

The Saturday Review

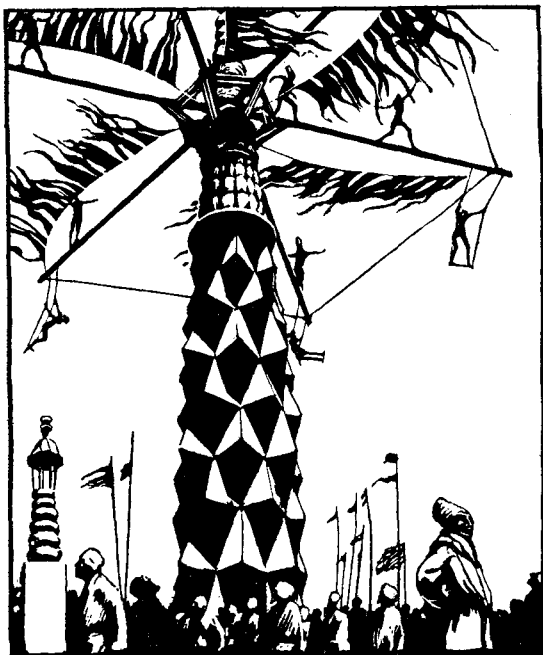
of LITERATURE

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*Fête in Xanadu*

VAD

I ruled as Kublai, kingdomed by a dream;
Even now I hear the fanfare, hark the cry
Of festival, my rainbow pennons stream;
My wild court gymnasts walk a golden sky.
W. R. B.

Standardization

TO each age its own bogey. To Victorian England the spectre of Philistinism, to our own day the bugbear of standardization. Or perhaps after all they are one, and Philistinism the encroachments of which on the life of the spirit Matthew Arnold so passionately decried, and standardization, which we so stridently denounce, are only interchangeable terms for smugness and indifference and materialism. Our expostulators, living in a mechanistic age, ascribe to industry the results which the Victorian critic belabored from a different point of view. But, like him, they fear the swamping of the higher values of life by complacent materialism.

Here, they say of the America of 1927, is a nation being fed a standardized education from standardized text-books by teachers so standardized that a breach of the conventions of doctrine may lead to penalties; a nation to which a syndicated press hands out standardized opinions, a standardized philosophy of living and loving, standardized jests, comic strips, and stories, with the precision that the manufacturer supplies it with ready made clothing cut to a standard length and dyed to a standard color; a nation in which labor saving devices, and telephones, and automobiles are undermining the stanchions of individuality by wiping out isolation and so standardizing experience. What, they ask, lies before such a country but a regimen of living and thinking in which no man differs from his neighbor, a civilization rendered colorless and flavorless through uniformity, and inert through similarity of ideas?

And yet does the fault lie in standardization or in standards? The American public waxed and grew strong on standardization—on the standardization of the idea that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were the inalienable rights of all men. It grew to well-being on the standardization of the doctrine of work. It grew to literacy on the

standardization of the thesis that education was the right of the masses and not the privilege of the few. Now that the masses are educated, and the laborer is wearing silk shirts and buying Fords, we are alarmed lest the vigor of the country be submerged by the standardized knowledge and the standardized manner of living which have become the common property of the American millions.

There can be no denying that there is danger. Large scale production, far-flung advertising, and the widespread distribution of goods and ideas have drained something of the color and flavor from American life. Men no longer react individually to conditions as they did in the isolation of the farm or the mine but respond to them under full cognizance of what their fellows are believing and feeling. They think alike, act alike, desire alike. It is a triumph that deviation from the usual is nowhere more frowned down upon than in democratic America. Conformity is the price of respectability, and eccentricity is the deadly sin. As nowhere else in the world fashions and fads tyrannize in America.

Therein, of course, lies the great peril to American society—in that it is a society sufficiently homogeneous to be easily amenable to pressure, and by virtue of the fact that it is overwhelmingly middle-class in danger of having superimposed upon it a set of values emanating from the mediocre rather than the distinguished elements of the community. These values will necessarily to a large extent be those of material satisfactions and unsuited æsthetic and intellectual interests. Since the turn of the industrial wheel has brought ease and leisure within the grasp of millions untutored in the ways of culture, naturally shoddiness in dress and thought will prevail. Yet false jewels, and rayon, and Books of Etiquette need not necessarily indicate anything more deplorable than an untrained taste striving for the expression of unformed æsthetic and social desires.

Since this is so, great is the possibility of developing standards of worth. What an opportunity for the movie, for the radio, for literature! What of value may they not standardize! Libraries and clubs that distribute large number of the same book throughout the country are sometimes decried as but one more agency in the standardization of our civilization. And they are. But what a means, if properly directed, to the standardization of good taste in literature, to the inculcation of love for literature, to the making of literature a part of living! Standardization may be good as well as bad. Not similarity of taste and desire is the enemy but similarity of bad taste and bad desire.

Good taste, however, can never be developed without something to feed on. A sense of the artistic and the fine does not spring unnourished in the human breast. The love of the dramatic, of the spectacular, of the passionate is there; these are qualities which it needs no guidance to develop. They are the crude values of life and literature, and the most untutored will respond to them. But the ability to discriminate between the dramatic and the melodramatic, between the striking and the showy, between emotion and emotionalism, this is an ability—a taste, if you will—born of acquaintance with both. Standardize reading of the better sort, thinking of the better sort, and automatically you will destandardize lack of judgment and cheapness of taste.

The Age of Impotence

By ELMER DAVIS

NOT the least noteworthy of recent literary feats is that of Mr. Warwick Deeping.* The epiphany of a new novelist is never so amazing as the belated arrival at the top of the hill of a veteran, who had to make the grade under the burden of a name familiar for years and never important. And since men of letters, however scornful of success in others, rarely object to it for themselves, it might pay to inquire why Mr. Deeping, after a dozen novels which got nowhere in particular, got so notably somewhere with "Sorrell and Son."

You may say that "Sorrell and Son" was only a commercial success, that Mr. Deeping is not an art author. Well, the world teems and overflows with art authors; Mr. Deeping is something rarer and perhaps more significant, the producer of a book to which several hundred thousand people came back in grateful relief after sampling the products of the art authors. (Fairly intelligent people, too; his public may not be Marianne Moore's but it is not Kathleen Norris's.) And if he should happen to be the forerunner of a new movement in fiction even the art authors, or so many of them as live on their royalties, may profitably give him some attention.

Obviously if I knew his formula I should keep it a secret and try it myself; seventeen large printings are worth shooting at. I do not know the trick of the mixture but it is not very hard to identify the principal ingredients. "Sorrell and Son" began with a story—the oldest and simplest story in the world, but one that will still be popular when the stars are old and the sun grows cold; the story of

*Doomsday. By WARWICK DEEPING. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

*Sorrell and Son. By WARWICK DEEPING. 17th Large Printing. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

This Week



Fête in Xanadu. By William A. Dwiggins.

Quatrain. By William Rose Benét.
"Main Street and Wall Street." Reviewed by Ray Morris.

"George Meredith." Reviewed by John W. Cunliffe.

Qwertyuiop. . . .

"Wedlock." Reviewed by Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

"Green Forest." Reviewed by Lloyd Morris.

"Streets in the Moon." Reviewed by Louis Untermeyer.

Next Week, or Later

Perennial Romanticism. By Ernest Sutherland Bates.

the man facing starvation, who hustles out and gets himself enough to eat. Add to that the history of a parental relation which was not a curse to both parent and child (here alone was sufficient novelty to entitle the book to be called "daring"); and a sexual philosophy which seems a sensible middle-of-the-road adjustment, resting on no supernatural sanctions, allowing the reasonable measure of liberty which we all permit ourselves while condemning the excess we deplore in others.

But these explanations hardly explain. The story, engrossing as it is, peters out when Captain Sorrell is relieved from danger of actual want, less than half way through the book. The sexual philosophy, however attractive, turns out on closer inspection to be of little practical use; "do what you like so long as you don't hurt other people" is a rather irrelevant precept in a world where it is impossible to exist without hurting other people. I believe the popularity of "Sorrell and Son" was chiefly due to its pervasive tone. The book has guts.

Whatever the intrinsic value of this quality, it has been so absent from recent literature as to have acquired a scarcity value, and when Mr. Deeping served it up, readers rushed for it like wild beasts for a salt lick. Twenty years ago we were overfed with visceral literature; the recent cult of impotence is no doubt partly a reaction from that. But now the pendulum has begun to swing the other way and Mr. Deeping was fortunate enough to catch hold of it at the right moment. When Captain Sorrell, so buffeted about by unjust Fate that he had a perfect right to sit down and whine about it, elected to get up and go to work instead, the thump-thump of the first trunk he carried upstairs resounded as loudly, and may echo as long, as the slam of Nora Helmer's door.



That thump echoes in "Doomsday," though Mr. Deeping's current offering seems unlikely to attain anything like the American popularity of "Sorrell and Son." Like a good technician, he gives most of his attention to his story; but some of the incidentals happen to have more news value for American readers, and their expansion would have helped the book on this side of the Atlantic. There is the life in Sandhurst Estates, a realty development that could be matched a hundred times in Long Island and Westchester and Florida—with the difference that the English ear is deaf to the siren song of the realtor, the English eye knows such creations as Sandhurst Estates for the cheap, shabby pretense that they are. Here live some of the "new poor" who are trying to keep up a front, people who have come down to it, not risen to it like most of our commuters, and their history would have the novelty for American readers that wild west thrillers had for English readers. But it is not news to Mr. Deeping; he sketches in his background and then goes on with the history of Mary Viner.

Mary, tied down to waiting on her invalid parents, had a young girl's natural desire for the earth, plus the moon. She was sought in marriage by Captain Arnold Furze, an impecunious gentleman who had come back from the war to try to reclaim Doomsday Farm. But Mary, as Furze told her, "wanted her cushion;" and the frontier conditions on Furze's farm meant as much drudgery as she had at home, and even less comfort. "She wanted Furze the man but not Furze the farmer," so she ran away.

I was not much excited by the history of Mary's flight, and disillusionment, and ultimate return, because it is too carefully arranged, like one of those hands which Mr. Foster lays out in *Vanity Fair* to show how Y and Z get five of the last six tricks. Mr. Deeping is not quite so bad as Messrs. Booth Tarkington and Freeman Tilden, who seem to feel that the old-fashioned virtues cannot take the rubber unless their antagonists, Sin and Sophistication, are dealt hands without any face cards at all. None the less he allows Mary, in her flight to the sophisticates, to get nothing but money; the man she got with it was a pretty sad stick, and one cannot help feeling that Sin and Sophistication have more to offer than that. On that side of the argument Mr. Deeping has cold-decked his reader; but on the other side Arnold Furze is a not unworthy successor to Stephen Sorrell.

Furze and his farm may also be lacking in news value for English readers, now that so many Englishmen are going back to the land because there is nowhere else to go; but to Americans lolling in the urban comfort of 1927 the story of his wrestle

with a stubborn soil has the same interest as the history of the pioneers who chopped this country out of the wilderness. For this Furze is spiritually a frontiersman, and it is a fact of some sociological significance that he found England frontier enough for him. He had no illusions; he knew that "all work is dull—unless you have got the spirit in you." He also knew that "half the farming in England is laborious and haphazard," that it needs brains as well as muscle.

He had an immense amount of hard luck, but he stood up under it; he saw his farm as "a battlefield upon which to fight the god of all cussedness and interference, Man's eternal fight." So he would seem significant, also, in the spiritual history of the human race, which has not got even this far by graceful gestures of resignation. Hard luck is plentiful in post-war England, and facing it the people of Mr. Aldous Huxley, for example, curl up and quit. Unless all biology is a lie, their fossil remains will some day be collected and catalogued and preserved in museums, by the descendants of the people of Mr. Warwick Deeping.



Mere survival is of course not a particularly conclusive argument, yet it might be pertinent to wonder what the devotees of the cult of impotence get out of their religion which requires that its priests be eunuchs. (Merely spiritual eunuchs, of course.) Guts—the spirit that makes a man stand up against work and hard luck—may possibly be barbaric and unrefined; yet this spirit would seem to have some practical value. Without it, the machinery of what we call civilization could not be kept going at even its present low degree of efficiency; and however poorly the futilitarians think of civilization as a whole, they are apt to be rather tenderly addicted to the comforts and suavities which the machinery creates. A certain amount of work has to be done to keep the furnaces stoked and the engines going, and it is not quite certain that "What's the use?" will forever be accepted as an excuse for ducking out of it.

It might have been argued, in times past, that if courage is useful, futility is beautiful; for impotence is nothing new, in art or life, and sometimes it has had a certain grace. There was decadence in the 'nineties, but the men of that Jonquil Decade at least tried to be beautifully useless, to give their worthlessness (which, like most literary worthlessness, was mostly pretense) a decorative value. But our current brand of futility is about as unappetizing as any that has ever been offered; it seems to be regarded as its own excuse and justification; graceful living is as much beneath the dignity of a man of feeling as work. To be sure nothing is done at present with any notable suavity; but it does not appear that impotence gains in value by being flung in one's face with a snarl.

It does not even give pleasure, at least to Americans and Western Europeans. From the purely hedonist point of view Mr. Stripling's Tennessee mountaineers are better off than Mr. Huxley's truffers of the arts; for they please other people quite as much and please themselves a good deal better. The Russians, of course, derive a keen pleasure from the contemplation of their own worthlessness, which has the further advantage of being objectively comic to non-Russians. But our authors cannot be Russian no matter how hard they try; their asplanchous heroes and halfwit heroines do not even delight themselves.

But it may be argued that if impotence is neither useful nor beautiful, it is what is; that the futilitarian novelists are unflinching realists, truthful reporters of the world as they find it. Well, let us see.



The not very subtle symbolism of the hero and heroine of "The Sun Also Rises" is, I suppose, the simplest statement of the philosophy now current among our most admired art authors. Before a world of unprecedented complexity and fascination Man stands helpless, paralyzed by consciousness of his own incurable incapacity; what is the use of trying to live with Life since she would only deceive us with everybody? The argument would be more convincing if it were practised by the author who sets it forth. I do not know whether Mr. Ernest Hemingway gives himself to Life, but he has certainly given a good deal of himself to Work. Not by graceful resignation to insuperable difficulties did he evolve that style, so bare, yet so lucid and suggestive, that it makes any sentence containing

ten words, or one semicolon, seem as superfluously ornate as the Ritz Tower. It was his ill fortune, after he had learned to write with economy and effect, that he knew no one worth writing about; one hears that he described accurately the society that centers about the Rotonde and the Dôme, but who cares if he did? One hears also that he is coming home to Chicago, and if he escapes the machine guns for a year or two he may give us something worth reading in itself, and not merely as an exercise in the art of composition. (On the other hand, he may meet the people John Gunther knows, in which case he will have wasted his steamer fare.)

The characters of Mr. John dos Passos find existence a quite irretrievable disaster; in one way or another they give it up, or eventually wish they had. But it was not by giving up that Mr. dos Passos erected the complex structure of "Manhattan Transfer." Jimmy Herf, disgusted with New York and Life, starts off across country toward no known destination; John dos Passos, with apparently the same views, stays in town and goes to work, and gets himself called a realist.

Some men, of course, are so made that in the face of difficulties they curl up and quit; their novels never get into print, though they may diffuse in conversation. But other men have what Captain Furze calls the spirit in them; faced with difficulties they set their teeth and dig in. And so, perhaps, these novels about impotence are a form of literature of escape. Their authors are lazy, like all human beings; they would like to acquire the art of what Miss Cather calls "yielding gracefully to the inevitable or the almost inevitable;" it would be a good deal more comfortable. But inside them is something (is it a hormone?—I am no biologist) which makes them work anyway, and work hard; hence the paradox of industrious novelists writing exacting books about the delights of utter worthlessness.



Not, of course, that industry and determination and success have been neglected by recent novelists. We have had plenty of novels about the successful man, but they are concerned with showing that the sweets of triumph turn to ashes in his mouth. Naturally this engaging doctrine, though several thousand years old, is still good for a big sale; we all like to be assured that the grapes were sour. I should be a little more confident of their acidity, however, if the novelists who write about the emptiness of fame and fortune shunned the public view and turned all their royalties into the Authors' League Fund. Read these devastating exposures of the hollowness of Success, and then go out to Long Island or Westchester and look at the country estates of their authors, and you will be driven to conclude that the only wealth and fame that brings satisfaction is the wealth and fame earned by writing devastating exposures of the hollowness of wealth and fame.

I do not object to fairy stories, but I am not persuaded that it does any good to call them realism. No doubt between surtaxes and alimony and arteriosclerosis many rich men lead a hard life, or what looks to them like a hard life. There are probably certain satisfactions which the industrial magnate can never get, but they happen to be satisfactions that he cannot understand, and would not want if he did understand them.

I may be mistaken; I have known only two extremely rich men, nor was I ever privy to the secrets of their hearts. I got near enough to both of them, however, to doubt gravely if their hearts had any secrets. Each of them started from nothing and made a vast fortune, by industrial genius supplemented by the indispensable nose for profit. The type is familiar in American literature, where its exemplar, having reached the summit, looks back over the long ascent and sees that the best of life has eluded him. Not these two men I have in mind. They were never perceptibly dissatisfied with themselves, though other people were often dissatisfied with them and said so in the newspapers; if anything had eluded them, it was because they had not seen it or did not want it. They were shining instances of the truth of Dr. Johnson's remark that self-dependent power can time defy as rocks resist the billows and the sky. Secure of their own approval, they cared nothing about the opinion of anybody else.

I believe that such successful men are the rule and not the exception, and that more truth about our