

REVIEWS

THE THIRD INCOMPREHENSIBLE

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Letters to her Sister, 1846-1859.*
 Edited by LEONARD HUXLEY, LL.D. (Murray. 21s.)

WHEN, in 1849, a son was born to the Brownings, some profane wag exclaimed, "Now there are not two Incomprehensibles but three Incomprehensibles." Many readers of this new collection of unpublished letters from Elizabeth Barrett Browning will be irresistibly reminded of this anecdote, for the most distinct and not the least interesting figure is that of Robert Wiedeman Barrett Browning, self-styled Peninni. True, there is no hint of him before page 99, where Ba is asking, "as a mere matter of curiosity," what is the price in England of "that very fine French cambric of which babies' caps are made?" but his diminutive form pervades two-thirds of the book, setting the ringleted, untidy, ecstatic figure of his mother in its most attractive light.

Previously published letters have made us familiar with Mrs. Browning's epistolary style, her inveterate slipshodness, her facile ardours, her courage, her idealism, her little exasperating tricks of habit and humour. There is nothing here, in this series admirably edited by Dr. Leonard Huxley, to suggest that earlier verdicts should be revised or rescinded now. As elsewhere, the descriptions of life in Italy have a good deal of colour, though it is the colour of a tinted lithograph. The famous personages who pass across the scene, Tennyson, Thackeray, Carlyle, the Empress Eugénie, the Prince of Wales, Florence Nightingale, even Hume, the original of Sludge, look rather like those portraits in chalk and crayon such as the age loved, where the whites of the eyes are insistently white, there are high lights on every fold of hair, every curve of ambrosial whisker, and the self-conscious lips are carefully touched with a rose-coloured pencil. Even Robert, the plaid-trousered, long-suffering Robert, sometimes seems a bundle of energetic and endearing qualities rather than a man. It is Peninni, the chubby infant incongruously thrust by destiny upon these two, who dominates and is alive.

For Robert one feels a growing sense of commiseration. He was tidy, and in some ways he was almost conventional. He found Ba's uncouth headgear, her perforated gloves, hard to endure; but, except for occasional good-humoured outbreaks, he *did* endure them. His full-blooded sanity must have been affronted by her spiritualistic craze; but he vented his annoyance upon Sludge rather than upon Sludge's patroness. Mrs. Browning writes from Paris in 1856:—

"Think of my horror at Robert's having heard to-day that Hume the medium is in Paris. I thought he was in Rome. I looked so scared that Robert promised me he would be 'meek as a maid' for my sake, and that if he met the man in the street he would pass without pretending to see (*sic*). Oh... perhaps you don't know that Robert has talked himself into quite a hatred of this Hume, which, of course, was very foolish indeed."

There are several similar passages in these letters, all throwing light on the genesis of "Sludge the Medium," and none likely to convert waverers to the spiritualistic faith. The merest flicker of humour would have been enough to put the incidents described in their true focus. But the gravity of Ba was dyed in grain.

During her lifetime and for many years after her death, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was accepted as unquestionably the greatest of the Victorian women-poets, alone on a pedestal. She has lost that pre-eminence. Few critics would now rank her above Christina Rossetti, whose austere, crinolined figure stands to-day beside the veiled and violet-locked image of Sappho. Yet there is this to be said for the dispossessed Elizabeth. Her letters may not bear the authentic impress of a poet's mind as do, for instance, the letters of Shelley and Keats; but compared with the monochrome jog-trot of Christina's they are iridescent and lyrical. Her imagination did not, as Christina's did, carve out for itself a narrow channel, ever deepening and darkening towards an unseen sea. It was rather a flood constantly breaking through dykes and dams, and spreading, shallow and luminous, over wide stretches of land. If, however, we pause to ask ourselves why Mrs. Browning's letters, tenuous and hectic though they often are, hold a charm unattain-

able by her sister-singer, we shall probably find the answer in the one word "Peninni."

We see him here as a most engaging child, precocious but not in the least priggish, and incomprehensible only in the sense that all babies are so. We come upon him staggering about in a plumed hat worthy of Kemble in the rôle of Hamlet; shouting *Viva Peone* as Louis Napoleon rattles by in his gilded coach; delighting in the beauty of the sun "which God hangs on a nail"; declining to eat "a rabbit, poor sing"; longing for a "little brozer," and suggesting wistfully that Vincenzo, the manservant, should go out and "catch a little boy" for his mother. He was also a child of powerful intuitions. When his parents took him with them on a formal call of inquiry at the house of George Sand, Pennini was heard to deliver himself thus to his small playmate, Desirée: "Pennini e Papa e Mamma via Torge And. Torge And no bene. Torge And un poeta." Could volumes have said more?

DOROTHY MARGARET STUART.

NEW NOVELS

A Farewell to Arms. By ERNEST HEMINGWAY. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)
The Hawbucks. By JOHN MASEFIELD. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
Seven Tales and Alexander. By H. E. BATES. (Scholartis Press. 7s. 6d.)

Early Sorrow. By THOMAS MANN. (Secker. 5s.)
The Shout. By ROBERT GRAVES. (Mathews & Marrot. 6s.)
Monks are Monks. By GEORGE JEAN NATHAN. (Knopf. 7s. 6d.)

BLUNTNESS and virility are definite virtues in a novelist, but Mr. Hemingway cultivates them too seriously. His blunt, virile story is told in the first person by Lieutenant Frederic Henry, an American serving with the Italian Field Ambulance on the Austrian front in the late war. Frederic is very much a man, and so is his friend Rinaldi, the surgeon, and all their conversations are very male; Frederic also spends his leave in very male style, and there is a good deal of intensively masculine drinking and fornication, described at times in the babbling fashion of writing popularized by Miss Gertrude Stein. Frederic is blown up by a shell while he is eating cheese in a dugout—later he gets decorated for his bravery—and as his wounds are severe he is sent to hospital in Milan. There he carries on an intrigue with an English V.A.D., whom he had already met at the front. When he is fit again he is sent back, but presently deserts, joins his V.A.D., and escapes to Switzerland. In Switzerland, Frederic and Catherine are very happy until something goes wrong in Catherine's confinement. The surgeon operates, but the child is already dead, and in a few hours Catherine is dead too. Death in childbirth, with all its fake conclusiveness and tragedy, is an old favourite with the second-rate novelist, but the realism with which Mr. Hemingway describes Catherine's death is neither second-rate nor second-hand, and I do not think that it was altogether the necessity to end his novel that moved him to kill the heroine. Frederic and Catherine are two people as healthy and dull as a man and woman can be. To philosophy, art, religion, social injustices, finance, politics, personal relationships other than their own, and to all the inquietudes that interest in such matters breeds, Frederic and Catherine are either strangers or immune. All they want is good food and drink, a comfortable double bed, pleasant weather, a pack of cards, some newspapers if possible. The human species as a whole may be cursed for meddling in matters too high and difficult for it, but surely the few and rare Frederics and Catherine's might be left at peace in their golden inanity. Mr. Hemingway wants to show what a shocking mess humanity is in when even a perfect pair of animals like these cannot love and propagate undisturbed and grow mellow and bored and old together. First, in the war, we are shown the pitch to which human beings have brought the science and practice of mutilating one another. Its horror reaches a climax in the ambulance when the man placed in the stretcher above the helpless Frederic bleeds to death on top of him. By the simple and unsentimental method of desertion he can leave the war behind, but death (in the surgeon's coat and rubber gloves as M. Cocteau conceived it) turns up at Lausanne too, and Catherine also dies of a hæmorrhage. This ghoulish preoccupation with the vulnerability of human flesh is inevit-

able in after-war literature, but Mr. Hemingway is not merely in the vogue; he is concerned in remembering the war for the sake of its general and persistent significance. Unfortunately "A Farewell to Arms" is written in a style which is often awkward and shapeless, and while the thesis gains by the dullness of the characters, the narrative suffers. Happy love even among the super-intelligent is notoriously difficult to make interesting in fiction; here the conversations consist of "You're a lovely girl," "You're a fine girl," and "I'm good. Aren't I good? You don't want any other girls, do you?" repeated and repeated with a few variations. It has been pointed out that maps made upon the scale of one mile to one mile serve the purpose of maps rather poorly.

"The Hawbucks" is an odd book, too. The writing is good and easy, as one would expect, but Mr. Masefield gives his thoroughly Edwardian hunting romance a curiously Georgian turn when he makes his beautiful heroine choose the worst bouncer out of all her suitors. There is nothing very improbable in her choice—most of the suitors are dull dogs, good at rolling tennis lawns, but either moony or mum, with the exception of Vaughan, whose tactics are almost too mediæval to be credible. The hero, the elder brother of the bouncer of Carrie Harridew's choice, marries Carrie's half-sister, a "hushed-up" half-sister, and there again the true Edwardian romance appears, but Mr. Masefield treats the hearts of all his characters with a neglect and indifference that leaves his plot looking rather plaintive and widowed. "The Hawbucks" has the dullness that comes of putting too many contradictions into one novel. Carrie, however, is really lovely, as women are lovely in Meredith, and the country is really the country. "A field of pale plough lay above a field of red plough, with elm-trees black-twigged against the sky, rooks building in them, and the intense green under the hedge."

The admirable thing about Mr. Masefield is that he is not at pains to be anything in particular. His novel, dull though it is, has a sort of grace and carriage that no book by Mr. Hemingway or Mr. Bates will ever possess so long as the chief anxiety of the one is to be inartistic, and of the

other to be so desperately artistic. "Seven Tales and Alexander" is a collection of short sketches and one fairly long story about Alexander who goes with his uncle in a cart a great many miles to pick fruit one beautiful autumn day. Wordsworth once said that heaven lies about us in our infancy, and since that day the supply of heavens and infants has poured from the publishing press in a steadily increasing stream. Some of the heavens and some of the infants have been good. "Jackanapes" was good, and Katherine Mansfield's "Prelude." Perhaps Mr. Bates tries to make the heaven of his Alexander appear too authentic. Something in any case is wrong with this child idyll, but the book is prettily bound in white and blue and pleasantly printed—a good sort of book to give away.

In "Early Sorrow" no heaven lies about the infancy described. The elder children in the family of a German professor are giving a party, and the little children are allowed to stay up for a treat. Ellie, the youngest and the darling of the professor, takes a great fancy to a presentable young man four or five times her own age. Her distress is so great when she is parted from him that the professor is summoned. He finds her sitting among her pillows. "Her head is on one side with the eyes rolled up to the corner between wall and ceiling above her bed. For there she seems to envisage the anguish of her heart, and even to nod to it—either on purpose or because her body is shaken with the violence of her sobs. Her eyes rain down tears." The cause of all this anguish comes up to the nursery and consoles her with some foolish, self-conscious words, and then the child goes to sleep. Here we have as little of a story as in "Alexander," and Thomas Mann is very much more sentimental than most English writers of his standing would dare to be, but the great difference is that one need not believe "Alexander" unless one wishes to, but one must believe "Early Sorrow."

"The Shout" is even smaller. It belongs to the Woburn Books, a series of short stories, so limited, and so costly for their size, that one supposes they are designed for millionaires to send to one another instead of the common Christmas card. Two others of the series are published

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with "The Shout"—"Fame," by Miss May Sinclair, and "A Ghost in the Isle of Wight," by Mr. Shane Leslie—but "The Shout" is the only interesting one of the three. It is a story told by a lunatic at a cricket match—a good setting. Mr. Graves lures the reader most persuasively into a labyrinth of confused personalities, but provides only a slight clue to the way out. The characters are natural and rather charming, and the queerness of the story is the fruit of imagination and not of ingenuity.

The tail of this review fits it no better than the prehensile tail of a monkey would fit a respectable dog. Mr. Nathan calls his latest book a Diagnostic Scherzo by way of warning, and a certain amount of warning is necessary. As a novel it is negligible, but as a series of immensely long monologues it is a feat of writing probably without any parallel. Lorinda, the heroine, is a young lady in search of a lover, and the lover must be a man of literary ability. But a man of literary ability cannot express himself clearly and fully upon life and literature and make love at the same time, while there are other reasons just as adequate why a man may not be able to make love at all. My own favourite among Lorinda's unsatisfactory friends is Mr. O'Hara, the dramatic critic and author. "I've seen, heard, read, written, staged, thought, analyzed, and criticized sex until the word gives me a headache," Mr. O'Hara tells Lorinda. "The prospect of indulging in sex thrills me about as much as the prospect of indulging in a motor ride would thrill Henry Ford."

LYN LL. IRVINE.

MR. QUENNEL AND THE SYMBOLISTS

Baudelaire and the Symbolists. By PETER QUENNEL. (Chatto & Windus. 7s. 6d.)

MR. QUENNEL'S sensitive study of Baudelaire and his followers belongs acutely to the newest school of criticism. It is the aim of the author, not to tell us directly what he thinks and we ought to think about his subject, but to try and describe the effect made on his sensibility by the sensibility of the author and then to communicate to us indirectly his own opinions on the subject, to write a work of art, in effect, on works of art. In undertaking this difficult task Mr. Quennell has had a good measure of success. In the essay on Baudelaire he concentrates on one or two aspects of the author's mentality, particularly on his "dandyism" and his belief in virtue as a form of "make-up" as something imposed on the natural barbarism of man, instead of a potentiality inherent in the human spirit struggling against a superimposition of sin. Hence all morality is a form of art, and the making of works of art becomes the whole duty of man. Dandyism, in a simplified, austere, almost monkish form, is the keynote to Baudelaire's existence. His outside and his inside are governed by the same principles. Mr. Quennell sees Baudelaire also sharpening his sensibility against the whetstone of the modern town.

"It is a background of urban civilization. . . . Then as the modern poet, Baudelaire, let us say, or another and lesser poet from the host of his literary descendants, Jules Laforgue or Mallarmé, wanders past, born *flâneurs* all of them were, peering up and noticing the damp, corrugated surface of the advertisements, though he may experience and