

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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Smoke and Steel

LECTURERS often complain that Americans fail to get into their books the savour of their own country. They know few birds beyond the robin, wren, and bluebird, wild flowers to them are often nameless, trees are either oaks, maples, or pines, the weather fair or rainy, and that intimate perception of nature which has always distinguished English literature—

Daffodils

That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty—

is well nigh absent from the poetry and prose of the more robustious.

The regretful critics are right, but it is not merely in American literature that the touch upon "Flora and the country-green" grows faint and perfunctory. We have a specialized nature literature, and there is much poetry especially which is heady with wild beauty and rich in images drawn from sun, earth, and air. But such books are beginning to have an exotic flavor. They are like the Germans of Tacitus who were dramatized for the Romans not because they were Germans but because they were different.

This is the age of smoke and steel and of secondary products a step away from nature—engines, artificial light, newsprint, instead of direct contact with primitive experience. The city's ragged edges spread over the country; the sense of soil and landscape is visibly departing. Chemistry and salesmanship are more conscious in the modern farmer's mind than the contours of his land. The woods and fields become for most of us (and especially the writers) a tonicking experience, like going to the opera. They are vivid to us, but abnormal.

Language is extremely conservative and it is not surprising that we still draw most of our figures from nature, of which we used to be momentarily conscious. It cannot continue. The literature of the completely urbanized modern will clash with machinery, and express sensation in terms of speed. It will be nervous, like city life, and it will have the dull sensibility (except perhaps to smell and noise) and the quick intelligence of industrialized man. Already poetry, drama, and fiction give evidence of new tongues, but the significance is obscured by such names as "jazz" or "expressionism," so that readers suppose they are reading what is merely freakish or decadent, whereas they are really tasting the current attempt to fit language to the age. Some day industrialized literature will have its way with a rush, and for a while books of country contemplation, idylls, pastorals, and the figurative language which has expressed our imagination in terms of earth and its creatures, of air, ocean, and stars, will seem as sterile as was the poetry of Pope to the romantics of the nineteenth century. Then the daring poet will be not he who writes of typewriters or telephones, but that exotic lyricist who dares to make a sonnet from violets or the gradual veil of evening.

Will the old loveliness fade from literature when smoke and dust and noise drive it from life? It is too difficult a question for a brief essay, but this much we may say, that man and nature are not likely to come again into ardent contact until the desire to live in crowds and with all the modern conveniences is sated; and this will scarcely be in our time. The next Shakespeare will have not dawn and sunset, birdsongs and the leafy tinkle of rain, to reckon with in the subconsciousness of his auditors, but puffs and explosions, gasoline, flickering

Slippers of the Goddess*

"It is easy, like Momus, to find fault with the clattering of the slipper worn by the Goddess of beauty; but 'the serious Gods' found better employment in admiration of her unapproachable loveliness."

By AMY LOWELL

THEY clatter, clatter, clatter on the floor,
Her slippers clack upon the marble slabs,
And every time her heels clap, I count one,
And go on counting till my nerves are sick
With one and one and one told out in claps.

He shot a hand out, clutching at my arm
With bony fingers. "Young man," said he, "look up.

Is that a starry face, or am I blind?
Do stars beset her like a crown of pearls?
Does sunset tinge and tangle in her hair,
And moonlight rush in silver from her breasts?
Look well, young man, for maybe I am blind."
I looked, and agony assailed my brain.
He chirruped at me. "So—So! Ancient eyes
Know better than to keep upon the floor.
What dazzles you is kindly sight to me,
One gets accustomed. But I interrupt
Your count. What figure had you reached?"
I shook

Him off and staggered to my room, bright pain
Stabbing my head.

I've never found that count,
Nor started on another. Every day
I look a little longer when she comes,
And see a little more, and bear to see.
But that queer man I've never met again,
Nor very much desired to, perhaps.
Gratitude is an irksome thing to youth,
And I, thank Hermes, am still reckoned young,
Though old enough to look above the floor,
Which is a certain age, I must admit.
But I'll endure that, seeing what it brings.

This Week

Two Books by Ben Hecht. Reviewed
by John Peale Bishop.

Thomas Hardy. By William Lyon
Phelps.

Next Week, or Later

"Timesquarese." By Robert Haven
Schauffer.

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Publishers of TIME,
The Weekly News-Magazine

lights, squeaking radios, and the powerful rhythm of a city streaming with orderly millions. He will remake his imagery, find and create new and strident beauties, and be not less Shakespeare because perforce he will be cockney. And Pan will have to pipe in the suburbs (the country will be all suburbs then) until men have ceased playing with smoke and steel.

*From "What's o'Clock," a posthumous volume of poems to be published by the Houghton-Mifflin Co.

Criticism in America

By MAXWELL BODENHEIM

LITERARY criticism is the ability to wager with yourself that your convictions are supreme, and to stage a contest of words between your often provoking doubts and your rising satisfactions. The wager is not an immediately apparent one, and for the most part it occurs between the confident lines of each essay or review, although sometimes it invades the actual, printed matter and reveals that the critic is not quite as convinced as his emphatic phrases would indicate. If he is an exceptional critic, he is just as apt to bet against his prejudices as he is liable to support them, and in such a case his critiques are in reality the performance that decides whether these prejudices will win or lose (an undisguised, prying argument with himself). The work of an author is merely the formal thrust that sends this gamble into motion, and as a grateful courtesy the critic assumes an air of delving into the author's style and purpose, although this style and purpose are entirely at the mercy of the critic's self-centred intentions. In fact, the test of a great literary critic rests upon whether he can make his egotism alert and humble enough to perceive and weigh the detailed contentions of other men, while still preserving its basic pride and its single direction. When the author's wooing of his own convictions becomes more intrepid and persuasive than the critic's attentive disagreement, the critic's ability at exhibiting a gracefully losing fight, without haughty dodging and invectives, will demonstrate his importance. If, on the other hand, his critical praise would seem to be justified, or if his censure appears to be more valiant and incisive than the work which caused it, then his stature is revealed by a display of self-control and an avoidance of over-statements and irrelevant flourishes of triumph.

Of course, the ancient question will be advanced at this point—who is to determine whether the critic has won or lost and whether he has actually demolished or enshrined the creation itself? Is it not always a matter of contending groups of men, whose different arguments are often equally plausible and deft in expression? One must indeed admit that the critic's victory or defeat can never be overwhelmingly established, and that Mr. A can attack the work of a novelist and Mr. B. can praise it without either of them advancing an indubitably right or wrong contention. However, the destruction of all standards and rules would wipe out literary criticism itself and substitute myriads of personal whims and moods, for criticism of all kinds is merely the conflict or the partial friendship of one egotism with the never quite similar egotisms surrounding it, and if this strife did not spring from permanent visions of victory and defeat it would lose the incentive behind its existence. In such a case, critics would be supplanted by commentators, some of them peaceful and others agitated, who would merely say in effect: "I like it, or I don't like it, and I've merely put together a few nouns, verbs, and adjectives to support these entirely personal and insecure attitudes." These commentators would fail to explain, however, why their likes and dislikes were important enough to be expressed in print and followed by other people, and why it would not be equally significant for the reader to stop any man on the street and listen to the latter's opinion on books, provided that the man was moderately cultured and spoke with a certain forceful cohesion. When you dispute the authority of any one standard over

another and when your rules, in the effort to escape from dogma, become erratic and virtually nonexistent, you are making every reader his own critic and reducing printed criticism to an undistinguished, indecisive, and unnecessary *mélée*.

This tendency, on the part of literary critics such as Heywood Broun, John Farrar, Maxwell Anderson, and others, has played its part in lowering American literary criticism to an indeterminate and not particularly brilliant series of squabbles and agreements, in which the human warmth, wit, and personal emotions of the critic serve as allurements, while the author's work remains largely unpenetrated and without any definite rating. The author may be berated if he fails to see why his creations should be publicly buffeted about in such an unrestricted welter of personal enthusiasms and dissents, but authors are likely to be unreasonable in such matters. The author would naturally prefer an assumption of originality and superiority on the part of his critic, and a dexterity of phrase that could equip this assumption and form a respectable challenge or a reassuring defence. Otherwise, the author marvels at the paradox of the critic's *unassuming audacity* and yet fails to see any great need for its regular appearance in newspapers and magazines.

One trouble with American literary criticism of to-day is that it often rests in the hands of men who, self-confessedly, are not remarkably proficient and unwavering in its pursuit, but who nevertheless achieve large numbers of followers, for reasons of critical ability. These critics, most of whom write for newspaper columns and book review sections, are popular because of their readable, genial, and generally "sane" views and styles, but keener and more permanent criticism would, of course, be much harder to read (for the more thoughtless person), much less humorous, and more often inclined to be "insane" in the opinion of the conservative-liberal majority. The influence of the aforementioned critics, however, has been partly caused by their complaisant audiences, who desire little save a simplified, familiarly adjectived, and "human" description and analysis of the creation, with invariable attacks levelled at any subtlety or irony that would naturally be above the skulls or below the belts of most readers. Yet, when we turn from this sincere, semi-cautious, eagerly journalistic crowd of present-day American "critics", we find ourselves confronted by disorganized, hair-splitting, limited, and envenomed conditions in the ranks of those people who have a better right to the title of critic.

The one man standing within these ranks who possesses the greatest contradiction of limitations and perceptions is Mr. H. L. Mencken. He has been garlanded and knifed more often than any other literary critic in this country, and he is the god of increasing numbers of college-students and groping, young dilettantes, to whom his sledge-hammer cynicisms and his humorous sneers at commercial, democratic, and religious shams, form a blessed refuge and restoration. His natural appeal is to a certain species of hurt, doubting, and hazily rebellious adolescence, since it is both inviting and easy for young people to grasp his jeers and diatribes at civilization in America and utilize them as an excuse for the readers' own lack of attainments, and as an outlet for the readers' more stifled resentments. Again, he is enticing to certain worldly-wise people who are forced to submit to the civilization around them without particularly relishing it, and who welcome the greater courage of his words. The stir in the air of this country at present—the unrest shown by an educated and at least slightly cultured minority of people—is neither aesthetic, nor intellectual, nor spiritual. It consists of anger, harsh amusement, and skepticism, with all of these qualities directed at the shabby lies and flabby circumlocutions of every-day life and the rulers within this life.

Mr. Mencken began to write when this unrest was just commencing to crystallize, and he has had a major part in its encouragement, but his value is that of a sociological investigator and, incidentally, an upholder of acrid frankness between the sexes. He has destroyed scores of monuments and evasions in the prosaic life around him, and in these respects his candor has been healthy and awakening, but as a critic of literature and art, and as a detached, original thinker, he is almost inexplicably blind and unreceptive. His jocose assertion that poets should be slain at an early age and that poetry

itself is a fanciful, melodious, and minor embellishment indicates the stupidly derisive and shackled gloom that occupies one half of his head and heart. In his prosaic immersions he deigns to accept verse as a light distraction after hard working hours, and so he orders poetry to adopt an idle mien and sing for him after his ironical wrestling-matches with facts and pernicious customs. This wilful and often irritable blindness is not an innate one but rather the product of a shamefaced reluctance. When you have spent the greater part of your days in attacking prosaic and immediate conventions and conditions, you do not care to recognize the art of poetry as an aloof and sometimes insolent competitor for your attention, for if you did you would have to admit that you had browbeaten and restricted your energies and perceptions, and had forced them to overlook something of great importance. It is highly probable that if Mr. Mencken could be exiled to a remote island for the rest of his life, in the company of two or three excellent and loquacious poets—removed forever from his Rotary Club, Methodist ministers, and official censors—he would wind up in old age with a clear and even eager discernment of the thoughtful, subtle, and aesthetic possibilities inherent in poetry. He is the victim of his own battle-mace—a mace whose great efficiency in one field has induced him to pass over other fields with a *hasty and unadventurous intolerance*.

Passing from Mr. Mencken, we collide with another critic who possesses the same broad bias, in a reversed and conservatively softened garb, and whose enmity with Mr. Mencken is more a matter of exterior differences than either of these men are able to see—Mr. Stuart Pratt Sherman. Mr. Sherman is also immersed in matters of social truth and justice, and democratic theories and habits, and moral issues and his mind is equally indifferent to questions of word finesse, and freshness of style and content, and intellectual peerings and intrusions, but unlike Mr. Mencken, he insists upon having such things as good taste, moderation, bright veils for sex, and final notes of intelligent optimism. In his opinion, literature should be the subservience of different egotisms to considerations of "beauty" and hope, and a mildly honest but not destructive spirit of human counsel—an expression of wholesome, restrained advice and confidence to the struggling people of a nation, and a more skillfully qualified description and reflection of their major requirements and trends. He occupies the same limited space in which Mr. Mencken resides, but he deals only in emotional caresses and mental side-steppings, instead of blows and cruelly slashing laughter. The art of writing itself—selections and combinations of words symbolizing the mental and emotional elations, curiosities, speculations, and despairs of contrasting individuals—holds little interest for Mr. Sherman. Literature in his estimation must contain that strength which can lift the burden of a message, or a solution, or a moral purpose, or an articulate expression of the emotions and thoughts inarticulately followed by masses of people, and although he drapes his prejudices in high-sounding phrases such as "the quest of perfection" and "the beauty that dwells among the rocks," he is in reality concerned only with questions of emotional acceptance and discretion, and mental caution and sobriety. In other words, he prefers literature which is instructive and uplifting at one end, or relatively impersonal at the other, and writing does not exist to him as an art sufficient unto itself, whose only restrictions are those of intelligence, boldness, and depth. He declares in effect: "Yes, let us have this intelligence, boldness, and depth, if they conform to my moral ideas and emotional reticences—otherwise, no!" In poetry he can support only those verses which confine themselves to rhapsodical or quietly simple emotions, and in this art the glacial antics of thought and the studied liteness of imagination are both abhorrent to him. Like another member of his general school of criticism, Mr. Brownell, he relishes that literature which is an impressive and sonorous evasion of the pitfalls, cruelties, and prostrations held within life, and defends his choice with unconsciously insincere arguments, since he could scarcely be expected to admit to himself the essential narrowness of his position.

In fact, a common similarity between American literary critics of all shades, from the semi-liberal conservatism of Mr. Sherman to the gruff, jumping-jackish, heavily erudite ultra-radicalism of younger critics such as Mr. Gorham B. Munson and Mr. Malcolm Cowley, is indicated by their unswerving

opposition to any subtlety in literary treatment which contains the qualities of nonchalance, or of conscious irony, and their unbroken dislike of deliberateness, detachment, and the romping of intellect. Great literature to them is always at bottom a vibrant, heavy, warm, confident, and all-embracing expression of earth incarnate, and their quarrels are only surface ones concerning matters of technique, coherence, and the exact depth to which sensuality and social custom should be plumbed. They are unable to perceive any greatness in literature which escapes from the over-heated conveniences, braggadocios, brawls, and lunges of an unadulterated earthliness—literature which examines and reports on life from the position of a half cold and half compassionate bystander, with both elements blended to a third one of *ironical pity*. They fling their overworked, unproven adjectives at this latter literature—tenuous, stilted, artificial, precious—and they retain the adjectives to deal with sheer fantasy in any form, and with a careful richness in metaphor and simile.

Another quality which most literary critics in this country hold in common, and which betrays the *hidden friendliness* beneath their conservative, liberal, and radical alignments, consists of a strong desire to belittle and deride and ignore the element of originality. In this connection, a recent article by Mr. Gorham B. Munson comes to mind—an article entitled "Another Aspect of Ezra Pound." In the course of this essay Mr. Munson writes: "What Whitman gave was a freer prosody, of course, but more than that he conveyed a very extraordinary consciousness of a man and the universe. Pound's admirers do not and cannot claim for him an original grasp of profound experience. . . . It is probably due to this failure to find a deep vital center that Pound has at times fallen a victim to the doctrine of individuality." To begin with, individuality is not and never has been a "doctrine." It is the essential quality held by all past and present masters of literature, and the tendency on the part of certain creators to make credos about it does not alter its basic importance and permanence. Mr. Munson reveals in his essay the prevailing hatred of originality (individuality). A man of spontaneous, exuberant, and entirely earthly originality, such as Whitman, is used to attack the more conscious and gracefully nimble originality of Ezra Pound merely as the critic's choice between two evils, for the critic in this case is primarily interested only in Whitman's "human" and cosmic attributes.

The most witless of men can gaze up at the vast stationary puzzle of the stars and become conscious of the universe—momentarily overawed by the immeasurable and glittering mystery above him. This consciousness is not of the slightest creative importance unless it proceeds, with the aid of imagination and fantasy, to speculate upon what the universe may be concealing and what the relation of earthly dwarfs may be to the walls and veils beyond them. This, of course, would lead to metaphysical conjectures—processes which are not relished by Mr. Munson and all the critics who hug their earth with a prostrate and artfully disguised vehemence! In their effort to escape from viewing and praising such a consciousness, they assign it to a man who did not really possess it—to Walt Whitman—so that a pretext may be found for ignoring actually metaphysical writers. Literary originality in its entirety signifies an endless, irreverent darting in every conceivable direction that can promise relatively new, or less worn shades of thought and emotion, and fresher methods of presentation to fit these shades. It is therefore discomfiting and obnoxious to those literary critics who prefer writers to remain upon one designated area of content and quality—one "deep, vital center" which is no more deep and vital than other centers, except that it represents the critic's deep and immovable bias! This determination to belittle and side-step the quality of originality extends to most of the other critics—to men as apparently separated as Mr. Joseph Wood Krutch, Mr. Ernest Boyd, and Mr. Laurence Stallings—and the fundamental harmony indicated leads one to certain suspicious surmises. American literary criticism will never progress beyond these suspicions—beyond factional disputes and the secret agreements beneath these exterior warfares—unless it abandons its aversion to originality, unimpeded intellect, fantasy, and deliberate emotion, and endeavors to stride side by side with each of these significant and slighted elements.

Humpty Dumpty's Wall

HUMPTY DUMPTY. By BEN HECHT. New York: Boni & Liveright. 1925. \$2.

THE KINGDOM OF EVIL. By BEN HECHT. Chicago: Pascal Covici. 1925. \$10.

Reviewed by JOHN PEALE BISHOP

"HUMPTY DUMPTY," now belatedly reviewed, is in every respect a typical Hecht novel. It displays Mr. Hecht's cleverness, his "many clevernesses," his bravado rising at times to lewd rakishness, his facility with journalistic summaries, his minor irritations at the grossness of the mob at times amounting almost to rage. Judged by its predecessors, it will be seen that "Humpty Dumpty" represents Mr. Hecht at his maturest and best. It is indeed a Hecht novel; but one wonders, remembering that there were novels before "Erik Dorn," whether that phrase is not a contradiction in terms. Mr. Hecht has many gifts; but it is by no means clear that the ability to construct a novel is among them.

His name was Kent Savaron. He was blond and well built. His face during those moments when he was not experimenting with expressions, was aquiline and indignant. When he stood before a mirror he would sometimes twist his mouth and cheeks into the violent faces which children make when overcome with ennui. He would think, "When I get so I'm ashamed to make faces like this then I'll know I'm an old fool."

There is no necessity to read further than this, the second paragraph of the introduction of the protagonist, to know that we are once more in the presence of the familiar Hecht hero. As to who that hero is, there can be, I think, no doubt. The disguise is meagre. The assumption of youth and yellow hair—of a pretty name and a preputial appendage—will hardly deceive anyone. That pose before the mirror is already suspicious; and one has only to read on a little further to make sure that our hero is none other than the author himself. Kent Savaron is Chicago, Semite, Iconoclast. Briefly it might be said (I judge only by internal evidence) that Erik Dorn was that phase of Mr. Hecht in which he was most like himself; Savaron seems to be that side of him which approximates most closely to Mr. Maxwell Bodenheim.

It is necessary to insist upon this identification of Mr. Hecht with his hero in order to point out how definitely he has failed in this his most elaborate attempt, to create a character? There is every evidence that Mr. Hecht has been at some pains to give his protagonist an appearance of reality. He has invented for Savaron a situation which should have allowed him to emerge clearly and completely, separable not only from the other paler figures of the narrative, but also from his creator. Savaron's marriage to Stella Winkelberg, his gradual extinction at the hands of her dull, tenaciously conventional family; his ambitious approach to Chicago from some tiny, unknown town of the Middle West, and his slow suppression by the citizens of that most mean city—these are circumstances admirably contrived to bring Savaron's particular strength and weaknesses into play, to show him not as a vain and vague adumbration of the author's mind, but as a character having its own fictional life and moving, once he has been set in motion, by his own force.

However, nothing of the kind happens. Mr. Hecht seems to have his theme (that of a man and woman bound to each other by an overwhelming sexual attraction, but painfully apart in every conception whether of thought or action) constantly in mind, but he cannot, somehow, manage to keep up his interest in it. He is quite willing at any time to drop it for the sake of an ingenious metaphor, or for even less reason. He is not content to give us Savaron's reactions to the Winkelbergs—though in all conscience they would seem to have been lively enough—he must forever be giving us his own reactions to these dull Chicagoans. And though Mr. Hecht allows himself ample space to set down Savaron's ideas on every conceivable subject, from Scriabine to Poincaré, from women in love to the last days of the dinosaurs, though again and again, of his own accord, he points out how essentially valueless these ideas are, and how impotent is Savaron's "genius," there is at no time any suggestion that Mr. Hecht is actually thinking in terms of a character. We know from Proust what an aid it is in "placing" a character to be given his opinions on art, on politics, on no matter what; but in order for these "ideas" to have the slightest value in a novel, it is necessary that the illusion be preserved that they proceed themselves from the mind of the character. And not only is Mr. Hecht

unable to manage the mental processes of a personage unlike himself (the mind of a Winkelberg is, as Mr. Hecht says, a conglomeration of newspaper paragraphs, but it is Mr. Hecht, not Mr. Winkelberg, who has read the papers), he cannot, despite his obvious honesty and the rigor of his self-criticism, impart to this blond and youthful image of himself anything more than a momentary reality and an ephemeral breath. Savaron cannot think for himself, and he does not move of himself. The notion that he could take his own life is absurd. His suicide is arranged by Mr. Hecht to suit his own convenience ("Humpty Dumpty" had at this point run past 350 pages) just as he forces Stella into a senseless and incredible promiscuity with men not for her pleasure but his own.

There are traces in Mr. Hecht's style of Huysmans, James Joyce, the wits of the *Yellow Book*, H. L. Mencken, Carl Sandburg, and Maxwell Bodenheim, perhaps of Arthur Machen; but in spite of these many influences Mr. Hecht's style remains peculiarly his own—that of a clever and restless journalist who can seize anything that comes under his eye with speed and nothing with precision, to whom no aspect of human life is alien and none quite worth his protracted attention, who is aware of everything that is going on in the world but hardly of the difference between the two objects immediately under his hand. He has undoubtedly felt a genuine indignation in the presence of the democratic mass, but when he comes to vent his rage it sputters in his mouth. He is sensual, but he has not brooded long enough over the objects of desire to come away with a fine disgust or any new appreciation of the emotions that accompany desire. He is familiar with modern scientific theories, but has used them not to illuminate his own experience but as a substitute for observation. He is in short Chicago, Semite, Iconoclast.

Aside from his perverse sense of man as a noble animal never "omitting ceremonies of bravery in



HARDY'S BIRTHPLACE
(See page 808)

the infamy of his nature," there is another conception which seems to underly much of "Humpty Dumpty" and pervade the whole of "The Kingdom of Evil." This is nowhere expressed with all the clarity one could ask for though it is at least made intelligible in the novel; whereas in the fantasy it becomes pretty hopelessly involved in the processions of hemaphrodites, visions of naked women, vague intellectual gods, and other paraphernalia of a stale and familiar kind. This—from one of Savaron's conversations—seems to be the gist of it: "The human mind is building itself up with its own logical and discernible forces. Listen—the conventions, philosophies, codes—all the works it prides itself on—they're a wall being built against life. Do you get the idea? This wall, it keeps on growing. It's got a secondary life of its own. That's what thought has become. And it keeps on increasing and making a great wall of itself."

The means which Mr. Hecht has taken to expose this idea in "The Kingdom of Evil" are hardly such as commend themselves as art, still less do they help to make the idea itself convincing. The two books, the one realistic, the other fantastic, are not so different as on the surface they may appear. "Humpty Dumpty" is simply Ben Hecht before the mirror, "The Kingdom of Evil," Ben Hecht through a looking-glass.

The first English Bible came from the press of the University of Oxford in England exactly two and a half centuries ago. The Oxford University Press was granted the right to print the King's books, notably the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, by Charles the First in 1632. In 1675 a quarto English Bible was printed at the Sheldonian theatre.

The Dashing Arlen

MAY FAIR. By MICHAEL ARLEN. New York: George H. Doran Co. 1925. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

IT has seemed to me that Mr. Arlen's sprightly tales have become the popular light reading of this decade in much the same fashion that those of Anthony Hope, beginning with "The Dolly Dialogues," found their way into every drawing-room in a period now long past. The reading public is always rather jaded and always welcomes a light and entertaining *divertissement* romantic enough to somersault over probabilities and do a successful turn on the literary stage by sheer force of charm. Then again, there was "The New Arabian Nights" of the late Robert Louis Stevenson. As Mr. Arlen bows across the footlights, it is time to reread them. Stevenson could be extremely sprightly and he can teach a posture.

Autres temps, autres mœurs! Mr. Arlen is absolutely of his day. He is sly and sparkling in the *môde*—and sometimes a little thin and sometimes a trifle cheap,—and extremely childish often in his worshipful regard for the fine bucks and ladies of Mayfair. Even an Englishman could not be so worshipful; and, incidentally, no Englishman would lout nearly so low. Mr. Arlen brings an entirely foreign enthusiasm—and, saying this, we pause. For Laurence W. Meynell learned from Mr. Arlen and produced "Mockbeggar," and surely Meynell is a true Briton,—and, all we can mutedly murmur is "My God!"

Mr. Meynell's book shows what will happen if the Arlen method is carried too far. But often Mr. Arlen himself carries it too far. He cloys, he offends the palate. Iris Storm merges into Rachael Massinger. What it is to be a fascinator in London!

Here is heroine worship indeed! And the great climactic interview in "The Green Hat" somehow merges into a vision of the "England is Proud of You" number in Charlot's Revue with the inimitable Beatrice parading as "Britannia." The scene explodes into travesty.

Yet we found "These Charming People" and "The Green Hat" mortally easy to read, and "May Fair" is just as readable. Arlen so enjoys his concoctions as to transmit great delight in his high-spirited nonsense to the reader. He is devilishly ingenious, with a not always excessive swagger. His pen is facile but truly artful. He properly exploits his best talents, and they are by no means to be despised.

No, in the words of one of Mr. Arlen's mad young men, "It is insane to work from grubby birth to grubby death with never an attempt to chain a star, with never a raid on enchantment, with never a try to kiss a fairy or to live in a dream." It is poetry and romance that Mr. Arlen pilfers from the ulster pockets of Reality, white rabbits of poetry and romance, exhibiting them with a prestidigitator's twist of the wrist. His people match poetic pennies. There is always a delightful "dying fall" to their thought and conversation. Thumb your Browning. "How sad and bad and mad it was,—but then how it was sweet!" However I misquote, that is the gist of a good deal that Mr. Arlen has to say to the average reader. And the average reader enjoys the violet melancholy of just such vicarious experience. For the average reader is really a devil of a fellow in his own mind.

And then there's usually a dash of tragedy and a decided dash of humour. Mr. Arlen has learned his craft too well not to mix up his sentiment with other spicier ingredients. He can tell an out-and-out sentimental story with a quite cynical air. He can shake up a soft drink and decant it for you as if it were perilous decoction. You don't realize it is a soft drink until after it has all gone down with a flourish.

And that signifies the touch of the accomplished craftsman. The touch is usually there, even upon the thinnest material. And the dexterity of this artful writer in manipulating the plots of his stories is a genuine gift. Sometimes he achieves true poignance, gives one the thrill of real tragedy. Always he is incredibly urbane, and a rattling *raconteur*, even when he is talking about comparatively nothing. That "The Green Hat" should prove a stage success will hardly surprise, for Mr. Arlen's sense of the dramatic is sharp.

We have not discussed individual stories in the new entertainment entitled "May Fair," because lovers of frivolity may pick and choose, and should buy the book if they want to sample it.