

"AS LAMPS BURN SILENT."

BY AARON HILL.

As lamps burn silent with unconscious light,
So modest ease in beauty shines most bright;
Unaiming charms with edge resistless fall,
And she who means no mischief does it all.

The New-York Tribune.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1910.

The programme of the new British "Academy," that fearful wildfowl, includes the encouragement of fellowship and co-operation among those who are disinterestedly striving for the perfection of English literature. The sublime Forty might do worse than make a start by promoting a new editorial sentiment on the subject of that extremely uncertain quantity, "hitherto unpublished matter." It is about time for something to be done that would abate the pomposity of the writers who expect every "new document" that they publish to be treated with profound respect. There is nothing talismanic about such a document just because it is new, but over and over again we are asked to regard a book as really valuable for no other reason than that it contains fresh matter, though this may contribute absolutely nothing to a better conception of the subject in hand. We have not seen Mr. John H. Ingram's recent book on Chatterton and accordingly have no opinion on the author's claim that it is a study "from original documents," but we must permit ourselves a smile over his indignation because two of his reviewers have not seen eye to eye with him in the appraisal of those documents. When "The Saturday Review" asserts, of the "nearly three hundred and fifty pages" of his book, "extremely little of this has hitherto escaped publication," he retorts, "I am quite prepared to prove in a court of law that this statement is false." That is all very well. But we fancy that we know just how the reviewer felt.

Some time ago we had occasion to notice a paper by Mr. Francis Gribble in "The Fortnightly" in which he traversed the life of Tourgenieff and touched upon the latter's adventures of the heart. Bringing in the novelist's relations with Mme. Pauline Viardot-Garcia he said: "It is not even known for certain—much of the correspondence having been suppressed—whether he was ever, in the full sense of the word, her lover." We ventured then to point out that there might be some persons indifferent to Mr. Gribble's speculations and content to regard a celebrated friendship without suspicion. We are glad to see our surmise confirmed by at least one individual, "a well-informed correspondent, who knew the Viardot family," for he has sent to "The Fortnightly" the following remarks:

1. Madame Viardot was married in 1840. At the time, therefore, of her visit to St. Petersburg in 1846, when, apparently, Tourgenieff first made her acquaintance, she had been the wife of M. Viardot for six years.

2. There is no question that M. and Madame Viardot enjoyed an extremely happy married life, and that she was held in very general estimation in Parisian society.

3. M. Viardot himself was by no means a nonentity. He was a distinguished writer on French Art, and held the important post of Director of the National Opera.

4. Tourgenieff was an exile from his own country, during the greater part of his stay with the Viardots, permission to visit Russia not having been granted until within a few years of his death. The Viardots, consequently, provided a home for a man who was homeless and without family.

5. Madame Viardot and her husband were the kindest friends that Tourgenieff ever possessed, and Madame Viardot, in particular, exercised a most salutary influence on him. The incident of the throwing of the ink-pot, to which Mr. Gribble alludes, was fully accounted for by the agonizing nature of Tourgenieff's illness.

As the editor of "The Fortnightly" remarks, we have here a very different picture from that given by Mr. Gribble.

Is a guide-book literature? It certainly seems so to the reader immersed in a volume of Baedeker. At all events he must be dull of soul indeed who cannot on occasion get out of such a book a joy almost equal to that communicated by poetry itself. However, we suppose that according to the conventions your best of all guide-books is not precisely a literary masterpiece, and therefore the average author who is trying to excel in fiction would probably scorn the adviser who told him to go and get a job as a cataloguer of towns and villages, picture galleries and taverns, trout streams and tramway lines. Let him read Mr. Claude E. Benson's "Concerning Guide-Books," in the current number of the "Cornhill Magazine." He admits that he has suffered trials and vexation in his career of guide writing. But, he declares, "it is a most healthy, enjoyable, and instructive occupation—at any rate, whilst one is on active service," and, he adds, "one is always, or almost always, on one's feet; one is in constant touch with the beautiful or interesting; one ought to learn something, and something worth the learning, on every expedition." On the other hand, we fear that Mr. Benson does not know what he misses through not being a maker of literature, at least in the novelist's sense. Nobody ever prints his picture. Nobody ever tells in public the breakfast food that he prefers or describes his writing habits. Perhaps, after all, to ask any of our young lions to write guide-books is to ask more than human nature could stand.

"VATHEK" BEDFORD

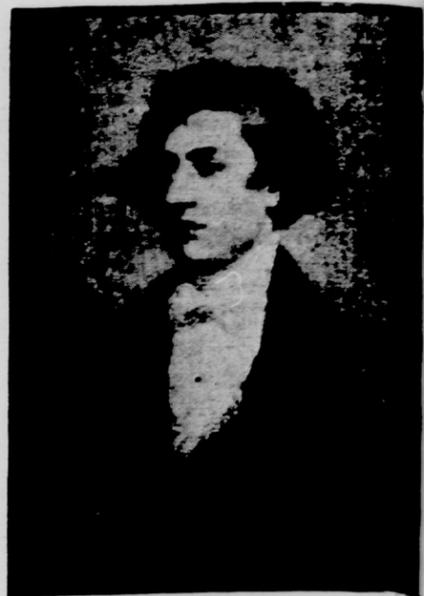
The Life of an Eccentric Figure in English Letters.

THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF WILLIAM BECKFORD, OF FONTHILL. (Author of "Vathek.") By Lewis Melville. Illustrated. 4to, pp. xv, 391. Duffield & Co.

Mr. Melville notes in his preface that when announcement was made of his having undertaken a biography of Beckford it turned out that Mr. Walter Jerrold was contemplating a similar task. It is not surprising that two authors should have felt moved to recite the career of the author of "Vathek." The wonder is that more pens should not have been exercised upon the subject long ago. It is one of compelling interest for the student of character and of eighteenth century English life. Beckford survives, of course, because he wrote a single little masterpiece; but even if the composition of this had never entered his head his

music from Mozart, long afterward telling Cyrus Redding that one of the famous airs in "The Marriage of Figaro" was hit upon by the master, at one of their sessions together, as a theme upon which the young pupil might compose variations. His drawing master is not known by name, but is said to have been one of the first artists of the day, and the tutors who educated him in his home carried him through prodigious studies. With these he was wholeheartedly in love, and with what determination he looked forward to a life of bookish and kindred enjoyments may be inferred from a passage in one of his youthful letters, recounting the things he wished to avoid:

To receive Visits and to return them, to be mighty civil, well bred, quiet, prettily Dressed and smart is to be what your old Ladies call in England a charming Gentleman and what those of the same stamp abroad know by the appellation of *un homme comme il faut*. Such an Animal how often am I doomed to be! To pay and to receive fulsome Compliments from the Learned, to talk with modesty and precision, to sport an opinion gracefully, to adore Buffon and d'Alembert, to delight in Mathematics, logick, Geometry and the rule of Right, the *mal morale* and, the *mal physique*, to despise poetry and venerate Antiquity, murder



WILLIAM BECKFORD.

(From a painting by George Romney.)

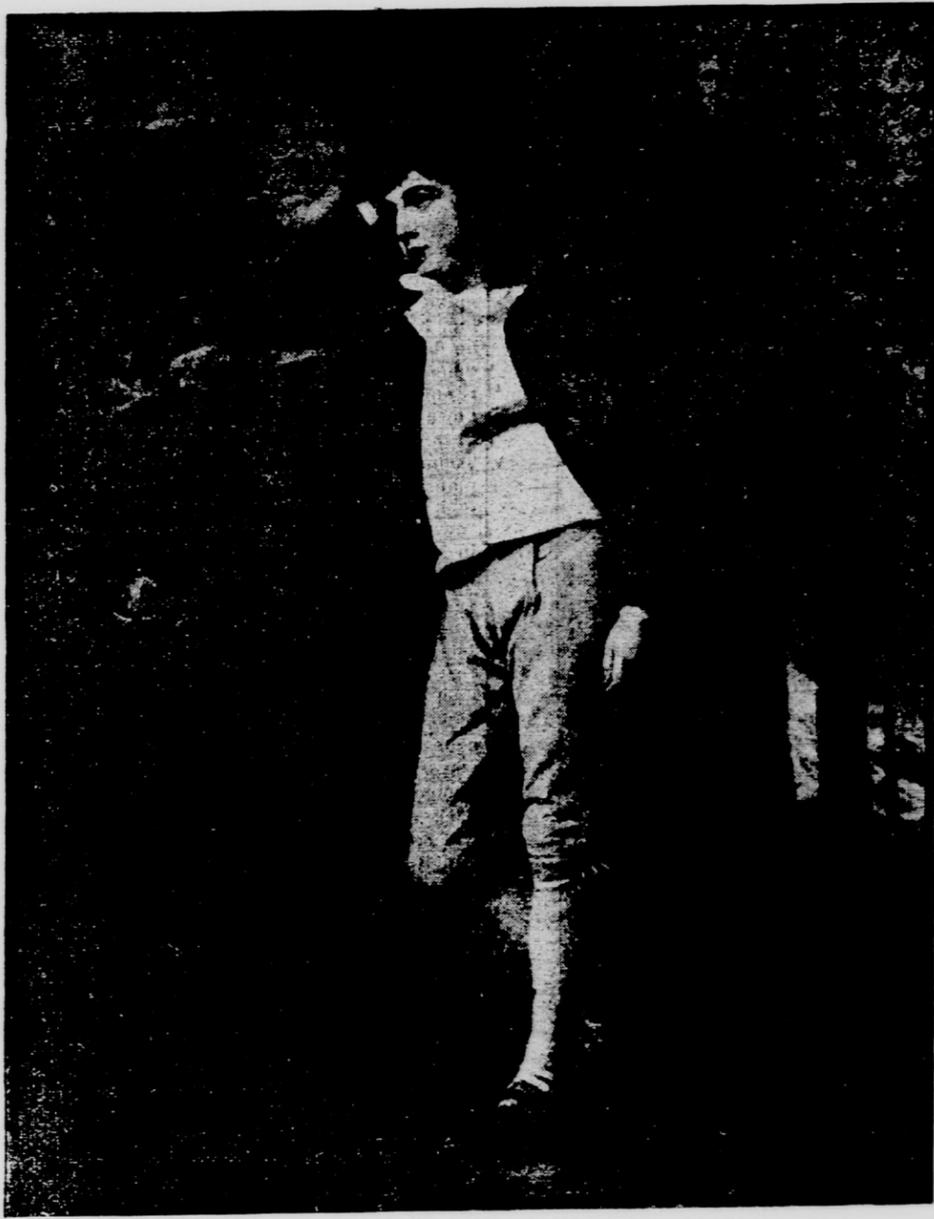
some solemn moments I am cast into prophetic Trances. Lost in Dreams and magic slumbers my Hours glide swiftly away. I have none to awaken me—none to sympathize with my feelings. These I love are absent. Thus desolate and abandoned I seek refuge in aerial conversations and talk with spirits whose voices are murmuring in the Gales. They are my Counsellors—from them I hear of past and future events—they sing of departed Seers and Heroes and bring me Indian Intelligence,—but not one Syllable have they whispered about you—why then are you the only superior Being—who is deaf to me and silent?

There is a good ream of this sort of stuff in Mr. Melville's volume, and much of it, we may note in passing, makes pretty dull reading, but it is significant as showing that when Beckford revolted against what was prosaic and gross in his period it was not in obedience to the promptings of a high ideal, clearly understood and definitely embraced, but because he was vaguely ill at ease, in a state of violent fermentation. He was governed not so much by a fixed purpose as by gusts of taste and desire, by his eagerness for intellectual sensations. "Vathek" is there to show that he had a streak of genius in him, but it would take a rather naïve enthusiast to assert, on the score of that book, that its author was a man of genius in the strict interpretation of that term. "Vathek" after all, is a brilliant *tour de force*, the one outstanding achievement of a man who wrote a good deal else that is still readable but whose essential fibre remains that of a self-indulgent dilettante.

There you have at once the source of his limitations and the source of his charm. Lacking the sustained power of the great creative artist, he had in its place as no small consolation all the faculties which fit the predestined taster of life to get out of his sippings the fullest possible pungency, delight, and, we may even add, edification. "I fear," he writes to Lady Hamilton, "I shall never be half so sapient or good for anything in this world but composing airs, building towers, forming gardens, collecting old Japan and writing a journey to China or the moon." Surely these things are in their ways worth while, and we need not regret that Beckford never scaled the loftiest heights. At least, he did not grub in swampy valleys, but on the contrary gave himself to his books, pictures and music with a positively noble ardor, not only forming great collections but making these minister to his not by any means negligible qualities as a thinking man.

He had, too, his impulses toward larger actions than those of the mere connoisseur—an interesting chapter in this book relates to his efforts to bring about peace between England and France—and if he scorned to associate with his fox hunting neighbors he was not slow to seek out really inspiring companionship. He knew Voltaire, and wherever he went he was amenable to the advances of people whose minds rose above food, drink and idle amusements. There is a story about an intruder at Fonthill who fell into the Caliph's own hands but presently showed that he knew how to talk. Beckford forgave him his indiscretion and kept him to dinner. In that episode he marked himself not only as appreciative of talent in others but as the creature of generosity that he really was, for all his ruthless arrogance. Mr. Melville asserts that he did good by stealth, as even in the absence of tolerably good evidence one could well believe it. There was much of the grand seigneur in this eccentric Englishman, much that was both manly and gentle.

He will be better understood and he will be liked the more by readers of Mr. Melville's book, though the latter is not, perhaps, quite the work of art that it might have been made. Some of the letters here cited have no interest beyond the fact that they have not been printed before, and throughout, in the adjustment of memoir and correspondence, the author uses a special skill, but joins text and document with little more adroitness than is required for ordinary manipulation of paste and scissors. He has not drawn a full, well balanced portrait of Beckford, full of light, life and color, and of a piece. But he manages to tell his story well enough, all of the available facts are doc-



WILLIAM BECKFORD.

(From a painting by George Romney.)

history would still repay examination. He was an original being, and his originality is the more picturesque since it is thrown up like a picture on a screen against the most conventional of backgrounds. The Caliph of Fonthill was about as congruous a type among his Georgian contemporaries as a veritable Oriental prince would have been, settled in the heart of London.

He had great pride of race, and the feeling he had about rank comes out very clearly in the fact that, as his biographer says, he always desired a peerage; but his immediate ancestry was allied to the merchant class, and Alderman Beckford, his father, though a high-minded patriot and a sturdy Lord Mayor of London, would appear to have had only the most practical traits to bequeath to him—along with a gigantic fortune. The future lover of all the arts and graces was only ten years old when his shrewd, plain spoken father died. Perhaps, if the old man had lived, Beckford's development might have taken another turn. His tastes would possibly have been disciplined and his habits of extravagance would assuredly have been curbed. But under the easy guidance of a doting mother the precocious lad had every opportunity to realize himself as he chose, and his choice had nothing to do with the paths along which the good Alderman had plodded. It was decisively in the direction of intellectual and aesthetic pleasures. Where the things of the mind were concerned all his sympathies and all his energies were instantly and tenaciously engaged.

He had the best masters and he was willing to work hard, disdainfully rejecting the ordinary games and other recreations of boyhood. Sir William Chambers taught him the principles of architecture, and he had lessons in

Taste, abhor imagination, detest all the charms of Eloquence unless capable of mathematical Demonstration, and more than all to be vigorously incredulous, is to gain the reputation of good sound Sense. Such an Animal I am sometimes doomed to be! To glory in Horses, to know how to knock up and how to cure them, to smell of the stable, swear, talk bawdy, eat roast beef, drink, speak bad French, go to Lyons, and come back again with manly disorders, are qualifications not despicable in the Eyes of the English here. Such an Animal I am determined not to be!

Beckford's frequent expression of his resolve to live upon a higher plane than that which contented the representative squire of his day obviously implies not only strength of character but mental vigor, and one expects him, even in his youth, to disclose a fairly well ordered ambition, but at this point it is necessary to reckon with a curious phase of his nature, on which Mr. Melville, by the way, is not particularly luminous. He dismisses as baseless scandal the contemporary stories of his hero which hint more or less darkly at moral obliquity, but he does not elucidate the positively fantastic moods by which Beckford long was governed. Are we to ascribe them quite simply and naturally to his possession of a warm imagination, harmlessly leading him to indulgence in hours of rhapsodical brooding, or are we to surmise that he suffered for a time from some small taint of mental aberration? Looking over the length and breadth of his eighty-four years, we do not dream of questioning his sanity, but down to the time of his marriage there is no mistaking his subjection to a kind of green sickness which at moments seems to carry him to the very edge of some disorder of the brain. "Let me dream away my existence in the lap of illusions," he says, and in one of his letters to Mrs. Peter Beckford, his cousin, he writes:

The same genuine melancholy and thorough contempt of the World inspires me to remain in solitude and silence. Visions play around me and at