

LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

THE FINEST ENGLISH SENTENCE

Life and Letters, a new English review which is being advertised all over London so extensively that one cannot descend to the 'tube' in a 'lift' without being compelled to consider its literary merits, — at sixpence instead of the usual half-crown, — raises an interesting question in its first issue. 'What,' inquires the editor, 'is the finest sentence in English prose?' The question is of the kind that demands definition before answer, and the inquiring editor does not shirk this responsibility. His definition of the perfect sentence is threefold: 'We do not think any sentence ought to be brought forward as among the best which is not pure in diction, musical in sound, and suggestive of a definite literary personality. This may seem a very mild requirement, but it is not satisfied by many sentences in passages justly famous.'

The next number of *Life and Letters* is to contain sentences in the master style selected — but not written — by readers of the new monthly. Meantime the editor submits his own choice, a sentence from Donne: —

If some King of the earth have so large an extent of Dominion, in North and South, as that he hath Winter and Summer together in his Dominions, so large an extent East and West, as that he hath day and night together in his Dominions, much more hath God mercy and judgement together: He brought light out of darknesse, not out of a lesser light; he can bring thy Summer out of Winter, though thou have no Spring; though in the wayes of fortune, or understanding, or conscience, thou have been benighted till now, wintred and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and benumbed, smothered and stupified till now, now God comes to thee, not as in the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of the spring,

but as the Sun at noon to illustrate all shadowes, as the sheaves in harvest, to fill all penuries, all occasions invite His mercies, and all times are His seasons.

He invites his readers to search the works of Sir Thomas Browne, Landor, De Quincey, Ruskin, and Pater, and proposes that when the classics have been duly investigated more modern writers such as Arthur Symons, W. H. Hudson, Max Beerbohm, Charles Doughty, Joseph Conrad, and Alice Meynell may yield a gem or two. Many modern writers, however, — and this is testimony of the decline in the beautiful art of reading aloud, — seem wholly indifferent to the demands of the ear and are content to appeal only to the eye. And, concludes this lover of good round English sentences, even 'Mr. Conrad himself is sometimes an offender in this respect.'

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THE OMNIPRESENT SOUVENIR FIEND

SEEING that the favorite European gibe at Americans is their fondness for souvenirs, and the devastating and reprehensible lengths to which they go to get them, this bit from the London *Sunday Times*, which transfers the shoe to the other foot, is well worth quoting: —

I wonder how many pieces of Hamlet's grave there are lying on mantelpieces in different parts of England, and belonging now to people who say casually, when you think it is a piece of an air-raid, 'No, only a bit of Hamlet's grave, you know.'

When I was at Elsinore, a few weeks ago, my guide told me that a large piece had been removed the previous week; now Louis Nethersole, who has been there recently, says that, on the ship on which he returned home, an Englishman showed him a lump of rock which he had taken from the grave.

More than that, he offered Mr. Nethersole a piece. I suppose they renew the grave every other month.

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HOW MUCH OF A FLEMING WAS BEETHOVEN?

ON the occasion of the centenary of Beethoven's death, which will not be celebrated until four years from now, a Flemish musical critic, M. Van Cawelaerts, propounds a new theory of Beethoven's spiritual ancestry. He asserts that the musical genius of Ludwig van Beethoven was largely of Flemish origin.

The paternal grandfather of Beethoven was a native of Antwerp and a professional singer who later emigrated to Bonn. Now a single generation, or more exactly a time of forty years, is not sufficient to transform completely the ethical and psychological basis of a human character. Even without having recourse to the natural laws formulated by Darwin and Lombroso, one can see clearly that Ludwig van Beethoven was the apex of a line of musicians. The tradition of musical instinct from father to son was as evident in that family as it was in the family of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The Flemish historian of Beethoven does not stop there. It seems insufficient to him to base his theory on lineage, which is somewhat in contradiction to the theory of the spontaneous origin of genius without reference to time or environment. Accordingly he tries to discover subtle bonds between the author of the Ninth Symphony and the Flemish contrapuntists of the fourteenth century. At that period Antwerp was already celebrated as the home of a flourishing school of painters, brilliant precursors of Rubens and Van Dyck, and of counterpoint composers of fine achievement. From Antwerp came Joaquin del Prato, the

master of Gomber, who was music teacher to Charles V; Goudimel, founder of the Roman school which later produced Palestrina; Egidio Biuchois and Du Fay, authors of some hundred and fifty musical compositions and founders of the renowned school of Flemish counterpoint.

Van Cawelaerts asserts that these musicians had a great influence upon the creative genius of Johann Sebastian Bach, who, with Mozart and Haydn, was a great source of inspiration for Beethoven in his first period of creation.

Finally the Flemish author recalls the story, unfortunately problematic, of the travels of the great organist of Lübeck, the Dane Dietrich Buxtehude, in Flanders, about the middle of the seventeenth century. Buxtehude was the author of many magnificent compositions for the organ, and he had a peculiarity not often found among the modern writers: he refused to have any of his work published. The only way to know his compositions was to hear them executed, and accordingly Johann Sebastian Bach embarked on a journey on foot to Lübeck in order to hear the great organist play. For three months he had been in daily contact with Buxtehude; and it is claimed that he is indebted for the spirit of his immortal fugues to these three months of intimacy with Flemish music.

One thing speaks in favor of the author of all these hypotheses—namely that, according to his reviewer in the *Tribuna*, he offers them to the credulous reader in the form of cautious questions.

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THE POPE AND THE BIRDS

PROTECTION of wild life is distinctly an American notion, which also has a deep root in England. On the Continent, although the idea of game pre-

serves is mediæval or earlier, protection of song birds is not carried very far, and Italy has always been the most pitiless of all lands in its treatment of them. In fact, much of the most difficult work of the Audubon Societies in the United States has been the protection of American song birds against Italian immigrants whose Latin sense of the beautiful sees in our warblers merely a table delicacy. If the birds have had a friend in Italy since Saint Francis of Assisi, he has managed to escape notice, and he has done the birds singularly little good.

That is why it is especially agreeable to note in *La Petite Gironde* a communication from the Pope through the medium of Cardinal Gasparri, expressing his sympathy with the French *Ligue pour la protection des oiseaux*. The papal communication runs: 'One cause finds in the Gospel a sound claim on the sympathy of the faithful: how can one be cruel toward the glad little creatures of the air who are, as our Lord Himself tells us, under the care of our Heavenly Father?' And therefore His Holiness expresses the desire that this effort toward goodness and kindness will find among Catholics the good reception that it deserves.



KISSING AND TELLING

A READER of the *Living Age* sends us the following quotation from the Diaries of W. S. Blunt, apropos of the article upon Pierre Loti that we published in our issue of December 8, with this personal comment: 'It confirms what some Tahitian friends told me about him many years ago when I discussed *Le mariage de Loti* with them.'

... After dinner Cambon, who was a bit of a poseur, sat on a sofa between two adies, telling stories of Pierre Loti and his fabulous love adventures. Loti, when at Constantinople, had made the acquaintance

of an Armenian lady of the half-world, and on that slender foundation of romance built up his tale of an intrigue with the Turkish inmate of a harem of the Eyub quarter who died of jealousy for his sake. So successfully had he done it that he had convinced himself of its truth, and to the point that when he returned to Constantinople, and was staying at the French Embassy, he came in one day from a walk, and assured Cambon, who knew the true story, and Loti knew that he knew it, that he had just been to weep in the spot in the Eyub quarter where he had been so happy. He had found the quarter burned, and the house reduced to ashes. Cambon assured us that Loti did this in all good faith, having been able to persuade himself to believe in these bonnes fortunes as things that had actually happened. . . .



MR. SAMUEL PEPYS, ADVERTISING MAN

MR. SAMUEL PEPYS, having been exhumed from the dusty shelves of the Bodleian, deciphered, broadcasted to the winds, — if not of heaven, at least of the library, — read, parodied, loved, and laughed at, is undergoing his final humiliation in the very city where the fascinating *Diary* was written. The *London Magazine* is devoting a special section of its advertising pages to 'The Posthumous Ad-Diary of Samuel Pepys, Esquire.'

The 'Ad-Diary' occupies five pages, the first of which is devoted to a huge portrait of the diarist and the unquestioned statement that 'most of the editions of Pepys's *Diary* are incomplete'; but not every slave of the Pepys habit will be able to accept the authenticity of all that follows. Mr. Pepys learns to patronize a mail-order house, is advised to buy toothbrushes and encourages his wife to buy them for Christmas presents, discovers a new patent sole and an artificial leather, and ends by considering the manifold excellences of a new brand of perfume.

REVIVING A CEREMONY

AN odd old custom was revived last October in the Flemish village of Comines, tucked away in the north of France. About 1454 the Seigneur Jean de Comines, having been imprisoned after the good old custom by a neighboring prince, managed to reveal his whereabouts by throwing the wooden utensils given him for table use out of the dungeon where he was confined. When his faithful subjects came to rescue him, he established a fair at which the ceremonial of throwing these 'louches' — as the country people still call them — among the crowd was always carried out.

But after a few hundred years of throwing louches the people of Comines got tired of it, and the custom was abandoned. This year, however, some enterprising member of the Comines Rotary Club thought it high time to disinter the old tradition, and the white-bearded fathers of the *municipalité* solemnly mounted a platform guarded by two huge and grinning wooden dolls, and hurled the wooden louches into the assembled throng. Not everyone in the crowd escaped injury, but, according to a French account, 'You could see people boasting of the fact that they carried on their heads the marks of the blows received in this rough distribution.'

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IMMINENT WORKS BY EMINENT HANDS

NEW books by Mr. Shaw and Mr. Chesterton loom in the offing. It is definitely announced that Miss Sybil Thorndike will produce the new Shaw play, *Saint Joan*, as soon as *The Lie*, by Sir Henry Arthur Jones, which is still drawing large houses at the New Theatre, has ended its run. There is an

element of irony in the succession, for it is only a few months since Mr. Jones gave vigorous expression to a hostility toward Mr. Shaw and his ideas almost as bitter as that which he poured out against Mr. Wells. Even this was by no means a new attitude, for a few years ago, in his book on *The Theatre of Ideas*, Mr. Jones held up to ridicule all the theories on which the Shavian theatre is based.

Saint Joan is to have a New York production almost at once, but the publishers surround the new play with a tantalizing air of mystery. From London comes the news that Mr. Shaw has only recently passed the proofs, and that the public will probably not be allowed to catch a glimpse of the printed play until it has appeared upon the boards. The London *Observer* says that 'it is spoken of by the very few who have been allowed to read it as one of the finest, if not the finest, play Mr. Shaw has written, infused with powerful and moving beauty and, in contrast to the diffuseness of the five-evening *Back to Methuselah*, wonderfully compact and obedient to the more obvious necessities of the theatre.'

G. K. Chesterton has followed Mr. A. Edward Newton's example and written a play about Dr. Johnson. Perhaps this stout defender of the Catholic faith is encouraged by the success of *Magic*, the only drama in his long literary career, which was successfully revived at the Kingsway Theatre, London, last October; or perhaps the resemblance in avoirdupois between the author and his new hero was too much for him to resist. It is also said that an American theatrical manager has asked for a play based on the Father Brown stories, but this is all very indefinite, and the particular incidents on which the play will be based have not yet been selected.