Bad Girls and Babbitts

Bad Girl. *By Vina Delmar. Harcourt, Brace & Co. $2.*
The Man Who Knew Coolidge. *By Sinclair Lewis. Harcourt, Brace & Co. $2.*
France is Full of Frenchmen. *By Lewis Galantière. Payson & Clarke, Ltd. $2.*

"BAD GIRL" is one of the miracles of American life, and it adds much to the richness and variety of contemporary American fiction. The miracle lies in the triumph of the author over the ordinary rule of fate; and her book's importance lies in the fact that she has presented a new milieu in a vivid, impressive and honest manner.

It is reliably reported that Mrs. Delmar had only a few years of common school instruction. A daughter of road-company actors, she was yanked about as a child from town to town and rarely had an opportunity to learn anything about the pleasures of reading or the difficulties of writing. Until three or four years ago it never occurred to her that she might write fiction, and then the notion occurred to her only by accident: she read a story in a popular magazine and thought the story was so bad that she could write a better one herself. And, ignorant of the niceties of punctuation and orthography, she wrote a story and sold it. Then she found that she had many stories to tell.

She tells her stories as though she were under oath on the witness stand, keyed up by the intensity of the situation, forced to omit irrelevancies, and yet completely articulate. She has observed life closely and she has achieved a sound, unsentimental, realistic philosophy. She has that rare thing, a personal style. The only lapses she has from this style is when she becomes "literary". Her literariness is that of the cinema captions:

"In that mad, whirling eternity just before the first blow is struck, every man is wildly gloriously primitive. In the blackness of club and nail, of tooth and claw, woman's business was to stand aside till the cry of the victor split the silence."

Fortunately she does not slip into that sort of thing often. Usually she is direct:

"Dot sat down and began to pull on her stockings. If you rush downtown every morning at eight o'clock, you haven't the daily bath habit. You put on your stockings and then your pumps. You keep your nightgown on while you slide your chemise up under it. Then you take off the gown and go to the bathroom. You wash your face, neck, and ears and brush your teeth. Then you wash your hands and arms. Sometimes if there is a comb near the basin you experiment with different parts in your hair before the medicine-chest mirror. But whatever you do at that mirror doesn't count. Back in your bedroom, the actual hair-dressing is done. But before that you powder, your forehead first, working down to your neck; then rouge on your cheeks, and next your lipstick is applied. *Then* you do your hair, and last you get into your dress, slipping it over your feet so as not to disarrange your hair. Now you are dressed."

The only other fault I can find with her as a writer is her occasional betrayal of her ideas of gentility—ideas also apparently derived from the movies. Now and then she uses these ideas for comment upon the character of some person in her story and (lamentably) in a superior tone. If a tired mechanic slumps into his chair while "ladies" are present, that only goes to show (to her) that the poor fellow is lacking in the refinements he would possess if he had blue blood in his veins. Meanwhile, in all cases, including that one, she has shown the reader that the mechanic is more considerate of the feelings and interests of others than you will find in any person of a long line of "blue blood" in his veins. Some one should introduce Mrs. Delmar to some of the scions of American old families and to European nobles. They have none of the courtly manners (displayed on the screen) of Adolphe Menjou, a plebeian in origin if my information is correct, or (displayed on the stage) of John Barrymore, the son of a family of troupers. Men and women of lowly origins show the gentility on the stage how they ought to act, but most of the gentility are very dull pupils: the gentility (for the most part) pick their noses at the table, they scratch their behinds at aesthetically inappropriate moments, and their manners are conditioned almost entirely upon the fact that they have so many menials dependent upon them that they act toward all people as though they were menials—because it becomes a habit to act thus, and they despise the menials. A longshoreman and a descendant from a long line of European nobility display many traits in common: their manners are boorish—i.e., they are not up to the high comedy of the cinema—they both have certain idiotic punctilios that they observe with a great flourish, they are drunk most of the time, and their language is foul. The longshoreman, usually, is more literate. He at least has read a newspaper.

Let Mrs. Delmar accept her people of "white Harlem" and never, in any case, condescend toward them. That is her mètier. She knows their difficulties in the struggle of life; she knows what they are interested in, how they occupy their time; she knows their codes and their deviations from their code. And these people are just as fine as anybody—just as fine as, well, say, they are finer (as a general rule) than, Count Boni de Castellane, or any one of twenty dozen other noble names one could mention. That stuff about "blue blood" and "old lineage" the "superiority of the Nordic blonds" is the flamingo.

Now to get to the novel itself. It is, in part, the story that about ten million mothers in America—maybe fifty million mothers—have wanted to write. It is the truth about the barbarous suffering that a woman has to undergo in bearing a child. It is the truth about millions of young couples existing upon small salaries, who are in love with each other and who go through the terrors of the damned when the wife becomes pregnant. The fact that after the child arrives the parents love it and are happy over having it has nothing to do with the misery and anxiety they have before the child is born. They have usually merely enough for them to live on, by the severest economy, from salary check to salary check. They may be highly sentient and may wish to enlarge the scope of their pleasures; but the money they have will not allow them to buy the books they want to read, attend the shows they would like to see, hear the music they would like to hear. They may be able to afford the movies now and then. Suddenly comes an economic catastrophy owing to their love for each other: they have not only the prospect of another mouth to feed and another body to clothe, but the terrific expense of doctors, nurses, surgeons maybe, hospitals, and all the rest. And then there is the pain to the mother. Nothing has been done about that. Men fly from New York to Paris; men talk from inland cities of America to inland cities of Germany over the radio-telephone; nearly everybody has an automobile of some kind and television is now a probability; but yet nothing has been done about the terror and the pain of childbirth.

It just isn't right. And say what you will, the question of money is the most terrible of questions. There is nothing that changes the aspect of relations between man and man, woman and woman, husband and wife, more than the question of money. In young love, in the early married years of young people who have pledged themselves to each other in simple faith and mutual trust, there is only one eminently disturbing factor: How are they going to get the money to maintain the bliss they now enjoy? And then comes hell in the form of what a curious idealism has called a blessing. The young wife is pregnant. And there is no money to pay for bringing the child into the world. The first reaction of the wife is fear: she hates to tell her husband what has occurred. The next reaction is that of the husband who, informed of his impending fatherhood, is torn between pride and a sense of disaster: he is proud of being a father and yet he feels that he cannot afford the honor.

Two terrors are created in the minds of two young people who are in love. Each blames the other, for such is the limitation of human imagination that one cannot blame an impalpable Entity and must have a physical object for the release of one's feelings; and one turns instinctively for that release toward the one one is closest to and loves the most. The rebellion of the wife against the facts of life is directed toward the husband, and that of the husband is directed toward the wife. From this arise acrimony and recrimination. It may all end, and usually does, for a time at least, in the peace and happiness of a new source of pleasure—a child—and the beauty of pride and contentment and hope may reign in the hearts of the young father and mother; but meanwhile the situation has not been so pleasant, and forever after that something has happened to alter the first fine bloom of their love.

Mrs. Delmar has depicted all this with subtlety, clear-sightedness, honest and dramatic sense. Her heroine is a typist and her hero is a radio mechanic. They meet on a Hudson River excursion steamer. Each is, at first, a "pick-up" for the other. A "pick-up" is a chance acquaintance accepted or endured for the adventure it may bring forth. Such contacts are usually arranged by tacit agreement on each side upon a purely practical give-and-take basis. The girl may want to have some one to dance with on the boat and some one to buy her a hot-dog and an ice cream soda and pay her fare home. If the youth she picks up is endurable to her, she may let him "pet" her to a certain extent; if she likes him, she may allow him to kiss her and may kiss him back; but she keeps her technical chastity intact as the final bulwark of her self-respect and her value in the open matrimonial market.

The child in "Bad Girl" went farther than that. The man said he loved her and seemed to show that he did. She loved him. When she believed that she had acted to her disadvantage by giving in to him, because she could not reach him by telephone at his place of work or at his rooming house, she was prepared to accept the consequences—she was prepared to accept the fact that she had been ditched. In this there was tragedy. Even if it was tragedy for only a few hours. She knew that she would lose her position, that her brother would punish her and her father revile her; her friends would feel sorry for her and she would have little chance of realizing her idea of a normal life for a woman. Then the boy showed up. He loved her. They were married. They were happy in their new and hopeful start in life. And then came the accident of love which was to mean so much to them in anxiety and misery.

In "The Shannons of Broadway", Mrs. Shannon, the wife and partner of a stranded vaudeville actor, who has taken over a hotel in a small town, goes upstairs to hear the confession of a waitress who has been weeping violently. She suspects what the confession is about. So does Shannon (Mr. Gleason). When Mrs. Shannon returns the following tremendously significant dialogue takes place:

"The works?"

"The works!"

Mrs. Delmar has given her readers the works on pregnancy and childbirth among young people on small income who live in "white Harlem", New York. What she has to say is probably true to most urban communities. Carl Van Doren, who read the book in manuscript, has an apt phrase about it: he called it a "folk-book of American life". It is on the cards that Mrs. Delmar will reach great eminence in fiction.

Sinclair Lewis is getting his "come-uppance". He has been riding the crest of popular and critical approval a long time. Whenever an author has had that ride, reviewers begin to sour on him and to take potshots at him. They follow the psychological rule of the Athenian citizen who cast his vote for Pisistratus not because he knew anything about Pisistratus but because he was tired of hearing Aristides called "the Just". The reviewers (some) are tired of hearing it said that Lewis is an important novelist. So they have decided that he used to be great but now he is a dub, that he used to be entertaining and now he is a bore.

That is all a lot of wofflegow. The greatest fault with Lewis as a novelist in the way of entertainment was his meticulous detail. He would interrupt his narrative to describe the interior of a house, or the looks of a real estate development, or the floor of a garage with painful exactitude. His greatest achievement lay in depicting a character by letting his readers know how the mind of his character worked.

In his new book, he has confined himself to that task exclusively. He has dispensed with narrative and has let his new character, Lowell Schmaltz, reveal himself in six long sessions of hogging the conversation. He expresses himself upon politics, religion, women, relatives, travel and the duties of citizenship. He has few thoughtful ideas about any of these subjects, and all the ideas he has had are platitudes. His ideas are received staples and not the result of any exercise of the brain. But he has a lot to say and reveal about himself.

What he reveals inspires in me a liking for the man, a sympathy with him, and a certain fear of him and his kind. He is successful. He is the salt of the American earth. He rules the country economically, politically, religiously, artistically, and socially. He is not vicious or malicious. He has worked hard for what he has. He is disapproved of by his wife and daughter and he is not sure of himself on many counts. He is a boaster with an inner gleam now and then of the wistful fact that he is no very great shakes.

I found "The Man Who Knew Coolidge" immensely interesting and immensely instructive. It is also immensely clever.

And so is Lewis Galantière's "France Is Full of Frenchmen". Galantière's hero is an American business man who has been sent abroad on a committee of upstanding American business men to settle the problems that threaten the amity established between the Americans and the French. That problem, in three words, is the French debt. The French want it cancelled and American business men do not. There is a lot of blah on both sides covering this simple fact and the ramifications of this blah are growing so extensive that animosity between the two nations may be aroused ultimately on every other count except the central one.

Galantière has written the diary of his business man. That worthy is Peabody Wise, familiarly known as Peab. Once the committee arrive in Paris most of their time is spent in seeing the sights and enjoying themselves; but they do spend a certain amount of time in vain conferences and official business meetings. The hero is made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, as what man was not? And he makes a speech in French and is answered by a Frenchman who repays the compliment by speaking in English. Those speeches are the triumphs of the book. As prose macaronics they have not had their equal in contemporary literature.

Galantière is fair to both sides. Beneath the fun of this book one may learn much about the fundamental psychological differences between the American and the Frenchman. The revelation is by no means to the American's disadvantage. Galantière has lived long enough in France to know his Frenchmen and he has no romantic illusions about them. On the other hand he has not the rude American dislike for France because it is full of Frenchmen.

OUT-GOING TIDE—GLOUCESTER *Ernest Thorne Thompson*

PERHAPS RATHER BITTER OLIVES

By S. K. Ratcliffe

BY his fellows in English journalism Henry Noel Brailsford is accorded high and special honors. I have heard it said, by at least three prominent editors with whom he has worked, that in command of the art of editorial writing and in general equipment Mr. Brailsford has had no superior among the English publicists of his time. He learned the use of his tools in association with a brilliant group of men on the *Manchester Guardian*. When H. W. Massingham, most accomplished and inspiring of recent English editors, created the London *Nation* Mr. Brailsford became his principal contributor on international affairs, remaining with him until, at the end of a comradeship that had lasted for sixteen years, he was given an opportunity—all too brief, as it turned out—of making *The New Leader* an organ expressing the finer mind of the Labor movement. Meanwhile he had been writing books. An adventure of study and relief administration in the Balkans furnished him with material for the best picture of Macedonia twenty years ago and for a war novel, "The Broom of the War God", so vivid and powerful that one can never understand why it has been allowed to go out of print; while in "The War of Steel and Gold" he interpreted the sinister movements that were making the great catastrophe inevitable. Although his range as special correspondent has been more restricted than that of his friend and colleague, Henry W. Nevinson, no British publicist has a closer knowledge of the European field, and at intervals he has been the most dispassionate observer of revolutionary change in Russia.

Such a writer, preoccupied throughout the whole of his mature life with the perils of European civilization, could hardly have refrained at the present stage of affairs from making a survey of "this distracted world and its need for unity". And here, in a volume bearing as its title a poetic phrase from a Shakespearean sonnet, *Olives of Endless Age* (Harpers, $3.50), is his contribution to the greatest of contemporary themes.

"The society which cannot adapt itself promptly to the rapid changes of its environment is doomed to perish. Peace is no longer in the modern world a lofty ideal. It is the condition of our survival." That is Mr. Brailsford's conclusion. He reaches it at the end of 400 pages devoted to a rigorous examination of post-war Europe: the botch of national frontiers and antagonisms left by the Treaty of Versailles, the unaltered diplomacy of the great powers with their unredeemed imperialism, the admitted impotence of the League of Nations in respect to all the most dangerous issues, the expanding menace of international capital.

His twin points of departure are the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, which he rightly marks as the end of the Versailles epoch, and the making of the Locarno pact two years later. The much-belauded "spirit of Locarno" was one thing. But Mr. Brailsford can make his readers understand that behind the parleys of our Briands, Stresemanns and Austen Chamberlains there are huge economic forces which, if not thwarted by old nationalisms or new forms of imperialist aggression, must work out towards an autocracy of international capital such as only a greatly reinforced League of Nations could conceivably resist.

Mr. Brailsford's survey of the possibilities of a Pan-Europa includes a discussion of certain continental theories which have not yet been taken seriously by English or American internationalists. His picture of the motives behind the Bolshevik drive in Asia will, if I mistake not, impress the American reader as conclusive. His chapter on Pan-America may seem to Mr. Brailsford himself in need of pointed additions since his recent visit to the United States. It is, however, impossible for a reviewer to summarize the analysis and