

## LONDON LETTER.

LIKE a valueless rough stone framed in the finest setting, Bushey lies among these lovely uplands and delicately-tinted woods, as much out of place as would be a Yorkshire village if carried from bare moors swept by North-East blasts to trim shady meadows through which I am sure only the gentlest of South winds ever venture to sigh. Those gaunt gray cottages in harmony among desolate hills and dales are here out of character, and their bare walls unadorned with any sort of creeper afford unbecoming backgrounds to the æsthetic young men and maidens who are very much *en evidence* this delightful summer afternoon. A second Bedford Park should arise, the only fit abodes for these *pince-nez* students, who must endure bitter pangs indeed at being forced to inhabit such congenial homes which even the useful draperies of honeysuckle and roses, morning glories and clematis, would fail to make artistic. Miss Greenaway should design and Mr. Edis should build model red-brick cottages for these Mallaises and Orchardsons, Miss Montalbas and Madame Canzianis of the future. It is not right that they should be asked to grace with their presence these battlemented small villas or unpretentious six-roomed little houses, where any one without the least knowledge of art might be content to live; and though they make the best of their surroundings with Liberty curtains, black-framed mezzotints and the like, still the most casual unsympathetic passer-by must feel that Cockney roadside dwellings are hardly worthy these enthusiastic young people, who have dressed their part with all propriety, learnt their words, and are only lacking the set scenes, the suggestive interiors, necessary to make their existence complete. The carriages, full to overflowing with Professor Herkomer's guests, toil up the long hill, passing by the way the pretty old church with the tranquil village pond lying at its feet, passing the charming Queen Anne Manor, and so, in the heart of the straggling sheet, halt at the gates of the theatre (once the dissenting chapel), where the play is about to begin. Into the midst of this quiet-looking colony London has sent representatives a hundred and twenty-five strong, ready with townbred straitness, maybe to laugh at, certainly to criticise everything we see and hear, and London pouring into this small oblong room where shrouded electric lights gleam and scroll-work and carved pillar decorate, settles itself comfortably, ready for any sensation which kind fortune may have in store.

The programme (a wonderful portrait, photogravured, of Miss Gilbert, "The Sorceress," forms the frontispiece) occupies our attention first; the Argument is read, and then as the first bar of the music is heard from below the stage, our fluttering papers are laid down, our busy chatter is stilled, and we concentrate our attention on the golden-brown curtains which are just about to part.

At last they swing aside. The camp fire gleams in our attentive faces as we watch the group of gypsies lying sleeping, lights the figure of the Sorceress Queen ("lithe as panther forest roaming") wandering hither and thither, impatient for the return of the child, and by its fitful glare throws into deeper shadows that part of the wood it fails to touch. Across the lake that "orb'd maiden with white fire laden" (the most realistic of moons, beating the famous "sweet regent of the sky" who looked down in the days of long ago on the attempted murder of dear Colleen Bawn) throws her fair beams a-glitter on the sleepy water and on the drapery athwart the Queen's tent; and the Wagnerian music throbs on; and the Sorceress paces to and fro among her subjects. Anything more effective than the shadowy scene and the weird music cannot be imagined; it was emphatically the real thing; but the charm was rudely broken by some one, far from where the supposed singer was standing, giving us an incantation hymn, Miss Gilbert coming in a trifle late with appropriate gestures. After that shock the action became brisker, and a lullaby (all out of tune) was followed by a serenade from Mr. Wehrschmidt, in which ridiculous words wedded to charming music were chanted in a peculiarly spiritless fashion; then, after a few fair choruses, a good dance, and one or two songs (still out of tune) the gypsies at the approach of dawn gather up their belongings and wander off, with their Queen and the stolen child in their midst.

Then came what to me, after that silent admirable opening, was by far the best thing in the whole performance. The camp fire has been stamped out, the colour of the sky has altered, for the sun is near at hand; light breezes seem to blow through the wood, cleansing it from any taint of that noisy, drinking crew over whom the Sorceress reigns; one almost hears the awakening notes of the birds. The character of the music changes; it's fainter, sweeter, more tuneful. To this spot strays a shepherd—in whom one has no difficulty in recognizing the Professor—fearful of advancing too quickly, unaware if, as yet, the tribe has left the country side. After a charming short dance, through the music of which you catch the irregular tinkle of the sheep bells—the most graceful of light measures—the shepherd is joined by a shepherdess, to whom he presents a necklace of barbaric beads (a gipsy girl's property, discovered at the foot of a tree) and to whom he sings a verse or two full of quiet tenderness. "For all our life's dear story, give us love and give us peace," and with this sentiment set, to be sure, to a few harmonious simple chords any one with the least ear for music can play, the Fragment ends. As the curtains slowly swing together the lovers wander away, hand in hand, into Arcady, while an old shepherd on a knoll by the river turns to look after them, and listening again to the never-to-be-forgotten piping air, leans, with a world of meaning in his attitude, on his crook. The figure of the white-bearded old man is the last we see. The strains of the love song are the last we hear.

From the theatre we went to the great studio where, to the clink of coffee cups, we talked over our entertainment. Browning was there, and Madame Antoinette Stirling, Fuller Maitland, Alfred Scott Getty, Mrs.

Garrett-Anderson and Mrs. Faucit, and from the walls Mr. Archibald Forbes looked on, and Mrs. Craik (an admirable portrait) and Ruskin kept watch over us. Through the pretty gardens we strayed, first to one workshop and then to another, and so to the inner sunny room where the printing is done, and where hangs an exquisite mezzotint of Lord Heathfield clasping the key of Gibraltar (do you recollect Hazlitt's favourable opinion of this piece seen by him first at the Angerstein collection?), and not far off an etching of Walker's "Philip at Church." As I look at the beautiful composition—Philip as you know shares the prayer book with his children, the Little Sister sits with clasped hands and bent head near by: the background differs from the illustration done for the novel. I think of a paragraph in a well-known essay:—"I own that I am disposed to say grace upon twenty other occasions in the course of the day besides dinner. . . . Why have we none for books, those spiritual repasts—a grace before Milton, a grace before Shakespeare—a devotional exercise proper to be said before reading the 'Fairy Queen'?" and to these I should like to add, for my part, a grace before Thackeray. One does not continually prate, I think, of the affections which lie deepest, and among the many writers whom one criticises continually the author of *Vanity Fair*, of *Pendennis*, of *Esmond*, is never much discussed; but none the less, "for ever echoing in the heart and present in the memory" are the matchless pages of English literature he has signed with his name. The shelf in the library to which most of us turn oftenest is the shelf from which we take those living picture books—like those in Andersen's fairy tale—in which, beneath the trees on the Castlewood lawns, in the shining candle-lighted drawing-rooms in Curzon Street, in the half-deserted Bloomsbury Square, in the cool shadow cast by the Greyfriars' wells, we can listen to and watch those men and women who are made of flesh and blood, not paper and ink. Lucky indeed are we to have in our possession such fairy gifts as these. Who can be lonely when from these magic leaves Beatrix and Mary, Clive and Ethel, Dobbin and Emmy Sedley (dear Emmy, 'tis the young and foolish only who call thee insipid) are ever ready to be our companions? Their talk seems to alter as we alter; we misunderstood or only half heard when first we listened to them; now as the years go on all they say becomes clearer, and of different meaning; actions, blamed or praised when first we watched them have at last their true value, and we understand these many many friends to whom the great writer has introduced us, as we must come to understand, even the stupidest of us, the people with whom we have lived all our days. "We have been young and old [writes Andrew Lang to Thackeray, in the *Letters to Dead Authors*], we have been sad and merry with you, we have listened to the midnight chimes with Pen and Warrington, have stood with you beside the death-bed, have mourned at the yet more awful funeral of lost love, and with you have prayed in the inmost chapel sacred to our old and immortal affections, à l'égal souvenir." Was ever writer so adored as is the creator of Colonel Newcome, with a love that, as I have said, his disciples talk little off, for, like all true affection, it lies too deep for many words?

As I turned into the village street I could see across the meadows into Hertfordshire, on the outskirts of which lies St. Albans, and I called to mind how, in a niche in a little church away from the cathedral town, there sits Sir Francis Bacon, watching over the tomb for which Aubrey wrote the epitaph. A walk of a few miles through the pleasant lanes brings one to the narrow chancel, worn by the feet of worshippers to the shrine of the author of those famous Essays in which (says Macaulay) Bacon talks to plain men in language which everybody understands about things in which every one is interested. An Italian is supposed to have been the sculptor of this somewhat clumsy figure, which gives one but a small notion of what the statesman must have been like. From the church it is only a stone's throw to the park, where are still the ruins of the house built by Sir Nicholas in order to entertain his Queen with all propriety, and where, across by the monks' fish-pond, is the site of the delightful small home Sir Francis designed for himself. The windows of the present dwelling of the Venetians shine in the evening light as I turn down the avenues to go back to the great city which lying so near to this country solitude, yet seems so far; and glad though one always is to return to "the sweet security of the streets," I think even the most inveterate Cockney cannot help feeling vaguely that in the peaceful charm, full of memories, of such a spot as this there is something quite indefinable, some wild flower scent, peculiarly the property of these lovely meadows and fields.

Flowers in great banks lined the staircases on the Private View day at Burlington House, and servitors in furred red gowns (*tempe* Sir Joshua) handed catalogues to the Quality who elbowed their way to the brilliant rooms. On all sides one hears, as one always has heard ever since I can remember, denunciation of the show as being the worst that has been seen for years, a remark most of the papers repeated next day. But if Orchardson is disappointing one finds Vicat Cole astonishing—like one of the dead landscape painters, a genuine Old Master—and from Goodall it is easy to turn to such excellent work as Boughton's, while among the many good outsiders a beautiful little Frank Calderon should delight you. There are interesting portraits, too, not a few, which should make up for Long's stuff, and Solomon's painful canvas, and from the pieces of such men as Millais, Pettie, Briton Rivière, Marcus Stone (for a wonder), Peter Graham, you can extract a reasonable amount of pleasure unless you are very hard to please, without grumbling over the mediocre pictures which are inevitable in such a gigantic exhibition. I saw that Agnew halted with Gladstone before only the twenty or thirty canvasses really worthy, through and through, of being examined; and this place is an admirable one to adopt, as thus you run no chance of wasting your time over indifferent and displeasing work.

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