

Laura and the Huntsman

LOLLY WILLOWES, or THE LOVING HUNTSMAN. By SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER. New York: The Viking Press. 1926. \$2.

Reviewed by CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

ANOTHER triumph for the ladies. I don't know who this Sylvia is, but certainly the best of our swains will commend her. She has written a remarkable little novel; that most pungent and cordially satisfying kind of thing that one hugs to one's tenderest rib and thinks gloatingly how few readers will really "get" it. How it tingles that rich, refined, and honorable snobbishness of the pensive reader.

I knew of a publishing house whose publicity department had a habit of saying, in its advance description of any novel by a woman for which it hoped for a good run, that it would remind the reader of Jane Austen. It soon became evident, so incongruous were the applications of the Austen *affiche*, that this publicity department had never read any of the immortal Jane's works.

But in this case the Austen comparison would not have been wholly false, for Sylvia Townsend Warner has a Jane Austen kind of humor. Humor, in the Austen sense, is certainly the rarest of literary gifts. Satire, buffoonery, wit, clowning, burlesque, geniality, all these are common; humor, and especially among masculines, is deplorably rare. Sylvia Warner has it. Yes, she has that nimble and tweaking ticklishness of mind, that pellucidity of observation. She has the freshness of phrase that lights up even a rather familiar kind of scene with new spangles. The history of the Willows family, narrated in the first part of this book, challenges comparison with the best that anyone has ever done in this vein. It is pure humor, done without a single grimace or a single sideslip into mere satire.

And then, about half way through the book, when you had begun to believe that all this was just the daintiest kind of comedy, there comes a sudden quickening of amazement and you begin to perceive that the lady is up to something quite other. This particular commentator has never yet given away the plot of any novel he has reviewed, believing that the nastiest manners. So I withhold the nature of Laura's adventure in the Chilterns and the identity of the Loving Huntsman. Here the author is on the trail of big game, and it does not seem to me that in the fantastic part of her story she is quite so successful. But she has the admirable sense to tackle it quite calmly and gently; and readers who are up to it will perceive the deeper darknesses inside her quiet fable. The story fades away into a darkness, leaving the reader perhaps just a little disappointment on the last page: that Huntsman, whose charm all know, could surely have suggested some gracefully ironic oddity to seal the scroll.

The book seems to me notably feminine in its skill and feeling. A silly thing to say, nineteen times out of twenty, for minds don't have much sex; yet there is something specifically female in its shrewd and sensitive delicacy. I don't believe the author quite grappled with the problem of the last third of the book, but even there the vague disappointment we feel is worth a dozen of the customary successes. Here is a new talent extraordinary in charm and wisdom, and aware of painful insoluble things.

A New Novelist

IN OUR TIME. By ERNEST HEMINGWAY. New York: Boni & Liveright. 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by LOUIS KRONENBERGER

ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S first book of short stories comes fortified with the praise of men like Sherwood Anderson, Ford Madox Ford, Waldo Frank, and John Dos Passos. The praise of such men fosters deduction. It indicates that Mr. Hemingway must have merit; it implies that his work is experimental, original, modernistic; it may even suggest that his work stems in part from the modes set by their own creation. All these deductions are to some extent true, but only the first is important. There are obvious traces of Sherwood Anderson in Mr. Hemingway and there are subtler traces of Gertrude Stein. His work is experimental and very modern. But much more significantly, it has sound merit of a personal, non-derivative nature; it shows no important affinity with any other writer, and it represents the achievement of unique personal experience.

I think it should be emphasized that Mr. Hemingway's stories are as much an achievement as they are an experiment. Already he has succeeded in making some of them finished products, whose form is consonant with their substance and whose value is not an implication for the future but a realization in the present. It is true that he has no power of emotion or deep quality of cerebration, but the way he has observed people and things, speech, surroundings, atmosphere, the spirit of our times, constitutes sufficient accomplishment for the moment. When translated into words, this power of observation is doubly effective: it is precise and direct, it is also suggestive and illuminating. Almost wholly through his sense of observation, he gets life into these pages: life at any moment, life at a vivid moment, life at a high and crucial moment. At his best, getting it there for a moment's duration, he somehow sends it running backward and forward, so that whatever must be understood is comprehensible by a discerning reader.

For the rest, his stories are experiments demanding further discipline and art. Between each two he interposes a paragraph of bare incident which further suggests the spirit of our time. Unfortunately some of the stories themselves, in their form and meaning, are like these paragraphs. They imply significance but they do not attain it; their lacunae are greater than their substance. They are not without life, but they lack meaning and intensity. Mr. Hemingway is in some respects an "intellectual" writer—in his culture, his humor, his implicit sophistication, his objectivity; but his work itself is finest when it portrays life, conversation, action. He is a synthetic observer, not an analyst.



Illustration from "The Art of the Printer," by Stanley Morison. (Simon & Schuster)

When West Meets East

BLACK VALLEY. By RAYMOND WEAVER. New York: The Viking Press. 1926. \$2.

Reviewed by ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

THE first novel of Mr. Raymond Weaver, "Black Valley," deals with a group of American missionaries in the little Japanese town of Kurodani during a particularly stressful period of their sojourn there. Mr. Weaver has avoided the temptation to lump them all together as "missioner" types. He has shown them as driven to this voluntary exile by subtle dissatisfactions with themselves and their meagre home environments. He has not done this by saying that so-and-so found thus-and-thus distasteful and therefore set out for Japan. The causes, or rather, the temperamental slants of the characters are brought out in their reactions during the few weeks of intolerable heat in which the story runs its course. It is evident that Mr. Weaver is a thorough student of psychology, for unconscious motives and unrecognized fixations play an important part in the development of the narrative. Not that "Black Valley" in any way resembles the painful psycho-analytic case histories, all too scantily clothed in fancy, that have of late fairly deluged the long-suffering public. The book is first of all a well-knit story with a considerable

dash of action, so that no one who wants "something to happen" will be disappointed, but over and above this there is the equally enthralling tale of the mental doppel-gangers of the characters, and there is further a keen criticism of the results of West meeting East under the particular circumstances of life in a missionary compound.

The story concerns itself primarily with the late-love of one Frances Penwick, a missionary far past her youth. She arrives in the compound at Kurodani expecting to find there her fiancé, Captain Horn, ready for the ceremony. Instead she is left to wait for eleven agonizing days without a sign of him. During this time the nervous tension in the compound rises to the point of hysteria; the other middle-aged missionaries, "the Ladies," form a sort of Greek chorus of evil based on envy and suspicion. Frances spends her days at the bedside of a friend who is dying very slowly and very painfully, and her nights in sleepless efforts to calm herself and her humiliating doubts, without disturbing her hostess. Under this strain, the climax comes in the frenzy of horror which overtakes her when she sees in the darkness of the garden the locked forms of two lovers. Sick with loathing, she regains her room. A paragraph will give something of Mr. Weaver's method in handling this episode.

But as she paced, one by one, in mounting succession, fragments of the night began to steal through the walls and windows, and settle themselves upon her. The madness that had driven her out of her room—the scream of the stairs—the touch of wool—the cool breath of an opening door—the trees, like great coral ferns—and then, a moving blur, a leprous, blended, and entangled gleaming.

It is after this that the revelation of her own being is painfully born within her, and it is in this very subtle analysis that the book reaches its highest point of excellence. It may be added that nowhere in current fiction can a like achievement be found.

The more lyric note of young love runs through the novel in the story of Gilson Wilberforce and O-yo-ake-san, where the direct and natural coming together of youth is contrasted with the hesitancy and self-consciousness of middle age. It serves, too, to introduce a modern Japanese heroine. O-yo-ake-san has a sort of symbolic innocence that makes her charm very poignant, yet is full of sweet reason: dissuading Gilson from marrying her, firm in her intention of having her child for herself, and sending her lover back to his own world. Where are the snows of yesteryear? Where Chysanthème? Where Butterfly?

Nathan on a Favorite Theme

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN ATTITUDE. By GEORGE JEAN NATHAN. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1925. \$2.50.

Reviewed by L. M. HUSSEY

AUTOBIOGRAPHY as well as biography is like a woman of potential fascination who must be perfectly accounted else her natural blemishes sully her charm. Too frequently when a man essays to write his own life or to set down another's life he exhibits little more than the blowzy curl-papers and down-at-the-heel boudoir slippers of inconsequential event. The "Who's Who" method of telling a life is customarily a paltry confection. It is stuff for old wives. Or so such common gossipings seem to me, for a man's dealings with his green grocer, his dyspepsia, or the pill he swallows at bedtime to palliate the sluggishness of his natural humors hold for me no very emphatic interest.

On the other hand the unabashed avowals of an intelligent man concerning his intellectual reactions to questions of minor and major importance, his prejudices and his amusements, make for autobiographic material of genuine savor. It is in this manner and with materials of this character that George Jean Nathan has now written a book about himself.

I say it is a book about himself although the volume deals with such disparate topics as theology, Otto H. Kahn, Jehovah, John Wanamaker, the Ku Klux Klan, alcohol, patriotism. No aloof, judicial personage judges these institutions, men, and things. Instead, Nathan, in the loquacity of a post-liqueur mood, speaking to intimates, gives frank tongue to his opinions and contrives thereby a charming and significant picture of himself.

During the course of two decades Nathan has written multiple scores of essays upon the theatre and more than half a dozen full-length books dealing with the same topic. Indeed, I know of no

other dramatic critic on these shores who has treated of the contemporaneous theatrical scene at greater length or with equal charm. Yet all the while he has performed these labors with the air of a man pleasantly enjoying himself. At his critical task he has carried about with him no burden of professional standards. Fundamentally, his æsthetic judgments have been based upon the simple dogma that if I, Nathan, like it, it is good.

The Nathan he now presents is no stranger to his prior readers but certainly he is here more winningly confidential than in any of his previous embodiments. This "Autobiography of an Attitude," by its shrugging indifference to conventional opinion, will assuredly outrage a very common type of reader, that is to say, the reading man who is irked by any book that does not parrot the trend of his thinking. And I have a suspicion that Nathan, although freely expressing all the diverse notions that entered his head while at the labor of the "Autobiography," had something of an impish eye upon this reading fellow given to chronic indignation. In other words, I believe the "Autobiography" to have been written not only for the amusement of the catholic-minded, but for the disquieting of tighter cerebrums.

The book, then, is not wholly sincere. But writing of this kind demands not so much naïve sincerity as a consistent portrait. Nathan himself treats of the point in his book when he declares: "The doctrine that sincerity is the first desideratum in a writer, I find difficult to swallow. To ask a writer invariably to believe in everything he writes is to ask a prize-fighter to believe that his opponent is a menace to society, an actor to believe that he is Agamemnon, or a patent medicine vendor to believe that he is a savior of mankind. It is no more necessary for a writer to believe what he writes in order to produce first-rate literature than it is necessary for a circus impresario to believe the doctrines of Nero in order to produce a first-rate chariot race."

In short, if the Nathan of the present "Autobiography," for the sake of harassing here and there a ninnyhammer, is seen to be a bit unveraciously shocking, the portrait at full length is assuredly consistent. That it may not be in all respects the veritable Nathan is no matter. There was never a bit of woodland actually extant quite so decorative as a wooded dell by Corot. Corot, like Nathan, improves upon nature.

The Nathan of flesh and bone, in coat, trousers and Arrow collar, has unquestionably, like all the simians of this planet, his moments as a dull fellow but the Nathan of the "Autobiography," being the highly confected creature of more than forty years of comfortable living and more than half that long of auctorial practice, is never dull. It is an engaging, a lively book. Largely it is wise and when a foolishness appears this folly is amusing.

A New Poet

COLOR. By COUNTEE CULLEN. New York. Harper & Bros. 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by WALTER WHITE
Author of "Fire in the Flint"

ONE approaches with a certain air of scepticism a book of verse by a writer who has won so many prizes it would need a ledger to chronicle them all. It's like going to a play about which all one's friends have literally raved, and nourishing the subconscious conviction that no drama could ever be half so good as one had been told it was.

In the case of Countee Cullen's "Color" I found myself wondering frankly how he had ever failed to win first prize in any of the poetry contests he had entered. Here is a young Negro—in his early twenties—who has acquired two second prizes and one first in the annual Witter Bynner contest for undergraduates, who won the Amy Spingarn and John Reed Memorial prizes, and others too numerous to list here. All these honors came to Mr. Cullen while he was a student at New York University. Mr. Cullen is now taking his master's degree.

And what are the elements which go to make up the undoubted excellence of Mr. Cullen's verse—that make him exclaim:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing?

There is, first, the inestimably precious faculty of imprisoning in a line of acid brevity and compactness the complete philosophy of an individual, a group, or a race. For example there is the amaz-

ingly expressive epitaph, "For a Lady I Know," which reads:

She even thinks that up in Heaven
Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores.

Or, again, there is "Incident":

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember

Countee Cullen, along with other poets of his race, possesses an advantage over his white brothers in this factor of race and race-consciousness as expressed in the lines quoted above. Mr. Cullen knows how to say what he wants to say—and, most important, he has something to say. Therein lies one of the advantages of prejudice and oppression—if it does not crush, it brings out a virile beauty foreign to those of easier estate. It has given to Mr. Cullen's verse a magical lilt and turn and strength which is so frequently found wanting in the majority of our versifiers, young or old.

But Countee Cullen is more than a racially self-conscious rhymster. His race and its sufferings give him depth and an understanding of pain and sorrow. But he rises above all surface barriers and sings of experiences of universal appeal, limited only by the winds and skies.

The Not Impossible She

MADAME RÉCAMIER. By EDOUARD HERRIOT. Translated by ALYS HALLARD. New York: Boni & Liveright. 1925. 2 vols. \$7.50.

THERE is probably no woman who ever lived whose features are now better known—thanks to the advertising genius of those who vend beauty preparations—than Madame Récamier's. She has achieved that immortality given to men chiefly by naming cigars after them. Some months since there were few men better known to newspaper readers than Edouard Herriot, sometime Premier of France, who has added to his achievements in that post and as Mayor of Lyons a biography of perhaps the best known of all the Lyonnais before his time. It is an imposing and an important labor of love. It begins with an inscription which gives the tone to the pages which follow—"There is no intercourse in the world more delicious than that with a beautiful woman who has the qualities of an honest man."

Every man has his heroine, and no one who reads these pages can have a doubt as to who the late Premier's heroine was. Every man has in the back of his mind an age in which he would rather have lived if he had not lived in his own, and there is little doubt that M. Herriot would have chosen the period of the great French Revolution for his. And it is interesting to reflect what would have happened to him had he been so fortunate as to live then. That he would have been a revolutionary no one can doubt. Viewing his career and the talents he has exhibited in these later days, it is difficult to conceive that he would not have been an important figure in that still more strenuous era, and it is conceivable that he would have gained an even greater place in history had he been born a century earlier. For surely he, of all men in France, has the peculiar gifts which would have counted heavily in a revolutionary epoch; nor would he have been one to hide his light under a bushel. We might have seen in him a rival if not to Robespierre at least to—shall we say? Danton! And if not Danton some shrewder soul like one of the Directors.

In that case he might have had his dearest wish gratified. He might have been an *habitué* of Mme. Récamier's salon. He might have been more. He might have been a rival to Augustus of Prussia, to Mathieu and André de Montmorency, to Ballanche; if he had lived long enough, to Chateaubriand. But if he had done all this he would not have been more devoted to Mme Récamier alive than he is to her memory. As his book begins, so it ends with a quotation. "A public man, dead or living, may be judged with some hardness, but it seems to me that a woman, even when dead, if she remained a woman in the essential qualities, is always rather our con-

temporary." In that sentiment he approaches and leaves his charming subject. She was a beautiful woman with the qualities of an honest, even a clever, man; she remained certainly a woman, in the essential qualities, as even the scoffer who looks on her portraits must admit, and this is her reward. She is the subject of a seven hundred page biography by a French premier. As her face—and figure—have been immortalized by great painters, her inmost life—and even somewhat of her anatomy—has been described for us by an eminent politician. What more could any woman ask?

It is a good biography. There are few things about Mme. Récamier which one can imagine that have been omitted. It is, like her pictures, distinctly a full-length portrait. "She was," as M. Herriot observes feelingly, "intelligent enough not to leave ten volumes of memoirs." She lived a long time—from 1777 to 1849—and a great many things happened to her. Hence the seven hundred pages. She was, without doubt, not only one of the best looking but one of the most charming women of her time. Hence the unstinted admiration, and hence, too, the charm of the story. She had many admirers and friends from whom she received and to whom she wrote many letters. Hence the mass of quotation which throws a light, and a not unpleasant light, upon her times. She had one admirer in particular—Ballanche—who took up a great deal of her time when she was alive, and takes up much of the reader's time now that she is dead. She had another—Chateaubriand—who took up still more, and even now occupies two pages or so of the index alone—even more than her very good friend Mme. de Stael. She had many others, including a prince of Prussia. She became eminent enough to be banished by Napoleon—that last test of female cleverness under the Empire—so she must have had brains. All in all one cannot blame M. Herriot for his devotion. Indeed one may be grateful for it. He has written not only an interesting book but one with such masses of footnotes, index, bibliography, even an iconography—and that is important in such a character—that were he not an eminent French politician one might almost venture to brand him with that phrase so alien and so distasteful to so many of our own politicians—that of scholar!

American Style

(Continued from page 553)

American teachers of English, believe with him that literary prose for Americans, whose rhythm of speech and life is so unEnglish, must yet have the roll of Arnold or the texture of Lamb or the vocabulary of an Oxford don, in order to be worthy the name of literature.

It is the emancipation from nonsensical ideas of this kind that has freed American journalism until, at its best, it is the best. It is just such silly nonsense—that A. C. Benson is literary and Mark Twain is not, that the ornate Bishop of Down and Connor is a good writer and plain John Woolman is not, that the new rhythms of American speech are inartistic and stale Victorianisms are not—that has left American prose in the balance between beauty and utilitarianism.

The truth is that most critics judge prose, much more than poetry, by its content. Write moderately well of mystical experience, of romantic beauty, of heroes of pith and dignity, and anthologies gape for you; but discourse of bourgeois democracy, of crude spaces, of familiar everyday life in a country where destiny works by broad movements while the individuals cuss, laugh, tell stories, and wink at the others lest they seem to be taking life too seriously—and you have embarked upon a new prose which Cambridge dons will not like, and your own compatriots regard as undignified.

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