a Special Double Number of the ACADEMY will be issued.

THOSE who indulge in the mild excitement of our Weekly Competition will observe that this week it takes the form of the best Book Tea suggestion. Here is one which gained a prize at a recent gathering. A lady appeared with a war telegram pinned to her dress, giving the speech of a distinguished general to the children who had endured the siege of Ladysmith. He looked at the wasted forms and pallid faces, and as he looked tears came into his eyes, and he said in a broken voice: "It will be all right now, children. You shall have a long holiday and plenty of bread and jam." Answer: "The Woman in White."

WE who follow the trend of modern fiction are aware of three very plainly marked characteristics: (1) That women are increasingly active in this branch of literature; (2) That much of the best modern fiction comes from America; (3) That far and away the most popular form of fiction in America is the historical novel. Take, for example, Miss Mary Johnstone's *By Order of the Company*, which we review elsewhere in this number. It is a remark-



MISS MARY JOHNSTONE.

able performance when we consider that the authoress is not yet twenty-nine years of age. The *Book Buyer*, from which we reproduce the accompanying portrait of Miss

Johnstone, states that this novel raised the circulation of the *Atlantic Monthly* during its serial publication by 50,000 copies. Miss Johnstone is a Virginian by birth and ancestry.

THE *Dictionary of National Biography* will be completed in June. It is announced that the Lord Mayor will signalise the publication of the last volume of Mr. George Smith's heroic enterprise by giving a "literary entertainment." Lord Rosebery, Mr. John Morley, and the Bishop of London are expected to be present on the occasion.

THE articles on village life which have appeared from time to time in the *Outlook* above the pseudonym "Clarissa" are to be published in volume form. The dedication of the book will run: "To my brother, George Wyndham."

WE regret to learn that there is no improvement in the condition of M. Edmond Rostand, who is suffering from congestion of the lungs. A chill caught at the rehearsals of "L'Aiglon" was the beginning of the illness.

MR. GOLDWIN SMITH has been on the old quest of trying to trace the personality of Shakespeare in the plays. The result will be contained in a short book, *Shakespeare: the Man*, soon to be published.

MR. GILBERT MURRAY, who wrote a scholarly *History of Ancient Greek Literature* three years ago, has attempted to recapture Greek life and feeling through the more literary medium of an original play, entitled "Andromache." Mr. Murray dedicates his effort to Mr. William Archer in the following interesting terms:

MY DEAR ARCHER.—The germ of this play sprang into existence on a certain April day in 1896 which you and I spent chiefly in dragging our reluctant bicycles up the great hills that surround Rivecourt Abbey, and discussing, so far as the blinding rain allowed us, the questions whether all sincere comedies are of necessity cynical, and how often we had had tea since the morning, and how far it would be possible to treat a historical subject loyally and unconventionally on a modern stage. Then we struck (as, I fear, is too often the fate of those who converse with me) on the subject of the lost plays of the Greek tragedians. We talked of the extraordinary variety of plot that the Greek dramatist found in his historical tradition, the force, the fire, the depth and richness of character-play. We thought of the marvellous dramatic possibilities of an age in which actual and living heroes and sages were to be seen moving against a background of primitive superstition and blank savagery; in which the soul of man walked more free from trappings than seems ever to have been permitted to it since. But I must stop; I see that I am approaching the common pitfall of playwrights who venture upon prefaces, and am beginning to prove how good my play ought to be! . . . We agreed that a simple historical play, with as little convention as possible, placed in the Greek Heroic Age, and dealing with one of the ordinary heroic stories, ought to be, well, an interesting experiment.

The "experiment" is issued at a price which would have commended itself to the democratic Athenian citizens—eightpence.

Reviews.

A New-Old Movement.

The Symbolist Movement in Literature. By Arthur Symons. (Heinemann. 6s.)

IN this grave and admirably-written volume Mr. Symons has a subject which suits his idiosyncrasy; and the work is, in most respects, better—more spontaneous, more sympathetic, more constructive, and more homogeneous—than any section of *Studies in Two Literatures*. He has always had a tendency towards the exotic, the mysterious (if not the vague), the Un-obvious; and he has always shivered away from contact with that positivity of daily common facts, that hard Britannic physicalism (cult of the cold tub), *toute cette vieille Exteriorité inflexible*, which characterise so deeply our nineteenth-century poetry and prose. Here, in this movement which found its most child-like exponent in Verlaine, its most brilliant in Mallarmé, and its loftiest in Maeterlinck, there is nothing to dismay, and everything to enhearten, a spectator of life and letters such as Mr. Symons. It is only natural, then, that he should be at his best. And his best is really something quite distinguished. Mr. Symons has nursed and watched over his critical talent with an almost maternal care and conscientiousness. We have seen it grow, during some ten years now, not only in strength, but in fineness and beauty. Essentially Gallic in literary temperament, Mr. Symons yet owes more to Walter Pater than to any other. His highly-wrought style possesses, in a measure, every quality of Pater's except the crowning quality of wistfulness. It is a notable style, elaborately perfected, ardent in its "chimerical search after the virginity of language," reverent in its attitude towards words, precise without being hard, and musical without affectation. As a critic Mr. Symons perceives gradually rather than by instant intuition. Instead of flashing the limelight into the cave, he examines it with a tinted lantern, showing you this and that, and ultimately directing an illuminating final ray upon the most secret arcanum of the grot. Take this, of Verlaine: "From the moment when his inner life may be said to have begun, he was occupied with the task of unceasing confession, in which one seems to overhear him talking to himself, in that vague, preoccupied way he often had."

In the art of personal portraiture—a valuable and legitimate, if somewhat modern, adjunct of criticism—Mr. Symons specially excels. There are several examples which might be quoted. We will give his picture of Joris Karl Huysmans at the house of "the bizarre Madame X.":

He leans back on the sofa, rolling a cigarette between his thin, expressive fingers, looking at no one and at nothing, while Madame X. moves about with solid vivacity in the midst of her extraordinary menagerie of *bric-à-brac*. The spoils of all the world are there in that incredibly tiny *salon*; they lie underfoot, they climb up walls, they cling to screens, brackets, and tables; one of your elbows menaces a Japanese toy, the other a Dresden china shepherdess; all the colours of the rainbow crash in a barbaric discord of notes; and in a corner of this fantastic room Huysmans lies back indifferently on the sofa, with the air of one perfectly resigned to the boredom of life. Something is said by my learned friend who is to write for the new periodical, or perhaps it is the young editor of the new periodical who speaks . . . ; and Huysmans, without looking up, and without taking the trouble to speak very distinctly, picks up the phrase, transforms it (more likely transpires it) in a perfectly turned sentence, a phrase of impromptu elaboration. Perhaps it is only a stupid book that someone has mentioned, or a stupid woman: as he speaks the book looms up before one, becomes monstrous in its dulness, a masterpiece and miracle of imbecility; the unimportant little woman grows into a slow horror before your eyes. It is always the unpleasant aspect of things that he seizes; but the intensity of his revolt from

that unpleasantness brings a touch of the sublime into the very expression of his disgust. Every sentence is an epigram, and every epigram slaughters a reputation or an idea. He speaks with an accent as of pained surprise, an amused look of contempt, so profound that it becomes almost pity for human imbecility.

Regarding the "Symbolist movement in literature" (Mr. Symons should have said "in French literature," for he deals with nothing else), it appears to us that there is no Symbolist movement. There is a movement, but it is not Symbolist. Or, rather, it is no more symbolist than all poetry is symbolist. Mr. Symons fails, brilliantly, to justify the term. He quotes *Sartor* to the effect that in the Symbol there is "some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite—the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and, as it were, attainable there." And he adds that it is in this sense that the epithet is applied to the now famous French school. But is it? In order to arrive at the Infinite *via* a Symbol you must first have the Symbol. And it does not seem that the Symbolist work is rich in symbols. Mallarmé, who is the self-conscious artist of the movement, its authoritative expounder, lays stress on Suggestion, not on Symbolism. "To name is to destroy: to suggest is to create." There lies the formula, and Mr. Symons's chosen extracts (exquisitely translated, by the way) support it. Where, in any but the usual degree common to every true poet, is the Symbolism of Mallarmé's "Sigh" or his "Sea-wind"? The fact is, this movement ought to have been called the "Evocative" movement. (It never will be, but it should have been.) "To evoke, by some elaborate, instantaneous magic of language, without the formality of an after all impossible description; to be, rather than to express." That was the aim of the fine flower of this school. The miracle was to be immediate, not wrought by an apparatus either of Symbolism or any other *ism*.

There had been "evocatives" long before Arthur Rimbaud roused the wondering enthusiasm of Verlaine. Scores of examples of "creative suggestion"—conceived in the very spirit of our French Symbolists—exist in Elizabethan literature. Provided he had not read Shakespeare, would any cautious person be prepared to deny that the last line of the following description, of a nun's life (note the second word particularly) was not translated from Mallarmé?

For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd . . .
Chanting faint hymns to the cold, fruitless moon.

Mr. Symons finds Symbolism (let us yield to the word) first in Gérard de Nerval, and he traces its course onwards through de l'Isle Adam, Rimbaud, and Laforgue, to Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck. And though, as we take it link by link, we see no flaw in the chain, it is ultimately clear that the Symbolism of Mallarmé was an essentially different thing from that of Nerval. The movement might almost be divided into two halves, partly concurrent: the first consisting of de Nerval, Rimbaud, and Verlaine; and the second of de l'Isle Adam, Laforgue, Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck. The former were children of Nature, singing they knew not how nor why; the latter were children of Art, subservient to theories of almost scientific precision.

The essay on Mallarmé is the most brilliant in the whole volume; it stands unequalled among all Mr. Symons's critical work, with the possible exception of his appreciation of Aubrey Beardsley. It belongs, indeed, to a very high order of criticism. The subject is one of intense and complicated difficulty; but Mr. Symons has treated it with a delicacy and a sureness of perception, an instinct for clarity, which can scarcely be overpraised, and which nearly make plain some of the abstrusest "divagations" of Mallarmé's decadence. His courage in advancing a theory of the way in which Mallarmé wrote verse and the reasons for Mallarmé's later unintelligibility is only surpassed by the persuasive convincingness of the theory.