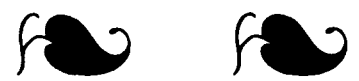


# by C. E. Montague



trade is far indeed from its primitive old marketing of such bald reports as Lady Blarney's brazen affidavit touching the garters.

There is no denying, so far as I see, that the resultant effect of veracity is worth the trouble taken. People used to take as a jest an old pantomime song:

The captain told the cook,  
the cook told the crew,  
The crew told me, so the  
story *must* be true.

But, applied to the art of fiction, it seems to express a deep truth—that hearsay evidence is the best; and hearsay evidence two-deep, the fact at two removes, may be best of all. Out of the mouth of two or three witnesses, one behind the other, and passing on his evidence, is the truth, in this odd art, best established. They say that sherry ought to live for a while in an old brandy-cask, so as to contract a certain convincing quality from the cask's genial timbers. Perhaps the most convincing sherries of all have lived in two successive casks, or in more. Certainly some fiction would seem to have extracted a new increment of validity from each human vessel that has apparently contained it on its way to the customer. Unlike many of the middlemen of commerce, these medial agents take nothing away from that which goes through their hands: they only add to it—humaneness, refinement, harmonics, second intentions, all sorts of good things. A high sense of their value may have set Conrad multiplying narrator behind narrator as he does, narrative within narrative, till you feel as if you were going into one of those little nests of many delicate boxes, one inside the other, which make a child wonder will he ever reach the chocolate cream at their core. The heart of the tale appears like the fourth-hand turf tip of the music-hall song:

"I know a bloke wot knows a cove  
As 'ad it from a man,  
Wot saw a party wot told 'im  
'E'll win it if 'e can."

And yet it all comes out, in Conrad, wonderfully right and overpoweringly simple and true, as if every extra temperament through which he had passed the story filtered it to a purer perfection.

And yet, again, just look at Jane Austen. Look at Fielding, at Scott, at Balzac. How little they seem to have thought about any of these mighty precautions and provisions for wayside enrichment. They "went behind" whosoever they liked. They wrote as if they were the supernaturally trusted confidants of every one of their characters, good or bad. They seem to have cared as little about attaining the higher plausibility as the Homer of Godley did about writing the best Greek!

Poluphloisboisterous Homer of old,  
Threw all his augments into the sea.  
Although he had often been courteously told,  
That perfect imperfections begin with an e.  
The poet replied with a dignified air,  
"What the digamma need anyone care?"

If those great ones, living when they did, were good enough to be classics, would a novelist of equal genius, who wrote now, be also good enough though he played the technical game as naively as they did? If Shakespeare's advent had been deferred till now, would he have ever brought the chief character of one of his plays on to the stage to tell the audience in confidence, just after the rise of the curtain, "I am determined to prove a villain?" No pat and confident answer rises to my lips. Genius, no doubt, has to live, with a will, the life of its own epoch: he who, like William Morris, attempts to live in the lost childhood of the world, always carries about him something of its dead coldness. One cannot quite imagine a Shakespeare of our days confining himself to the Elizabethan syntax and vocabulary. Would he, like a modern dramatist, discard the "aside" and the soliloquy too?

But then, again, is it certain that all this novel and intensely exacting technique evolved for the novel by the critical genius of a few middle-nineteenth century Frenchmen and of Henry James is really imperative? Or is there some bigger truth that they have not got hold of?—does it arise from something still unexplored, in the very nature of

narrative fiction, that its richest and strongest practitioners should look like very standard-bearers of the cause of technical looseness? In some moods one may find oneself thinking that the curious state of absorption and semi-belief (never literal belief) which we call illusion in a reader's mind, may be actually favored by a certain easy-going way of the writer's, an unguarded-looking habit, an unprofessional-seeming lack of technical apparatus.

Of course such doubts are flat heresy in the view of a whole school of intelligent and eager critics. They are so well equipped, and they feel so sure, that it seems almost like disobeying one's own conscience to fall short of complete and final agreement with them. Still, what can you do? Sceptical protestings will come. "Conscience says, 'Launcelot, budge not.' 'Budge,' says the fiend," and puts into your heart a fundamental and comprehensive misgiving like Harriet Martineau's occasional suspicion that the rising science of political economy was "all a mistake." What if the old slovens, the Thackerays, and Hugos, and Tolstoy, were really the practical men, after all, and knew what they were doing in all their ramblings and loquacities, as a crafty envoy does his country's business by dint of flirting and conviviality?

"What is truth?" "What know I?" Many admirable persons have a way of finding in every discussable question, of literary criticism as well as of conduct, a choice of Hercules, at any rate a choice of A. H. Clough, between "truth and falsehood," "the good and evil side." Yet the bearing of Montaigne and that of the far from jesting Pilate may sometimes be about as far as some of us can go without humbug.

*The foregoing essay is the third by C. E. Montague to be printed by THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE since his death last Spring. With his decease passed one of the finest spirits of contemporary English letters, a journalist of force and ideals, and a novelist of growing power. He was a director and constant contributor to the Manchester Guardian, and served in the army from 1915 to 1919. Among his published works are "A Hind Let Loose," "Fiery Particles," "The Right Place," "Rough Justice," and "Right Off the Map" (Doubleday, Doran).*

## A Record of 1927

THE WAY THE WORLD IS GOING. By H. G. WELLS. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1929. \$2.50 net.

Reviewed by E. PRESTON DARGAN  
University of Chicago

WITH few exceptions, the chapters in this volume appeared as syndicated articles, during 1927, in the British and American press. Some of them deal with ephemeral or "newsy" topics: a German film, experiments with dreaming, the English coal-strike, tilts with Lord Birkenhead and G. B. S. This kind of thing warrants Wells's formal assumption of the term "Journalist" as best describing his literary activity. I find a sprightly controversial manner and an increase in effective irony.

There are also further developments of familiar and more general themes. That man, both soul and body, is still "in the making." That our period is an age of swift transition and life will soon be very different. That catastrophe will overtake our grandchildren, if we allow any more insensate wars or preparations for them. We must seek peace and pursue it.

The bulk of these articles may be focused around three central luminous points. New light is shed, first on Wells's conception of art, particularly the art of fiction; on his doubts concerning democracy; on his understanding of civilization in England and in America, with special reference to the relations between the two countries.

He told his audience at the Sorbonne that, as a journalist, he accepts the transitory nature of art and letters too. We pass, you pass, they pass. "Every thing flows on," was the motto of "William Clissold." But where a ministrant to beauty believes that art alone endures, Wells the ephemeralist,

will allow no exceptions. Artist and poet perform their deeds through and for their own generation principally. Soon they are all swept "into one living mortality as journalism in the widest sense." Sceptics may inquire whether Keats was prominent for his views on birth-control or whether Raphael reveals simply "humanity's impression of the present."

All this means that the novel particularly should turn to "creative propaganda" for the new order of things. The arts should comport a "quasi-religious attitude to world affairs." Even ardent internationalists may admit here a contamination of genres. Good observers have noted that neither under Fascist nor under Soviet direction is great pictorial art developing. Wells naturally is strong for Dreiser and Upton Sinclair; as propagandists they are in the forefront of American fiction. Is this a sign that Wells himself may be lacking in that critical faculty whose absence in the American psychology he so deplors? Is it an indication that he who wrote of the Mind of the Race yet wears blinders before the "long hope" of the artistic mind?

The fact is that Wells has become an Absolutist. He seizes arbitrarily the various overlapping zones of human endeavor. He arranges them as concentric circles, with the bull's eye of Progress in the center. This fine faith makes him steer in some directions aloof from reality. But it remains a working faith, and here are some of the less debatable articles in its creed.

There is more joy and health, more comfort and promise among us than ever before. The laborer has leisure, the "hopeless drudge" has almost disappeared. Social cruelty has been replaced by social kindness. Not only has the average life-span been much extended, but it is better filled. *Homo sapiens* is becoming more sapient; so is his lady.

Yet there is no "guarantee in progress" unless we create it. The common sense of the majority is not to be relied upon. In his significant lecture at the Sorbonne, "Democracy Under Revision," Wells explained his doubts about Parliamentary government. A reorganization is needed to handle effectively the great questions of peace and unity. The trouble with egalitarian democracy is that it leans too much on the common man, ignorant or indifferent. Wells's faith is now in the younger generation, in those who uphold the Kuomintang, Fascism, or even the Soviets. Their causes may be wrong, their zeal is profoundly right. But what if they choose the wrong cause again?

Wells is not over-partial to our country; certain experiences during his last visit were probably disheartening. While recognizing our unparalleled social vigor, he refuses to consider us "a Holy People." Our superiority, to be sure, ranges from "films and flivvers" to "Bunker Hill and bathtubs." Western Democracy, we gather, is a cranky flivver, with a loud, but ineffectual engine. The American eagle evolves into an "isolated ostrich," who can't bear criticism.

Yet England and America, with all their faults, are the only crutches for tottering civilization. Wells is proud to be an Englishman, even a British Imperialist of the less selfish kind. "The British Empire is not a thing to destroy; it is a thing to rescue." He boldly proposes certain drastic remedies for an ailing and suspicious world. There should be a federal super-government, with power to enforce its decisions. We must have less of that absurdity: "Our country, right or wrong." We must feel in our bones the increasing frightfulness of war. We must recognize that peace is *against* nature, as it is against a chauvinistic patriotism. To espouse this cause may well mean persecution by the entrenched interests and by the "salutable minority" (almost any daily paper will prove that point). So a genuine movement for world peace will not be a pink tea affair; it must be "a revolutionary movement in politics, finance, industrialism, and the daily life alike."

There can be no doubt about the earnestness, the glow, the general rightness of his message. The doubt is concerning its reception and our will to take the long road. "We too live and pass," concludes Wells, "reflecting for our moment, and in the measure of our capacity, the light and wonder of the Eternal."



## Books of Special Interest

### Mary Todd Lincoln

MARY, WIFE OF LINCOLN. By KATHERINE HELM. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928. \$4.

Reviewed by L. E. ROBINSON

LINCOLN'S biographers have necessarily considered the personality of his wife, though seldom with sympathetic phrase. The reports of her life, including that of the unfinished Beveridge "Lincoln," have rested primarily upon testimony so insufficient that, to attempt a life of Lincoln himself upon similarly restricted evidence would get us nowhere. Biographers have very naturally lavished their interest upon Mr. Lincoln; quite as naturally they have been far less concerned to hunt down the evidence needed for a trustworthy estimate of her life and character. Material useful for a biography of Mrs. Lincoln, in addition to what we already have, may lie among the ten thousand or more letters and papers which Robert Todd Lincoln deposited a few years ago in the Library of Congress, with the stipulation that they should not be inspected until 1947.

A contribution of some value to an understanding of Mrs. Lincoln has been made by her niece, Katherine Helm, in her "Mary, Wife of Lincoln." Miss Helm is the daughter of Emilie Todd Helm, a half-sister to Mrs. Lincoln. Emilie Helm, eighteen years younger than Mrs. Lincoln, after the death of her husband, a Confederate general, at Chickamauga, lived for a time with the Lincolns at the White House. Miss Helm bases her account upon family traditions, her mother's reminiscences and war-time diary, and upon previously unpublished letters and telegrams written by Mrs. Lincoln and her husband, by Robert Todd Lincoln, and others.

Much of Miss Helm's story is unauthenticated. Her portrayal of Mary Todd's earlier years at Lexington, Kentucky, as well as of her life as the wife of Mr. Lincoln, is told with the flow and conversational detail of a charming fictional narrative. The reminiscences are too fully and confidently presented to be unsupported by footnotes or other means of identification.

There are, of course, references to historical events which the informed reader will know to be accurate or may easily verify. There is a great deal that contradicts the point of view with which Lincoln biographers, following the Herndon tradition, interpret Mrs. Lincoln. There is denial, for example, of the much-debated episode of Lincoln's frustration of his appointed marriage with Miss Todd on January first, 1841. Miss Helm's explanation of Lincoln's deep melancholy makes Miss Todd's flirtation with Stephen A. Douglas the heart of the trouble together with Lincoln's sense of his inability to provide for a wife who had been a "petted and fêted society girl," who had been accustomed in her father's home to "floors waxed and polished like mirrors."

Miss Helm's narrative intimates nothing of what Herndon referred to as "the tempestuous chapters" of Lincoln's married life. There were no outbursts of violent temper and no "broomstick" effervescences to disturb the family régime of plain living and high thinking. It is admitted that Mary Lincoln had once been an "incorrigible flirt"; she continued to be passionately fond of beautiful clothes and was her own seamstress; she was full of fun and an airy badinage puzzling "to a dull-witted person"; she had "a keen, almost uncanny, insight into the motives of men"; she distrusted Herndon's friendship for her husband; she was a painstaking and economical housekeeper, and carefully looked after Mr. Lincoln's health; she worshipped him, and both idolized their children; she read books for Lincoln, who so far respected her judgment that he "took no important step without consulting her."

There is a good deal of solid evidence of Mary and Abraham Lincoln's mutual love; the testimony of Whitney is as valid as anyone's on that point, and Mrs. Lincoln's letters, reproduced in Miss Helm's pages, cannot be jauntily disregarded. They are intelligent and sincere; they reveal in Mary Todd Lincoln nothing acidulous after tragic disappointments, but a woman of fine sensibilities and taste, with devotion and affection for her husband and her children.

Miss Helm's account of Mrs. Lincoln's

last years is historical material. There was much experience in the White House to sadden the life and break the spirit of this high-spirited woman. She possessed a native pride and self-dependence with which to confront the social and personal occasions for grief. From all we know of her to date, she had been impulsive and decisive—deficient in tact and patience; her husband, in spite of his powers of heart and mind, never threw off the infection of pioneerism and apparently made no special point of cultivating "those little links" of punctilio which were as significant for one Mary as for another.

But what of it? Miss Helm's well-written book contains at least enough source material to throw a ray of real light upon some of the moot questions that have lingered perplexingly about the personality of the quick-witted and sagacious Mary Todd Lincoln, who loved her Lincoln and from first to last believed in his greatness.

### Provincial Society

NOTHING IS SACRED. By JOSEPHINE HERBST. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc. 1928. \$2.

Reviewed by EDWARD T. BOOTH

IT is certainly not the intention of the author of this book to make an indictment of the American middle classes. That sort of thing is not done any more, of course. The provincial society she writes about has been grilled so thoroughly in the past ten years that only the most ingenuous readers can any longer inflate a feeling of superiority by attending processes against the business people of our small towns and cities. If the author were to write another novel about the social group that we may presume she lives in or any other she knows, we can be sure that her penetration and her complete "objectivity" would give us a similar report. There is none of the complacency of the "intellectual" joiner in her book, none of the familiar *snoobism* of those who have reached violently from the society she writes about.

Comparisons with the work of Ernest Hemingway are inescapable in this connection. If Josephine Herbst, for instance, had written "The Sun Also Rises," she would have pressed out of it all sentimentalizing and irony about "the lost generation." She would have cleared her mind altogether of the pathos that Hemingway, for the life of him, cannot help giving in to as he writes of the exasperated hedonists of the neo-romantic world he knows best.

"Nothing Is Sacred But Money" is the full title of the book, really, and let no one read into it any sentimental connotation, any note of romantic rebellion against the cash nexus. "Can I talk to you a minute?" says Harry Norland to his mother-in-law in the opening paragraph, and when his secret is out, the motivation of the novel is revealed in both negative and positive aspects. This bumptious joiner, who has stolen money from his lodge and knows that family pride will protect him from the consequences of the only unpardonable sin in a mercantile civilization, is the nucleus of the social malignancy that Josephine Herbst exhibits thereafter with perfect composure. In him and about him are all the steady dull aches and the paroxysms of pain experienced by the common garden or rotarian hedonists of our time. Their wretchedness is viewed steadily in the interrelation of pride and money-getting, and quite without "pity and irony."

When you died, they buried you, money was always found for the undertaker. If you stole, they scraped up enough to keep you from the pen. But to save your happiness, that was something no one understood as an emergency.

I am going to refuse to read into the last sentence, spoken by one of them, any special pleading on the part of the author for the exceptional couple of the novel who resist the unintermittent social suggestion that money is the chief good. For they posit another value and are as shamefully harassed and duped by it as any of the pluggers or go-getters. "They believe in love," as the saying is, and in "the free life," and you may see how their belief serves their interrelation of vanity with this other cardinal illusion.

But moralizing at the expense of a book which is quite without moralizing intent calls for an apology from the reviewer. By way of apology let the moralizing serve to throw into relief the chief merits of the novel, in which there is nothing of the sort. Not even a line of interpretive reporting, not a hint of emotional coloring. In "Nothing Is Sacred" the attitude of hardness and even-mindedness in the face of what we know to be the conditions of life in our time, or of any time, for that matter, have crystallized without a flaw.

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