Recent Fiction.*

Mr. J. D. Beresford and Mr. Gilbert Cannan come in the unarranged numbers of "younger men" of whom English fiction has a cheerfully prosperous number. Mr. Bennett, Mr. Wells, Mr. Galsworthy, and Mr. Conrad are become fairly well fixed in the general mind, but people are not very sure about Mr. Hugh Walpole, Mr. Compton Mackenzie, Mr. D. H. Lawrence, Mr. W. L. George, Mr. Oliver Onions, Miss Ethel Sidgwick, Mr. Somerset Maugham, or Mr. Beresford and Mr. Gilbert Cannan. Each has a little group of admirers, but if you ask someone who knows all about Mr. Walpole who Mr. Beresford is, you are likely enough to meet with blank ignorance and vice versa. In fact it is wholly possible to say that Mr. Beresford is one of the "first six living realists" and few could positively deny it, partly because they would not know just who the five other realists might be, and partly because they would not know what Mr. Beresford had done which made him worthy of inclusion in any such vague (and curtailed) pleiad.

Mr. Beresford's previous work, however, is well worth being better known than it seems to be (in America at least), and "These Lynnekers" is even better, in that it is more completely definite and more obviously what its author intended. The three volumes about Jacob Stahl had something of that large vagueness which is common in the recent biographies of modern fiction, and lacked that feeling of completeness and single impression which one wants in art, but this book is more condensed and more satisfactory in that one can get a fair impression of it all at once. Jacob Stahl was a type of the sensitive man of letters. This book is the story of a worker.

Richard Lynneker is rather the best of the modern figures in which recent English novelists have tried to present the emergence of the twentieth century from the smoothed-over chaos of Victorianism. Edwin Clayhanger is doubtless the best in presentation, but in himself is hardly typical of modern characteristics, Mr. Wells's Remingtons and Ponderevos are clearly nothing but rapid conjectures, Mr. Galsworthy's half-dozen rebels against the old regime are all drawn with an ironical insistence on their weaknesses and impossibilities. Of the later figures Philip Morel in "Sons and Lovers" and Michael Fane in "Youth's Encounter" are the most memorable, but one of them is an artist and the other an æsthete, and it is not clear that the twentieth century is to be particularly artistic or æsthetic. Dickie Lynneker was a worker. He came from an old family settled down into conservative self-indulgence in a rectory just outside Medborough, a cathedral town not far from London. His father, his mother, his elder brothers (both clerical), his elder maiden sister, all represent an acquiescence or a subservience in the established order in which they comfortably exist. His younger sister kicks over the traces and is for the time lost. Dickie, the youngest brother, buckles down to the different necessities and possibilities of life, and comes out at the beginning of the twentieth century on the sure road to be somebody. The family and the man are well drawn, but Mr. Beresford's most original achievement lies in his conception. We are by this time very familiar with the idea of the new man or the new woman rebelling against the imbecilities of old convention, and insisting on "being himself" or herself. We have had plenty of accounts of how people got rid of all sorts of religious rigidities, moral interferences, social tediousnesses, and so on. Losing one's faith, one's principles, one's habits (everything but one's honor, and often enough that too),—that is something we have got well accustomed to imagining, for it has been presented in the last few years with great vigor in a score of striking if slightly sketched-out forms. To us in America at least, that sort of thing seems rather old-fashioned and indeed conventional. With us the eighties and nineties, whatever they were, were not especially a time of the freeing of the individual from old restraints. With us (as with the French), they were rather a time of positive building up of new ideals of life out of all sorts of national material which had come to easy notice after the unhappy reactions of a great war. With us, as with the French, the thing the present generation had to do when young men and women was not to get free of binding conventionalities but to prepare itself for the many ways that offered of making life

* These Lynnekers. By J. D. Beresford. New York: George H. Doran Co.
Three Sons and a Mother. By Gilbert Cannan. New York: George H. Doran Co.

effective. It is by being that kind of person that Richard Lynneker seems to get into touch with the real currents of life better than any of the other figures (attractive though they be) of which current English writers, including Mr. Beresford himself, have offered us so many.

Such a conception is in itself something worth while, though not enough for greatness. Mr. Beresford has here happily succeeded in realizing his idea in a set of figures and an atmosphere indisputably human and presumably true. As to just what may have been life in a country rectory in the eighties and nineties the average reader will have but the vaguest idea; but Mr. Beresford's figures certainly seem absolutely and actually real. It may be that if we knew better we should criticize a little. When it comes to things that I think I know about I do criticize. For instance, Adela after five years in Canada comes back with American habits of thought and ways of speech; she says her brother looked "as if he was rubbering at the freaks in a dime museum." How it may have been in Toronto I cannot say, but in "the States" no one would ever have said that because the dime museum period was over and done with before the word "rubbering" came into use. In like manner, one of Adela's children (who "spoke pure American") "remarked on the cuteness of the back seat of the 'wagon.'" The word "cute" Mr. Beresford must have got from books; few use it at present, and no one who did would apply it to the back seat of a "wagon" either in Toronto or anywhere else. So in very minor ways Mr. Beresford, where he does not happen to know the life he is presenting, depends on false authorities, and it may be that he does so in larger ways. But the general impression is quite the contrary; his book on the face of it is a rich and true working out of a sound and good conception, and that in a form which will be likely to make a much more definite impression than the larger and somewhat vaguer picture of life in the trilogy of Jacob Stahl. It naturally lacks the variety of that fine work; it has in it nothing quite so good as the best of it (the beginning of "A Candidate for Truth"), but taken as a whole it should do more to give people a high idea of its author.

However much Mr. Beresford and Mr. Cannan may be alike (their publishers call them both realists and other people have called both "younger men") there is not much superficial resemblance between "These Lynnekers" and "Three Sons and a Mother," unless it be that both are about families. The former is one of the biographies not uncommon in fiction to-day, or perhaps autobiographies or near-autobiographies. Mr. Cannan has written such books himself; in fact he is rather apt to take up a person, get him out of old surroundings into new ones, and then show how life gets along *de novo*. That is always something of a biography, which may begin with birth and end with marriage, or begin anywhere else and end nowhere in particular, as is apt to be the case with modern realists. The present book is on the face of it different; it presents itself at least, as the story not so much of an individual as of the development of the life of a family. One gathers from some prefatory lines that it is a story of Mr. Cannan's own family, though of just what element is not very clear; we certainly do not have Mr. Cannan's own youth, for he did not grow up in the days when Victoria Regina was a young woman unless his age is nearer one hundred than is likely. Nor would Mr. Cannan be apt to present his own youth and that of his brothers in any such manner. However that be, the book gives a curious study of the Victorian age in its early days which is interesting reading along with Mr. Beresford's study of later Victorianism. Just why these able chroniclers of current history should betake themselves to the history of the day before yesterday and the day before that is hard to say. Many nowadays who are not absorbed in the moment are at least thinking of explanations of the moment. Mr. Cannan is at least frankly historical. "History" wrote the maiden sister who had lived in Germany and Italy, "is concerned with the absurd and rather theatrical doings of a few people." Mr. Cannan gives us an amorphous history of early Victorianism: we have the financial security, the subordination of everything to obvious success, the individual comfort and independence, the stagnant wealth and the unconsidered squalidnesses of poverty, the remoteness of religion, the theoretical freedom and the actual tyrannies of day-to-day life, the constant talk and discussion, the usual lack of beauty, thinking, comradeship, liberty (the phrases are mostly Mr. Cannan's), that we associate with the immediate past.

This view of Victorianism, however, does not come to the surface till one has got well along in the book. On the face of it the story is of a Scotch widow with five young children, who set out to make their fortune or fortunes in England. Margaret Lawrie had brothers who had "done well" in England. First Jamie the oldest boy goes down to Thrigsby, the growing North-of-England

cotton metropolis of the forties; he gets a foothold and brings down his mother and the rest of the family, and the story concerns their life, or at least the lives of the boys, who grow up, get on in business, marry, and so on. Such at least is the ostensible topic of the book; in reality Jamie Lawrie is the only one with whom the reader is given any sympathy, so that the book gets round to the common theme of the man of genius amid impossible surroundings. At the end Jamie goes to America to make certain journalistic studies; the book ends as he leaves England with a vague longing and a passionate hope, "going towards the New World where there had been wars of liberty." Possibly Mr. Cannan meditates a trilogy.

This much on the subject, however, does not really give us a sufficient idea of the book which is Victorian in its large inclusiveness and its detail. The publishers speak of Mr. Cannan as a realist. Of course that word may mean almost anything, but if it gives the idea of one who presents things as they really appear to an observer of life, who gives a picture of life, then Mr. Cannan is not a realist. Since the time of Balzac the writers of fiction have generally worked to give us an idea of how their people and their scenes appeared to the eye, to present us with something of a panorama of the world. Mr. Cannan throws all that overboard and deals with people almost in the spirit. Not that he says absolutely nothing about appearance and form, but he never carries on his account so that we are tempted to visualize it. Somewhere or other he calls his work a "comic vision" and such it is; comic in the Meredithian sense, and vision, not because it deals with something seen but because it deals mostly with spiritualities and states of mind with only form enough to make them comprehensible. There is much more to say on this subject which must be left out here, but so much it was well to say for the sake of the reader who might easily be bewildered in the current of short statements of fact that make the book, without much idea of whither it was carrying him. One will have to get half through the book before beginning to appreciate it,— at least I did.

The End of the Century and Early Victorianism,— are both of these curious topics for our modern realists? When one's own time becomes impossible then one may well enough turn to history. When everything seems shifting, unstable, ephemeral, one may well enough try to be free from passing impressions. English literary taste to-day is said to be turning to "more serious" things. These two novels, at least, are more serious in intention than the great mass of our American fiction, and being well done are better worth reading.

EDWARD E. HALE.
