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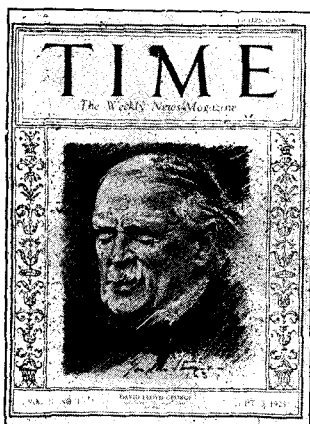
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A New Scheherazade

By JAMES WHELFALL

PANAIT Istrati is the son of a Greek mother and a Rumanian peasant father. He has a deep gratitude for his mother's years of devoted care and his very real affection for her, but a dominating desire to know the world and its people took possession of him, and he set forth. He soon developed a passion for friendship, overreaching as that of the members of Sangers Circus for music, and the experience of more than twenty years spent among his fellow men, as waiter, pastry-cook, locksmith, sandwich-man, stevedore, house-painter, photographer, copper-smith, mechanic, domestic servant, navvy,—I believe this list is incomplete,—are now being written. By the merest chance, Istrati lived to discover that his vagabondage had loaded his mind with a priceless cargo of anecdote for the embellishment of the stories* to which we, in company with

*Les Récits d'Adrien Zografli: I. Kyra Kyralina; II. Oncle Anghel; III. Les Haidoucs. By Panait Istrati. Paris: Rieder. Adrien Zografli, can now listen. I suspect that Adrien, to whom these tales are told and who, we are given to understand, will speak for himself later, bears the same relation to Istrati as the "I" of "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu" does to Proust.

In 1921, at the age of thirty-seven, Istrati tried to kill himself; he failed, and the letter he had written to Romain Rolland on the eve of his attempted suicide was posted by the inmates of the hospital at Nice where he lay hovering between life and death. Thanks to Romain Rolland, to whom he acknowledges his debt in a charming foreword, he has begun to put himself on paper. In 1917 Istrati knew no French; in 1921 Rolland received a letter from Nice, to which he refers in his preface to "Kyra Kyralina" as "la confession d'un nouveau Gorki des pays Balkaniques," and goes on to say:

Il est un conteur-né, un conteur d'Orient, qui s'enchant et s'émue de ses propres récits, et si bien s'y laisse prendre qu'une fois l'histoire commencée, nul ne sait, ni lui-même, si elle durera une heure, ou bien mille et une nuits. La Danube et ses méandres. . . Ce génie de conteur est si irrésistible que, dans la lettre écrite à la veille du suicide, deux fois il interromp ses plaintes désespérées pour narrer deux histoires humoristiques de sa vie passée.

Istrati seems to have, in common with Gorki, a complete disregard for a certain class of reader, for there is no evidence of squeamishness in his writings, and I would not advise anyone to send "Kyra Kyralina" to the British statesman who threw "The Constant Nymph" across the room at an early page. It is this very quality in a book which convinces one that its author has a fine and right conception of the true meaning of art, and in the particular case of Istrati, it is a sort of guarantee of his sincerity. His unflinching frankness has not been assumed *pour épater*; he is merely being faithful to his creed. If he meets a man of sensibility, a man with a heart, of what importance are his *mœurs*? The all-important thing for him is that his friends should be men of heart, and not unfeeling egotists, *des morts qui empêchent les vivants de vivre*. Whatever Istrati's friends may be,—and some of them are extraordinarily odd,—they are not corpses, and he has made them live their lives over again for us with astonishing vividness.

As far as I know, Rumania has produced exceedingly few writers in recent years whose work is known in England or America. Princess Bibesco's "Les Huit Paradis" and "Isvor, Pays des Saules" are in a different *genre*, but exquisite in style and content. They have both found their way into English, and "Isvor, The Country of Willows" is a fine piece of recreative translation by Hamish Miles. "Les Récits d'Adrien

Zografli"—may they run into many volumes—make it now an absolute necessity for all who have the merest beginnings of a fondness for literature to watch Rumania.

Istrati's work is, if I may steal a phrase sometimes too lightly employed by a blurb-writer friend of mine, "lit by the unmistakable fires of genius." It is a pure stream of tale-telling which flows with leaping brilliance down the hillsides and through the rye-fields of Rumania, and the glimpses we get of a little-known country are delightful; the Danube at Braïla, with its flotilla of cushioned pleasure craft in which the rich men of five nations dream away the summer hours, and its procession of towering ice-blocks in winter, is very fascinating and exotic, but what prevented me from putting these "Récits" down until I had read the last page is Istrati's complete mastery of the story-teller's art. The smooth-running of his narratives is never impeded by unnecessary detail; his exposition is accomplished with lightning rapidity, and his backgrounds are sketched in with the skill of a seasoned craftsman. We get therefore pure narrative with none of the conventional wrappings to which the poor reading public of today is accustomed. There is no tortured psychological dissection of character here; no repetition or congestion; no mannered or experimental prose. The result is such a flawless piece of work of its kind that one feels it must have been obtained by virtue of a firm determination to avoid these pitfalls in the way of the would-be tale-teller, but I was never more certain of anything than that Istrati's composition is entirely effortless.

I have just received Rieder's book-list from Paris; it contains the information that "Les Haidoucs," the third collection of "Récits," is now published, and I trust that my enthusiasm here will send some of my readers to their book-sellers for these three slim volumes by a new Scheherazade.

The Salad Bowl

The brick [in New York City] varies in color from an unsuccessful lemon white to deep red, with some particularly fine oatmeal tints in the later buildings that take the sunlight with a radiant sweetness. One had the ridiculous fancy about the Americans that after a generation of breakfast-food eaters the oats were now coming out in their architecture. In the clear, gay atmosphere of Manhattan these oatmeal palaces are delightful. They add quietly to one's growing conception of New York as feminine—feminine as Venice, with which city one observed unexpected links.

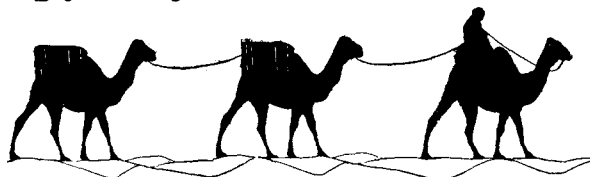
—James Bone, "The City of Dreadful Height," in *Manchester Guardian*.

The eternal question still is whether the profit of any concession that a man makes to his Tribe, against the Light that is in him, outweighs or justifies his disregard of that Light. . . . A man may be festooned with the whole haberdashery of success, and go to his grave a castaway.

—Rudyard Kipling, *Independence*.

The poetic literature of England is one of the mightiest efforts that a national mind has ever achieved, but her prose literature has never grown up. It was written on the playing-grounds of Eton. From the Round Table through Scott and Stevenson to Conrad it is always a boy's tale, with adventures borrowed from the criminal calendar, and a psychology that is taken bodily from the cricket-field; and I think it is today as dead as is the literature of Belgium, of Spain, or of Switzerland.

—James Stephens, *The Outlook for Literature* (1922).

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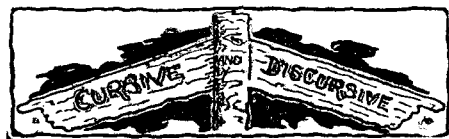
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WHEN one meditates the nature of reality it seems entirely possible that the vibrations of writers' moods might have created in the beginning, and might continue to create and populate, another world than this, filled with the various figures of their fancy. Others before us have toyed with the idea.

What matter if the scenery were rather spectral, the forms that moved about in that space not always entire, their actions not always conforming to natural laws as we know them. Enough books have been written to fill such a phantasmal world with every variety of denizen. It would bear a singular resemblance in beauty and gloom, light and shade, to the world as we know it. Its ruling spirits would be the most vividly presented characters wrought by the greatest authors. The fringes of its society would be peopled by the lame, halt, and blind creations of lesser writers. There would be pleasures and palaces, contented homes and festering slums. And there would be quite a district of neurotics. Of course, as the great characters of fiction live forever in the circumstances and through the years that their authors allotted them, there would be quite a muddle of centuries, of costumes and fashions, manners and modes.

But then the old idea of Heaven anticipated such a medley! In the Country of Characters, we speculate, all and sundry would not immediately be divested of the habiliments of their time, a harp thrust into their hands, a halo slapped on their heads, a white robe shaken down over shoulders. No, thank God for that! They would project themselves from the pages of their respective volumes in their habit as they lived, and remain so. Enough characters from every epoch, against their proper background, would serve to divide the Country of Characters into provinces in each of which would flourish the civilization of a different period. And think what an interesting interchange of ideas might result from, for example, a chance meeting between the characters of one of Fielding's novels and those of a more modern work by Virginia Woolf.

With respect to the parallel existence of the life and manners of various times this character world would afford more interest than our own. And yet it is no more than the world that exists in the mind of any widely read and truly cultivated person. Such a mind contains many centuries. In it a process of comparison between this era and that is always going forward. In such a mind Tom Jones does meet and greet Mrs. Dalloway. Becky Sharp and Iris Storm can foregather. (Whether they would choose to do so or not is another matter.) The characters of Jonson's "Volpone, the Fox," say, stray within sight of the characters of Joyce's "Ulysses," even if only to avoid them. There are, of course, thousands of other instances. The combinations and permutations are well nigh infinite.

Looked at in this light, what a never-ceasing pleasure it should be to the inordinate reader to possess two worlds,—the spectral one of Characters that Have Never Actually Lived conducting to so many meditations. But alas, it takes a most remarkable mind and memory to keep in purview even one district of the Country of Characters at one time! Though that world is no sphere, still the sun of insight and memory does not often illumine the whole tract at one time, save for the truly extraordinary reader. In ordinary musings much of it sleeps in darkness while one particular territory only is fitfully lit. That, at least, is the average experience. The really great critic spies out the land otherwise. His mind's noonday comprehends more nearly the entire scene. At one and the same time he perceives the highway and forest of the Canterbury Pilgrims, say, and the sombre estates of the Russian novelists. This way and that all is to ponder and compare. Numberless similitudes and differentiations rise to his mind. At least such should be the peculiar prerogative of the truly informed critic.

Every year, as novels multiply, we become more convinced, however, that this Country of Characters needs the practice of some Malthusian doctrine. If it is true in our own world that we have not yet solved the problem of the unfortunates that throng our asylums, it is equally true that a great many only half created or very imperfectly created beings must perplex the administration of the realm we have imagined, populated by authors' minds. The immigration problem in that land can, perhaps, never be satisfactorily settled; and of late years many minor writers have let loose upon the coun-

try an influx of very doubtful citizens.

Mysteria, for instance, which surely is the section where the characters of detective fiction and mystery-romance foregather, might well complain of the number of new and rather third-rate detectives and criminals that have come to swell its numbers; Realistica, of the number of psychopathic cases; Elysium, of the number of unbonneted polyanthuses and western he-men. Such are a few cases in point. And yet, what is to be done about it? So far, of course, there has always existed a Limbo into which, after a few years, the less permanent of the population justly faded. In fact, we can imagine a regulation by which in every year of this Country's existence a committee of Immortal Characters is appointed with free access to all realms, to herd into a large assemblage all the imperfect creations of minor authors and march them, without delay, to the edge of the desert of Oblivion, there bidding them farewell, having first supplied them with sustenance for certain days, after profiting by which they are, presumably, lost forever to the mind. In fact, we earnestly feel that some such measures must have for long been practised, for it is certain that numbers of persons, after brief citizenship, forever vanish from the Country of Characters and are heard from no further. Perhaps, after all, this exodus keeps pace with the influx.

The truly great characters are, of course, confronted with the tedium of living for-

ever. For a person in, say, Hamlet's state of mind, this must be extremely wearing, and Macbeth must, by this time, be atrociously weary of Banquo. Still, there seems to be no help for that; though perhaps the impermanent creations of lesser writers are more grateful to their creators than Shakespeare's immortals are to Shakespeare. We shouldn't wonder!

Which really brings us to the end of what we have to say this week. Only it occurs to us that, there having of late years been such a revival of imaginary map-making, it might be quite amusing to construct a chart of the Country of Literary Characters, both of the old realms therein and those adjacently new. We leave the matter to the consideration of the man who made the map of Fairyland and to the other inspired cartographers of imaginary territory.

W. R. B.

Shaw's play "Saint Joan," translated into French by M. and Mme. Hamon, will be published in October by Calmann-Lévy. In the Paris *Temps* of August 10 Mr. Shaw contributed, by special request of the editors, the feuilleton "Chronique Théâtrale" under the title "Réflexions." After having been invited to write this article Mr. Shaw has not hesitated to include therein certain reflections against Paris and the French. If the author intended these remarks to be "funny"—and how could he have intended

them otherwise?—they did not produce the effect desired.

Plon is publishing a posthumous work by Maurice Barrès, "Pour la Haute Intelligence Française," with a preface by Charles Moureaux, member of the Academy of Sciences, which includes Barrès' defence of French laboratories. It is also announced that fragments of a posthumous novel by Barrès, on the subject of the Rhineland, will appear this winter, with a study of the author by M. Chappey. Maurice Barrès only son, Philippe, writes frequently and well in the Paris press.

Pierre Loti's "Journal Intime: 1878-1881" is published by his son, Samuel Viaud (Calmann-Lévy), but is not found to reveal anything particularly new which could alter the already delightful impression of this writer and man. There are descriptions of youthful escapades, and of his relations with his "dear old mother," whom he brought to Paris for her first visit there, and where she was never tired, wanted to see and do everything like a girl, and made him spend an *argent fou*, much to his amusement. He wrote to a friend at the time: "My heart is frightfully empty. My only pleasure is in my mother's." This was anterior to his marriage, at a period when a certain love affair with a woman "of a beauty that was never seen before" had gone wrong.

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