THE LONDONER

Books at the Wembley Exhibition — The Queen's Dolls' House — An Exhibition of Contemporary Printing — A Pirated Book by Arthur Machen — "The Green Archer" and Detective Stories in General — Three Exceptional Books for Children — Walkley vs. Craig.

I HAVE heard many comments upon the enormous exhibition which is now being held at Wembley. This exhibition has been loyally supported by the press, and many miles of appreciative celebration have appeared in the columns of the daily, weekly, monthly, and other journals which are circulated among the reading public all over the British Empire. I have not personally visited the exhibition, and it may be that I shall not go to see its glories; but this is a matter which need distress nobody. My one purpose in mentioning it at all is to put upon record a curious report which has reached me. This has reference to the display of books to be seen at the exhibition. The British Empire, as all the world knows, is an enormous confederation of peoples, renowned for activity and colonization. It has produced the greatest writer of the modern world, and some other well esteemed authors; but it has never regarded itself as particularly magnificent upon that account. When other nations, and in especial the German nation, have seemed to take from England her rights in Shakespeare, there has been an academic row. Never otherwise. And I am credibly informed that the national modesty regarding literary treasures has reached its apex in the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. I am told that in the whole of the exhibition, which shows many things, from railway engines to switchbacks, there are no fewer than seventy five books. This is splendid. It recalls very distinctly the fact that only in England could the chestnut have arisen which represented the dilemma of two young women stumped for inspiration as to a gift for a friend. One of these girls at last said: "I know. Let's give her a book." "Oh, no!" cried the other, instantly. "She's got one!"

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Further as to this matter. Quite a lot of attention has been directed to the enormous educational and historic value of something known as the Queen's Dolls' House. This treasure has awakened in the minds of the British public curiosity unmoved by any other exhibit except the sensational "Rodeo". Some part of this curiosity originates in the fact that Her Majesty has herself taken much interest in the making of the house, which has in miniature statues, books (contributed by famous authors and all handwritten by the authors themselves), carpets, furniture, and sanitary arrangements of the utmost accuracy. But for something more than this loyal interest, perhaps, the public has come from immense distances to see the house itself, sanitary arrangements included. Several visitors have informed me of the conditions under which this house may be seen. One pays a special fee for the privilege of waiting in a queue for some time, being at length admitted to the shrine, and being kept in movement, single

file, past the exhibit, the rate of progress being such as to make quite impossible any detailed examination of its contents. It is, for instance, absolutely impossible to look at the books contributed at so much expenditure of energy by the famous authors. They might just as well be dummies. I cannot think this is well considered on the part of those who are responsible for the exhibition. I admit that the task of handling the large crowds desirous of seeing the treasure must be a matter of considerable difficulty; but there should be a way of giving greater satisfaction to the sightseers. I have had a particular complaint from one who contributed a volume to the library. He received for the pains he took an ingenious reproduction of a communication written by the Queen, which he (in common with several of the other workers) took to be a real handwritten document (as though Her Majesty had nothing else to do but to sit down and write hundreds of letters to the hundreds of people who gave their services to the Dolls' House), together with a ticket admitting himself once, free, to the small room in which the house is exhibited. He succeeded in getting past the queues by a stratagem, but was forced to take his place in the stream of people who were rapidly being shepherded round the exhibit. He claims to have seen nothing, not to have seen even his own contribution; and also asserts that by the time he was again in the open air he was so tired and sick of the proceedings that he hastened forthwith from the exhibition. His is not the only case of which I have heard, or the only complaint. I think that, considering the joy which this particular man would have felt at the sight of his own work among the other volumes, there should have been some arrangement whereby the Dolls' House could really have been examined in such detail as to permit of the sight. I have no wish to see again my own volume, or indeed to see the Queen's Dolls' House; and I write without bias. But as each person helping to make the house must have spent some hours upon his job, and as most of those invited to contribute were writers whose time is valuable, something more than a circular might perhaps have been vouchsafed to them.

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An exhibition which I have really attended is the Medici Society's small collection of printed books. This is now being held at the Galleries of the Medici Society in Grafton Street. It does not, as did a former exhibition in the same Galleries, attempt to give a general view of printing, but is severely restricted in scope. In fact, some of the exhibitors found themselves hampered by the limits put upon the books which they were allowed to send for entry. It is for this reason not very satisfactory. There are few books which satisfy the taste of a booklover who is scrupulous concerning the size and arrangement of the printed pages of the books he handles. American exhibits show up well. Several of them are attractive and ingenious. They are sufficient evidence of the unwillingness of the best American printers to be satisfied with perfunctory work. But in all, there are not, I should say, above a dozen books in the whole place which gave me real pleasure. The title page of "The Fleuron" was one of the most graceful things I saw. Very good, also, in its own section, was Martin Secker's edition of Jane Austen — the nicest edition on the market. The big monumental edition of Jane Austen, of which I spoke some months ago in this letter, was on show, but although the type page was appropriate enough the

other details of the volumes were disappointing. In particular the bindings and labels were extremely — unnecessarily — ugly. A friend versed in these matters, to whom I mentioned my dismay at some of the commercial book work which was to be seen, assured me that the exhibition had one most satisfactory feature: it definitely established the fact of an improvement in taste and quality among commercial publishers and their wares as compared with the same things of ten years ago. It may be. We now have a number of houses who are devoting considerable care to the production of their new books. To compare these new books with those which were thought good enough in the past is certainly reassuring; but the advance is not yet so widespread as it should be. I remember how the English books exhibited at the Leipzic Exhibition of 1914 filled me with dismay. They were solid bulky books, with heavy respectable cloth bindings upon them — books made to last. But they did not compare favorably with the exhibits of several other nations. The cloth bindings were less furiously ugly than the French cloth bindings, but only in this respect did the English exhibits seem to me to enjoy any superiority at all. So it may be that we have advanced. If so — excellent. And all the more credit to those who began the good work. I think it may soon be forgotten how much they did. It is less difficult to carry on a good tradition than it is to inaugurate one.

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During the last few days I have been called upon to deal with a question of Anglo-American copyright — in the works of an author (American) now dead, whose works enjoy copyright in England, but not, it would seem, in America. This has been a curious and interesting task, in view of the fact that several of the author's books were out of print. They might have remained so if it had not been for the enterprise of an American publisher, who, however, now finds a difficulty in marketing his ingenious new edition in this country, owing to still existing copyright. The new copyright act assists authors (or rather, their heirs and assigns) by preserving them from obstinately unenterprising publishers who prefer that a book should be dead rather than that it should be in the hands of another firm; but it does not apply to the strange case I have been describing. It merely illustrates the difficulties still surrounding copyright, and in particular the discrepancy between the English and American laws. Apropos comes another strange story, of a writer who has lately enjoyed a sudden astounding (though none the less well deserved) boom. I refer to Arthur Machen. Mr. Machen, like many another who has had to wait long for proper recognition, naturally has a fair quantity of uncollected work lying half hidden and half forgotten in the pages of dead and living periodicals. As I hear the story, a particularly vivid and eager American publisher had an inspiration one day, which took the form of sudden knowledge that a book might be made up of some of Mr. Machen's uncollected writings. He produced the book. Such things have happened before. And now as a consequence of this publisher's "pirated" version, there is to be an authorized volume of newly recovered and collected material from Mr. Machen's pen. It is to be called "The Shining Pyramid", and in this country it is to be issued by Martin Secker. Mr. Machen's complete works must be assuming quite an imposing appearance now. This, for one who only a short time ago was almost neglected by the

general public, and whose list of publications was very brief, is quite surprising; but it is also excellent, because it shows that the really able writer has few chances nowadays to escape recognition, and recognition in his own lifetime. We have the recent — the comparatively recent — cases of Joseph Conrad, W. H. Hudson, and Arthur Machen to remind us of the truth. Few writers could be less alike than these three. All, in varying degrees, have in the last ten years tasted success long withheld. And it should ever be added, as an essential tribute to the American nation, that half the recognition in each case was granted by readers of the United States, stimulated to their action by admirable skill on the part of American publishers. American publishers have played a similar part with writers who have not had to wait so long, but in the three cases I have just mentioned the service rendered has been, perhaps, of greater help to the cause of literature than in some others.

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As many men do, I take great pleasure in sensational mystery stories. I said as much two or three months ago. And as I have just read an unusually exciting specimen of this kind of story I venture to draw attention to it. The book is "The Green Archer", by Edgar Wallace. It is not a first class yarn, because it would not bear rereading upon any ground whatever; but for fertility of sensation I think it deserves considerable praise. Each chapter — and the book is divided into a tremendous number of short chapters — has its thrill. The twists of the narrative are innumerable. It is improbable, and the characters are in many cases obvious and conventional. But they are used with freshness, and the book is written with real zest. As a consequence, I could not willingly part with it until I had grasped the solution of its horrors. Edgar Wallace, the author, is a pretty well known journalist in this country, and made some reputation many years ago by winning a large prize — I almost think it was £1,000 — for a sensational book called "The Four Just Men". If I ever read that work I have forgotten it completely, and so I think that I can never have read it. Mr. Wallace has written other books in fairly steady succession, but apparently they have not been of such quality as to establish him as a writer of sensational tales. The defect of "The Green Archer", however, suggests why this should be. "The Green Archer" seems to have been written as a serial for some paper unknown to me. I imagine that it is almost impossible for a story written as a serial to be first class. All the twists and turns of "The Green Archer", ingenious as they are, are of the kind dictated by the need for leaving off at a moment of excessive tension. The development is not "inevitable". There is about this book nothing of the admired classic "form" which is made the one test of virtue in a book by the youngest critics of the day. But it has more form, and more personality, than most of the detective mystery stories which are published. I should say that it was better and richer than such of the tales of J. S. Fletcher as I have read. Whether it equals the best work of Phillips Oppenheim I do not know. Mr. Fletcher's stories seem to me to be too much of one pattern. They defer the climax very cleverly, but sometimes attribute the crime to a person who does not appear in the book as an acting character until the last pages. This, I think, is a mistake. It is not a mistake made by A. A. Milne in his charming "Red

House Mystery". Austin Freeman, who is one of our best detective story writers, has a hardness of ingenuity which, coupled with his rather formidable scientific exactitude (I believe Mr. Freeman is or was a doctor, and accordingly bound by medical probability), gives his stories too diagrammatic a quality. All in all, I believe that it is still impossible to beat the Sherlock Holmes stories in their own field. Their faults are manifest, and have been much canvassed; but they have one characteristic which cannot be replaced by the more elaborate methods of their successors. This quality is that of personality. Arnold Bennett thinks they would not have survived if it had not been for the risibility excited by "that ass Watson". He forgets Holmes himself. Holmes's methods may be simple, his guesses fortunate (what Holmes himself, with all his talk of "You know my methods, Watson", calls "long shots"), but the stories are held together by that method, by the odd details of Holmes's violin, injections of morphia, moods, disguises, his habit of forcing some of his clients to underrate him by dreamy apparent irrelevancies, and in fact by his unmistakable temperamentalism. He makes some sort of appeal to the imagination. That is what no other detective in fiction has, so far as I am aware, been able to do. These other detective stories awaken our attention, they may baffle us; but they do not do more than excite us. The Holmes stories — putting aside all the portentous paraphernalia of "method"— cause us to smile at two personalities. The best of the Holmes stories seem to me to be "Silver Blaze" and "The Speckled Band". I am not prepared to argue about them. I only believe them to be the best things of their extremely entertaining kind.

I spoke just now of A. A. Milne's detective story. Milne has just written something else that all writers would like to write — a book of verses for children. This is to be published next season. It consists of the verses which appeared last winter in "Punch" over Milne's initials. Milne is thus in the happy position of having done nearly all the things that young writers wish to do. He has written successful plays. He has achieved light verse, essays, parodies, a story — "Once Upon a Time" — for children, a detective story, and now a book of verses for children. I cannot for the life of me see what his next triumph will be. He has left so few worlds to conquer. There is still, of course, the novel proper. There is philosophy (May Sinclair dabbles in philosophy in the intervals of writing novels in prose and verse), and there is romance. But I think Milne has too sly a humor for either of these things. He will have, like Pooh Bah, to "set bounds to his insatiable ambition".

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Another versatile writer, turning his attention from fiction and the gramophone, is to supply us this autumn with an ingenious work in an unfamiliar field. I refer to Compton Mackenzie. The editor of "The Gramophone", which indispensable journal has just entered upon its second year and volume, has returned to an early love. He has composed a book for children. In this he is to show that all the nursery rhymes are not isolated gems, but are a part of the canon of make believe. In order to do this he has written a story in which all nursery rhymes are placed in their right relation to each other and to the realm of childhood. I have not seen the book, which I understand is to have remarkable illustrations by a

young new artist, but judging by the unusual ebullience of the author's nature, his inexhaustible inventiveness, and his high spirited refusal to grow up, it should be an exceptional treasure for the nursery.

As I am writing of the nursery library I should like to give early warning of one of the most extraordinary books I have ever seen. This book also will be published in the autumn, so that it would appear that the children current in 1924 are to be unusually favored in the matter of literature. The book I speak of is called "A Guide to Caper". I do not know what other people will make of this work, but it seems to me, in its pictures, at any rate, to be a work of genius. There are to be just over twenty illustrations, in sepia, and they are the work of an artist named Denis Eden. Mr. Eden spends all his time in Italy, with his wife and a young family; and this book is a byproduct of a very rare talent. It is like nothing else that I have ever seen, and the artist's style, although at first glance it may suggest affinities with the work of various artists — Rowlandson, Cruikshank, etc. — of classic rank, is wholly original. I know how risky it is to forecast the reception likely to be given to a book of this kind, and it may not appeal to all as it has appealed to myself and to those others who have seen it; but I shall be extremely surprised and disappointed if "A Guide to Caper" does not take its place as a recognized treasure for bibliophiles and children. The author of this "Guide" is Thomas Bodkin, who is well known in Dublin art circles. It is through his instrumentality that the book has taken shape as a book at all, and his text, if less remarkable than the pictures, is still a model of fascinating nonsense. Readers of these letters will know that I do not often praise without reservation. I am ready to do so in the present instance. For me, "The Guide to Caper" is going to brighten the autumn publishing season.

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An amusing little battle has been raging between Gordon Craig and Mr. Walkley, the battlegrounds being the pages of "The Mask" and the columns of the "Times". As everybody knows, Mr. Walkley has carried personal impertinence fairly far in the "Times", besides introducing into dramatic criticism the exquisite phrase "roguey-poguey" in description of certain English actresses. He has a wit and a love of the French language which he combines with the utmost respectability. He has the snobbery of self conscious refinement. And he has a not always successful attitude of tolerant indifference to the serious drama and its disciples which at times moves me to the strongest sympathy. There *is*, of course, an enormous amount of solemnity connected with the theatre, and Gordon Craig, although a man of genius and an artist, is as solemn regarding the theatre and regarding his own contribution to it as any third rate mediocrity could be. The combination of genius and solemnity is not an impossible one, though it is regrettable. But Mr. Craig, besides being a genius in his activities on behalf of the theatre and a genius in the field of the woodcut, wields a pen. He can write satire. If he were less long winded, he would be a very effective controversialist. He cannot check himself. He streams on and on, with the result that he spoils his own effects. Mr. Walkley is a better controversialist. He knows when to stop. Being also naturally vulgar, he allows himself to be offensive in the right place. The combat, if it were continued, would almost certainly end

in a victory, therefore, for Mr. Walkley. At present, it is open to anybody to think that Mr. Walkley has answered Mr. Craig, or that he has been severely and effectively reproved by Mr. Craig. I will explain the details of the fray. Mr. Walkley went to a theatrical exhibition at a British museum some time ago. It was an exhibition of all sorts of things connected with the theatre and the drama. It had been organized by earnest people who care much for the stage and the drama, but rather more for the drama than for the stage, and rather more for their own reputation than for either. Mr. Walkley, who is impatient with those who cannot take the stage as it is, and who want what they call "good" plays in the theatre, had a flippant article on the subject of this exhibition. He said that he had looked out of the window, and described what he saw outside. In this way he very offensively implied that he thought such exhibitions piffle. In that I agree with Mr. Walkley. I think such exhibitions are organized by those who have nothing better to do. But Mr. Craig thinks otherwise. He — or one of his coadjutors in "The Mask", who writes with the defects of Mr. Craig — accordingly replied to Mr. Walkley. He tried his hand also at offensiveness, by reminding Mr. Walkley that Mr. Walkley for years worked as an official in the Post Office; and proceeded:

A.B.W. is a man of the world — all the time he is trying to make us see that; nor an insular one either, he would be reminding us . . . all the time reminding us. He says (not in so many words but all the time) I am a *bon viveur* — one who knows all about wines, cigars, (he may not smoke, still in his pages twiddles a fine cigar) about all that counts in the life of a man about town . . . a distinguished elegant man who knows his town be it Paris or London, Budapest or Napoli. . . .

A.B.W. pretends to be bored very often. It were as good a pretence as any other were it out of the theatre.

For in a theatre it is (dare I say it to anyone so delightful and gallant as A.B.W.) rather bad manners for anyone to pretend except the actors. . . .

Excellent A.B.W.

He does not want to be aware of any reality — he wants to be in an imaginary world with the Ghost [the Ghost in "Hamlet"] he detests and the Tempest which he dislikes. And yet when he goes to the International Theatre Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum he begins "gazing out of the windows at gardeners who were planting geraniums from pots in an inner courtyard". . .

and so on. I wish I could quote all the salient passages, but I have no space left. Those of my readers who are interested should obtain "The Mask" for April, 1924. It contains the gems of the discussion. Mr. Walkley has made a rejoinder, which leaves the matter where it stood. And Mr. Craig has written a short acknowledgment in the shape of a letter to the "Times". There will be no more. The pleasure I derive from the encounter is that Mr. Walkley's particular affectations have been pilloried, not with heat, but with a sort of ridicule. If Mr. Craig's article had been half its length its power would have been greater. Even then, probably, it would not have affected the esteem in which Mr. Walkley holds himself. To move that self esteem would be a monumental task. And moreover Mr. Walkley is quite able to look after himself. By those who do not see "The Mask", he may well be supposed to have won an easy victory over an illiterate crank. Nevertheless, my own sympathies are with Mr. Craig, not upon the specific point at issue, but upon general grounds. Mr. Walkley's interest is in the stage, and not in the theatre. It was worth pointing out.

SIMON PURE