

his presence honored us. The pride which protected his humility was ever nervously on the watch, and, quite naturally, saw now and then what Conrad suspected was there. Suspicion always does find the evidence it expects to find; and to Conrad, a simple soul, sensitive and friendly, desirous to please, the ordinary slights of busy and careless humanity were grave warnings that, whatever our devotion, we were reserving something which would never be kept from a real Englishman. The pity of it is that there is not anywhere a real and typical Englishman whose company any of us could stand for more than five minutes. That portrait of Conrad at the age of twenty-six suggests reserve and proud sensitiveness, and yet a confidence which required the assurance of friendly contacts; and these contradictions in their adjustments were bound to make sorrow for him. They did. The letters are full of groans and cries of pain.

One is not surprised to hear them, and yet they distress a reader. Conrad had nothing of the comic spirit. His humor was sardonic. He could not disperse his melancholia by laughing at himself, or smiling at the world. Yet one is bound to remember that though it is true recognition was long in coming to him, still, that is not a rare addition to the weight of the cross an artist may have to carry along. It is, indeed, an almost inevitable penalty for doing work to the hidden value of which an indifferent world must have its attention drawn again and again before it will pay any attention to it. It has often happened to such men, and it will continue to happen to them. One hears that the volume containing Keats's odes, the poems by which we know him, took twenty-five years to sell five hundred copies. One remembers also that Lamb knew something of the heat and burden of the day; yet read his letters! Once, when a visitor to Lamb confessed that coming along he had bought a book of his, Lamb wanted to see the evidence, and was so delighted that he offered to contribute towards the cost of it. Lamb was reconciled to whatever was in store for him, and his blithe mockery was enough to make the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune tired of fooling with him.

The trouble with almost any foreigner who would serve another tradition is that he treats that tradition with greater reverence than they who were born in it. He would be, for instance, more English than any Englishman ever was, except the sort of Englishman discovered by George Washington to be an intolerable nuisance. The Primrose Habitations of England are still stocked with such people. Every country has its own variety of resentful and insoluble nationalist who thinks the Deity did remarkably well when he was created. It is always such people who are supposed by foreigners to be the guardians of the true national soul—whatever that may be—whereas it ought to be obvious that no supernal Being would trust anything of value to their guardianship.

Nevertheless, the foreigner who would go into the British shrine usually becomes ultramarine in his blue Toryism; he becomes more Conservative than Dean Inge or Lord Balfour. Balfour probably makes sly jokes—totally incomprehensible to his fellow Tories—behind the scenes, about the kind of people they are. But the solemn awe of the initiated alien soul induces a few very rum complexes. He will defend things old and English which many of us, perhaps most, would not be sorry to see consigned to the pit. They are no longer representative of England because, as in every other country, changes occasionally take place even with us. It is not very likely the English are going to keep a respect for their old aristocracy, for example, when they know quite well that most of it was bought over the counter. The aristocratic principle, of course, is something different and need have nothing in common with country seats and the peerage. So simple a truth is one to which the novitiate Englishman cannot reconcile himself. He wants to be something which exists but romantically. And all the time, too, he is damned by a secret apprehension of his inferiority, or at least of a difference which will never approximate to the true caste—a manifest absurdity to all the warm friends who know he is not like themselves only because he belongs to a peerage to which neither money nor worldly power is a key. Yet that sense of an unfortunate difference makes him so difficult and meticulous in his comments and criticism, trying to get his blue bluer than blue can be, that to a careless native of the

realm his tests are far too austere to be applied to anybody but immortals on the slopes of Parnassus.

It is necessary to say so, for otherwise Joseph Conrad's admirers, who are held by his sonorous and noble diction, may get a shock when they read his letters; they may wonder whether they were written by the same man. But the letters were. For it is wrong to suppose that Conrad had a profound mind full of deep and mysterious stirrings. He was not subtle because his prose is allusive and glancing. His letters show what a simple and lovable man he was. It is the man whose writing is easy and buoyant who usually has the elemental and gloomy depths under him, and the allusiveness of such a writer had better be closely watched, for it is likely that he knows something we do not; he is not going to tell us; but if we have ears to hear—Conrad's preoccupations, however, appear from his letters not to be concerned with what we may suppose troubles a brooding soul secluded in what we will call Gethsemane. His preoccupations were of another order. He desired to be unmistakably English, to be even a man of Kent; it was therefore unwise to consider him a man of Sussex, as I did once, for I did not know on which side of the dividing line of two counties his house really stood, and did not care. Naturally, to me Conrad was not only English, but timeless and of no particular locality. He was a poet. Of what parish is a poet? However, I erred in my spacious reverence, for improperly I did not approach Conrad as an Englishman, but as an admirer.

Again, he had done what no other Englishman had done, and, as it happened, what no other Englishman could do, because the time for it was past; for Conrad contributed to the body of English literature authentic and noble testimony to a phase of British ships and British seamen which had gone and was all but forgotten. Not an inconsiderable achievement. All the same, if another Englishman acknowledged him in gratitude for that, why then it was surprisingly discovered that Conrad was a novelist to whom the sea was no more than a background for a study in psychology. The Englishman ought to have known better than to mention ships and seamen, when paying him a tribute. This time the mistake was not all mine; it belonged principally to Havelock Ellis, who had contributed to the *Nation and Athenaeum* a piece of work so good that I rejoiced, both on my own account and Conrad's, when publishing it. Later, I found that its subject was not amused.

There it is. Yet there had been a time—but that was some years before he dismissed the sea as somewhat irrelevant—when Conrad was unacknowledged except by a few first rate judges. There had been a time when it was possible for one of the asses, reviewing a book by Conrad, to recommend that it should be translated by Mrs. Edward Garnett. An infernal and stupid insult. But the world will never be empty of asses; a clear perspective of even the domain of letters is not always easy to get because of the vista of ears, waving and distracting. Why worry? It is part of our delightful landscape. It adds to the interest of the world. We should not know our prospects if they became void of so accustomed a feature. Long may they wave! Conrad, of course, in his early days as a writer was often annoyed both by their unexpectedness and their obstinate and untimely movements.

Yet it was Conrad himself who advised us that it is useless to get angry with the winds of heaven. Of course it is. The winds blow, and the long ears wave, as they list.

Mr. G. Jean-Aubry has given us two volumes, revealing some intimacies of a master which we shall treasure, for they display the litter of the august workshop, the slippers of the great man, and such things; and we love it. He has been a patient but enthusiastic investigator and editor, and the biography in volume one, with its elucidation of people and places in the novels and stories, reads like an elaborate piece of detective work. We have often wondered who Kurtz was, for instance. Mr. Jean-Aubry is able to tell us, for he has been working through the "Heart of Darkness" by the aid of a cryptic diary which Conrad had preserved. We hear of the ship which was the real Judea; of the actual Tom Lingard. This is Joseph Conrad's fountain pen; and that was the material out of which he made his "Arrow of Gold," though you would hardly guess it. Yet the solemn relics rebuke us. The pain which so often is betrayed in his letters is

communicated. We have made an immense fuss over him, of late, and now we see that what gives us so much pleasure was done when in agony with gout and in the despair caused by the evident fact that we were not much interested in him, anyway. Now he is gone; and so we will dote over even his letters written in haste on matters of business. If ever this world got authentic news of the death of God, we might become pure in heart.

## Vathek

By HILAIRE BELLOC

THERE are a certain number of books which are of first class excellence and which become partially forgotten. Sometimes their names are remembered and are quoted often enough by people who have never read a line of them. More frequently not even is the title remembered. Among the last is "Vathek." That a certain number of educated men could give you the title of "Vathek," and could even tell you who wrote it—that a much smaller number have actually read it, is true enough, but it does not take the place which belongs to it in the story of English Letters, still less has it the place which belongs to it as a particular, a unique thing.

Yet in the whole range of English literature there are but two short stories in the old sense of the word "short story," not a magazine article but a completed piece of fiction, which can take their rank with the fifty or more of the French model from which they derive. These two are "Rasselas" and "Vathek." Everyone should read them. They ought to be common textbooks with which the youth of England were as familiar as they are with too much of the lesser stuff in Shakespeare and with whole wads of textbook fodder ladled out to them for specimens of their country's achievements.

Of the two books "Rasselas" is the greater, yet "Vathek" the more remarkable. "Rasselas" weighs more, but "Vathek" is the more incisive. It ought to count with that very different book, "Wuthering Heights," as a triumph in deep etching. No one who had read it ever forgets it, or can cast out of his mind the branded lesson which it conveys.

Like "Rasselas" "Vathek" was written at a sitting. Indeed both books convey that powerful sense of unity which is of such value in the founding of any work; and it is unity of a sort which comes through immediate action of the pen when the mind of the writer is at its highest potential. But unlike "Rasselas" "Vathek" was written *literally* at a sitting, if we are to believe its author (and I see no reason why we should not). That is, "Vathek" was written without its author stirring from his work, his mind wholly absorbed in it, and with no distraction of meal or sleep or converse. "Rasselas" was, if I remember right, continuously written indeed, but a matter of a few days. It is worth remembering that while both books are upon a high French model of the eighteenth century (as was for that matter the verse of the time) "Rasselas" was a purely English production. It is as national a book as you would get in the language. But "Vathek," a triumph though it is of English prose, was written originally in French: so scholarly and so adaptable was that generation of educated Englishmen.

Indeed the fate of "Vathek" in the matter of language is as interesting as it is curious. Its author Beckford, perhaps the wealthiest man of his time, the son of a Lord Mayor of London, amused himself by writing the famous thing in the French tongue. For this kind of story had been presented to English minds in the French medium, and Beckford, when he flashed out the work, must have been fresh from the reading of Diderot and Voltaire. Presumably he did not care whether it were known or not, seems to have had no intention even of printing it.

But a clergyman who was with him saw the manuscript, translated it into English, and it is this English version which we have today.

Here is indeed an extraordinary historical incident, and one which makes a man think curiously (and I hope profoundly) upon the genius of language. A piece of work is written by an Englishman in the French tongue. It is so much admired by another Englishman that this other Englishman translates it into English and behold, the result is a significant piece of English prose with no trace of the French original, but sounding as though it came straight (as indeed it did originally) from an English mind.

It is another matter worthy of consideration that the author himself did nothing else in the way of

writing in the whole of a longish life worth considering, though he was active enough in folly and vice, and that the translator left no mark whatsoever. His name remains without echo even among the minor names of English Letters. Is that not a proof of inspiration? Of the truth that the best written work is not a man's own but something granted to him from outside? I at least think so; so that it always seems to me ridiculous for any man to be vain of really first rate written stuff, or to ascribe it to himself, or to regret the passing and loss of his power to produce it. Whether it also be ridiculous, as it would seem logically to be, that we should revere great names in literature I know not; but at any rate when men cease from this sort of worship society is doomed.

Such effects as that of "Vathek" are not produced by the subject alone, though the subject is necessary to those effects. There is needed to create these rare great things, the indefinable power of style. And the style of "Vathek" is as penetrating and more arresting than that of Voltaire. It is English of the contrasted rythmical balanced style which the eighteenth century spoke as its natural tongue, and of which it made in its highest moments something we shall not reach again. Here also the parallel of "Rasselas" recurs. "Rasselas," too, is written in a perfect manner, but suited to what it has to say, for "Rasselas" is a philosophy of resignation and of right values without alarms, without edge of emotion. In "Vathek" the shorter sentences, or at least the shorter rhythms, the relief of the macabre, the vividness of episode reflected in vividness of idiom, correspond to the arresting business the author has in hand. Not a philosophy, but a parable of the wages of sin and of death.



The story of "Vathek" is of the simplest. It is the old story of those who defy the gods; the core of all tragedy. For tragedy is not, as has been said, the conflict of two rights, nor is it, as has also been said, the watching of inevitable doom in spite of man's action. Tragedy is the example of retribution; and it is this which makes tragedy, like all other high literary forms, moral.

Vathek is Commander of the Faithful in the early ages of Islam. He ridicules divine things, and yet (it happens to such men) has a twist for diabolism. He is filled with a curiosity for new and vivid experience and for discovery. He would see for himself those things which cannot be seen without supernatural aid of the wrong kind. He wishes to visit the tombs of the Kings before Adam far off in the gloomy and deserted mountains of the Persian border and to know the dwelling of the dead. In all this he is supported by an old witch mother who follows his adventure and shares his fate. He makes a compact with a Demon who visits his court. He sets out eastward with a great train under the promise of the reward he has sought and he obtains it. He passes beneath the earth to the dread sepulchres of the Monarchs of the older time, he comes into the vast hall of Eblis the Ruler of Hell, and therein finds himself suddenly, unexpectedly, dreadfully and forever of the damned. His old mother, his companion throughout, passes with him into that despair.

There is not in the whole range of English letters so far as I know them a description of the loss of a soul compared with those last few lines of "Vathek." Indeed it is one of the marvels of the book, as of all first rate work, that such an effect can be produced with such economy of material. Read it, and it will remain in your mind permanently: the figures that pass, not speaking to each other, with their eyes cast down, and each with a hand upon a burning heart.

The course of the book—the process of its incidents—leads up with an insistent march to that climax. You have in it all the fortunes of the soul; its delights in this world, its repose, and even its last opportunities of salvation. Among the most poignant of the brief, shining passages in the work is that where Vathek comes, in the last stages of his journey, upon a being who sings as might a shepherd in the hills, and whose song half woos him to repentance—till the Sultan determines at one last moment to continue in his evil and his good angel leaves him with a lamentable scream. For the book is full of freewill and is an appalling reality of human life.

Remark that all this was written by one of the vilest men of his time, one whom vice drove be-

fore he died to something like madness. It was but a folly in Beckford, yet a typical folly, that he set out to build on his place at Fonthill in Wiltshire a tower higher than any other in the world. It collapsed. Of his evil nature the stories told of him, both true and false, are more illuminating.

The worst that is true of Beckford, the author, need not be repeated; but a story very typical, and I think almost certainly with a core of truth, is this one; I heard it from the child of a contemporary when I myself was young. Beckford at Fonthill isolated himself. Two young bloods had a bet that they would visit him against his will. They rode in and announced themselves. He kept them to dinner, promising them hospitality, but at midnight turned them into the Park, telling them that his hounds were loosed, and locking the door upon them, so that they fled for their lives to the nearest wood, and were rescued by hazard late the next day half dead.



A WOODEN STATUETTE OF CONRAD IN THE FORM OF A SHIP'S PROW BY DORA CLARKE OF ENGLAND. COURTESY SEAMEN'S CHURCH INSTITUTE

It is not an unknown accident in the history of literature that men thus doomed by their own wickedness should produce work warning others, and certainly there are few that warn more vividly than "Vathek." It is as though the writer had been granted some presentiment of what follows the course of such living as his, had had, as it were, a vision, was artist enough to set the vision down, but not man enough to profit by it. At any rate one may call "Vathek" one of the most profoundly moral books of the world. Whenever I read it I recall the admirable irony of the last phrase in the parable of the Unjust Steward—"That they may receive you into their everlasting habitations." The operative word is "everlasting."

There is no doubt in the mind of the reader of "Vathek" when he lays down the book that "everlasting" is the just epithet for that isolation in the Hall of Eblis, those averted eyes, those hands upon those burning hearts.

## An American Canon

(Continued from page 191)

adapted to youth and to the moral and esthetic instinct in youthful stages. The fashion now is to decry him, yet if his excellence is not deep it is certainly wide. He must go in the American canon. If there is a later addition it must be Sinclair Lewis. His books, like Bunyan's, Dickens's, Shakespeare's, have given names to the language. They are not yet time-tested but it seems probable that "Babbitt" at least will stay among the few books of which all reading Americans will be conscious and which most Americans will read.

This American canon does not compare in the importance of individual books with the English list, although Emerson, Hawthorne, Twain (in one book), and perhaps Poe could be shifted without too much incongruity. Yet even though some of our greatest names cannot be included, it is a good list for one hundred and fifty years of national history and a fruitful addition to our inheritance in the mother tongue.

## The Play of the Week

By OLIVER M. SAYLER

THE LETTER, a Play in Three Acts. By W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM. Produced at the Morosco Theatre, New York, September 26, 1927. New York: George H. Doran Co. 1927. \$2.

Reviewed from Production and Published Manuscript

IN our survey of contemporary drama as oral literature conditioned by purely theatrical expedients, one of the most powerful limiting factors is that of time. To a degree unmatched by any other art, the acted play is temporally circumscribed within a narrow range. Ignoring for the moment the one-act play, which is a highly specialized problem, the actually elapsed acting time of a play today, based on a curtain rising at 8:30 to 8:45 and falling at 11 to 11:15 with customary intermissions, runs from two to two and a half hours. While most plays seem to abide agreeably by this constricted span, we do not know how many significant and stimulating themes are thereby denied birth in the dramatist's imagination. And occasionally a play is presented which is manifestly the victim of this tradition's power, a play unfortunately extended or pared down to this arbitrary length.

A case in point is "The Letter," dramatized by Somerset Maugham from the final short story in his volume, "The Casuarina Tree."

Forceful as it is in the theatre to one who does not know its original form, "The Letter" as a play, loses a great deal of the demonic intensity inherent in its plot. Expansion from fifty pages of narrative to three acts and four scenes—to two hours—slackens the taut wire of this intensity, permits a roving attention, encourages deductive thought, and discounts the power of the startling dénouement. Suspecting that foreknowledge of this dénouement might be responsible for my reaction to the play in the theatre and in book form, I have reread the story, only to find it as relentlessly potent as on first acquaintance. Since dramatic intensity is the paramount resource of "The Letter," anything that attenuates it is inauspicious, prompting inquiry into its inevitability. In other words, I submit that "The Letter" as a play might have preserved its dynamic capital intact if it could have been told in three short scenes of a little over an hour's elapsed duration.

I do not mean to say that "The Letter" in the theatre is weak, thin, ineffective. On the contrary, it grips its audience, it holds the spectator within the spell of sympathy, pity, suspense. But it does so largely because of the personal intensity of Katharine Cornell's characterization of the suffering wife and the atmospheric intensity of Guthrie McClintic's *mise en scène*. Ironically enough, the theatrical expedients of actor and producer tend to counterbalance and quash the damage done by the theatrical expedient of temporal limitation.

Let us see how "The Letter" might have been dramatized to retain its intensity if custom had not imposed an arbitrary length. The plan, scope and site of the first act might still be used, with its mysterious slaying and its informal cross-questioning of Leslie Crosbie in her home on a plantation outside Singapore. Considerable slack might be taken up, though, all the way through. Much more time might be gained in the course of the second act in the prison where Leslie waits her trial, thus denying cerebral processes an opportunity to canvass alternative solutions. Picturesque as the setting is, the substance of the scene in the Chinese quarter at the beginning of the third act could be carried over by reference, to the advantage of suspense, into the final scene, which belongs, as in the story, in the home of the Crosbies' attorney, Joyce, instead of back in the first act setting, for the sake of the staggering and bitter contrasts of the dénouement.

This "Letter" would begin at nearly nine and finish shortly after ten. Can any playgoer honestly contend that he would rather sit through two hours or more of diluted drama, just to "get his money's worth," than crowd a thrilling and really memorable experience into an hour?

The inconsistency and the improvidence of the time limit in the theatre is patent by contrast with the freedom of the other arts. The subject suggests endless discussion, but in no way so eloquently as by recognition of what we would lose in the other arts under similar conditions. Suppose the novel were limited to 250 to 300 pages. In the