

BOOK REVIEWS

SHACKLES OF THE FREE. By Mary Grace Ashton. (John Murray; 7/6.)

This is the author's second volume, and shows a very marked advance both in story and technique on the earlier novel, *Race*. Some of the old defects remain, as, for instance, in the first paragraph, which is a curious mosaic of journalese, bad grammar, and inadequate punctuation (*cf.* p. 68, is not *tardily* tautology? and *abjure* a mistake for *adjure* on p. 249, and on p. 301 does *plain* stand for *plainly*?). But the old power of description uncannily convincing characterisation, and sudden eloquence is increased. We hazard the guess that Miss Ashton writes 'by ear'; at least we have discovered ourselves unconsciously reading passages of her book out loud to taste the sound of them. We fancy the author must do the same herself. Perhaps this inevitable trick is due to her conscious dexterity in the choice of words and to the pattern into which she deliberately weaves her phrases, suggesting thereby a seventeenth century model of language, distinguished and rhythmical.

But the plot of the novel is new and interesting, new, of course, only in the mode of its treatment, for all stories are at heart 'old stories,' and all tales at least 'twice told.' Indeed, the novelty of the plot of this story is that it is a 'return to antiquity'; it is new because it is a return to the very old. The novel nowadays is often little else than a story of passion, morbid, Freudian and nasty, with the hero half-Sheik and half-fanatic, a lay Martin Luther. Here, on the contrary, we have presented to us a normal group of human beings, some managing, some managed or refusing to be managed, and some blessedly aloof: we are shown, indeed, the age-long conflict between duty and desire, but this time in terms of divine providence, namely the contentment of such as have found their vocation, the unsatisfied longings of those who have not, the restlessness of man the seeker, the continued inspirations stimulating him who has found the beginning of his 'way.'

The theme is developed in believers and unbelievers, some of each finding their 'way.' But the book concerns itself with the illuminating thesis that duty is only a very dull name for an exciting process, *vis.*, the following of a vocation.

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It is this thesis which imparts to the book an air of breathless enthusiasm, reminding us of Father Benson's supreme triumphs in the *Coward* and the *Conventionalists*. It is, as we have said, 'a return to antiquity' in that it has the old characters of the Greek drama, robed, however, in modern 'creations' and silk stockings, and in heather mixture and plus fours.

The characters of the women, Ruth and Diana, are well drawn; but the men are more shadowy, except Simon, the 'escaped' novice, whose moods and restlessness are admirably portrayed. Only the descriptions of country life and life in Paris are rather conventionalised and not very accurate in parts. Oh, yes, and does Chanctonbury 'tower'?

Accustomed to the older completeness of style, we find the new fashion of literature unfinished and therefore lacking in clarity: but we are bound to say that where it loses in clarity it gains in subtlety of impression. The half-emerging forms of Rodin lack the clean outlines of the sculpture of the Greeks, but yet they do convey an impression of life which the others must always lack. This *Shackles of the Free* is also impressionist; and so it lacks clearness of outline, yet is subtly convincing in its piled-up phrases, involved, rich, and obscure, and its description of the inconsequent meanderings of human consciousness. It gives impressions of real mental analysis which perhaps else could not be conveyed. Certainly the author has power to provoke and interest. We found that the book held us to its finish, vivid, clever, and true.

B.J.

WESSEX FROM THE AIR. By O. G. S. Crawford, F.S.A., and Alexander Keiller, F.S.A., F.G.S. (The Clarendon Press, 1928; £2 10s.)

Open the volume of fifty large photographs of prehistoric sites, *Wessex from the Air*, and—presto—you are flying in an aeroplane over the rolling Downs to discover some long lost Neolithic camp or settlement. Perched high aloft, and the earth far away beneath, you feel

'Like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken.'

Let the time be a fine evening in July, the place somewhere in the heavens a mile south of Salisbury Cathedral. Suddenly in a wheat field there appears, traced out by a belt of darker green corn, the unmistakeable evidence of a forgotten fosse.