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THE HALLELUJAH CHORUS

by Douglas Bush

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S narrow-minded friend Arminius, the middle-aged will remember, did not enjoy reading the *Daily Telegraph*. Borrowing Dryden's dictum on Elkanah Settle, he declared that its style was boisterous and its prose incorrigibly lewd. This harsh verdict always brought remonstrances from the patriotic Englishman. "No, Arminius, I always say, 'I hope not incorrigibly; I should be sorry to think that of a publication which is forming the imagination and taste of millions of Englishmen.'" As one reads the advertisements of new books, pieced together from the almost indistinguishable reviewing columns beside them, one wonders if much of our critical prose is not at least "a little full-bodied". So many of our most quoted authorities, doubtless, inspired by the example of Cicero, use adjectives only in the superlative degree.

Few writers of our time can complain of lack of appreciation. If they have just got a book printed they are saluted with twenty-one guns, and henceforth the eyes of the nation are upon them. If they have written

several books and are getting along in the forties, they have attained the status of grand old men, whose lightest word upon things in earth and heaven is delivered amid a reverent hush. Let us glance at a few pontifical utterances, concerning Evelyn Scott's *The Wave* for example. "The greatest novel on the American Civil War," says Mr. Carl Van Doren. Although the judgment is qualified, since one does not recall a multitude of novels on the Civil War, it may be doubted if *The Wave* will live as long as *The Red Badge of Courage*. "One of the most impressive novels written in twentieth-century America," says Mr. Krutch, with a qualification that is perhaps unintentional. The *New York Times* declares, quite simply, "Like Dante, Miss Scott has written an Inferno"—a verdict which recalls the Homeric parallels invoked to describe *John Brown's Body*. It is no wonder that scholars make poor reviewers; they have read Dante and Homer and are forever incapable of such dewy freshness. But peevish comments from the sidelines are of no account in the face of such a triumphant summary as this: "It has been called by three

critics a work of genius; by five others, the greatest novel of our time; and by four more, the greatest novel of the Civil War".

"One of the great fictions of literature, a truly stupendous and astounding work," says Mr. Percy Hutchison of Galsworthy's *A Modern Comedy*. "One of the miracles of American life," cries Mr. Rascoe, after reading *Bad Girl*. A foreigner unaccustomed to our critical idiom might wonder which of the two is the better book—but then all service ranks the same with God. Mr. Rascoe, of course, is our foremost wielder of the superlative. "She is one of the most gifted and original artists in the whole field of English fiction. *They Stooped to Folly* is, I believe, her masterpiece": Mr. Rascoe's voice is unmistakable. Mr. Phelps used to be Mr. Rascoe's nearest rival in the matter of large utterance, but the increasing "frankness" of contemporary writing has limited his opportunities for eulogy. However, he can still let himself go on occasion, and a lifetime of saturation in great literature gives weight to such a pronouncement as this: "Mr. Wilder is an artist of the first rank; he is original and profound; he has at command a style of such beauty and accuracy as to be literally the 'last word'". Mr. Wilder's success, declares Mr. Phelps, "shows that America is ready to listen to a great artist as it listened to Hawthorne". Happy America!

The torrent of superlatives pouring over the torrent of new books gives one much the same feeling of utter exhaustion that is induced by the preliminary announcements of a new moving-picture: "The super-super-drama of the ages—glamorous—tragic—daring—exotic—thrills—shocks—gasps—ten thousand actors—one thousand photographers . . ." "Seeking standards of comparison," say the modest publishers of *Wolf Solent*, "scores of reviewers have fallen back on Poe, Tolstoy, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and Sophocles. So lavish, so superlative have been the tributes that The Inner Sanctum has not dared to quote them all, for fear of courting

incredulity and scepticism." It was indeed discreet to stop short with Shakespeare and Sophocles, for there is no knowing to what real heights of literature we might have been led.

Obviously when writing has made such prodigious advances the struggling pioneers in fiction can hardly be mentioned any more. A somewhat hurried reviewer lately remarked that Sir Walter Scott's "hurriedly completed novels are still well known today, especially to the younger generations". It is gratifying to be assured that the younger generations are less flaming than we thought.

It would take a volume to record the living writers who have achieved greatness or had it thrust upon them. "It is a book," said Mr. Gorman of *Dodsworth*, "that impresses upon us again the potentialities of Sinclair Lewis as an American Balzac." Mr. Krutch, the most scholarly of our dramatic critics, was able, after quoting Aristotle, to pronounce *Strange Interlude* a play "in all senses of the word 'great'". What a critical notion of style was revealed in a review of Mr. Lewisohn's *Mid-Channel*: "Even when he is writing nonsense—and sometimes I think he is—Ludwig Lewisohn writes beautifully". Mr. Christopher Morley, one of our most benevolent critics, announced that Mr. Ernest Sutherland Bates's *Gospel According to Judas Iscariot* gave him "a more energetic idea of Christ than before". This means, as an English reviewer observes, that "a conception of Jesus as a man who deliberately compromised his own faith and misrepresented it for the sake of popularity is a more 'energetic' idea of Jesus than any with which Mr. Morley was previously acquainted". A number of persons have found an energetic Jesus in the gospels now superseded by Mr. Bates.

There was a time when Mr. Carl Van Doren seemed likely to become a critic of distinction; but his sympathies, always generous, have widened until they embrace almost anything; and yet, so eager are reviewers and the public to be led, an

Olympian nod from Mr. Van Doren establishes *Bad Girl* and its successors as literature.

But there is no need of heaping up critical opinions which shout at us from every advertising page, or of adding more authoritative names to those already mentioned. Six or eight conductors in New York have the national orchestra under their baton. Their verdicts are caught up and repeated, the echoes roll from soul to soul—until another week has brought another dazzling star into the firmament and the whole business is enacted again. Critical opinion grows, like ballads, by incremental repetition. And the critics seem to agree with Emerson that consistency is the bane of little minds, for when, a few months after the initial judgment, they come to view the year's work *sub specie eternitatis*, they are as likely as not to repudiate the early exuberance—not openly, but merely in the way of sad judicial comment on the small crop of immortals the year has produced. In the case of important reputations, the same critics who inflated them may lead the reaction against them, and then everyone else joins in the hue and cry. Academic persons and others who do not swell either chorus are old fogies who are unresponsive to contemporary literature. It is not clear why the fickle oracles of journalism should, while conducting their education in public, wield such power.

Uncritical extravagance is not, of course, confined to the United States. Mr. Galsworthy has made the fortune of a good deal of poor stuff. Mr. Walpole every week or two discovers the most promising young novelist in England. But the great art of salesmanship is naturally and obviously at its best in this country. And now that most of the critics are attached to book clubs we may expect independence to grow from more to more. As we read in Plato's *American Republic*, a citizen cannot learn too young to cheer for a cause he does not understand at the bidding of a leader he does not know. How potent the virus is the career of Stuart Sherman

proves. He started out with scholarship and a mind, and then—as THE BOOKMAN lately said, in an article on Sherman that did not join the chorus—and then he came to comparing a play of Don Marquis with Æschylus and Sophocles.

It is customary to shudder at the slashing judgments delivered by English reviewers a century ago, but how valuable a Jeffrey or Macaulay, even a Lockhart or Gifford, would be just now! It is doubtful if Keats was more hurt by reviewers' brutality than he would be if he knew that in *Wolf Solent* "Keats has come back to life and is writing prose". Really, as one surveys the critical comments that appear from day to day, one asks if we are insane, or illiterate, or merely unscrupulous.

A distinguished scholar and critic a while ago, weary of the adulation showered upon a good but far from great novel, wrote an unfavorable critique of it; the editors who returned it admitted that he had a strong case, well presented, but—they could not afford to print it. To complain of uncritical panegyrics, those already quoted and hundreds of others, is not to disparage the books, which are often quite good, destined sometimes to live six months, sometimes a year or two, and once in a great while much longer. Nor can anyone deny that sane and intelligent reviews are written, by some of the men mentioned and by others, but it is the superlatives that mold public opinion. "I suppose," wrote a man who has always walked alone, Mr. A. E. Housman, "that this is hardly what would be called a favorable review; and I feel the compunction which must often assail a reviewer who is neither incompetent nor partial, when he considers how many books, inferior to the book he is criticizing, are elsewhere receiving that vague and conventional laudation which is distributed at large, like the rain of heaven, by reviewers who do not know the truth, and consequently cannot tell it. But after all, a portion of the universal shower is

doubtless now descending upon Mr. Butler himself; and indeed, unless some unusual accident has happened, he must long ere this have received the punctual praises of the *Scotsman*."

A number of our journalists outdo the *Scotsman*, and in fact are more reliable than the slot-machines.

If one of the elementary functions of a literary paper is to enable a busy person to distinguish a good book from a bad one, the seeker after the best is in a sad plight. Concerning several thousand books a year he receives the same advice that Dr. Johnson, surely in haste, gave to one who inquired about Baxter's hundred or two pamphlets, "Read them all, they are all good". Such a

thoughtful and challenging work as Mr. G. R. Elliott's *Cycle of Modern Poetry*, for instance, received less space in most literary papers than scores of ephemeral novels and slapdash biographies. Confronted with so many important books every month, one may, with pardonable weakness, decide that the flood of contemporary genius is too swift and strong, that one might as well give up the struggle and be content with Shakespeare and Sophocles. But one may still wish that the choir singing its lusty Hallelujah Chorus might be, if only for a month, miraculously changed into the likeness of a picture that once appeared in *Life*—the boys of the deaf-and-dumb school giving, with eager but silent fingers, their school yell.

JOHN JASPER—STRANGLER

by Howard Duffield

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.—*The foremost problem in detective fiction—that is what Dickens bequeathed to his readers in the unfinished "Mystery of Edwin Drood". Mr. Chesterton says: "The only one of Dickens's novels which he did not finish was the only one that really needed finishing. He never had but one thoroughly good plot to tell; and that he has only told in heaven".*

The puzzle of "Edwin Drood" will never be solved. It is, therefore, perfectly futile to some folk; perfectly fascinating to others. From the year of Dickens's death to the present, continuations and solutions have occupied second-rate novelists and first-rate critics. Plays, and even a film-play, have been founded on the plot. Andrew Lang in England and Harry B. Smith in America each wrote an essay based on the idea of putting Sherlock Holmes on the case. Two great mock-trials have been held in which Jasper was tried for murder. One, in London, was in the hands of authors: Gilbert K. Chesterton was the judge and Bernard Shaw the foreman of the jury. The other, in Philadelphia, was conducted by lawyers, business men and scholars. The chief controversies have raged around two points: did Jasper succeed in committing the murder, or was Drood—as one of the tentative titles for the book suggests—in hiding, after an attempt on his life? The other question is: who was the detective, Datchery?

In this article, Dr. Duffield passes by these problems and studies the antecedents of Jasper, Precentor of the Cathedral, and strangest of villains. Mr. Cuming Walters (himself the inventor of an odd theory about Datchery) has compiled "The Complete Edwin Drood", which is a veritable encyclopedia of the whole controversy. If you look at it, you will see that in this study by Dr. Duffield there is a plausible suggestion which all the other critics have missed. Dr. Duffield, picking up a hint in one place, and a clue in another, has done something which I should have thought impossible. He has contributed to the discussion something really new.—EDMUND PEARSON.

AMONG the unsolved puzzles of literature, a few are more intricate and fascinating than *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Interrupted by death when the novel was half written, Dickens left to his readers a riddle which is equally baffling and alluring.

The work was to have been published in twelve monthly instalments. Only three were printed. Three more in manuscript were

upon the author's desk when he died. The thread was cut when only half the story was told. Edwin Drood was a boyish chap, engaged to be married to a schoolgirl. As their betrothal was a testamentary provision of their parents, their love-making lacked ardor and the young people tugged at the tether. John Jasper, a cathedral choir-master, was Drood's uncle, and treated him with an ostentatious affection. On Christmas Eve