THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING[1]

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

ALL that Benham wanted was to be king of the world. He admitted it frankly to Amanda—Amanda, whose hair was misty dark; whose sweetness and nearness and magic, whose very charm, were making Benham more grimly resolute to break away, to start out upon his quest for kinghood. For already Benham had thought out and judged Amanda. She was not interested in his quest. He had told her that he wanted to "understand the collective life of the world," because ultimately he wanted to control it. It was with amazement and incredulity, with indignation, that she learned of his mad project: learned that he was actually proposing to go off by himself upon this vague, extravagant research; that all her admirable endeavors to make a social position for him in London counted for nothing with him—that he was thinking of himself as separable from her.

It was not strange that Amanda could not understand. Doubtless she remembered that not distant time of their first meeting on the road to South Harting, when Benham encountered her, "a light, tall figure of a girl, brown, flushed, her dark hair tossing loose," as she was trying to intercede in a dog fight. Of course Benham had come to her rescue; and it was not long after this that they had kissed (for it should further be noted that Amanda's voice was "all music," that she had a "glowing face," and an eyebrow "like a quick stroke of a camel's-hair brush"). Benham had given Amanda a copy of Plato's *Republic,* and Amanda had said she would read it through and through,—"she loved such speculative reading"; for Amanda, though the possessor of both passion and pulchritude, was not without

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[1] *The Research Magnificent.* By H. G. Wells. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1915.

intellect. Moreover, she was a free soul, "as clean as the wind." She made Benham feel that "there was a sword in her spirit." So Amanda had read the *Republic;* she not only read it, but she read it very intently and thoughtfully, in the armchair by the lamp, "occasionally turning over a page" —from which it might have been deduced that William Porphyry Benham, with his face of "enthusiastic paleness" and the "glowing darkness" of his eyes, had effected a rather definite reaction in Amanda. And soon after, in the garden of Amanda's home at Harting, concealed by artichokes and apple-trees, Benham had told her that he wanted her, and they had embraced, "alertly furtive" (Amanda had not known about poor little Mrs. Skelmersdale, who "wasn't altogether respectable," but who nevertheless had been to Benham "the most subtle, delightful, and tender of created beings"—though she had amazing streaks of vulgarity. *That* experience had of course been thrilling and delicious . . . "what can compare with the warmth of blood and the sheen of sunlit limbs?" It was true that the quixotic Benham, after he fell in love with Amanda, had had a sudden wild impulse to marry Mrs. Skelmersdale, "in a mood between remorse and self-immolation." But just then a vision of "a sunlit young woman with a leaping stride in her paces had passed across his heavens." So he contented himself with kissing Mrs. Skelmersdale,—this was on a bench in Kensington Gardens,—and they had wept a little together . . . This "sex business" was a damnable business). And so Amanda and Benham had married, and had gone off upon an incomparably wonderful honeymoon, climbing mountains and swimming in the warm waters of legendary lakes and loving each other with extraordinary ardor—"in chestnut wood and olive orchards and flower-starred alps and pine forests and awning-covered boats, and by sunset and moonlight and starshine."

All these things—excepting the Mrs. Skelmersdale episode—must have been in Amanda's thoughts this night as she stood with her husband at the window in the late London twilight, her straight, slender body in the dinner-dress of white and pale green, and the sweet lines of her neck and shoulders, looking (as they should have looked to the great dreamer Benham) singularly lovely and provocative. She had even begun to talk about children, having set herself to cultivate "a philoprogenitive enthusiasm"; for, as she

told herself, he could not leave her if she were going to have a child. But Benham had said yes, he wanted children, but that he must go round the world none the less, and he must go alone: because she would not be interested in his ambitions and projects—she would be interested only through him.

And then for the first time Amanda learnt precisely what it was that Benham wanted: "I think what I want," he told her quite simply, "is to be king of the world." It does not surprise us to know that Amanda stared at him. There are, he explains to her, no kings but pitiful kings. Dreadful things—miseries, inhumanities, unspeakable tragedies—happen "because the kings love their Amandas and do not care." And what is there that Benham can do about it? Well, he can do his utmost to find out what is wrong with his world, and rule it, and set it right. This kingship, he says, is his life. "It is the very core of me. Much more than you are. I mean to be a king in this earth. *King.* I'm not mad . . . I see the world staggering from misery to misery, and there is little wisdom, less rule, folly, prejudice, limitation . . . and it is my world and I am responsible. As soon as this light comes to you, as soon as your kingship is plain to you, there is no more rest, no peace, no delight, except in work, in service, in utmost effort."

And so Benham set out upon his great labor, his mighty quest, the Research Magnificent, of which all his life he had dreamed. He had had, from a time quite early in life, "an incurable, an almost innate, persuasion that he had to live life nobly and thoroughly." He called this noble and thorough living "the aristocratic life"—by which, you understand from the start, he means something that is not connoted by the thought of peers and princes: "nobility for him was to get something out of his individual existence, a flame, a jewel, a splendor." It was something apart from the conventional life, which is a choice between a merely good life and a merely bad life, between "the bridegrooms of pleasure and the bridegrooms of duty"—the old and perpetual choice. "I say now to you," he told his friend Prothero, "that this life is not good enough for me. I know that there is a better life possible now—a better individual life and a better public life . . . Now this better life is what I mean when I talk of Aristocracy: its way of thinking is Science, its dreaming is Art, its will is the purpose of Mankind."

To realize this life in all its fulness, to impose this dream upon the consciousness of humanity, was the object of Benham's great journey through the world, which took him far and led him into Odyssean adventures. To establish this republic of mankind, to enter into this unseen kingship, this beneficently aristocratic ruling of the globe, you must, of course, have overcome the three chief limitations of the personal life. These are Fear, Indulgence (elsewhere Benham is satisfied to call it "Sex"), and Jealousy—these restrict the soul of man. Fear and Sex he had already met and overcome. But the greatest of these obstacles is Jealousy, "because it can use pride"; and it was jealousy that brought Benham back to London because of suspicions concerning Amanda. When, taking her by surprise, he found her embracing her lover, Sir Philip Easton, in his own hall, he set forth again upon his quest. It was at Johannesburg, during the Rand outbreak in 1913, that he came to the end of the great quest. Does it matter, he had been saying to his friend White, if we work at something that will take a hundred years or ten thousand years? "It will never come in our lives, White. Not soon enough for that. But when one comes to death, then everything is at one's finger-tips. I can feel that greater world I shall never see as one feels the dawn coming through the last darkness." . . .

It is a curious fact—the significance of which we are not prepared to divulge—that in England, where there is little interest in ideas, the novel of ideas has yet at times come to so superb a flowering. Only Mr. Wells, only an Englishman, could have given us such a thing as *The Research Magnificent*—not even the amazing M. Romain Rolland could have accomplished just this blend of largeness and pungency, shrewdness and imagination, breadth and swiftness, actuality and vision. Here is a book at once epical and intense—the book of a dreamer who is also a seer; a dramatist who is also a lyric poet; a philosopher who has walked among men. Here, in short, is a masterpiece—a book that enlarges and exalts the sense of life, that brings back to us the noble saying of Richter: that there will come a time when man shall awaken from his lofty dreams, and find his dreams still there, "and that nothing has gone save his sleep."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.

NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF JOHN HAY. By William Roscoe Thayer. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915.

It is with exceptionally keen anticipation and with more than the usual degree of that friendly interest and pride which notable men inspire in their fellow countrymen that Americans of all sorts will turn to the *Life and Letters of John Hay*. Here, one feels, is the story of no ordinary character, and of no single or limited achievement. John Hay impressed himself upon the minds of multitudes who had no direct acquaintance with him, as a man both large-minded and versatile—at once a man of culture and a man of affairs, a thorough American and yet a cosmopolitan, a poet and humorist of the type of James Russell Lowell, and also one of the ablest men who have held the office of Secretary of State in this country. His life covers a period of which we are the immediate spiritual heirs. Toward the time just preceding the Civil War most native Americans look back with a peculiarly strong feeling of affinity; the Civil War itself is the great event that has mattered most to the lives of all of us; the period of readjustment following the War is felt almost as a part of our own times, and merges into the more recent years which we are just beginning to see as historic. As interpreting this period, no man's opinions and personal reactions could well be more interesting than John Hay's. Hay was both a keen observer and in no small degree a shaper of events. His field of knowledge and experience was wide. He was too big, too sensitive of soul, and too many-sided, to escape the full effect of the spiritual tendencies of his time; moreover, he was gifted with rare powers of expression.

The expectancy roused by such considerations meets with a full measure of satisfaction in the book which William Roscoe Thayer has given us. Mr. Thayer has had ample material to work with, and he has handled it with wisdom and with appreciation. While refraining from the attempt to write a political history, he is of course obliged to supply a narrative framework for the *Letters* and thus to touch upon political events. In so doing he provides not merely framework, but background; and it is worth remarking that this