

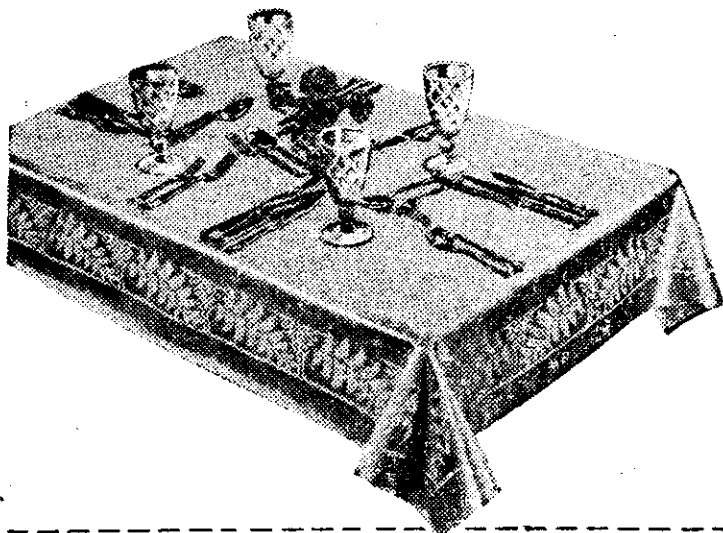
If it's Pure
Irish
Linen
it should
say so!



Pure Irish Linen, the most coveted of all fabrics, is becoming readily available again. Tablecloths, sheets, pillowcases, table napkins, tea towels, guest towels and many other household items, all in pure Irish Linen, are on display at any of the better stores. See them . . . feel the famous smoothness of this strongest, most lovely of fabrics. But, before you decide, make sure you are buying pure Irish Linen. Most Irish Linen carries a distinctive label. Another check is to hold the article up to the light—pure Irish Linen will show the threads thicker in some places than others. Don't be confused by similar-sounding terms.

If it's Pure Irish Linen it should say so!

Strongest—most beautiful of fabrics!



Irish Linen Assn., G.P.O. Box 1998, Wellington.

Please send by return post copy of your Free Booklet "Irish Linen in the Home."

Name

Address

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER

INCORPORATING N.Z. RADIO RECORD

Every Friday

Price Fourpence

MAY 14, 1954

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.1.

G.P.O. Box 2292.

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Telephone 70-999.

"A Most Excellent Play"

SAMUEL PEPYS, who loved the theatre, once described *Volpone* as "a most excellent play; the best I think I ever saw." A modern audience might be less enthusiastic; but listeners who hear the BBC adaptation, announced this week on page 7, will quickly know they are hearing a work of genius. Ben Jonson could not match Shakespeare: he was too much of a scholar to reach the highest levels of poetry; and his characters never quite separated themselves from his analytical mind. Like all the Elizabethans, however, he had great energy in the use of words. The story of *Volpone* sweeps along in a torrent; and sometimes, as in the mountebank scene under Celia's window, there are remarkable passages of sustained rhetoric. There is action, too. Something is always happening; and if now and then the dialogue takes an added comedy from subsequent burlesque ("Forebear, foul ravisher, libidinous wine!") we are never in doubt of the author's meaning.

Like Shakespeare, Jonson went to a town of Renaissance Italy when he wanted a setting for a story of passion and intrigue. His satire on legacy-hunting has its background in "Venice"; and in this city, which exists only on the stage, nothing is improbable. The "vultures," "ravens" and "crows" who are so anxious to inherit *Volpone's* fortune are comfortably removed from ordinary life, and yet are close enough to it to leave elements of truth in their most extravagant behaviour. It is now less usual for citizens to fawn upon a wealthy man in the hope of getting a place in his last will and testament. Activity of that sort is confined to the outer fringes of families: the tender attentions thrust upon Mr. Lillyvick by the Kenwigs in *Nicholas Nickleby* still have solid truth

under the exaggeration. But even in Jonson's day the antics of *Volpone* and his toadies would have seemed absurd outside a comedy. Elizabethans could see humour in situations which held the play together. For us, perhaps, the humour is less obvious. The parasites in *Volpone*, and, of course, "the Fox" himself, are too bad to be true, and certainly too bad to be consistently funny. Jonson seemed to be fascinated by his characters, or by their "humours"; and in allowing them a loose rein in plot and counterplot he was drawn too often to the edge of tragedy. But all is straightened out: intrigues are frustrated, villains unmasked, and the virtuous saved. Until then, in a world where everything is larger than life, the play keeps its audience in a suspension of judgment.

Present-day listeners can find an added interest in rumours of ideas and manners which now have the flavour of antiquity. Jonson thought it wise to find his setting in Venice, but his characters—like many of Shakespeare's—are true Londoners. The dialogue is English to the bone; and when the first strangeness is over it has much that is familiar, especially in racier turns of speech which later were to be transplanted to America. It is harder to follow topical allusions; and Ben Jonson, who could never put aside his learning, is constantly throwing out hints of odd practices in magic and medicine. All this, however, is merely flotsam on the tide of words; the final impression is of immense vitality. Life for the Elizabethans was short and hard; but if the shadows were deep, it was because the sunlight was strong and abundant. Men laughed loudly in those days; and although the laughter may seem sometimes to have been ill-founded or mock-heroic, it can still shake us.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 14, 1954.