

## Thoughts on Returning.

By SYBIL THORNDIKE.

How good it is in life to happen suddenly on something which sweeps the years away and leaves one those many years younger.

I had that experience this morning. As I went to rehearsal at the Old Vic with a warm welcome from Lilian Baylis and her producer Andrew Leigh I was jerked back 13 years to the autumn of 1914, when Lilian had welcomed me first as a recruit to the Old Vic Company, then launched into a mad scheme of playing Shakespeare regularly in London. Andrew Leigh had been one of the first to welcome me on that day too. It was Ben Greet who had fetched me there, saying "Come and do some Shakespeare—that will make you forget your troubles." My troubles were the troubles of many women who had seen husband and brothers go off to fight, and that offer to play at the Old Vic was a godsend in more ways than one to an out of work actress.

How different was the picture I saw to-day. Gone was the grubby rehearsal room, and the cheery smell of bloaters and bacon from "Pearce and Plenty's" down below; gone were the tiny stuffy dressing rooms where three or four crowded into space hardly large enough for one; gone was the stage jammed up with scenery and oddments—a horror to the fearful and safety-loving L.C.C.—and instead I saw a beautiful clean rehearsal room, wardrobe room, and dressing rooms of generous proportions. No smell of sausages and mash—all efficient and hygienic, and workman-like. I thought to myself "I would just like a peep at the old days with the people that have gone." As I was thinking, Mary Sumner sitting beside me said: "I wonder where Dickie is." She had voiced what I was feeling. Where were they all? Dickie Saunders, Eric Ross, my own young brother, Frank—all those who had passed through the Vic in her struggling

days, and now had passed on? Somewhere, I think, watching and saying: "Don't forget the days that weren't successful; look back sometimes and remember jolly things when we were all poor," and I felt "I'm glad I was at the launching of this theatre; I don't want to forget the days that were struggling." There were jolly days and hard-working days. We spent most of our time there, sometimes not even getting out to meals, picnicing in the pit on dainties sent in from the friendly smelling coffee shop Pearce and Plenty. We lived mostly on coffee and buns, with an occasional blow out at Mrs. Wagner's restaurant in Waterloo Road. Mrs. Wagner's nine-penny cuts from the joint with vegetables were glories to be remembered in those days when rations kept us very short. We did not run to Mrs. Wagner's every day, but her helpings carried us over the days between.

I believe it is a good thing in life to go back deliberately and tread again the ladder by which one did ascend, and live through the feelings of each step, and count the difficulties solved, the troubles surmounted, and the many happinesses which come when one has to make big efforts, and there isn't much money. One remembers most one's friendships, and the spirit of comradeship.

I realised this morning how little the outward changes matter. The Old Vic is tidied up, but it is the same Old Vic, and I shouldn't have been in the least surprised to see the old troupe bursting in as jolly as ever, those who have gone, and those who are working elsewhere, and all being welcomed by that unchanging spirit, Lilian Baylis.

I'm glad to be back in the old theatre again, and here's to the days and the friends that are past, and here's to the days of the future.