

Readers' Authors Present an "Authors' Author"

THIS uniform edition of Leonard Merrick looks like an attempt on the part of distinguished authorship to command from the public, during the lifetime of a neglected confrere of high deserts, the material recognition that is sadly overdue him. If such is the case the experiment is a heartwarming thing to watch and the edition, which is a good one, doubly merits enormous sales.

But why has Leonard Merrick gone neglected?

Our friend who edits a popular magazine undertook to tell us why. Although you would not suspect it from his work, he is one magazine man whom nature intended, not for a real estate agent or a patent medicine vender, but for a poet. He had borrowed *Conrad in Quest* from us and had, of course, succumbed; he had met Leonard Merrick and was his.

He said Merrick heretofore had never been properly advertised. Advertising could make not only money but momentarily serious recognition for bad fiction. Want of it could damn the best. Tell even the pundits insistently enough that Mary Ann Peterkin's *Hearts and Hay* was a great novel, and lo! they would begin to think it was. A piffling incompetent author could be "built up," provided some editor or publisher would take trouble and buy the space.

II.

Our friend then went off on shop tangents. Able promoting could force any magazine down the public throat in any quantity. If one of Mr. Saffron's editors thought *The Yellow Boudoir Review* was ready to profit in ads by 100,000 more circulation, he had only to report to that effect and next month the thing was done. Fiction editors no longer watched the mails for promising contributions; they called up Harlow B. Blenkinsop, genius while you wait, and ordered a 5,000 word love story interesting to business men, the copy to be ready by Thursday noon.

What chance had a Leonard Merrick "on his own" in such a world?

It sounded to us like a wearied minor devil describing hell. We did not believe it was true. We decline to believe that it is true. If it is, let us suppress it, as the New England spinster said of Darwin's theory of the creation. With regard to most of the magazines we see we have no objection to it. If our friend's explanation does not explain their short stories something else equally fearful must explain them. But among novels it has occasionally happened that one has appeared without flourish of trumpets, quietly made its way and presently dominated the book market.

Leonard Merrick's novels some years ago had their chance in America to do that. They received abundant professional recognition. We should have supposed them just the good novels to succeed—however, ours is a naively sophisticated view. They didn't. We have now been trying to figure out the reason, independently of the advertising theory.

The excuse for all this thinking aloud in public is a copy of *The Actor-Manager*, preface by Mr. Howells. He thinks it "in every way the best of Mr. Merrick's stories so far as I know them." We do not agree with him; and—deferring discussion of its merits for a moment—we think it the Merrick novel best likely to have a very general appeal. Its material is restricted to the people of the stage, and that is material which the large stagestruck element of the public will have none of unless it is treated in a stagestruck way; while the rest of the public finds it overspecialized for interest.

Here is an exceedingly simple story, beautifully spontaneous, yet formed (form is a professional consideration, and spontaneity if anything ought to handicap a writer with the average reader, who can't gratifyingly see for himself how clever the writer is), about four persons: an excessively idealistic and moralistic actor and playwright; an able commercial actress with a typically abnormalized ego and nature; a romantic young man of wealth; another actress of finer parts who sympathizes with the idealist and whose business in the story is to unfold him at

the beginning, then to get out of the way, finally to return, not to provide a happy ending, but to prevent mistake of Mr. Merrick's attitude for a tragic one.

The idealist and the commercial actress marry, prosper together professionally while tormenting each other connubially, and naturally break apart, the lady providing for her future by making a "scoundrel" of the rich romantic, her husband's friend. This, the reader is allowed to surmise, frees the husband to be happy with the woman he should have married in the first place.

III.

We have seen Mr. Merrick admired in print for his knowledge of "the seamy side" of the theatrical profession. Now if only he did exploit a seamy side *The Actor-Manager* would probably be a best seller in this country. But unfortunately for his royalties, Mr. Merrick, who knows actors, insists on seeing small difference between their natural history and that of any other class. What seams he does turn up run through the entire human fabric. If his idealist Oliphant were a lawyer, the worldly and non-maternal wife Blanche a social climber's daughter true to breed, and Alma King a stenographer, the developments could be the same—although Blanche in characterization would be somewhat different, since she is, as Mr. Howells notes, specifically of and for the stage.

Half a dozen kinds of maltreatment of the material without any rebuilding of the plot might have made it go like hot cakes. Suppose the scientific-sentimental view were taken of Blanche Ellerton. Have her ever so Advanced; dedicate her to her own Personality; repudiate her claims of motherhood on woman—too for birth control; flay Oliphant as a "predestined" mediæval prig; give Fairbairn, not the acute romantic, but ruthless, primal strength—and buy yourself your Rolls-Royce and your villa.

Or take the syrupy-sentimental attitude toward Oliphant: make him as Noble as all-get-out; have Blanche a Bad Woman, a vampire; let Alma King love and renounce in saintly silence, only to let her lips and Oliphant's meet on the last page.

Decidedly one trouble with Leonard Merrick is being an honest man.

He does the thing his way and as easily and unconstrainedly as he does everything. He refuses to take himself hard as a sage or softly as a pander. And he has no partisan sympathies among the characters. Blanche originally married to Fairbairn and Oliphant to Alma would have been happy ever after according to their different lights and worthy enough of any one's respect—although there would be no novel. The wrong man having married the wrong woman, each in behavior following natural bent, both cut sorry figures—the man as an arrant prig, the woman as an unfeeling mother, an unsympathetic comrade, a sordidly faithless wife.

Of the two, conventionally she appears the worse, because the ideals with which her situation conflicts, luxury and electric light celebrity, are ideals conventionally inferior to domesticity and artistic integrity. And so more than one recent reviewer has jumped at the conclusion that the author is a partisan of the prig. Which is a mistake. The point of *The Actor-Manager*, if it unconsciously has a point, is that anybody, always himself and true to himself, may appear admirable or contemptible according to the natures of the persons with whom he is surrounded and related.

IV.

This novel being what it is, its failure of popularity is more or less understandable. But what of *Conrad*, the golden *Conrad*, which isn't limited in interest by anything, but is lightly fiddled on one of the heartstrings of every man and woman over 30? Mr. Howells asks our own question about the neglect of Leonard Merrick and makes several guesses at the answer—guesses that must have failed to satisfy Mr. Howells himself.

What is the correct answer, anyway? Perhaps these twelve distinguished sponsors have supplied it and the world at large is to discover Merrick at last under their auspices. We hope so!

THE ACTOR-MANAGER. BY LEONARD MERRICK. Introduction by William Dean Howells. E. P. Dutton & Co. Limited edition, \$2.

"Aren't Business Men Wicked"

I HAVE learned what a difficult road is the one that leads to success. Amid its bumps and hollows honest men stumble and fall and perish. It really isn't a road at all, but a Forest, in which the gentler animals are merely the food of the wolves. So I no longer lay too much blame upon a business man—a denizen of the Forest—if he makes of himself a wolf. Nowhere else is the law of the survival of the fittest so rigidly enforced as in the Forest of Business.

This paragraph is from *Wolves*, a short and intense novel of American Big Business, by Alden W. Welch, who is new to the writing of novels but long trained in the forest of which he writes. His first novel is in many respects a notable one. It is executed with vigor, reserve and an absolute lack of waste, and the mystery element is so ably handled as to convince us that Mr. Welch can if he chooses become a first class master of detective stories.

The conviction came to Erich Congreve early that business was "a deep forest peopled by wolves in men's clothing" and that it only remained to discover which wolf had the longest and the sharpest teeth. Mr. Welch uses young Congreve as his central figure, showing the effect which continual struggle had upon his character. There are numerous minor issues which need not enter into this discussion but which will interest the reader. In some respects Mr. Welch's method is strongly reminiscent of Arnold Bennett. In meticulous manipulation of detail, especially in the minutia of household service, the touch is similar and there are times when the theme and certain situations in *Wolves* incline toward *The Price of Love*, through the plot and development are quite dissimilar.

In literary execution Mr. Welch falls far short of Bennett. We question whether Bennett even after merciless business training could ever have spoken of "a brace of excessively humorous remarks." At any rate this unpractised writer has the art of winning and holding the interest of his readers, and these will include people who are not usually drawn to novels in which the commercial element is stressed. Although not without romance, this is in no sense a romantic novel.

What romance it has was evidently not in the original prescription but has been laid on in a thin coating as a concession to consumers. The lack of a deeper love interest will not be found detrimental, and is preferable to an excess of sentiment in a book of this nature. As the author says, speaking for his hero: "What has a wolf to do with love?"

WOLVES. BY ALDEN W. WELCH. Alfred A. Knopf. \$1.40.

"The Mystery Keepers"

THE manifest need in fiction of a psychic detective of the better class has been supplied by Marion Fox in *The Mystery Keepers*. Marteyne, the psychic sleuth, does not rely upon seances to bring out the guilt of murderers, and there is only one bit of table turning in the whole book. He is a mild sort of medium who just wanders around the scene of the crime and gets rather cloudy revelations of what happened.

The book is equipped with a haunted abbey and a self-starting family tradition. It is never dull enough to put the reader to sleep at noon, or exciting enough to make him fall out of a hammock.

THE MYSTERY KEEPERS. BY MARION FOX. John Lane Company. \$1.50.

Here is a British opinion of *Java Head*: "Mr. Hergesheimer has two grave faults as a novelist—his sensuous passion for hot, highly colored decoration, and his contentment with occasionally slovenly English. It would not be worth mentioning this if we did not think he was capable of becoming a very great novelist indeed." That "a sensuous passion for hot, highly colored decoration," is a grave fault is nonsense. That the decoration in *Java Head* is "hot" is a matter of personal temperature—and pray, on which pages is the "slovenly English"?

Gertrude Atherton says in the July *McClure's* that she doesn't drink and is agin prohibition, and the other day we met an author who does drink and is strong for prohibition; on the third hand it can be authoritatively stated that Rupert Hughes's *The Cup of Fury* will help no one to decide.

"Sock Songs"

DOUBTLESS *Books and the Book World* should take up the volume of Sock Songs with a diffident hem and haw and downcast eyes, for the songs were called forth by a contest in another department of THE SUNDAY SUN, and they reappear between covers with the benefit of an imposing office preface.

Miss Lula Merrick, a magazine writer, invented the contest and proposed it to THE SUN. Her idea, which worked out admirably, was to stimulate patriotic knitting and to prompt knitters to make up cheery, homely little jungles for enclosure with the socks to the men in France.

Within its first month the contest assumed proportions no one had expected. The weekly prizes were \$5 worth, \$3 worth and \$1 worth of wool; and it is safe to say that many a serious poetry competition has failed to produce more gratifying results, both in quantity of entries and—the conditions allowed for—in average quality.

The contest ran from May, 1918, until the armistice. Each Sunday the three prize winning songs were published, with ten others of "honorable mention," and sometimes a few more that seemed interesting. All that were published have been made—quite independently of THE SUN—into a presentable little book, which is one of the souvenirs of the work at home to win the war.

Our heart sinks with a fear that Messrs. Mencken, Colum, Frank Harris, Francis Hackett, and (last but not greatest) Clayton Hamilton, should any or all these assorted wisecrackers happen to pounce on this volume, would search it in vain for a milestone on the pathway up Parnassus. The writers of the Sock Songs were made happy in the writing and a few odd tens of thousands of people were in the reading; and this at a time when happiness was scarce and strictly rationed. And so, for our part, we are glad that there were Sock Songs, and glad that there is a book of them—albeit we could have wished that the book's appearance had been more timely.

Of the two or three hundred songs republished a good third seem ingenious enough to hold their own in the sock of

"light verse" as that commodity goes now, and a few by Miss Nancy Ford, Mrs. Emma A. Langlotz, Mrs. José M. Asensio, Miss Laura Wallen, Mrs. Constance Entwistle Hoar, and the exceedingly graceful and felicitous Mr. Edward Ten Broeck Perine, among others, are not far from being poetry in any ordinary company. As a specimen of these, we have selected *To One Who Would Not Learn to Knit* by Miss Ford:

"Here in still New England are brisk,
bright mornings
And long, golden afternoons without
alarms or warnings.

"The patchwork hills lie well content
beneath the autumn sun,
The orchard trees are bent with fruit, and
harvesting is done.

"The shell-wrecked soil of Flanders a
richer harvest yields,
And death walks terribly to reap those
grim, unlovely fields.

"And there are men in Flanders who battle
for the right,
Who die to guard for you and me this
home of all delight—

"And yet you yawn and say it's much too
hard for you to do;
Too hard! To knit for those who fight to
keep your home for you!"

SOCK SONGS. Boston: The Cornhill Company. \$1.25.

"As a novel the book is a little incoherent," writes a London reviewer of *Blin Alley*. "It strikes you that a seduction here and there is thrown in because a W. L. George book without sex would be too great an anomaly for any one." Evidently the worthy W. L. is not without honor in his own country.

Le Livre Contemporain

A magazine devoted to French Literature. Sent free on application.

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