

Farewell to Youth

THE WAY OF ECBEN. A Comedietta Involving a Gentleman. By JAMES BRANCH CABELL. New York: Robert M. McBride & Company. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by EMILY CLARK

THIS farewell to youth by Mr. Cabell has already, inevitably, been misunderstood by many persons. Perhaps Mr. Cabell places, publicly, a higher value upon youth than any person alive today. It is, he is the first to admit, a desperately uncomfortable state, to which he cries "Vale!" without too much regret. But it is also, he believes, the only state to which belong the glory and the freshness of the dream essential to a new creation. So, in one of the shortest of these chapters of the biography, which for want of a better word one calls novels, he says Hail and Farewell to Ettarre, the witch-woman, and to Horvendile, her faithful, unsatisfied poet-lover of the ages.

Alfgar, King of Ecben, who gives up his throne and his bride because of a brief, unfortunate glimpse of Ettarre, is rare among Cabell heroes, in that he has merited as a sub-title to his story "a Comedietta Involving a Gentleman." He is, I believe, the first gentleman to figure importantly in a Cabell story except Colonel Musgrave of Matocton in "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck." Mr. Cabell has dealt largely with poets, pawnbrokers, great leaders, and great noblemen of State and Church, but only, as I remember, on two occasions with gentlemen. These two books bring into the light an important fact: Mr. Cabell is not sufficiently skeptical to disbelieve in the existence of gentlemen, but he is sufficiently skeptical to believe that the fate of a true gentleman in a world which is neither just, rational, nor urbane is only a degree less tragic than the fate of a true poet. And this is merely another way of saying that Mr. Cabell, though often sad, is never cynical.



The first chapter of this book is concerned with war between Alfgar, the King of Ecben, and Ulf, the King of Rorn, caused by the desire of both of them for a princess called Ettaine, as lustrous in appearance, and as lustreless in mental and moral qualities as most of Mr. Cabell's flesh-and-blood women. At the moment of his victory and on the eve of his marriage King Alfgar is fleetingly visited by Ettarre, with her red-haired poet who first drew her from the grey wastes beyond the moon, heralded by the remote skirling of the music from behind the moon. And the next day he gives up his kingdom of Ecben and his bride, Ettaine, to his defeated rival, Ulf, of Rorn, to wander far from the set ways of life at the summoning of Ettarre. On the first lap of his journey he gives the strength of his hands to a leper who asks it in the king's name. Although Ulf is King of Ecben only through the grace of Alfgar he has proved himself royal by refusing to forsake his gods even when they have forsaken him. Thereafter, throughout his journey Alfgar yields his most valued possessions to requests made in the name of Ettarre and of the god of Ecben, whom he alone now worships; to the demand of the little people of Darvan that kings must pay for being kings, and to other unreasonable demands so phrased that a gentleman may not refuse them. The requirements of the little people of Darvan, maddened by the certainty that they cannot understand or defile that "very small, pure gleam of majesty" which has caused royal persons to be other than the inhabitants of Darvan, with their hunting-cry of "The King pays!" were, naturally, the most horrible and exacting that Alfgar was compelled to meet. For Alfgar, throughout his living, keeps to the old way of Ecben, which is to serve one god and one king and one lady *in domnei*.



His life, free of all practice of the creative arts, is as misguided as that of any poet, and when reminded by Ettarre herself that he has raised up a thick-witted and brutish king to the throne of Ecben, and caused his god to be overthrown, with himself as the single remaining worshipper, he replies that he has done all of this for the dream's sake, and is content to serve his dream. Whereby the author of Alfgar again proves, in his dealings with his creature, as this reviewer has said elsewhere, that he, although a poet, is closely akin also to the creature known as a Virginia gentleman; so closely akin that he is often both shocked and repelled by the looseness of his own lovely ladies, while not even faintly

disturbed by the fixed custom of his heroes to deal fairly with these ladies. Mr. Cabell possesses elements of Alfgar and Colonel Musgrave (whose ability to be shocked is not their only gentlemanly attribute) as recognizable as the elements which he also possesses of John Charteris and Felix Kenaston and Townsend of Lichfield. This is to be remembered in any consideration of him. He therefore deals as tenderly, even as pitifully, with true gentlemen as with true poets, recognizing that by right of the utterly irrational dream which they serve they are, of necessity, denied all the rewards of life except an occasional glimpse of the dream which must at last destroy them. So Alfgar, like Rudolph Musgrave, lacking the blood and iron which supports the Cabell heroes engaged with war, or with great affairs of Church and State, must go his way unaided even by the sturdy strain of caddishness which supports most poets, unafflicted as they are by the disastrous obligations of Alfgar and of Colonel Musgrave of Virginia.

So, when old Alfgar, ignoring, unlike most Cabell heroes, all allurements of ladies by the way, finally wins to Ettarre and finds her, to his ancient eyes, very much like any other woman, but, "after all, quite nice looking, in an unpretentious fashion," he kneels and kisses her hands, for she is "his appointed lady *in domnei*." When he tells her that he has kept faith with the old way of Ecben and with her, Ettarre, who understands a gentleman as she understands a poet, replies: "You have kept faith, instead, with Alfgar, after your own fashion, and after no fashion which became a well-thought-of monarch?" The witch-woman knows that it has been always the habit of gentlemen to imagine themselves faithful to the past, modestly oblivious of the extreme rarity of their own kind in any age.



SCHWEIK: THE GOOD SOLDIER.

It is in the colophon following this meeting that Mr. Cabell, now the fifty-year-old author of twenty chapters of the Biography, takes formal leave of Ettarre, Poictesme, and a poet's youth, to which the first two owe their existence. This farewell, in addition to being misunderstood, has, of course, been plentifully and heartily disagreed with. At a period when youth for both men and women is being indefinitely prolonged it is not pleasant to feel that, however convincing this atmosphere of youth, it is, to Mr. Cabell at least, spurious. His belief is already recorded that love outside the garden between dawn and sunrise is not love but lust. His belief is already recorded that women are beautiful only to the eyes of youth, and that to a mature vision every woman's appearance is inadequate, or too "carefully enhanced and edited" to own any quality of glamor. Now in his ending of the Biography his belief is recorded that after forty-five a writer may improve only in his control of his material, and that even this improvement may avail him but little. None of these beliefs is exhilarating to contemplate. They are, to the contrary, so depressing that one does not need to be forty-five to feel an impulse toward argument. Here, however, there will be no argument, because Mr. Cabell has at least sufficient basis for his beliefs to lead an adversary into deep waters, and because Mr. Cabell has stated these beliefs so very beautifully. This short chapter of the Biography of Dom Manuel's descendants is completely in harmony with the preceding chapters. And in no one of the twenty chapters has Mr. Cabell failed in any detail of service to the dream which, doubly cursed, he is constrained to follow.

Two new volumes of the Verney Letters are shortly to be published in England. Continuing the story first published some forty years ago, they record the doings of the Verneys in the reigns of William III and George I. They have been edited by Margaret Lady Verney.

Ammunition of Laughter

SCHWEIK: THE GOOD SOLDIER. By JAROSLAV HASEK. Translated by PAUL SELVER. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1930.

Reviewed by JOHN PALMER GAVIT

HAVING spent a couple of months last Fall in Czechoslovakia, I was prepared to read with uncommon interest this story of the adventures of a Czech soldier in the war. So I did—with that sense of familiarity with local color that one feels when he sees in a book the name of a foreign place through which he passed once in a train. . . . "Oh, yes, I know that place; I have been there." I was not expecting to find a substantial contribution to the world's literature.

Bohemia was a part of Austria-Hungary; therefore the Czechs were from the point of view of the Allies alien enemies; it took them a long time to discover that they were even more keenly interested in the defeat of the Hapsburgs than the Allies themselves. Americans scarcely understood that banner carried by the Bohemians in one of our Liberty Loan parades, I think at Cleveland:

*Americans, be not discouraged—
We have been fighting these tyrants
For three hundred years!*

Czech regiments were in the Austrian line on all the fronts, especially against the Russians and Italians; but they were always disaffected, unreliable. The Austrians knew that well enough; they not only brigaded them with more loyal units, but put over them Austrian officers and even compelled them to fight under the menace of machine-guns. I believe the story that they were shot by scores and hundreds from the rear, by their own officers and batteries, for failure (suspected or actual) to make good in the Austrian cause. It is notorious that whole regiments of Czechs and Slovaks simply melted away, vanished unaccountably from the fronts. In known instances they went over *en masse* to the enemy and turned their bayonets the other way about. Woe betide when they fell again into the hands of their former commanders!

Well, this book *laughed* thousands of Czechs into mutiny. In its way it was one of the deadliest weapons in the Allied cause. On its own account it belongs in history with the tank and the *Soixante-Quinze*. To the work of the stars in their courses, fighting for the destruction of the Hapsburgs, it added laughter. I can understand the failure of the Austrian authorities to shoot this fellow Hasek, only on the theory that in their characteristic congenital stupidity they did not appreciate the lethal nature of this blade in their vitals.

The author was a Czech journalist. Returning to Prague after a long period of war-imprisonment in Russia, he began in 1916 the weekly publication of this chronicle of the military exploits of an incredibly simple-hearted and gullible Czech rear-rank private soldier from the streets of Prague, who with ostentatiously selfless loyalty served meticulously, ridiculously, the various kinds of shoulder-strapped fools commanding him. In all continental Europe, especially in Czechoslovakia and Germany, they are holding their sides over this book; though it enrages the militarists and the martinets of all the armies because it exhibits more than any other that I can recall the screaming absurdity of the people and business of war. This is inevitably undermining, a permanent spiker of guns; as much so as "All Quiet on the Western Front," "Journey's End," or any other of the solemn things. More so—men can fight horrified, disgusted, frightened; they cannot fight laughing.

It was the author's intention to continue the series; he died leaving Schweik just arrived on the Russian front. We cannot guess what further ludicrous adventures awaited him. Evidently he was not to die, because the author's preface describes him post-war as walking about the streets of Prague oblivious of "his significance in the history of the great new epoch." He adds that Schweik "did not set fire to the temple of the goddess at Ephesus, like that fool of a Hereostratus, merely in order to get his name into the newspapers and the school reading-books. And that, in itself, is enough."

It is intensely and intentionally funny, answer sufficient to any suggestion that the Czechs lack humor. Deliciously Rabelaisian in spots—a true satire. On the whole we have a new literary creation. In my judgment Schweik falls not very far short of Don Quixote and Tartarin—this book is going to be a classic, or I miss my guess.

The BOWLING GREEN

"The Drink"

I READ in Edith Sitwell's charming *Life of Alexander Pope* that he sent a parcel of fresh-picked cherries to some ladies asking them particularly to return the wrapping paper with care. The sheets in which those cherries were bundled were part of his manuscript of the translation of *Homer*. It pleases me to think that cherries will taste even sweeter henceforward, now I know that pretty episode. They should; so much larger is poetry than the things it touches.

I saw a poet yesterday: my old Endymion. He will not mind my giving him our remindful nickname; few will identify. He was looking well, handsome, even prosperous; perhaps because he has not been writing much poetry. He looked pinker and plumper than of old, and when I complimented him thereon he said it was Drink. He sat, demure as usual, during miscellaneous lunch-table palaver; how charmingly, when he was fain to leave, he slid off from the group, leaving in a quiet ripple, no unnecessary splash. I God-blessed him in my heart, for I am happy to be one of those conspirators who know how great a poet he is. I can prove it to you in a moment—

But what, I am thinking, does a poet drink; what must a poet drink? What porridge had John Keats? Anyone "with the curse in his or her blood that intensifies experience and makes moments beautiful or terrible beyond the comprehension of the cool outside observer," what drug may make him master of his hour?

What was that comic proposition that someone, Macaulay or some other vast rhetorician, once debated for our schoolboy task—That as civilization advances poetry necessarily declines? It is very likely true in the individual; as he grows established, busied, incumbent upon prosperous fact, mercifully the flame declines into less troublesome ember; but who cares gravely to argue so huge a nonsense. Poetry comes with anger, hunger and dismay; it does not often visit groups of citizens sitting down to be literary together, and would rightly appal them if it did.

What can a poet drink? For broken hours and idiot horrors, for beauty seen and unclaimed, for the hole in the mind that lets loveliness escape, for sharp edges of Time that cut and bruise, what pharmacist can cater? "Hast thou, O pellucid, medicine for case like mine?" cried Walt Whitman. What savage acids of darkness had he tasted who wrote:—

Alas! 'tis true I have gone here and there,
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gored mine our thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,

Made old offences of affections new;
Most true it is that I have look'd on truth
Askance and strangely. . . .

And then going on to the triumphant conclusion—perhaps the supreme tenderness of intimacy in our language, where the double adverb suggests the double beauty of what it praises—

Even to they pure and most loving breath.

Yes, "what's in the brain that ink may character?" What did the poet drink to learn to whisper so? There was a young rhymist once who used the same pretty trick in a madrigal, doubling his bosomy adjective; was he the less pleased with his cleverness because he had to explain it to the gay mammal herself? Or the less proud when he learned that Shakespeare had done it too? What they drink puts them even with Shakespeare; there are more than two gentlemen in Verona.

What must the poet drink? He does not know and cannot tell. He gazes with amazement on the innocent bravado of editors and critics: think of the incredible perils of conducting a literary magazine, which deals at least part of the time with people trying to feel and say the truth. The word *magazine*, he does not forget, once meant a place that was likely to explode. He lives emotionally beyond his means; in what court of chancery may he petition for receivership? Whatever goblet you bring him,

drug it deep with laughter. Three fingers of laughter, bartender; and I'll Say When.

My mature Endymion slipped away; we are all always slipping away. He had work to do; we all always have work to do; sometimes the work does us. If Wordsworth thought the world was too much with him in the Lakes, what would he have felt on West 45th Street? In the drink the poet must learn to mix for himself there must be the ingredient none knows how to name. Shall we call it Wholeness, or Oneness, or Simplicity? Call it what you please, it brings for an instant the drowsy numbness Keats mentioned; and then words neither numb nor drowsy. It brings clean certainty; not the negatives of philosophy but the positives of intuition, the continuous integrality of life. Then he catches up with Time by standing still, and standing so, in an air of dreadful clearness, he knows how simple all is. The philtre scalds in the throat but it goes to the Right Spot. Consciousness is made whole, seeing is believing. A wormhole drilled smooth in dead wood, the fuzz of frost on a mouldered twig, the taste of cold water, an axe-blade going through the billet at one stroke, were one winter morning's analogies for that feeling. Everything becomes analogy, of which is the Kingdom of Heaven. Then—again! quote my old Endymion—he drinks honey from the poisoned lips of life.

What did I have in mind when I said there are still great poets? This:—

O Love, a thousand, thousand voices,
From night to dawn, from dawn to night,
Have cried the passion of their choices
To orb your name and keep it bright,

Until, however tides may vary
At neap or ebb of life and breath,
Your influence is planetary
Upon this body of our death,

And that dark sea that takes the dying
Kindles along its coasts to flame
For thousand, thousand voices crying
The exaltation of your name.

He slipped away, he went about his affairs. I wonder if he knew how much of my love went with him. And he had given me just the drink I needed.

* * *

Captain Felix Riesenbergs, that always pungent person, has been writing in the *Nautical Gazette* of the extensive works of the late Admiral Mahan. I find the following:

Like so many old whales, Mahan apparently went Christian for a dog watch or so, as shown by his writings, but he switched his pen back to the sea again, leaving the nebulous charting of Celestial regions to the regular licensed personnel. I can work up no steam on items such as "Freedom in the Use of the Prayer Book." The only prayer books we knew at sea, in the good old days, were pieces of flat sandstone, used in whitening decks, not souls; and we got right down on our sore knees with them, sloshing around in the wet and sand.

* * *

The advertising of educational institutions is usually fairly conventional. Therefore I confess to a sparkle of admiration for the management of Seton Hill College, Greensburg, Pa. In *The Commonwealth* it describes itself as follows:—

An Eastern School with Western Vigor
A Northern School with Southern Charm
43 Minutes from Pittsburgh
500 Minutes from Broadway

* * *

I was asked to contribute a prefatory note to a certain book shortly to be published. I read the galley proofs, and found that it was necessary to speak with considerable candor. I tried to do so, and was amused when the publisher, with most courteous embarrassments, confessed that he dared not use the preface because he thought it would ruin the sale of the book.

I've been wondering whether he was correct? As a test, I reprint here the preface I wrote, without identifying the book to which it refers. I believe that this preface, instead of scotching the sale, might perhaps have aroused some curiosity in hesitating purchasers:—

PREFACE TO "—"

This book represents (for weal or woe) almost the ultimate form of "modernism," which consists partly in making a book almost unreadable to simple people. For this is not literature in the customary

sense. It is a form of signalling. It is a series of crackling telegraphic staccatoes. To those who prefer literature to be readable it will be horrifying, and frequently obscene. It can be justly considered as decadent, morbid, hateful, and supremely dull. But it is also a thrilling exhibition of Latin wit. It is a sort of soufflé of brandy and ice cream. You need not let the Bertha M. Clay method of paraphrasing obscure from you the really Voltairean calibre of some of the content.

Signor — (I am so ignorant that I do not even know if that is the mannerly way to refer to him) is said by his translator to have the monstrous fecundity of Spain. There is a legend about his keeping seven fountain pens, filled with red ink, in his waistcoat pocket. Well, he is still young, not even forty. He is more likely to live by the distilled perfection of some of those sad little epigrams that were once translated in *The Bookman* than by sprawling brilliant burlesques. But he has the prime quality of perfect health; he has written his book his own way and to please himself. There is hardly a rule of prudence or judgment that he has not broken. Certainly he and his translator between them have made this book a problem for an anxious publisher. I doubt if I ever saw a book that would be more difficult to sell. Of the people who will read it not one in a thousand would be patient enough to discern the beautiful, sensitive and merciless imagination that lurks among a great deal of tosh.

He has a formula for his sententiousness; it is even a familiar one, but it has always been sure-fire. "Something of Palm Sunday morning constantly pervades the city," he says of his fantastic movie capital, "even on Monday nights." Such is the formula, and it's delightful; but it is small beer compared to the really noble intuition of his finer passages. See the passage about the speeding movie stars lolling in their de luxe car which is compared to a moving bath tub, from which their heads baskingly emerge.

The man is a poet; I dare say he may even have written poetry, with one of those seven fountain pens. This is an extremely morbid and cerebral book, extremely witty, and most disrespectful to a great industry. It should be read a little bit at a time; preferably aloud, in a carefully chosen gathering. It is prickly with remarkable crystals of rock-salt. It will be badly received, and inadequately read; but it pleases me greatly to think of a man having a mind like that. I should know his mind again if I met it anywhere.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Scamp or Hero?

THAT DEVIL WILKES. By R. W. POSTGATE.
New York: The Vanguard Press. 1929. \$4.

Reviewed by JOHN W. S. ALLISON

THIS book possesses the double advantage of an interesting subject and an interesting author. Wilkes, in England and in America, has often been a subject for lively discussion. His latest biographer, Mr. Postgate, is a brilliant and promising member of a group of Young Liberal writers in England. Mr. Postgate is the right kind of author for Wilkes, and Wilkes fits Mr. Postgate's vivid and picturesque style.

In England, Wilkes has often been regarded as a scamp, while, in America, he has enjoyed a certain reputation for heroism. The treatment that he receives in this biography is a combination of these two opinions. But his biographer is at pains to impress on his readers that Wilkes was more an echo of the great men to whom he attached himself, than a figure who stood out alone on his own original platform. Accidents played a great part in his stormy and varied life, and the rapid ascents and descents that he experienced were frequently, but not always, due to circumstances over which he had no personal control. His only complete and almost invariable victories were *conquêtes d'amour*. Chapter VII entitled "Wilkes's Return" is by far the most interesting chapter in the book. It includes a brilliant description of London at the middle of Wilkes's century, but has not the author dressed up his eighteenth century a bit to fit Wilkes?

A play is to be produced in London very shortly dealing with the lives of Charles and Mary Lamb. The title is "Charles and Mary" and it is written by Miss Joan Temple, the author of "The Widow's Cruise." Among the characters are Wordsworth and Coleridge.