

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME IV

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, AUGUST 6, 1927

NUMBER 2

### "Normalcy" and Romance

MR. GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON, who more than a quarter of a century ago invented the kingdom of Graustark and won for it millions of readers through the ensuing years, has restored to the literary map that realm which war and the younger generation and a pervading glorification of realism had all but relegated to oblivion. Here it is again in "The Inn of the Hawk and the Raven,"\* with the glamor still bright on its make-believe and with all its accessories as of old. Though kingdoms are outmoded to an extent, this imaginary state of Mr. McCutcheon's devising can still beguile the fancy. Or better perhaps, again. For we are only now swinging back to that interest in the romantic and the pseudo-historic that is the normal entanglement of the mind in the days of uneventful living. When battle is on, disaster and grandeur lay imagination by the heels, and only the real does not irk the soul. But in the fat years of peace the soul would go adventuring; not having the fearful fascination of strife to lift it from itself it must escape from the humdrum of the life around it by building itself new worlds.

Before science had turned the marvelous into the commonplace, the mind that wished escape from the shackles of the immediate had recourse to playing with the vision of a universe in which the forces of nature were bridled to man's desire—a universe where air and sea no longer presented barriers to his enterprise. But when a Deutschland has crossed the ocean to lift its periscope in the waters of an enemy nation, and a Lindbergh has flown the Atlantic, the inventions of a Jules Verne lose their savor. Reality has outdistanced imagination, and the novelist's creativeness lags behind the triumphs of science. What then remains?

There remains both the field of the supernatural, and the field of the romantic and the historical. It is a significant sign, indeed, in an age intensely materialistic, an age when efficiency and mechanical perfection are the gods universally adored, that fantasy should be constantly gaining ground. The fairy tale for adults has not only met with critical acclaim in these post-war years, but it has gained wide currency, and the reason that it has so won a foothold is not far to seek. For here is the means for the questing fancy to indulge its desire for something outside its own experience, something that will enthrall imagination and give it wings as the old bold conceptions of a universe yielding possibilities unknown to reality did. When the remarkable becomes the normal, then the supernatural begins to fascinate thought. So we have the ghost story thriving alongside the gentler fantastic tale, and an eminently scientific generation playing in its idle moments with what lies outside the bounds of the proven.

The other recourse from its own surroundings which the mind can find is in the past, or in the trappings of the past. There, too, imagination can roam amid unfamiliar scenes, and when it chooses, forget the world of today. The historical novel is enjoying a revival at present that reflects this vaulting of interest from the preoccupations of busy life to the picturesqueness of an older day. And the time is ripe for the romantic novel, the novel like Mr. McCutcheon's "The Inn of the Hawk and the Raven," with its imaginary kingdom, its band of

\*"The Inn of the Hawk and the Raven." By George Barr McCutcheon. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1927. \$2.

### This Is Our Doom

By SHAEMAS O'SHEEL

A SLENDER sheaf—straw, straw and a few poppies,  
For all the labor of our days.  
A few dreams, dreams troubled and elusive,  
Though the nights are long.  
Ashes, our hearts at last a handful of ashes,  
And yet their flames  
Light such a little space in the dusk of Time.

This is the doom of those whose desire is unbounded,  
To feel in the dark  
The wall insurmountable,  
To hear beyond hearing the song that shall never be heard,  
To see beyond seeing the picture that shall not be painted:  
To sense forever  
In wind and water,  
In wood and meadow,  
In city and solitude,  
More than the heart can hold or the mind encompass.  
This is our doom, we weavers of Time's pale garlands,  
To seek forever and find not the Rood and the Rose,  
The Lips and the Grail that beckon us in our dreams.

### This Week



Yes, "It's the Law," and "Does Prohibition Work?" Reviewed by Harold S. Davis.  
"Editorial Silence." Reviewed by Elmer Davis.  
"Disraeli." Reviewed by Amabel Williams-Ellis.  
"To Begin With." Reviewed by Arthur Colton.  
Studies in Sociology. Reviewed by Franklin H. Giddings.  
"A Good Woman." Reviewed by Grace Frank.  
"The Secretary of State." Reviewed by Louis Kronenberger.  
"Beila." Reviewed by Theodore Purdy, Jr.  
Gilbert White Meditates at Selborne. By Leonard Bacon.  
Escaped into Print. By Christopher Morley.

### Next Week,

William Blake. By J. B. Priestley.

outlaws, rough, conscienceless, yet chivalrous on occasion, its beautiful maiden, and its gallant lover who thinks his world well lost for love. Mr. McCutcheon's book will be welcomed by his readers as another in a series which they enjoy. It will be recognized by critics as a sign of the times, an indication that the world, after the strain of the war years, has swung back to "normalcy" once more.

### Parnassus in Station

By MARSHALL MCCLINTOCK

THIS is not a musty, dim old bookshop such as one reads about in books by sentimental bibliophiles. Here are no tables and shelves of old and forgotten tomes, dust-covered and faded, with yellowed leaves. The idly curious do not poke their noses into nondescript stacks of volumes here, while the dreamy old proprietor goes on reading.

No siree, this is an up-to-date, up-and-coming, one hundred per cent efficient, snappy bookstore for commuters. Right in the middle of the rush and bustle of a great railroad station stands this store with neat shelves holding primly the alphabetically arranged books. Here the commuter, watch in hand, can rush in and get, in no time at all, a book of pictures for the kiddies, something light with love in it for the wife, something sweet and gentle for invalid grandma, or a good old-fashioned, blood-and-thunder detective story for himself. He can buy them or rent them. On one side of the shop are the books for sale. On the other are the library books. Young, wide-awake clerks jump at his orders in either section.

I am one of those young, wide-awake clerks. My tasks are tremendous. I must smile politely at nagging old women. I must not give in to, yet must satisfy, bullying men. I must tell in ten words the story and all known criticism of the latest books—about thirty a week. I must not throw bothersome, empty-headed, and talkative shopgirls out of the store. I must not sink an axe into the head of any neurotic old lady who thinks "The Revolt in the Desert" is either the sequel to "The Sheik" or a novel by D. H. Lawrence. I must absolutely refrain from fainting when the seventy-fifth person in one day asks for "Elmer Jantry" by Sinclair.

The shop is open from eight in the morning until midnight. My hours are such that I am enabled to meet every type of person that comes into the store, for I begin my duties at five in the afternoon when the most exasperating questions are asked, when hordes of people "must catch a train in just one minute and want a book." About seven o'clock things take a more leisurely turn, and the customers do not run in and race out to the train. By nine o'clock I can begin to do a little reading in between customers and from then on come only those who saunter in and chat and handle most of the books on our shelves. Some of these people I could murder, others kiss. I don't know what the difference is, exactly. Perhaps it is just in the way they handle the books. Some fondle them and act at home with them, while others seem to be abusing and maltreating these things in paper which challenge them and are strange to them.

The shop has no counter. Clerks and customers mingle and tangle in the scramble for books between five and seven o'clock. There is Miss Wilton, who is always standing looking at the shelf of reserved books, none of which she can take. In that position she is in the way of the paper in which to wrap "boughten" books, in the way of the telephone, in the way of the reserved books. When you try desperately to reach around her for one of these things she asks innocently, "Am I in the way?" Even after one of us assured her that she was very much in the way continually, she did not desist. We are now trying to get rid of her by pushing our elbows in her eye and stepping on her feet when we reach for the things she obstructs.

As I turn from a slight scuffle with Miss Wilton, I am nailed by a little thing who has a list of books. She wants any of these I happen to have in. They are all salacious sounding things with titles like "The Marriage Bed" and "The Hard Boiled Virgin." I come upon one, "The Contact Bride." I have never heard of this masterpiece or of anything like it. What! have we been missing a best seller? Anything with such a title is bound to go. I appeal to the other clerks and to catalogues. No such book has been heard of. I ask the customer about it. She saw the name in a newspaper held by a neighbor in a subway train. I give up. She decides on the "Hard Boiled Virgin" until I tell her it has no conversation in it. Tucking a "Marriage Bed" under her arm she departs. We continue to wonder about that "Contact Bride" until our Mr. Brown in a flash of imaginative brilliance decides that the title she misread in the paper was "Contract Bridge."

Next I am assailed by the oft-repeated question, "What's a good book?" Now, this question really is a stunner. Just think it over yourself. What is a good book? Yes, you can name off several you've enjoyed immensely, but would this customer think any of those are good books? Probably not. You must try to read that customer's mind in a flash—or lack of mind, and recommend accordingly. Questions for leads are useless. When you ask her what sort of books she wants, she says "Oh, almost anything." When you ask her what she has liked recently she says she has not read much lately, or names a book you never heard of. The best thing to do is to bludgeon it out. She will never take the first book you suggest. I don't quite understand the reason for this, but it is true nevertheless. Some customers refuse everything. They look at the jacket and say "No, I don't like the looks of that one." The way to get rid of these is to pick up one and say, "I don't suppose you would care for this. It has been banned in Boston." She takes it at once.

Few customers ever know the author of any book for which they ask. Many do not even know the titles. A sweet old lady told me once that she wanted a book that had something about hills or something like that in the title—no, she didn't remember the author's name, but the title had something about hills or something in it. I tried the "Delectable Mountains" but that didn't work. Guessing games always fascinated me and so I enjoyed this. "The Magic Mountain" and the "Hill of Dreams" awoke no response of recognition, but I took a long shot and made it on "Hildegard."

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By far the most popular books both in the library and for sale are detective and mystery stories. And although there are hundreds of these turned out every year, we are always shy of new ones. There are many members of our library who have read every one of our detective stories. The popular authors like J. S. Fletcher, Edgar Wallace, Sax Rohmer, and Frank Packard could turn out one a week and get away with a big sale on each.

Mr. Hang, with a slight whiskey breath and always with about two days' growth of stubby whiskers comes in quietly at nine o'clock every night and repeats the same speech: "Have you got a book for me? Something in the line of detective, mystery, adventure, or pirate stories?" He can never remember the names of books he has read and he keeps us praying for the appearance of more thrillers.

The darky porters in the station read the most hair-raising mystery stories, a fact which struck me as odd. Wide-eyed and a little trembly, many have whisperingly requested dream books. A scholarly tome on Witchcraft in Knopf's History of Civilization series has attracted much of their attention.

A famous Charleston dancer and the comedian in a very successful musical comedy are regular patrons of the detective story section. The latter bustles in almost every night, a little makeup still showing in the difficult corners behind his ears. A few nights ago he could find nothing new in the mystery line so took out Frank Swinnerton's "Summer Storm." He brought it back the next night, said he didn't like it, and asked for something "with guts in it."

The Book of the Month Club has received much criticism on the score that people should not have others select their reading material. But if the club does not do the selecting, the clerks in bookshops will, for most people are completely unable or unwilling or uninterested in choosing their books.

Nine-tenths of our customers both in the library and in the for sale section just ask for something good, something "they're all talking about," something that's popular. Beyond that, the choice is up to the clerk and what he says usually goes. Many people have the annoying habit of asking "Have you read it yourself?" and will not take the book if you haven't. The only thing to do is to answer yes, in order to make the sale. At first I did this in fear and trembling, hoping they would not ask very definitely what the thing was about. But I soon overcame this dread. Unless the title and jacket showed plainly that it was a detective or mystery story, I could always get away with saying "Oh, it is a modern English problem novel." It usually was.

Such folk are timid in their ignorance, however. Others are pugnacious. One young lady did not know the difference between fiction and non-fiction, apparently had never heard of the words, and thought me quite silly to make such distinctions. Another little shop-girl wanted Oscar Wilde's latest novel, and was sure that he had written something within the last few weeks. She was completely exasperated with my ignorance in thinking him dead.

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The stupid ones, however, are not so maddening as the literary birds who have read everything, who want the modern, ultra-modern novels with high-brow reputations. They talk in high, highly-inflected voices with high-sounding phrases. Ah, they are so literary! And it would be such a joy to throw them out! After such people, a straight business man who wants something light, snappy and exciting is a relief. Why is it that so few men seem able to indulge an interest in literary and esthetic matters without losing their virility? I'm sure it wasn't always thus.

Poor husbands come in asking for a book reserved by their wives, but they cannot remember the name of the book so we cannot give it to them. They act so at a loss and in dread of the bawling-out they will get when they arrive home. I wonder if Kathleen Norris is worth all the trouble she causes in this way. Mealy-mouthed old ladies trying to be young hang and gush over me to cajole me into giving them books I shouldn't let out. Big, strong men who you know are members of the American Legion try to rage and storm and bully so loudly that I will give them a copy of "War Birds" long before it is their turn. I flee from the library section to a customer who wants to buy. She asks for the latest best-seller, so I show her a copy of Edith Wharton's "Twilight Sleep." She runs her fingers over the pages and says dubiously, "Hm, not much reading matter here." I tell her the quality is quite high, in spite of the quantity. "But I don't want anything with much thought in it." I display an Arthur Train novel. "Oh, yes, there's much more reading matter here." And out she goes, satisfied. I could have showed her some much larger books, but I'm afraid they might have had some thought in them.

"Have you any books for a boy?"

"Yes, in this section right here."

"Oh, this looks interesting. How much is it?"

"A dollar and a half."

"A dollar and a half! But he's just a little boy, no taller than that."

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Etcetera. Another interesting thing is the different way in which men and women handle books. Most men pick up a book as if they were not at all afraid of it, virilely, strongly, securely. They look at the title page, the blurbs on the jackets, and glance over the pages. All very sane, of course. But women drop the book while taking it from the shelves with two fingers, drop two packages while picking up the book, set the book on a table in front of them upside down, poke with an umbrella as they turn the book around, then open the volume precisely at a certain page, with hand flat on the open pages. They read intently a few lines, then turn swiftly and certainly to another page as if they had been referred definitely there. This is repeated several times. Then, "No, I don't like the looks of this," and they set the book upside down on a pile far removed from the place they picked it up. They are very careful to do this every time they examine a book. What they read and why is a mystery to me, and their whole attitude towards the book and handling of it are astounding and incomprehensible.

I mentioned "Twilight Sleep" above. Its extreme popularity surprised all of us, in spite of Mrs. Wharton's usual appeal. Our Mr. Brown, profiting by this and the former popularity of "The Marriage Bed" and such titled things, decided that his first novel would be named "Obstetrical Youth." It is certain to be a best seller. One customer has already asked, without smiling, for Edith Wharton's "Abortion" and I am not sure that he was not serious.

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I made a grievously wrong guess the other night when a customer walked in. He looked like a farmer from upstate who was in the station for his return train after a visit to the big city. His request for a "good book" confirmed my first idea that he wanted something light and exciting. I tried the latest Frank Packard, with a jacket depicting the handsome hero doing battle with the dirty villain for the beautiful heroine in the background. "No, I don't like jackets like that." I tried a few more getting better as I went along, but they did not take. Soon the customer began going over all the books in the shop, telling me what he liked and what he did not like. He liked very little, and he had read most of the things we had. He was quite intelligent, but too critical. I remained silent. He saw a Harold Bell Wright. "That's awful, of course. But 'Elmer Gantry' is just as bad, only on the other side of the fence. In Wright everybody is good, which is untrue. In Lewis, everybody is bad, which is equally untrue." I ventured that Lewis presented his material much better than did Wright. I shut up with his retort, "It makes very little difference, doesn't it, in what manner hokey is presented?"

And this little place of ours is more than a book-shop. Wives call up and ask us to tell their husbands who are to call for books that they'll be a bit late for dinner but not to wait because she's just with Myrtle and bring home a loaf of bread and don't forget we have to dress for the theatre. Shop-girls leave notes for their sisters and boy-friends. A musician left his bass viol with us one day. Library members come in to borrow enough money to get home. And all this for "a dollar deposit, twenty-five cents a week, and two cents a day overtime." A lady wanted me to close shop one night and carry her bag to the hotel across the street for her. She didn't like to be seen with negro porters.

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There are really lots of nice people, though. The man who came in with the figs and talked about the educational system, the reporter for a trade journal who knew Spengler and had read undoubtedly three times as much as any of our customers. From his conversation I thought at first he was at least a professor at Columbia. An engineer buys more books than any other individual, and gives long talks on Herbert Hoover and economics and capitalism with each purchase. Mr. Crampton, the fast-talking little Englishman, rushes in with wise-crack upon wise-crack, looks up a new word in our dictionary, and casts slurring remarks on Bruce Barton, God, and Jesus. A crop in our library is named Lawbacher. Mr. Chase always gives a cigar with his quarter, in spite of our protestations that no one in the shop smokes them. Mr. Christopher Morley walks in like a spring zephyr, bringing freshness with his smile and cheeriness. Neysa McMein joined up recently, and Gardner Rea, the cartoonist, gets a book occasionally. Oh yes, we're just a big happy family, composed mostly of black sheep.

"Probably no volume of devotional verse has exercised so wide an appeal as 'The Christian Year,' the centenary of which has just been celebrated at Hursley, the little Hampshire village where the author labored for many years as a parish priest," says *John O'London's Weekly*. "John Keble was so diffident as to his own powers it was only at the urgent request of his father that he consented to the publication of the book. Its success must have astonished him. Over ninety editions were issued during his lifetime, and the popularity of these poems today remains undiminished. Many of them are household words. 'Sun of my soul, thou Saviour dear,' 'Blest are the pure in heart,' 'When God of old came down from Heaven,' 'Ave Maria, Blessed Maid'—these hymns are known and sung in every quarter of the civilized world."