

A New Sedgwick Novel

READERS of Anne Douglas Sedgwick have been aware for some books past that she was turning toward what, if you are knowing, you call "the stylistic and decorative", and away from what is variously called (according to your personal taste) "the realistic", "the truthful," or "the materialistically photographic". In *The Little French Girl* one figure at least was certainly a metaphorical one in a fresco, rather than a living member of our mixed-pickles human race. This was the all-conquering siren mother, evidently intended to symbolize pure, unmoral beauty. She was too all-conquering. A siren before whose charms literally everybody fell is not even a conceivable possibility for beings who so long ago recognized the *de gustibus* proverb as one of the aphorisms of our existence.

In the latest Sedgwick novel, *THE OLD COUNTESS* (Houghton Mifflin, \$2.50), not only one character but all the book is done in the allegorical fresco style, and beautifully done if you like that style. If your taste allows you to enjoy it, and if you realize to begin with that this is what the book has to offer, you will immensely enjoy this story, half French, half English, wholly non-realistic, lovely with an unearthly sort of lambent spiritual distinction which has become the peculiar quality of Mrs. De Sélincourt's literary personality.

If your habitual mood leads you to read Theodore Dreiser, shun this book. You will save yourself and those about you an outburst of protest against its "unreality, thinness, sentimentality, impossibility." The comment of the realist in my own circle as he laid down the book was not indignant but melancholy. "It never happened," he said sadly. "Not one thing in it ever happened." As I say, if this thought is one to sadden you, keep away from this story of complex mankind (the husband), torn between sweet, honest, wholesome, healthy human joys (his lovely young wife), and the darker, more potent, more dangerous, more exalting joys and pains of mysticism (represented by the exquisitely saintly and alluring other and third angle of the triangle).

I ought to add a footnote referring to the word "mysticism" as used above, and

protest against our narrowing it always to the meaning of doctrinal or religious mysticism. I do not mean it in this sense, but as referring to all those strange, deep-lying, overwhelming, spiritual gropings in human beings, gropings which not only refuse to be contented with merely human satisfactions, but as part of their essence seem always bent upon rending and tearing asunder merely human satisfactions. That's the kind of book it is; resembling a Sinclair Lewis novel as closely as a Puvis de Chavannes fresco of classic groves resembles a flash-light photograph of a prize-fight. There is spiritual truth in it, — the picture of the compelling power of a soul which has endured and survived and conquered suffering. But it certainly "never happened".

DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER

A Short Talk to Belloc

BILAIRE BELLOC'S SHORT TALKS WITH THE DEAD AND OTHERS (Harpers, \$3.00) are very short, and the first essay is only mildly amusing. It was a pity to take a title so associated with past brilliance and wisdom, from Lucian to Landor, from Lord Lyttleton to Andrew Lang, and to employ a literary form so full of opportunity, yet make so slight a use of them. The truth is that Mr. Belloc is a little too casual with his readers, by whom he would appear to have become rather spoiled; for he often writes as if anything is good enough for them, apparently taking little pains with his ideas, and dashing down anything that comes into his head in a somewhat lordly fashion. At his best, as we know, he can write very well. If a little oracular at times after the manner of a British Justice of the Peace, he can also be engagingly human, and even boyish. In this volume, too, he writes prose which reminds one how finely he once wrote it, — and, of course, can still write it when he cares to take the trouble.

Putting aside the first paper, which gives its figurehead title to the volume, "*and Others*" contains much that is both amusing and wise. The wisdom is better than the humor, which is too often heavy and labored, except in the occasional nonsense verses of which one wishes there were more. I think the best of humorous

papers is that on "True Advertising", a whimsical commentary on a congress of advertising men who came to the conclusion that advertisements ought to tell the truth.

The Lord Lyttleton aforesaid, who, like Lucian, wrote some "Dialogues of the Dead", has this passage in the preface to his book, which I would apply favorably to Mr. Belloc. He says: "Indeed, one of the best services that could now be done to mankind by any good writer would be the bringing them back to common sense, from which the desire of shining by extraordinary notions has reduced great numbers, to the no small detriment of morality and of all real knowledge." Curious how all ages seem to have been alike; but certainly no age more than our own has needed that bringing back to common sense. Well, Mr. Belloc is the man to do it, if any one can. The best things in this book are full of common sense. Of course, it is Tory common sense, — but perhaps all of it is that.

The best things I mean are the papers dealing with Byron and Livy, both particularly good and "sound": "Talking of Fakes," "Talking of (and Singing) of the Nordic Man," "The Fate of a Word," "Talking of Poverty," and the paper for which I am most grateful of all, "On *Rasselas*." How good at this time of day to hear a critic saying: "Every man ought to read *Rasselas*, and every wise man will read it half a dozen times in his life. Indeed, a man would do well to read it once a year at least; for never was wisdom better put, or more enduringly." And what a sound canon of criticism is this: "A work of art is not to be judged wholly nor even generally by its effect as a work of art, but is rather to be judged by its whole social effect upon man."

When I read this, and some other wise and occasionally beautiful things in Mr. Belloc's new volume, I feel repentant for the perhaps rather unkind tone of my opening paragraph. Still I meant it kindly, — for his own good! — and for the good of his readers. Besides it's true that he *is* a little too go-as-you-please and take-it-or-leave-it-damn-you even for an essayist who writes with that "rambling ease" with which the jacket of his book credits him.

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

The First Realist

VIRGIL BARKER has given us in **PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER** (Arts Publishing Corporation, \$2.00) the first popular study to be published in English of one of the most remarkable personalities and painters of the sixteenth or, indeed, of any century. The pictures form a rather more important part of the book than the text. The fifty or more plates give probably as good an idea of the variety, vigor, and realistic quality of Bruegel's talent as can be conveyed by half-tone reproductions of photographs, — those shadows of paintings.

Bruegel was indeed, as Mr. Barker says, "the first complete realist in the history of painting". His sympathetic, humorously satirical, but entirely uncompromising, presentation of peasant life illuminates not only his own period but all time. "We can understand," says Emile Michel, "the admiration which François Millet professed for Bruegel. In those drawings of the master pinned on the walls of his simple studio at Barbizon, he found his own models, and felt in complete harmony with the point of view of the artist whom he could hail as one of his forerunners."

Bruegel's vivid influence extends to artists other than painters, even down to our own day. The first essay in prose of his fellow countryman, Maurice Maeterlinck, was a sketch called "The Massacre of the Innocents" wherein the New Testament story is told as if it were the account of a raid of Spanish troopers on a sixteenth century village in Flanders. Every detail of the scene is described exactly as Bruegel painted it in the great picture from which Maeterlinck drew his inspiration.

The master painter was also a profound thinker. He was, as Henri Hyman says, "the eloquent interpreter of the popular feeling of his epoch, the Hogarth of his time". He was, indeed, one of the great *rieurs* of Rabelaisian breed. This very quality which made him immensely popular in his own day, has since somewhat obscured his talent as a painter and distracted attention from the purely pictorial beauty of his later landscapes. As he developed, he became steadily more entirely the painter. The lover of landscapes and season forced the satirist and humorist into the background, and though