

Two Statesmen on Reading

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T is always interesting to know what great men read. Sometimes the knowledge discloses a vein of common humanity that runs through great and small alike. I once surprised a distinguished, dignified, and highly intellectual professor of philosophy reading Anita Loos's "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." He was so absorbed that I thought he must be perusing Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" in the original tongue—which he was perfectly capable of doing. He looked a little guilty to be discovered in such companionship. But, instead of decreasing my respect for him, his light-hearted act raised him in my esteem. "He is a true philosopher," I thought, "for he recognizes Philosophy in whatever garb he finds her." For a moment I felt lifted out of my commonplace atmosphere into the empyrean of philosophic thought. For I had regarded "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"-although I had never dared to say so before this incident—as a little masterpiece, probably to become a classic like Xavier de Maistre's "Voyage autour de ma Chambre" or Gilbert White's "Natural History of Selborne." And now it had the cachet and I the confirmation of a philosopher. A book of philosophy it certainly is, not, however, of what could be called the Platonic school.

But I have strayed a long way from my title. I started out to report the views of two distinguished contemporary statesmen on books and reading, not my own unimportant opinions.

The London "Times" recently reported an address by the Prime Minister of England, Mr. Stanley Baldwin, in which he disclosed some of the boyhood reading that had influenced his subsequent career. There were in his bill of fare Scott's novels and poems; Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress;" the "Chronicles of

Froissart;" Grimm's "Fairy Tales;" Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare;" Dickens, whom he "reverenced in some ways as the greatest genius England produced"—a bold statement for a Prime Minister who cannot want the Thackerayites to join the Laborites in their attacks; and, finally, Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer." Mr. Baldwin believes that hearing the English Prayer-Book and the King James Bible Sunday after Sunday in his boyhood was in itself a liberal literary education. The Premier is not especially concerned about books for children. "I was left to myself to find my own provender in the library," he says. "If you do that with a child, he will always take the nourishment suitable to him."

Mr. Baldwin must have read Ruskin as well as Scott and Dickens, for Ruskin said more than sixty years ago—in "Sesame and Lilies," if my memory is reliable—that a young girl turned into a library will eschew the bad books as a fawn in a field eschews the noxious weeds. But that was in the era of the jeune fille and before the modern day when the young girl is supposed to see, hear, read, and know everything, and neither chews nor eschews in gulping down her literary diet, the nutritive calories of which she is inclined neither to measure nor consider.

Mr. Baldwin is, of course, a Britisher and a Tory. Now, according to that noble patriot Mayor Thompson, of Chicago, British Toryism is the greatest danger this country has to face. It must be perfectly evident to all 100 per cent Americans that the British Prime Minister put Mark Twain in his list of books as a mere bait to tempt them to read Dickens, whose "American Notes" are a burning scandal. This will make every true American distrustful of his literary advice in any respect. Let us turn from

him, then, to another statesman, an American liberal, with whom we shall probably be safer.

At about the date that the London "Times" reported Prime Minister Baldwin's attitude towards books and reading, the New York "Times" printed an interview with Senator Borah during which he gave some account of authors that have influenced him. He is not to be inveigled by the current vogue of the "best-seller." "At the risk of being called an old fogy," he said, "I still follow Carlyle's example and each time a new book is published I read an old one." He enjoys novels, but, as "the majority of modern novels might be better classified as text-books of physiology and psychology," he turns for relief to Hawthorne, in spite of his "morbidity;" to Balzac, in spite of his "monarchistic ideas;" to Dickens, in spite of the fact that "he is given a little too much to caricature;" and to Thackeray, in spite of his being "a little too English to appeal to a Middle Westerner."

For poetry Senator Borah turns to Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante, "whose works," he says, "I read and re-read so often that I can quote pages from them . . .; so, you see, in some things I am not as radical as I am painted."

For imagination and humor Mr. Borah likes Swift, although he does not wholly approve of the cynicism of the author of the "Battle of the Books" and the "Tale of a Tub." But of all the authors he mentions Senator Borah evidently feels a greater sense of indebtedness to Emerson than to any other. In this admiration and gratitude his bookloving countrymen will join. Emerson's star is in the ascendant. The figure of the gentle, pungent, clear-thinking, truth-speaking sage of Concord is looming larger and larger as a man and artist on the stage of English litera'

Speaking of Books

A New Literary Department

Edited by Frances Lamont Robbins

Erskine Repeats the Dose

THE comic strip provides an accepted picture of mankind. Mr. and Mrs. and their fellows represent what men and women think of one another and how they act toward one another. Male and female, if you do not fit into this picture, you are suspect and strange. The man is always browbeaten; the woman is always restricting and clinging—the "ball and chain;" the other woman is always independent and wise. John Erskine has again selected the comic strip as a springboard from which to leap, with agility and grace, into an amusing and best-selling book.

In "Helen of Troy" the treatment, if not the theme, was fresh. In "Adam and Eve" the theme again appears, and by this time the treatment is rather too familiar to engage by its originality. The philosophical dialogue, a Greek form, is again used as a vehicle for clever and trite comment upon the everlasting relation between the sexes. The philosophy of this relationship which Erskine expounds is somewhat similar to that of Cabell in "The Cream of the Jest." Helen is Helen until she is possessed; every Eve is somebody's Lilith, etc. But Cabell speaks of poets; Erskine, of arrow-collar men. "Helen of Troy" appeared, it was welcome. There was good medicine in the sugar-coated pill, useful for American women to swallow and digest. Now it seems as though there could be few left undoctored. The complaint is not against the value of the dose, but against its continued use.

In "Adam and Eve: Though He Knew Better" Adam investigates Eden and makes the acquaintance of the animals. He finds Lilith, and learns about love. He finds Eve, and learns about marriage. That is all. The best of the book lies in the tender mirth which colors Erskine's picture of his hapless protagonist. But this is mostly lost under the mass of his clever comment on the ladies. In the first chapter is a paragraph which makes a promise for he book which, in this reviewer's opinis not kept:

"I never question an old story myself, not when I like it, and least of all when it recurs daily under my eyes. Adam is not yet at peace. He can reconcile himself neither to be lonely, like a god, nor to be completely mated. On the whole, he favors the angels but prefers to be a little lower. His naming of the animals, what is it but a parable of the scientist in him? He knows the name of a thing at sight. Later he tries to find out what it is."

After those wise and moving words, come a few chapters, the pleasantest of the book, which tell with delicate wit of Adam's experiences among the animals of Eden. Then comes his meeting with Lilith and their life in Paradise together—the first companionate marriage. After that Eve; clothes, separate bedrooms, regular hours for meals, finally the baby.

Praise be, Adam gets some comfort out of the baby. Nobody contradicts him when he says, contemplating his son:

"Eve, I hope you don't mind my saying it so often, but I'm glad it wasn't a girl. After all, this is a man's world."

What They Are Reading

The books in greatest demand are usually those most discussed. Because we believe that Outlook readers want to keep informed about contemporary literature, we have arranged to have eight book-shops wire us each week the names of the ten best-selling volumes, which follow. These particular book-shops were chosen because we think that they reflect the tastes of the more representative readers. These shops are as follows:

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Boston—Old Corner Book Store.
Rochester—Scrantoms Inc.
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Denver—Kendrick Bellamy Co.
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Fiction

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A clannish family in a fresh setting of Canadian forest survives the potentially disrupting love affairs of several of its members. There is excellent caricature

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