

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

SIR HARRY JOHNSTON, 'SHOWMAN

By Dorothea Lawrance Mann

THE Englishman, if you listen to his conversation closely, will almost convince you that he belongs to the most futile and worst managed of all nations. Almost—but not quite—for somewhere between impression and conviction, you will become aware that this is his magnificent gesture toward the world. In his own strange way he loves his country as does the Frenchman, is as convinced of her superiority as the German, and praises her more subtly than the American, but he is obliged to assert his individuality in his own manner. If you are misled by what he says, it will only add to his inborn feeling of racial superiority.

Sir Harry Johnston possesses all the usual affectations of his nation. His important achievements he nearly always mentions in a subordinate clause of the sentence. You need not necessarily ignore them on that account. Because during recent years his attention has been centred on the four acres of his garden, you must not suppose that they look bigger or more important to him than those four hundred thousand African square miles which he was previously engaged in adding to the British Empire. It is merely good English manners to stress the four acres and mention the four hundred thousand square miles casually. Sometimes to be sure Sir Harry comes near to forgetting his tall gesture. It is hardly discernible when

he is wondering whether English history would have been changed, as far as the Boer War is concerned, had he instead of Sir Alfred Milner been appointed to the High Commissionership of South Africa for which both were mentioned in 1896. We must remember however that during the years between 1880 and 1906 most of Sir Harry's time was passed among simpler and franker people than the English!

To almost any human being the most welcome words of tongue or pen are, "Tell me ALL about yourself." Unfortunately no one—unless possibly a physician—is quite honest in making the demand, so that it is generally wise to curtail the confessions. Sir Harry Johnston merits the right to tell all. We could wish however that he had been more parsimonious in confession. There is material here for half a dozen volumes. It cannot be crowded effectively into one. We should have known him better had he told us less about himself. He has played too many rôles in life: been painter, author, naturalist, diplomat, explorer, treaty maker, empire builder, linguist, ethnologist, biographer of Livingstone, friend of Stanley, of Lord Salisbury and of Colonel Roosevelt, coworker with Cecil Rhodes, and in the later years of his life novelist and short story writer. The showman faces a very difficult task in doing justice to an actor of such versatility; but Sir Harry does not prove too good a showman of himself. Time has woven its golden haze over the past and the confessional mood is alluring. It prevents his discriminating successfully. We knew Sir Harry

better in "The Gay-Dombey's" and "Mrs. Warren's Daughter" and "The Man Who Did the Right Thing". In "The Story of My Life" we lose him in the multiplicity of his revelations. His dramatic instinct is at fault. Material such as his should have made a thrilling story; actually the exciting incidents, like the amusing ones, are hidden in the midst of many commonplace things. When we can find him he is still the Sir Harry of the novels, with his scorn of emotional religion and fixed theology, and his cynical and humorous regard for his fellow human beings. When he pauses to present some one of the great figures who move familiarly through his pages, he becomes again the artist, but he is never successful in showing himself.

It is poor psychology in the main which hinders Sir Harry. As nearly as we may judge he enjoys himself in all his varied rôles, and he plays no favorites among them. He will not take into account our prejudices. He insists that we take his life as he took it—a little mixture of everything, some native troubles, an excursion into the mountains, an unexpected view of a strange animal, a few observations on native customs or the geography of the country, a tribute to some one of the fine Englishmen who helped build Great Britain's African colonies, a bit about the treatment of fever. Life is like that, we agree, a jumble of many small things. One hopes that when the years of reflection come it will be possible to see some plan, some purpose running through it all, not the mere recreation of daily events.

Sir Harry is, when he wishes to be, an admirable raconteur. We like the story of Cecil Rhodes's tailor thumping on the door and dunning him for a bill of three years' standing, or that

of the hastily summoned Sir Harry in pajamas, taking notes of astonishing propositions made by Rhodes in the small hours of the morning, or of Sir Harry being scolded by Cecil Rhodes for the enormous midday meal he had eaten. His consternation when he heard the Duke of Connaught give his mother the wrong name on the occasion when Sir Harry was to be knighted by the queen, is even now apparent. It was not of course permissible for him to correct the queen even upon so intimate a matter as his own name and record! On rare occasions we get hints of the mischievous Sir Harry who confounded both Dickens lovers and Shavians with his *lèse majesté*. At one such time he recounts his seeing of Queen Victoria's collection of miniatures, picturing the illegitimate as well as the legitimate children of the English sovereigns. The lighter vein is rare however. Sir Harry uses the tall gesture overmuch. He forgets that it is the duty of the autobiographer to treat his subject with as much lightness as he would accord to others.

The Story of My Life. By Sir Harry H. Johnston. The Bobbs-Merrill Co.