

CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

By ARTHUR
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IN a day when there is a very perceptible tendency to stray after false literary gods we cannot have too many books like "Memories of a Hostess" (Atlantic Monthly Press), in which M. A. De Wolfe Howe has drawn chiefly from the diaries of Mrs. James T. Fields, the wife of the Boston publisher. There is a good, wholesome tonic in turning back to the New England oracles who contributed so much that is sound and enduring in our literature. What if they did take themselves a little seriously? They certainly did that. Here in "Memories of a Hostess" is the voice of good old Dr. Holmes: "O. W. H. picked up a New York pamphlet full of sneers against Boston 'Mutual Admiration Society.' These whipper-snappers of New York will do well to take care. The noble race of men now so famous here is passing down the valley—then who will take their places! I am ashamed to know the names of these blackguards. There is —, a stick of sugar candy; — and —, who is not even a gumdrop, and plenty of them."

DR. HOLMES felt that his fame was secure for the ages on account of one saying: "Most men write too much. I would rather risk for future fame upon one lyric than upon ten volumes. But I have said Boston is the hub of the universe. I will rest upon that." With all his bubbling geniality and philosophy there was in him a curious strain of mental intolerance. Boston, his class at Harvard College, his particular circle of accepted companions—there was the salt of the earth. Outside of that there was very little that counted. There were some very good writing men among the "whipper-snappers of New York," to whom he so contemptuously referred. On May 22, 1872, there was a dinner party at the Fields home, the guests being Dr. Holmes, Mr. Longfellow, Joseph Jefferson and William Warren, the two first comedians of the time. According to the diary: "Dr. Holmes had a way at the table of talking of 'you actors,' 'you gentlemen of the stage,' until I saw Longfellow was quite disturbed at the unsympathetic unmannerliness of it, in appearance, and tried to talk more than ever in a different strain."

THE hostess of these "Memories," who died early in 1915, having survived her husband many years, was James T. Fields's second wife. Fields had married in 1850 Eliza Josephine Willard, a daughter of Simon Willard, Jr. She died within a few months, and in November of 1854 Fields married her cousin, Annie Adams, not yet 20 years old, the beautiful daughter of Dr. Zabdiel Boylston Adams. In his capacity as a publisher, identified with the firms of Ticknor & Fields and Fields, Osgood & Co., Fields made many distinguished friendships. Before his death in 1881 he became widely known as editor, lecturer and author. Living in Charles street, Boston, the Fieldses had as near neighbors Oliver Wendell Holmes, John A. Andrew, the war Governor of Massachusetts, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. About 1863 Mrs. Fields began a diary which she kept up till 1876. On the cover of the first slender volume she wrote: "No. 1. Journal of Literary Events and Glimpses of Interesting People."

IN this diary, under date of July 26, 1863, she recorded: "What a strange history this literary life in America at the present day would make. An editor and publisher at once, and at this date, stands at a confluence of tides where all humanity seems to surge up in little waves; some larger than the rest (every seventh it may be) dashes up in music, to which the others love to listen; or some springing to a great height retire to tell the story of their flight to those who stay below. Mr. Longfellow is quietly at Nahant. His translation of Dante is finished, but it will not be completely pub-

lished until the year 1865, that being the six hundredth anniversary since the death of the great Italian. Dr. Holmes was never in healthier mood than at present. . . . Mr. Lowell is not well. He is now traveling. Mr. Hawthorne is in Concord. He has just completed a volume of English sketches, of which a few have been printed in the *Atlantic*."

THE diary for 1859-60 tells of the visit of Mrs. Fields and her husband to Europe. Says Mr. Howe: "The 1859-60 diary of travel achieves the more remarkable spectacle of Mrs. Fields in conversation with Leigh Hunt less than two months before he died, and reporting the very words of Shelley to this friend of his. They may be found in the 'Biographical Notes' published by Mrs. Fields after her husband's death. Shelley says: 'Hunt, we write love songs; why shouldn't we write hate songs?' And Hunt, recalling the remark, adds, 'He said he meant to some day, poor fellow.' Perhaps one of his subjects would have been the second Mrs. Godwin, for, according to Hunt, he disliked her particularly, believing her untrue, and used to say that when he was obliged to dine with her 'he would lean back in his chair and languish into hate.'"

DURING twenty-eight of the thirty-four years of her widowhood Mrs. Fields lived in close association with Sarah Orne Jewett. Miss Jewett, fifteen years Mrs. Fields's junior, had previously to this intimacy lived almost entirely in the Maine village of her birth. In 1881, the year of James T. Fields's death, she published the fourth of her many books, "Country By-Ways." It had been preceded by "Deephaven" (1877), "Play Days" (1878) and "Old Friends and New" (1879). In this sympathetic friendship both women found the stimulation to literary activity. Miss Jewett's production was henceforth constant and abundant. In the very year of her husband's death Mrs. Fields published her "James T. Fields: Biographical Notes and Personal Sketches," and a second edition of "Under the Olive," a small volume of poems. Also she resumed the regular writing of the diary which she had abandoned in the face of her husband's failing health.

LAST week there was comment in this department on the obvious fading out of Sinister Street from both fact and fiction. Yet here is Mr. Thomas Burke, he of "Limehouse Nights," with a new book, "The London Spy" (George H. Doran Company), in which he tells of strange and mysterious thoroughfares which seem to have escaped the observation of the usual town traveler. The inevitable question is: how much of it is a true picture of actual scenes and how much of it is entirely of Mr. Burke's own invention? It is not possible to believe that there is something in London not visible to any eye save the eye of the cockney born within the sound of Bow Bells; for the average cockney sees his streets as drab and colorless and monotonous as he sees his life.

TWO years ago an American making an extended stay in London was giving over a day to following the footsteps of Shakespeare in the company of an eminent English Shakespearean scholar. Just off Falcon Square, where Silver and Monkwell streets meet, there is a dingy public house. It occupies the site of the structure in which Shakespeare dwelt during the years when his fortunes were associated with the Globe Theater in Southwark. There is much more that is genuine Shakespeare in London than in Stratford, and Falcon Square is the spot at which to begin the pilgrimage. Thence you make your way, as Shakespeare did, down Noble street to Cheapside. In Cheapside, between "Bread and Friday

streets, you stop, for here was the Mermaid Tavern, where Shakespeare made his breakfast of a huge tankard of ale. Then, not by the direct route but by devious lanes, you proceed to London Bridge, and, crossing it, turn westward in quest of the brewery that covers the ground of the old Globe.

"ROMANCE is dead. There are no more Sinister Streets," said the American. Then in the face of somewhat startled protest he went on: "Tinkling cymbals! Whited sepulchres! There are no more Sinister Streets. They went out with Fielding's Jonathan Wild the Great and Hogarth's Gin Lane and Beer Alley. Were they here in Dickens's time or did he invent them? An American reads Dickens in boyhood and thrills to the mystery and sinister suggestion of Seven Dials. He comes to London to find a Seven Dials that is neither mysterious nor sinister; only stupidly commonplace. I have ferreted out your Hanging Sword alley and your Bleeding Heart yard and your Crooked Usage in Chelsea, and your Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway, where Burke pictures the 'colored darkness,' and the 'pallid blue light' that is the symbol of China throughout the world, and your Petticoat lane. Names, mere names. The real Sinister Street exists only in the imagination of the writer of sensational fiction." "But yesterday," protested the Englishman.

"IT is always that yesterday," the American countered. "One must have the riotous imagination of a Tartarin, wandering by night through the little streets of Tarascon, at the end of which the Rhone glittered, to conjure up 'They.' Here in London only the commonplace in streets remains. East End or West End, there is no spot that is not as safe as Hyde Park corner at noon. That is to London's credit, but, as I said, romance is dead." "Have you ever heard of Notting Dale?" asked the Englishman. "No. What is it?" "It is a street in the far western part of London, beyond Bayswater. It is so dangerous that no policeman dares to pass through it alone." At this point the discussion ended. But the following evening the American had occasion to write: "I have just been through your Notting Dale, which they now call Sirdar road, from end to end. In doing so I have detected what I believe to be a slight inaccuracy in English literary history. I found Notting Dale so bucolically peaceful that I feel that it must have been there, and not at Stoke Pogis, that Gray was moved to write his 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard.'"

HOW Disraeli, inordinately vain of what he supposed to be his perfect command of the French language, was wheeled out of employing it in addressing the Berlin Congress is told in the course of "Sir Edward Cook, K. B. E.," published by the E. P. Dutton Company. To Lord Odo Russell came Sir Philip Currie and said: "The chief has prepared a French speech for to-morrow and we shall be the laughing stock of Europe. Can't you stop him?" Russell felt that it was a delicate operation, but promised he would try. Going to Disraeli's room he said: "My dear lord, I hear you propose to speak in French to-morrow." "Such is my intention." "But this will be a terrible disappointment. Your French is perfect, but everybody can talk French. What the Ambassadors are expecting is a speech in English from the greatest living master of the language. Are you going to disappoint them?" Disraeli spoke in English.

IT was about twenty years ago that New York entertained, and was mildly entertained, by the Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac, one of the city's periodical eccentric visitors. Montesquiou carried on some of the sunflower traditions of the Oscar Wilde visit of seventeen or eighteen years before. At the time he was a man of about 40, of a really good French family, possessed of ample means, whose sole interest in life was the pursuit of the finer and more delicate shades of literary criticism. In a word he was one of the intellectual "decadents," who a few years earlier were calling themselves "symbolists" and a few

years later were calling themselves something else. Actually he was no mean critic, a volume of his writings having been taken quite seriously by some of the least tolerant of modern men of letters. But the American newspapers did not take that into consideration. In his appearance and mannerisms they found material for some very witty and diverting "copy."

WITH Montesquiou came his friend, Gabriel de Yturri, a Spaniard, with similar tastes and similar "preciosities." Their visit was with the purpose of seriously delivering a series of conferences on topics entirely out of tune with modern American life and manners. That Montesquiou should be greeted with a measure of good natured derision was inevitable. He understood America not in the least, and there was utterly no chance of his ever being taken seriously. For an hour he and his friend caused a little ripple in society, but that was largely due to the idle curiosity which Americans are prone to show for the latest "novelty" from the other side. But the newspaper "gems" that were printed from time to time concerning the poor gentleman's plush waistcoats, his *trois mousquetaires* hat and his orchid shirt collar were pure invention.

THAT visit is recalled now because of the recent publication by Lippincott & Lewis of J. K. Huysmans's "Against the Grain" ("A Rebour"). When the book originally appeared in Paris in 1889 the hero, Des Esseintes, was accepted as having been drawn straight from Montesquiou-Fezensac, although Huysmans embellished the portrait from his own imagination. "A Rebour" caused considerable of a literary flurry in its day, and because of it Max Nordau picked out Huysmans as the object of a particularly scaring chapter in his "Degeneration." But "A Rebour" found many ardent admirers, English and French. Oscar Wilde told of his hero's enthusiasm over the work in a chapter of "The Picture of Dorian Gray." George Moore said of the author: "Huysmans goes to my soul like a gold ornament of Byzantine workmanship. . . . A page of Huysmans is as a dose of opium, a glass of some exquisite and powerful liqueur."

HERE, in a nutshell, is Des Esseintes, the hero of "A Rebour." The portraits of his ancestors showed stalwart troopers and stern cavalymen. But as the result of two centuries of inbreeding he comes into the world an enervated weakling, a dreamer who a distaste for life, an idler whose fortune spares him the necessity of serious labor. After a brief plunge into conventional dissipation his overwrought nerves, his neuralgia and dyspepsia drive him to a season of retirement in a country house which he fits up to soothe his fantasy and to gratify his complex aesthetic sensations. To quote Havelock Ellis, who contributes the introduction to "Against the Grain": "He has a tortoise curiously inlaid with precious stones; he delights in all those exotic plants which reveal nature's most unnatural freaks; he is a sensitive amateur of perfumes, and considers that the pleasures of smell are equal to those of sight or sound; he possesses a row of little barrels of liqueurs so arranged that he can blend in infinite variety the contents of this instrument, his 'mouth organ' he calls it, and produce harmonies which seem to him comparable to those yielded by a musical orchestra."

THE third volume of Mr. H. L. Mencken's "Prejudice" has just been published by A. A. Knopf. Conspicuous among the essays in the volume are "On Being an American" and "Star Spangled Men." No one, with the exception of Mr. Mencken himself, is likely ever to be in entire agreement with Mr. Mencken. There is no use arguing with him. For one reason, one would be likely to get very much the worst of the argument. There is undoubtedly a great deal that is sound as well as clever in Mr. Mencken's contentions. But it does seem a pity that he lacks the ability or the inclination to throw off the uncompromising intolerance which he ascribes to the re-

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