

... With ... BOOK and VERSE

By "John O'Dreams"

Our Fortnightly Book Review "Harlequinade."

(By Constance Collier, with a Preface by Noel Coward.)

MISS CONSTANCE COLLIER, an actress of note and, as all the world knows, a name to conjure with on the dramatic stage, has added to her laurels by trying her hand in another artistic field—that of literature. There are many ways of writing an autobiography, and Miss Collier's method possesses the basic qualities of clarity and sincerity, coupled at times with an engaging guilelessness. Her knowledge of and love for the stage is lifelong and profound, and she tells the tale of her gradual emergence from poverty-stricken days of childhood and twilight of cheap boardinghouses without a trace of snobbery, and with unfailing joie de vivre. Always to Miss Collier the adventure of living has been a splendid one, and by dint of invincible grit and ability, coupled with beauty of the spectacular variety, she has climbed the steep pinnacle of success and won her place in the sun.

Love of the drama in its multifarious aspects would seem to be inherent in the Collier family, who at times followed their star on a path of thorns, when threadbare garments with miserable food, and very little of that, were their daily portion. But through it all the singing heart prevailed, and one guesses that the darling of the London stage is still the same gay-hearted, lovable creature as when she tramped the streets of London, looking for an engagement, with the mother she adored.

In this racy-written narrative we hear of life in New York, Hollywood, San Francisco, London in war-time and there is much interesting comment on social life, from the days when Miss Collier started her career as a beautiful Gaiety girl, with a retinue of oftentimes unscrupulous admirers, to later times when she was treasured friend and collaborator of a brilliant galaxy of novelists, playwrights and dramatic stars, of whom she gives some excellent thumbnail portraits.

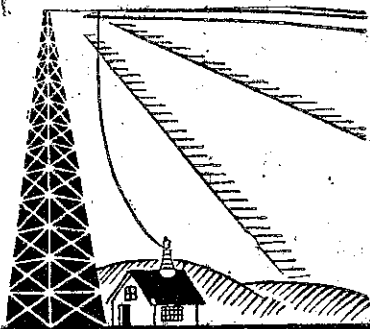
Of Sir Herbert Tree she says: "His vivid wit seemed to sparkle. Even in his tired and dull moments he was still fascinating. Always the best conversationalist at any table when with congenial people, his vocabulary was remarkable, and he had a lovely and graceful sense of words. A gipsy, a vagabond, and a great gentleman." Of a beloved friend: "Of all the lovely women I have known, Lily Hanbury was the most beautiful. All frank gaiety of soul, and with a generosity that was unbelievable, full of tolerance, the kindness of her spirit shone through her eyes, and added to all the most appealing beauty." Of Coquelin: "The last of the great classical school, he had all the elemental qualities—strength, passion, joy, generosity." Of Gertie Millar (Countess of Dudley): "A figure like a reed and a face like an enchanting marmoset."

Miss Collier married a fellow-actor of note, Julian L'Estrange, and the union was a happy one until shattered by his early death. She tells with engaging frankness of the casual manner in which she entered into the holy estate, and of the happiness of the years that ensued. But it is obvious the master passion of Miss Collier's life is her art—the urge of the stage is in her blood. A certain ingenuousness, usually the prerogative of youth, remains a characteristic of Miss Collier's style, and we feel, in spite of her great career, there still lurks in her gay-hearted personality a good deal of the Nice Big Girl. Her comments are entirely free from bitterness, often very just and penetrating, and she has a gracious enthusiasm for high achievement, not only in those dear to her, but in the wider world beyond the scope of her affections. Poignantly interesting, for instance, is the account of those last interviews of hers with Dan Leno, and his subsequent tragic illness and death.

The book is illustrated with excellent portraits of Miss Collier in many roles, including a superb "Cleopatra," and two beautiful portrayals of the actress in the dramatised version of du Maurier's "Peter Ibbetsen."

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