

His Master's Voice

By Ernest Boyd

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY ELDERS. By St. John Ervine. Macmillan.

WHEN St. John Ervine began to write he had something to say and he expressed it in his own manner. I remember when I first saw him he was bowing before the curtain of the Abbey Theater, Dublin, a rather timid youth, wearing glasses and obviously somewhat moved by the enthusiastic reception of his first play. "Mixed Marriage" was a fine dramatic presentation of a theme and a problem which he, as an Ulsterman, had realized and felt with deep sincerity. His first novel, "Mrs. Martin's Man," which came a couple of years later, also had that quality of reality, of genuine feeling and observation which belongs to literature that springs from the depths of experience. Then came the war, the encomiums of Bernard Shaw, who has publicly praised no other Irish writer, and the disastrous period of Mr. Ervine's régime at the Abbey Theater, and a Shaveling, a chip of the Fabian block, took the place of the writer he once promised to be. Success in America, which has had no equivalent either in his own or his adopted country, completed the transformation and has provided him with opportunities of faintly reproducing his master's voice.

Mr. Ervine can now turn out a machine-made drama of the Manchester repertory school with all the conviction of a Harold Brighouse or a Stanley Houghton. He more or less repudiates the play and the novel which, whatever their defects, were informed by a breath of originality, of personal experience at least, apparently because they lack the veneer of Fabian radicalism which he has adopted and adapted from Wells and Shaw. He presents himself in the guise of an Irish Wells in "Changing Winds," a novelist of ideas—and what ideas!—while he carefully cultivates a truculence which is obviously derived from Shavian precedent. In this collection of more or less literary essays, his first publication of the kind, one finds all the guile and attitudes and some of the theories which made Shaw a remarkable journalist a quarter of a century ago. In the introductory chapter he offers a naïve variation upon the old Shavian text that men of letters are of no more account than manual laborers. "The mere fact that a man has contracted the habit of putting words together does not entitle him to more of the world's respect than is due to one who has contracted the habit of putting bits of metal together and calling the result a motor car. I do not know why a man who writes books should regard himself as a better man than one who makes butter." I feel inclined to remark, as one of Mr. Ervine's young intellectuals might: "Oh, I say, come off, you priceless old thing!" But one is disarmed by the ingenuous chatter which precedes, where we are told in the consecrated formula: "Were it not for the insistence of some of my friends I do not suppose I should issue this book to the public at all. We are too prone, we subscribers, to put our casual writings between the covers of a book." Really! "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking" I must rise to protest against such stereotyped humbug.

ONE may not quarrel with Mr. Ervine's estimate of the unimportance of his own "scribblings," but one objects to the solemn naïveté of the manner in which he expresses it. It is hard to believe that so much coercion was necessary to induce the author of "The Critics" to provide that crudest of all satires with a counterpart. The patronizing essay on AE, with which the series of studies opens, is too obviously written straight from the heart (of an expatriate Orangeman glamourised by the metropolitan delights of London!) to require that ingenuous apologia. AE, it seems, is a remarkable personality, but he has not the good fortune to have graduated from the Fabian nursery. He "has lived too long and too exclusively in Ireland. He is not free from the mush sentimentality with which Irishmen regard themselves, this everlasting self-congratulation . . . this smug preoccupation with their own virtues and bland disregard of their vices, this eternal denial that they have any demerits." Poor AE does not live in the astringent and rarefied atmosphere of London, where, as everybody knows, log rolling is unknown. He stays in Dublin and passes "from one center of adulation to another"; he submits to "the paltry gabble of the third-rate minds he encounters on most occasions in Dublin," where there are people "who seem to believe that Ireland has produced a greater literature than England."

Dublin, as I have said, does not take Mr.

Ervine seriously. He is evidently annoyed about it. But that is of little importance. It is, however, of some importance to get right what is a matter of actual, indeed notorious, fact. In so far as Dublin differs from any other literary center—and it has its proportion of imbeciles no less than London, Paris or New York—it is in the absence of hero worshipping in literary circles. I have seen a roomful of people, all of whom read and admired Yeats, pay no more attention to him when he entered than to the humblest "third-rate mind" present. So far from adulation being the constant portion of AE, he has been more treacherously denounced and more ruthlessly exploited in Ireland than any one else. His ideas are taken without acknowledgment and his failure to surrender to any party has made him suspect to the patriotic of all kinds. Mr. Ervine has had only the slightest experience of the Dublin he so glibly distorts. Its defects were far more accurately summed up by Shaw, who also fails to secure there the respectful attention to which London accustoms him, when he bitterly denounced the "sterile, destructive mockery of Dublin." I should never recommend it as a center of adulation, except to politicians!

MR. ERVINE'S unfortunate experiences in Dublin have developed in him an obsession about Ireland, which finds relief in tirades closely modeled on certain passages in "John Bull's Other Island." He admits that "Synge, Padraic Colum, Lennox Robinson, Daniel Coakery, James Joyce—all these have shown us an Irish people completely false to the world's common belief about them." Yet he writes constantly as if nobody but the author of "Changing Winds" had any realization of the facts of Irish life. When every single writer of the slightest note has helped to explode the Dion Boucicault legion of Ireland, it is clearly either disingenuous or ignorant of Mr. Ervine to attribute to intelligent Irishmen the gabble of tenth-rate politicians and journalists and to contrast these people with exceptional types elsewhere.

He says, in an attempt at Shavian pyrotechnics and have the same illusions about greedy, mean and treacherous people, who have humbugged the rest of the world into the belief that they are a faithful, generous, high-minded, kindly, noble and tolerant race." So far as this has any meaning, it is that the Irish share the same charming characteristics, and have the same illusions about themselves as every nation since the beginning of history. So far as it has the meaning Mr. Ervine intends, it is just hysterical Belfast anti-Catholicism.

So long as his subject has any relation to Ireland Mr. Ervine is haunted by his obsessions. He has apparently never heard of the way in which one or two gunmen can hold up a New York restaurant or attack a bank messenger in a crowded street. He cites as an example of Ireland's craven pusillanimity the case of an English official who was assassinated in Dublin while a streetcar full of unarmed people failed to rescue the victim. "But the gunmen were Sinn Feiners! Hence the obligation upon peaceable citizens to defy desperadoes armed with revolvers. He does not believe any one ever saw George Moore's poems. In proof of this rash assertion he merely shows that he has never looked at even the title page of "Flowers of Passion." The chapters on Bennett, Chesterton, Galsworthy, Wells and Shaw add nothing to what everybody who has seen or read these authors might have written. Characteristically, he pokes fun at Galsworthy's humanitarianism, but takes very seriously the social theories of Wells and Shaw. Chesterton arouses his anti-Catholic, anti-peasant prejudices, but as he is not an Irishman he is not denounced as a degraded idiot. Finally, Mr. Ervine laments the absence of criticism in Ireland and the prevalence of abuse. His own book proves beyond a doubt that he, at least, is not destined to remedy either of these defects.

News Notes

Stokes has just got out a book entirely devoted to the history of one engraving, the famous "Headless Horseman" of PIERRE LOMBARD. It definitely settles the question of whether the engraver intended the "Horseman" for Cromwell or Charles I, upon evidence discovered in the library of an old English country house.

COMPTON MACKENZIE has named his new novel "The Seven Ages of Woman." It will be published in January, a month which promises quite a few new books by notable authors.

Some Recent Fiction

By Isabel Paterson

THE RED REDMAYNES. By Eden Phillpotts. Macmillan.
THE TREASURE OF GOLDEN CAP. By Bennett Copplestone. Dutton.
THE CAT'S PAW. By Natalie Sumner Lincoln. Appleton.
ROGUE'S HAVEN. By Roy Bridges. Appleton.

A PLEASING delusion exists among the laity, and is fostered by those who know better, to the effect that any author could, if he only would, debase his talent to the making of "popular" fiction and thereby enrich himself at the expense of his artistic integrity. According to this theory, Joseph Conrad, for example, might have spared himself years of unremunerative labor had he been willing to stoop to the artifices of Robert W. Chambers, although, of course, he would never have achieved the loftier and more limited success which has now crowned his efforts. Conversely, of course, Mr. Chambers might have been another Conrad if he had been sufficiently self-denying in the matter of quick returns. Well, it is a pretty thought and doubtless consoling to many a stern and suffering young intellectual, even if it is not true. And Mr. Eden Phillpotts has done an ill service to his colleagues by offering an exhibit in disproof.

Everyone knows Mr. Phillpotts's solid and serious novels dealing with the Dartmoor County folk; and even those who don't care much for such painstaking studies of the honest yeoman have always admitted it was good stuff of its kind. Now he essays a detective story, the sort of thing you might suppose any practised author ought to be able to dash off during a summer holiday. Nothing to it but plot, you see; no deep delving after character, no need of atmosphere for fine writing, just an artisan's job of construction.

Yes, but when your plot stands out as naked as the skeleton of a sky-scraper, it has to be exceedingly well joined up, for there is nothing to hide a defect. And so "The Red Redmaynes" is plainly a second-rate performance; readable, indeed, but not at all plausible and suffering from manifest weaknesses alike in conception and in craftsmanship. Past master in his own line, here he is but a journeyman and must stand aside for his betters.

The chief error is in motivation. There simply isn't any. His main characters, his First and Second Murderers, so to speak, do their killing for no good reason, but only because "it was their nature to." But this is out of nature. Surely a forced beginning in a book is worse than a forced ending; it flatly precludes all chance of a first class story, just as an error in the major premise makes a syllogism fundamentally impossible. It is reckoned unsportsmanlike to give away the plot of a mystery story. But is it not even less sporting for Mr. Phillpotts to solve his mystery by saying that the angel-faced Jenny Pendean aided and abetted the assassination of her three dear old uncles just for fun? Not even a Freudian complex against uncles, mind you. The antics of her husband, who was the active agent in the matter, seem to be put in just to make it harder to guess. Minor absurdities one can but pass over in pained silence. Mark Brendon, the detective, is one of these. Likewise the incident of his biting his tongue until blood flowed from his mouth, and the next day smoking and chatting without the least difficulty. Now if it had been his head he had injured, one would not be surprised at a lack of painful consequences.

No, these things are not so easy as they

look. If they were, I'd write them myself, instead of criticizing them.

BENNETT COPPLESTONE also has misapplied his abilities in making a mystery story of sorts of "The Treasure of Golden Cap." His gift is for romance, preferably historical romance. Here he tells a story within a story, beginning to-day and reaching back through the false bottom of an antique sea chest and by means of an old privateer's log book hidden there to the days of King James the First. But the inclosing narrative is nothing of itself. It is only a frame, and the frame is much too big for the picture. The picture itself is a fine, bold vivid sketch, worthy of expansion to the full limits of the book.

Richard Nutt, the hard-working buccaneer, picking up his living as best he could in the narrow seas betwixt England and Brittany, is a real, breathing human creature. And his difficulties with the fine lords and courtiers who shared his spoils and stood ever ready to leave him dangling in the noose of a rope when they could get no more profit from him are instructive as well as lively reading, however saddening they may prove to those who innocently think that graft is a modern invention. Also Richard's bride, Marie de Breton, is a winsome heroine, affording good comedy in her drastic housecleaning of the pirate ship. Richard could not always make piracy profitable, but Marie made it sanitary. There is some pretty writing, salt and fresh as a sea wind in those pages. Unfortunately, the first chapters are cumbersome. The story is slow in getting under way and the last chapters are very nearly superfluous. Too much false work. Let the author clear his decks the next time and he will do well.

THE Cat's Pajamas. No, it's "The Cat's Paw." But anyhow this mystery story is at least consistent. It contains no touch of reality from beginning to end. The reader knows where he is at. He is in the region of sheer impossibilities. The more the merrier. This sort of thing is a purely mental diversion if you like it. It makes no demand upon the emotions. The murder itself is what you might call technical. There had to be one, and no one could possibly grieve over the taking off of stingy, selfish old Susan Baird. So one may devote one's undivided attention to the problem of who did it and why. Was it her niece Kitty, or either of her niece's two admirers, or her second cousin, the Potters, or her doctor, her lawyer, her old servant? Count them off, cenny, meeny, miny, mo, and you have as good a chance of hitting on the right one as by reading half way through the book. This means it is a skillful performance of its kind. It is that exactly, a bit of deft juggling; but as it pretends to be nothing more one can hardly complain.

"Rogue's Haven" is more obvious, though almost as lively. It is a good outline for a "cloak and sword" movie scenario, with a kidnapped hero and a mysterious and persecuted heroine. Being kidnapped was a sort of hereditary habit with John Craike. His father before him had been shanghaied and sent as a convict to Australia—unjustly, of course. This time it was an uncle who was the villain. "Rogue's Haven" was the fitting name of the ancestral home. It is hard to say anything about such a story without taking the bread out of the author's mouth.

