

The Foreign Visitor

The Stranger, by Arthur Bullard. New York: The Macmillan Company.

A MAN in the first year of his maturity, thoughtful, travelled, master of languages and experienced in the manners and customs of many lands, comes to New York. He is the son of an American medical missionary in Morocco who had become a Moslem and he himself has been reared in the Mohammedan faith. Now at length he visits for the first time his father's land and after a period of studious loneliness he becomes acquainted with a group of zealous young Americans representative of the higher ideals struggling for recognition in this country: a painter, a novelist, a political reformer, a socialistic and atheistic professor, an efficient practical-minded woman whose life work is the organization of the finances of charities upon sound principles,—and a frail young woman who makes the text and illustrations for children's books and whom an incurable malady has doomed to an early death. His entrance into their lives affects markedly the career and character of several of these people; but by carefully subordinating the parts played by the other members of the group to those played by the painter, the charity worker and the illustrator of children's books, Arthur Bullard, has avoided any too close resemblance to Pippa Passes or to The Passing of the Third Floor Back.

The nearest literary affiliation of this remarkable novel is to a much older kind of book. It is now nearly three centuries and a half since Giovanni Paolo Marana started the vogue of what may be called the Letters of a Foreign Visitor type of fiction and satire in his once famous *Espion du Grand Seigneur*, known in English as *The Turkish Spy*. The situation of an intelligent, thoughtful and observant man, placed in the midst of a civilization utterly different from that in which he has been brought up, gave excellent opportunity to drive home the lesson of the great diversity and incongruity of the religious beliefs and moral codes of mankind and of the need to recognize the degree to which individual beliefs and codes are produced by non-rational forces such as race, environment, tradition and education. The corollary that followed from realization of this fact was the necessity of purging the mind of all ideas due to the accident of historical position; to limit belief to those truths acceptable to all; to acknowledge that manners and modes of thought alien from those to which a certain civilization has become accustomed may be as valid as, may be nearer the ideal than, those accepted by that civilization; in a word, to clear the mind of prejudices. Such lines of thought appealed to the cosmopolitanism characteristic of the eighteenth century. In our own time the same train of ideas has been followed successfully by Mr. Lowes Dickinson. It has remained for Mr. Bullard, while discarding the convention of the letter-form, to employ a similar theme brilliantly in a novel dealing with twentieth-century New York.

For the development of such a theme the author has many happy qualifications. His power of acute observation of modern society was shown in the earlier novels which he wrote under the pen-name of "Albert Edwards." His knowledge of the ideals of the Moslem world has already appeared in his book, *The Barbary Coast*, written under his own name. The juxtaposition and entanglement of

these two conflicting intellectual interests make capital material for fiction. There can be no doubt of the value of such a book in our present pressing need for a cosmopolitan point of view. The question is whether Mr. Bullard's mind and art are not too refined to enforce his lesson in the virile fashion necessary if it is to command attention.

It would have been easy to evolve from his material a series of harshly satiric rasping scenes filled with crude contrasts of Western with Oriental manners and ideals. Mr. Bullard avoids anything so obvious. There is satire and reproof in plenty, but it is subtle, restrained, often by implication rather than outright, and placed second in interest to the delicate love-story between the Oriental visitor, Donald Lane, and Eunice Bender who employs her scanty dole of life in fashioning delight for children. From the *Stranger* the painter who has lost touch with his art through an unfortunate and unsympathetic marriage gains advice that leads to a drastic but simple solution of his domestic difficulties. From the *Stranger* the atheistic socialist learns something both of the Moslem idea of God and of the practical socialism of Morocco. Through intercourse with him the successful organizer of charity finances gets a suspicion of distrust in the all-sufficiency of her gospel of Efficiency. From him the delicately beautiful artist whose work had been looked down upon by her sturdy and practical friend, who had become reconciled to pity as the only meed bestowable upon her, and who is soon to die, learns that there is another ideal possible than the American one of robust physical health and that into even her wan life love can come.

As Mr. Bullard has avoided the rocks of mere Menckenesque satire, so has he steered clear of the equally dangerous shallow pools of sentimentalism. The beauty in his book has in it no touch of the maudlin. He has not achieved a great book—there are few such in the world—but he has penetrated pretty nearly to the core of some of the counterfeits that time will break. His story is interesting, thoughtful, reasoned, suggestive. It offers the balance of an alien ideal with which to weigh the shibboleths of modern America: education, reform, health, progress, efficiency.

S. C. C.

From The Yiddish

A Lithuanian Village. By Leon Kobrin. Authorized translation from the Yiddish by Isaac Goldberg, Ph. D. New York: Brentano's.

THE ascendancy of Yiddish in the literary world is one of the outstanding phenomena of the last half-century. When one remembers that almost until yesterday Yiddish was either ignored or despised by most of the enlightened even of Jews, one cannot but wonder at the high place it has nevertheless succeeded in achieving for itself.

The Jewish Art Theater was one of the very few places—possibly the only place—in all New York last season where drama of worth was given a hearing. And those afforded the access will testify that of all the newspapers in America today, few other than those printed in Yiddish make even a pretense to literary importance. Possibly that is because the English-reading public goes to the magazines for its periodical literature, while the Yiddish reader can

have recourse only to newspapers. But compared even with the American magazine, the Yiddish daily ranks superior in at least one essential literary quality. At times, it is true, you will read in the Yiddish periodicals contributions rather roughhewn and in a taste not exactly "so." But despite such defects, the literary pages of *The Day* and the *Jewish Morning Journal* and the *Forward* are unique, incomparable, in America today. They are so because they are replete with that first virtue of modern literature: they are true, completely true, to life.

The credit for that is due probably to the readers of Yiddish as much as to the writers thereof. The Yiddish-reading public must be a peculiarly intelligent and gifted one if it will encourage—as it does—the astoundingly honest work of Cahan and Asch and Raisin and Zevin. It must be at once both very naive and very worldly wise if it will accept—as it undoubtedly does—the sketch and the narrative and the "unhappy-ender" as regular literary fare.

That is one's first reaction to *A Lithuanian Village*: a sense of wonder at the rare mental caliber of the Yiddish public. For the book is worlds removed from the commonplace and the ordinarily "acceptable"; indeed, to be appreciated and enjoyed it demands a literary taste of quite a high order. In a series of sharp vignettes it presents to us an environment almost extinct today—the environment of a drab little village in the pale. In restrained and simple language a restrained and simple folk is depicted dragging its weary body and soul through the whole cycle of the monotonous year. Only on its holidays and its annual fair day does it feelingly live, and then it lives hectically, madly, with abandon. But the rest of the year it merely exists saphrophitically.

The whole work is frankly realistic, softening no oaths and tempering no vices. One is never moved to suspect that the author is "toning-down" his colors. The hatreds, the jealousies, the bickerings, meannesses and fears are portrayed no less clearly than the loves and aspirations of those wretched Lithuanian Jews. Yet withal, it is a refreshing bit of reading, for despite the bitterness and ugliness floating like scum on the waters of that ghetto life, one never quite loses consciousness of the great deep cleanness beneath it all. In that Kobrin proves himself a master: his realism is suggestive and translucent, not blunt and opaque. It never staggers or blinds one, as does the realism of Caradoc Evans, for instance. You read how those Jews half strangle each other in their efforts to earn a kopeck or two; you hear those bitter wives curse at their stalls, and see those stunted husbands pore over their holy books; you feel the grimy superstition that clogs the daily life of those villagers, know the smallness of their horizon and the narrowness of their vision—and you love them nevertheless. And somehow you are impressed that the hegira of their offspring to the land where "Jews can be policemen," was a far from woeful event in the history of the soul of the New World.

Dr. Goldberg's translation is admirable. Only those acquainted with the wild brawling nature of Yiddish, that polyglot gibberish naked of syntax and choked with allusion, can understand just how well the translator has accomplished his task.

Unless the English public is as sightless as Mr. Mencken would have us believe it to be, one may confidently expect this first of Kobrin's books to appear in English will be far from the last.

LEWIS BROWN.

Masks, by George Middleton. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

TO speak of the drama as the most impersonal form of art is one of the commonplaces of criticism; it has remained a critical commonplace despite the example of playwrights whose work is stamped, like a lyric poem, with their own individuality. George Middleton is among their number. His plays mirror a certain personality, a certain milieu. The same set of characters is repeated in one situation after another; they belong to a comfortable middle class, becoming unreal when they pass out of it either to wealth or vagabondage.

The prevailing mood is that of disillusion. One of the six plays in his last volume is concerned with a writer who views indifferently his wife's amour with a banker; he has his own designs, one discovers, on the banker's daughter. Another describes the discomfiture of an actress, an arriviste, who tries to be sincere for once and comes near losing her position as society lion. *Tides* is kindly and bitter at the same time; it is the picture of an internationalist beaten by the war, vanquished by his need for being at least once on the side of the majority and sharing the comfort and warmth of the crowd. All these plays are savagely polite, showing the ambition to achieve great satire without the ability to bite very deep.

Their heroes are of two types; either they are striving ruthlessly for a artistic or financial success, or else they are broken idealists. The first type, disagreeable as it may be, represents an ideal to Mr. Middleton; the second type comes nearer to his actuality.

In the title play of the volume, the two characters face each other. The idealist is Grant Williams, a dramatist; he has just sold himself out, rewriting an honest tragedy into a Broadway success. With the promise of a thousand a week in front of him, he is still unsatisfied, and his own created characters come to life to haunt him. Tom Robertson is one of these; as hero of the earlier tragedy he had been willing to sacrifice everything, his family included, for the attainment of honest artistic expression. Against the dramatist he holds this grievance: that he has been remodelled into the leading man of a milk-and-water comedy. "When an artist deceives himself," he tells Grant, "when he turns his soul into money, he dies."

One divines that the play is an autobiographical drama with George Middleton playing both of the leading roles. He descends sometimes to the hokum of Broadway (remember that he is the author of *Hit-the-Trail-Holiday* and *Polly with a Past*); on such occasions he is none other than Grant Williams. When he writes what to his mind are the honest, unprofitable plays of this volume, he is the ruthless artist, Tom Robertson. He was faced by the antinomy of art and commerce, and he has at least made an excellent play out of his compromise.

M. C.

Contributors

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STARK YOUNG, professor of English at Amherst and author of *Addio Madretta*, has just returned from spending several months in Italy.

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