

What is Literature, Anyhow?

More or Less Dynamic Impressions of John Cowper Powys, M.A.

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

WHETHER you call it literature or "literachuah"—what is it, when you hear a man like John Cowper Powys, M.A., from Cambridge, set up an invisible bookshop on the stage and proceed to tell you what to read and why, what not and why not, and why the "young person" about whom censors are so careful should not be allowed to dictate literary fashions? For the past four weeks this volcanic interpreter has been giving passionate lay sermons on literature to Canadian people in and around Toronto. Tugged in a Cambridge gown, swallow-tail—or was it Tuxedo?—little black tie and immaculate shirt bosom, without the scrawl of a pencil or the mumble of a prompter's cue, he has done his best to make a literary lecture resemble the hot headlong lines of a big melodrama or a problem play. He has talked a mile a minute about great authors in four countries. If he had been taken down short-hand by the phonic method the thing he spent an hour and a half delivering would have been almost as impossible as the luriddest page in Carlyle's French Revolution or one of the most delicious passages in "Gargantua and Pantagruel."

Now, John Cowper Powys, M.A., has gone back to Cambridge, I daresay; or perhaps to New York. And he has left behind him a trail of literary culture, consisting of Goethe, Ibsen and Strindberg, Tolstoi and Turgenieff, Balzac and Guy de Maupassant. This man Powys is a hyper-climacteric wonder. He lectured last week upon French literature. No, it was hardly a lecture. It was an evangelistic discourse clothed in the lurid garb of ejaculation and of Dioynsian culture. It was a Bacchanic brainstorm based upon perceptive analysis. It was a quick run through the morgue of French letters into the museum, thence into the salon and the French Academy.

Somehow or other the audiences that packed the hall in Toronto to hear Mr. Powys were nine women to one man, when most of the few men were from the university. This was a compliment and a challenge to Mr. Powys. He might have known that nine-tenths of us in this country don't care a button about pure literature even when it deals with allegedly impure subjects. We don't mind a little of it dressed up in the garb of drama, or tricked out into political orations, or furbelowed into a good heterodox sermon. But we don't as a rule care to hear a Cambridge don tell us what we should read and why—just because he has happened to have time to read what we don't. That's the reason we send the dear women out to hear such men as Powys while we sit at home or go to the Club to talk about "wine, women and politics." (I am quoting Powys.)

Times have changed. Men started to go back on sermons some years ago. They have begun to retrograde on serious drama and cultural concerts. And now they have even abandoned the literary lecture to the women who, of course, are supposed to do nine-tenths of the world's reading anyway, except in the stock columns and the sporting pages, and some detective stories. And this is precisely where a few men like Powys, if properly handled by a man like the late Major Bond, might carry the tendencies of the times to the point of "passionate logic" in revolution. (Again I quote Powys, who admired the passionate logic and the intellectual abandonment to an idea possessed by the French people.) How should men like Powys be hitched up to the real masculine machinery of modern times? Very easily. Just the same way that "movies" have made millions more or less familiar with some sort of drama without words or any intellectual effort.

WE must admit that civilization has become so complex that the forty years of a man's life, when he really has his wits about him, are too short to understand the world as it is and as it used to be, let alone what it is likely to become. Ask Arnold Bennett—if the average man has the ghost of a chance to cram the world's literature and music and art and history and politics into his ken, and at the same time grub out a respectable solution of the H. C. of L. None whatever. We are all too busy.

Therefore we must have priests of literature and art. We need men to scour the world for literature and art as once we needed Columbuses and Pizarros to pillage the world by discovery of terrae novae; just as we need the phonograph and the player-piano to give us the world's music that we haven't time to study for ourselves; just as we need the illustrated papers and magazines to give us pictures in place of travel and seeing art galleries.

And Powys is the very kind of man. It's all very well for Public Librarian George Locke to keep a huge castle of books open day and night. But when we get in there half of us don't know what under the sun we ought to read. The booksellers downtown can't tell us. The book reviewers usually bore us—God save them! The university extension lecturer puts us amiably to sleep. Therefore, if we don't get any literary life from these conventional functionaries, and if even the women no longer have time to give us the world's literature in tabloid form,

let us hire a hundred men like Powys, if as many can be got, and send them round helter-skelter over the land to tell the women what is and has been doing in the world of letters. It used to be said that literature is life. Then let's have literature and yet more abundantly.

Powys knows how. He believes in the dynamic energy of literature. He lives it. He began to live it when he was six years of age reading Hugo's "Toilers of the Sea." When he opens a book he clutches it by the nape of the neck and says, "Now show me! Thrill me! Reveal to me the genius of your maker of the times in which you were written—or by the hocus-pocus I'll chuck you into the garret!"

When he has eaten alive the contents of several books by one author, does he stop there? Nay. He gets another as unlike it as possible, say from the same nationality. He gathers in the books written by Frenchmen and Scandinavians and Germans and Englishmen and Russians. He traverses them by and large, rakes them fore and aft with his search-lights, sketches out the net mean average of the lot and goes at them again to fill in the details, to see what in the name of Apollo and of O. Henry these men and women have done to illuminate the tendencies of their times for the good of the twentieth century. When he has got half a dozen or more big authors veritably disembowelled for his own more or less pessimistic amusement, he straightway constructs a lecture which no doubt he writes again and again, intensely rumpling his hair and talking to

himself just to get familiar with the kind of apoplectic language that he needs in order to make up the lecture for the stage.

Powys makes up his language with literary grease paint and rouge. No doubt about it. He tricks it up as an actor or a Caruso does his voice that he may get it across, not flat black and white, but plump, livid colouresques of dynamic energy that remind you of a Gargantuan feast gobbled in breathless haste. The time is so short and the subject so big, and the attention of the nine to one intellectual audience so riveted upon him as he flim-flams his long, black gown and black tie about the little yellow pulpit, sometimes almost picks it up and carries it away or crumples it into kindling wood.

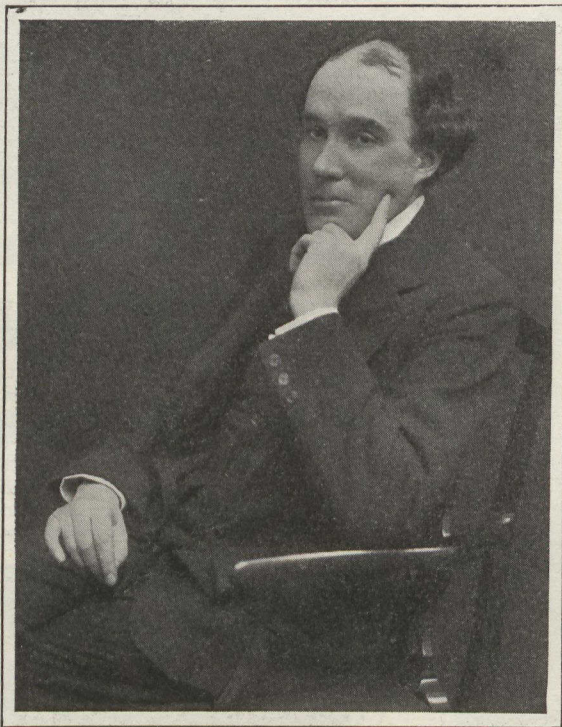
Dynamic? Yes he is. And from the moment he strides like Macready out to that yellow pulpit he has the spotlights full on. He pitches in headlong; no sotto voce smug introduction, but "in medias res," with the pantheistic, primal energy of a Sappho right into the arena where he wrestled last week in one hour and a half all the French writers of note from Rabelais to Maupassant to a glorious and Bacchanalian finish.

Not for him the grey lustre of George Eliot, the white optimism of Browning, the smug complacency of Thackeray or the respectabilities of any Anglo-Saxon writers whatever, unless it be Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dean Swift, Byron and Kipling—whatever he thinks of Masefield and of G. B. S. He deplores the dull drudgery of the Englishman because he is English himself. He glorifies the cosmic irony of the French; and he gave a red-hot, living-picture transcript of the raw-meat orgies of Rabelais, the immortal cynicisms of the giant agnostic Montaigne, the splendid audacities of Voltaire, the passions of Balzac, the profound cosmic pity of Maupassant and the intellectual abandonment of Anatole France. He dismissed Hugo because he was not pure French. He said nothing at all of Zola—why, oh, why?

The Art of Laurence Irving

By HUGH S. EAYRS

SOMEbody, greatly daring, once told Winston Churchill that he would come to be famous as the son of his father, Lord Randolph. Mr. Churchill, as might be expected, replied that the day would come when the world would remember Lord Randolph Churchill as being the father of Winston



Mr. Laurence Irving, a distinguished son of a distinguished father.

Churchill. It was not a particularly choice compliment to the memory of his father, but it probably had in it some element of truth.

There is a gentleman touring Canada these days who came to be famous as the son of his father. That is how Laurence Irving begun. In 1893, Mr. F. R. Benson, that dean of the drama, with whom everybody who is anybody in English stage circles has been associated at one time or another, included in his company the second son of the great Irving. People admired him and loved him because of the name he bore, for the admiration which England had for Sir Henry Irving had in it something very near reverence. Thus Laurence Irving launched his barque in the channel which opens into the widest sea of fame. The launching was another's; making the port has been Mr. Irving's task, and already, at forty, he has made it. Possibly, the fact that he was his father's son hampered him. A great many people said, "Ah, he is good, but he can never be as good as his father." Probably Mr. Irving would say himself that he could never equal his father, and that

to be remotely like him is the thing whereof he is most proud. But, if he continues upon the road where he has made such headway, it is conceivable that the mantle of the father will descend upon the son, and at the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, England and the world will see Sir Henry Irving reincarnate, who, being dead, yet speaketh in his second son.

There is much that is suggestive of the father in the son. I remember seeing Sir Henry two nights before he died in Bradford, England, playing in "The Bells." Whoever saw the great actor in this, his greatest play, must always have the imprint on his memory of those mannerisms which made Irving, Irving. One would be ready to swear that they could never appear in any other, for Henry Irving transcended his fellows, yet Laurence Irving subtly suggests many of them. He is like his father physically. His resemblance in method is even more marked. And yet, he is different, and the difference is there because the resemblance was there first. No one but Irving's son could act as Laurence Irving acts. As a corollary, the art of the son is the art of the father developed along new lines, and in part enhanced. Laurence Irving is Laurence Irving because he is, fundamentally, Henry Irving. Most of that that made the acting of Sir Henry stand out as Matterhorn stands out beyond and above Pilatus, makes Laurence Irving stand alone and apart from any other actor on the boards to-day. His art is something separate, different, and immeasurably more appealing than that of any compeer with the possible exceptions of Sir Johnstone Forbes-Robertson and Mr. Harvey.

THE old question of whether an actor should sink himself in his part or play himself above and round his part is surely settled in the example of Mr. Irving. His success is pre-eminently due to the fact that he is an artist first and an actor afterwards. In "Typhoon" he is completely Irving because he is so absolutely Takeramo. In "The Lily" he is wholly Irving because he is so faithfully the Marquis. In "The Unwritten Law" he is altogether Irving because he is so innately Raskolnikoff. In "Othello" he is overmasteringly Irving because he is so truly Iago. When you have seen "Typhoon" you say "Takeramo was wonderful." It is not until afterwards that you say, "Laurence Irving was wonderful." You are captivated by the actor because you are pervaded by the part he plays. Hardly any player before the public to-day puts such a premium on make-up. Martin Harvey as Sydney Carton or as Captain Reresby has still the face of Martin Harvey. Laurence Irving has a different face when he plays Takeramo from that he affects when he plays Raskolnikoff, or Iago. It is not merely the difference between the marks of the grease paint or the wigs. It is the absolute changing of expression. There are players on the halls to-day who earn their living by contortionizing their features. Not one of them is so perfect in this regard as Laurence Irving. He is a veritable Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When Takeramo is playing, Raskolnikoff is dead. When Iago speaks, the polished Marquis never