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Humor and the 'Twenties

AMERICAN literature that is worthy the name stands now squarely on its own feet. It owes nothing to British literature except what both draw from a common tradition, and a share of the criss-cross of tendency which unites all contemporary literatures. American fiction particularly has developed traits so striking and so entirely indigenous that no one can mistake its origin. In form, in substance, and in style the differential is so great as to warrant the question sometimes whether the reaction against imitativeness has not carried us into eccentricity. With a national history now seen to provide themes of the highest importance for drama, poetry, and fiction, with a contemporary scene unequalled in activity and variety, the American novelist (it would seem) has only to be as productive as the country he writes about. He is a part of it, of course, and this explains some of his deficiencies in depth and the finer shading of character in which he still suffers in any comparison with European literature. It does not explain the frequent lack in really good American fiction of the rather important quality of humor.

Is white America essentially unhumorous? We have never thought so. And yet a comparison between leading American novels by oncoming writers and leading British novels makes this difference almost startling. A difference in elegance, which favors the British, was perhaps to be expected, and not too much regretted. A difference in honesty, in the grip of the writer upon apparent reality, which very decidedly favors the Americans, was not to be expected, but is there. The British novel, where it has not gone into psychological subtlety with Virginia Woolf, has become hearty, pleasant, picturesque, and a little sentimental, with Priestley, Francis Brett Young, Neil Bell, and the later Galsworthy. It seems a little *vieux jeu*, no matter how agreeable, beside the hard, sharp outlines and new (and usually unsympathetic) characters, of the American books of, say, Hemingway, and Faulkner, and Evelyn Scott. An essay could be written in comparison of "The Forsyte Saga" and Evelyn Scott's recently published "Calendar of Sin," also a "saga"; and let it be said that if in composition, in depth of character study, and in style, "The Forsyte Saga" is much superior, many of the scenes in the later sections of Galsworthy seem thin and soft beside the extraordinary canvas which Mrs. Scott has crowded with transcripts of the kind of American life which our earlier novelists concealed from us.

One feels in these new American writers a sense of power, a scope, a conscious skill in the transcription of fresh and unrecorded life, which is much more like the sensation which the nineteenth century Russians gave us than anything in English since Hardy. They lack suavity; they lack the will to please, which, when not perverted, is a very important factor, especially in fiction and drama, but they make such delightful books as "All Passion Spent," or "Return I Dare Not," or "The Square Circle," or "Precious Porce-lain" seem a little like "La Traviata" sung at the Metropolitan; and beside them the subtle Virginia Woolf is an abbé in a salon talking intricate refinements while the crowds jostle without.

And yet they write without humor, and see life, so far, almost entirely in two di-

(Continued on page 328)



COWPER'S BIRTHPLACE.
FROM AN ORIGINAL WATERCOLOR.

The Tragedy of Cowper

By NEILSON CAMPBELL HANNAY

BETWEEN genius and suffering a mystical but real relationship subsists. That the English poets have drunk deep of the waters of Marah, the most haphazard observation will attest. About all we know of ancient Deor is that he had much to lament. A May morning on Malvern hills cannot assuage the grief of the champion of Piers Plowman. Chaucer had far more to complain about than his empty purse. The buoyant Shakespeare of the high comedies surely imbibed a bitter potion and felt the stinging blasts of merciless experience as he crossed the ridge between the centuries and descended into the depths of "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" and "Othello" and "Lear." Milton's organ reveals its grand, severe solemnity when domestic disappointment and political tribulation have thoroughly afflicted him. The tumultuous young manhood of William Wordsworth was transmuted into permanent serenity, but only after the long tribulation over his half Gallic daughter had tempered his spirit. And what more shall I say? for the time would fail me to tell of Spenser, Cowley, Swift, Collins, of Burns and Chatterton and Keats and Lamb, of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett, who through suffering subdued kingdoms of ideality, obtained promises of a better world, stopped the mouths of leonine pessimists, quenched the power of the ardent Quarterly, escaped the edge of the Edinburgh, from weakness won to strength, waxed valiant in the contest of wits, and proved themselves superior to hosts of aliens.

Let there be no misunderstanding: suffering is not the cause of genius, though genius is often a cause of suffering (let the Carlyles bear testimony). Suffering

The Eagles

By DANIEL HENDERSON

NOT like a wolf shall Death leap;
Nor tracking my way as a beagle.
Death, the terrible eagle,
Singles me out from his height;
Bides the time for his sweep.

I shall follow my wont; I shall keep
The road he marks for his flight.
I shall vision a goal to be won—
But wings will darken the sun.

is, perhaps, not a necessary condition of genius. But the evidence is abundant that suffering is usually a concomitant of genius, and that, when present, it always qualifies it. Genius implies sincerity, and suffering purges; genius implies energy, and suffering challenges; genius implies concentration, and suffering may effect self-organization.

This qualifying influence of suffering is implicit in the entire mature life of William Cowper—the bicentenary of whose birth (November 26th, N. S.) the thoughtful are wistfully recalling at this time—and affords a key to the rationale of his genius. How and to what extent did suffering qualify this genius? Whether or not a poet, or indeed any man, profits by his experiences depends, of course, upon himself. Suffering probably increased the rebellion of Byron; it seems to have accelerated the disintegration of Coleridge; but Cowper it restrained, intensified, expanded.

As a youth at Westminster School he was fond of sport and gay frivolity. As a young barrister in the Temple he was buoyant, somewhat pretentious in dress and manners, lighthearted and irresponsible and flirtatious, delighting chiefly in merriment and the cleverness of the members of the Nonsense Club, who, like himself, had a flair for things literary, and were interested mainly in the objective side of purely mundane life. Then with terrific force broke the storm, which a decade earlier had threatened, but which had blown out to sea at Southampton. The familiar tragedy of St. Albans followed, and at its close Cowper was a changed man. I am thinking now not mainly of his embarkation upon that middle period, that Mediterranean of intemperate and extravagant pietism at Huntingdon and during the early years at Olney; I am reflecting rather upon the more strictly psychological alteration that took place in him. Henceforth the man who previously found the zest of life in carefree social intercourse becomes the devotee of solitude or of the most restricted and selective fellowship. He who had delighted in a bizarre variety and complexity of interests now loves simplicity, and will have no more of the sophisticated city. Interest in externals gives place to introspection, sometimes excessively mor-

(Continued on page 328)

Playboys of Britain

BERNARD SHAW. By FRANK HARRIS.

New York: Simon & Schuster. 1931. \$5.

Reviewed by TEMPLE SCOTT

THIS is not a biography nor is it a literary study; it is rather an attempt to portray Shaw's character as a man, and to sum up his work as a dramatist, as these affected the mind and heart of Frank Harris. The result is, as might have been expected, a remarkably interesting and decidedly readable book. The publication should appeal strongly to all interested in contemporary letters. Harris wrote nothing better than this contemporary portrait of Shaw, and he made portrait painting in words the chief activity of his life. If many of these portraits were not faithful likenesses they were always drawn with a masterly hand. This one of Shaw, however, comes very close to being both bravely executed and true to the living reality.

The title page tells us that it is an unauthorized biography; yet Shaw, in a postscript to this work, writes that the proofs of the book were left to him to correct on the writer's death last August. It is true that prefixed to the work are printed several letters from Shaw in which he tries to prevent Harris from undertaking the writing and denying him authorization; but he does, in the end, give a kind of qualified consent, and he does correct the proofs. "I have had to do many odd jobs in my time," he writes in the Postscript to the work, "but this one is quite the oddest." I dare to make the suggestion that Shaw gave himself to this oddest of jobs more from the charity of his heart than out of fear of what Harris might say of him. This is not the first time he has helped a friend in need.

Frank Harris is dead. His perturbed spirit is at rest. Yet, as one reads the pages of this palpitating study of his friend and more successful contemporary, one cannot help feeling a deep regret that his magnetic and picturesque personality will never again cross the stage of this life. Harris prints a long letter of Shaw's in which he, Harris, is held up as a ruffian. "Set a ruffian to catch a ruffian," writes Shaw by way of excuse. If Shaw correctly names him, then there have been few such captivating ruffians in this world of ours, with so compelling a personality and so delightful a spirit. Whatever Harris's faults may have been he was ever true to himself and, therefore, never really false. He could assume some virtues which he did not possess, but he could not carry them as natural attributes.

(Continued on page 328)

This Week

"THE WET PARADE."

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT.

"RETURN I DARE NOT."

Reviewed by GRACE FRANK.

"GREEN MEMORY."

Reviewed by HENRY WALCOTT BOYNTON.

ALICE AND THE AQUITANIA. II.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

ROUND ABOUT PARNASSUS.

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

Next Week

CHRISTMAS BOOK NUMBER.

butes. The truth is that Harris was a disillusioned idealist and, in his disappointment, went, like all such, to the other extreme in his contact with the world. Shaw tells us in the Postscript that Harris "was firmly persuaded that the human race consisted entirely of Frank Harris." I should prefer to say that he was firmly persuaded that the human race had only one Frank Harris in it, and that he stressed this estimate of himself in his relations with others to the point of such egregious self-assertion that he became reckless in his impatience with the average human being for not making larger room for him on this globe. He has not been alone in over-indulgence in this kind of self-esteem. Most authors have had and continue to have a fair modicum of it. But Harris was alone in a romantic carelessness, in his heedless exercise of this necessary attribute. Had he been as diplomatic in his behavior as he was true to himself, he would never have fallen into the desperate straits of his last years. Indeed, he might even have achieved wealth, even as his friend Shaw has done.

It surely must afford a strange interlude in this tragi-comedy of life to sit and watch Frank Harris writing a biography of Bernard Shaw and Bernard Shaw carefully correcting what Frank Harris wrote. As one reads this book, Harrisian onslaughts on Shaw and Shawian retorts on Harris, one is reminded of Leech's drawing in A Beckett's "Comic History of England" of the Battle of Bosworth Field, where Richard the Third and Henry of Richmond are depicted at swords' point with wooden, tin-foiled weapons, heaving at each other with dreadful countenances, to the intense and rapturous enjoyment of the "gods" in the gallery and the groundlings in the pit. The gods and the groundlings will enjoy this book hugely.

But this is but a passing vision. There is a true and even an intense seriousness in Harris's so-called biography. He does his best to act the biographer's part despite his hatred of details, but his impatience to get at his subject with his own bare hands is evident on every page. He cannot keep himself out of these pages try as he will. This may be bad biography, but it's good Harrisian fun, though there is much here that will furnish food for serious thinking in days to come.

Harris got what details he sets down of Shaw's nonage from Shaw himself, and he is careful to print Shaw's letters to him in full in which such information is furnished. We are told in some detail of the almost Bohemian ménage in which Shaw was born, and the privations the boy lived through from his childhood to his young manhood. George Carr Shaw, the father, was the relative of a Bushy Park baronet. He was also a jovial liver, airily unconcerned about the necessity to provide for a wife and a home. The mother was a lady of undoubted ability but rather careless as to how her conduct appeared to the world either as a lady or as a mother. She left her husband in Dublin and joined up with a "Vandaleur Lee" to conduct a school of singing in

London. The relationship, however, was purely a business one and promptly ended when Lee attempted to pose as a *maestro*. Mrs. Shaw would have none of that kind of charlatanism, and she thenceforth made her living as best she could by teaching singing alone.

Young Shaw, however, remained in Dublin with his father who sent his wife an allowance of one pound a week. The boy went to school for a time and when he left school he became a clerk to a real estate firm. After five years of this kind of drudgery he left Dublin and his father and went to London to try his fortune there. At this time he was twenty years of age and the lean years which followed were many in number and sufficiently painful in suffering to become sored in Shaw's memory for the rest of his life. How Shaw lived through them and where he arrived after his experience of them is vividly sketched in the pages of this book. This part of Shaw's story has already been given in the authorized biography of him by Dr. Archibald Henderson, but it bears the retelling in Frank Harris's words since Harris had not a little to do with helping Shaw in those days of distress, and lifting him out of his Slough of Despond.

Of course, what is written in this book is not always pertinent to the subject. That would be impossible in any writing by Frank Harris; for whenever he can introduce himself he carefully and also appropriately does so. If this be a technical fault as an impertinent intrusion the reader enjoys the intrusion. It should rather be taken as a musical accompaniment, in appropriate tempo, to the main theme.

One such intrusion is especially arresting. It is where Harris prints in its entirety the long letter Shaw wrote to him on September 27, 1918. In that letter Shaw hits Harris right between the eyes. Harris gives a snort but takes the blow smilingly, merely countering with a gloved left: "In the summary of opinion about him by his friends and enemies," writes Harris of Shaw, "I think next to Wilde's was George Moore's. Moore put Shaw down as 'the funny man in a boarding house.' Huxley said he was a 'wingless angel with an old-maid's temperament.' De Casseres classified him as a 'fifth carbon copy of Voltaire who would never be great because his humor was not tragic.'" All this, of course, is no answer to Shaw's letter, but it makes good reading for the general. An even more astonishing intrusion of Harris in this biography is where he prints Shaw's long explanatory letter, dated July 14, 1918, of what he meant when he called Harris a ruffian. It is not possible to quote this letter in full because of its length, but it is permissible to speculate as to what purpose it can possibly have served Harris to exhibit himself thus in public castigated by a master in the use of the cat-o'-nine-tails.

"I've had my fights with Shaw," he writes, "and one was because he publicly characterized me as a ruffian. I didn't know then he was paying me the homage the serf pays his hero. He wrote me the

long letter to show he, too, was a ruffian, but of an inferior strain." This may be a retort courteous, in the vein of badinage, but it leaves Harris where Shaw's mocking laughter had been intended to leave him—in the stocks for other people to jeer at. A strange interlude, indeed, is this biography of England's greatest living dramatist!

A review of this book seems scarcely necessary seeing that Shaw himself has supplied one in his Postscript. When Harris tries a feint or hits Shaw in the text, Shaw carefully counters or parries it in this Postscript, always with a smile, and often landing an uppercut with his left by way of a reminder that he is very much on the mat. "It is hardly an exaggeration to say," he writes,

that he [Harris] ultimately quarreled with everybody but Shakespeare, and this book contains such attempts to quarrel with me. But I bear no malice, as he is at bottom trying to quarrel with a scheme of things in which fellows like me crawl between earth and Heaven, and snatch little successes in which there is no sort of justice and fundamentally no reality.

Shaw is here scarcely fair to himself for even Harris, in his berserker fashion,



FROM A CARICATURE OF SHAW, BY JOSEPH SIMPSON, REPRODUCED IN DAN RIDER'S "ADVENTURES WITH BERNARD SHAW" (LONDON: MORLEY AND MITCHELL KENNERLEY).

admits that Shaw, so far from "snatching little successes" most certainly labored and even suffered hunger to earn those successes. It would perhaps be nearer the truth to say that Shaw was gifted by nature and taught by experience to fall in line with a scheme of things in which "there is no sort of justice and fundamentally no reality." Harris, on the contrary, did believe that there was a justice and a fundamental reality. Unhappily for him he did not understand what Shakespeare fully understood and Keats knew so well, that the world is not concerned with justice but furnishes only the material for genius to use as a means for soul-making. It is somewhat surprising to find that so profound a student of Shakespeare as Harris was, had not read this meaning into the famous phrase, "Ripeness is all." Probably Harris was not to be satisfied with ripeness, but must also have aimed at achieving "success." He did manage to snatch many successes. These successes, however, seemed to cast more alluring shadows, and it was in chasing these shadows that he let the successes drop and so found himself poor indeed in the end. His friend Shaw was a saner and a more self-denying man, as this book amply demonstrates.

Shaw recognizes Harris's gifts with large appreciation. Mrs. Julius Frankau surprised him by telling him that Harris was of an exquisitely sensitive nature; but he explains that his own experiences "which included nearly ten years of apparently nearly hopeless failure, had hardened me to such a degree that I lost all sensitiveness to any criticism but my self-criticism. It is impossible to acquire hardness," he adds, "and retain a sympathetic understanding of how something that falls on you with the weight of a fly's foot can sting apparently tougher men like the lash of a whip." He came

to know "that Harris could not bear the spurs that patient merit from the unworthy takes with any sort of equanimity."

The subject of sex was an obsession with Frank Harris. It was his King Charles's Head, and cropped up on the slightest provocation whenever he put pencil to paper. It was to be expected that it would form a feature in this story of Shaw's life, and it does. Harris asked Shaw for facts as to his relations with women, and when Shaw sidetracked the request, Harris so persistently pushed him for information that Shaw finally wrote the letter, dated June 24, 1930, which is printed in the chapter entitled "Shaw's Sex Credo." It is a frank and full statement, but it adds very little passion-color to the portrait Harris had already sketched in the first part of this chapter, with colors from his own palette.

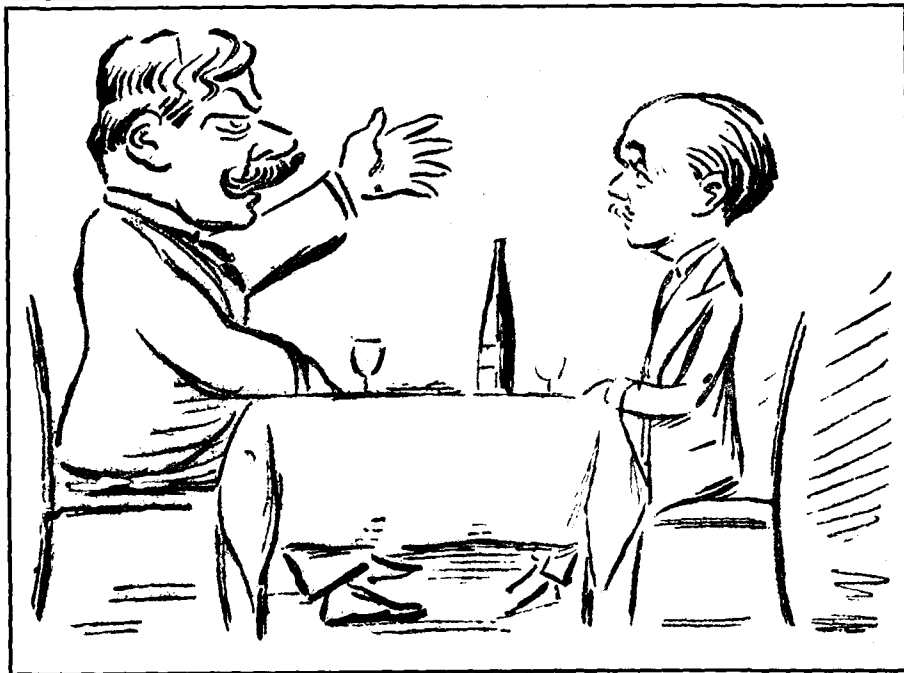
A reader of this biography feels himself almost impelled to think of the biographer rather than of his subject, because of the striking contrast Harris builds up between himself and Shaw. Out of this contrast a picture of Shaw is precipitated, less heroic, of course, than the picture of himself, yet bearing a speaking likeness to the living original. How far this likeness is true to life, the reader must decide for himself, after he has read what Shaw has to say of it in his Postscript.

Harris lived on the plane of the imagination, while Shaw struggled manfully on what he calls "the prosaic plane of every-day life." But as Shaw rightly points out, Harris mixed the two planes, and thus got into difficulties and incurred maledictions, a course of life which moves Shaw to suggest the following rather biting epitaph on his friend:

Here lies a man of letters who hated cruelty and injustice and bad art, and never spared them in his own interest.
R. I. P.

Shaw tells us in his Postscript that Harris, instead of using the facts which were given him for the making of this biography, put in instead a good deal of guesswork.

His guesses, he adds, were not always successful; some of them were miles off the mark. . . . Even when he had obtained information from me directly he could not jettison the guesses that conflicted with it, and continued to write with the information and the imaginative conjecture running in his head concurrently and coming uppermost alternately, thereby landing himself in obvious contradictions. I have got rid of the contradictions on the objective plane by simply supplying or correcting the facts. . . . But I have made no attempt to reconcile the subjective contradictions, even when these have arisen through his slips backwards between conjectural fiction and accurate information. . . . I could not, however, save Frank Harris from doing himself some injustice in this book. His list of the passions that life offers to the dramatic poet; love, jealousy, envy, the will to power; passions as primitive as they are enduring, would put him out of court in dealing with humanity in its highest stage of evolution, or with society in its highest stage of civilization. If you are to rule out religious ecstasy, political Utopianism, the pursuit of knowledge and power over matter and circumstances as distinguished from vulgar ambition, the struggle in that pursuit to extend mental faculty, especially mathematical faculty, and the fixation in language, music, color, and form of the imaginative conceptions, thereby making their inspiration communicable, you have nothing left but savagery; and if Harris had been really limited, as he implies, to love, jealousy, envy, and ambition, he would obviously have been no more competent to write a book about my work than a Hollywood scenario inventor of writing a book about Einstein. His own work clears him of any such disqualification. He was a cold-blooded writer, even when his theme was sex, like the French "realist" writers who pleased him most. . . . I think that in every case when Frank Harris does not understand me, or any other of his contemporaries, the real difficulty is that he does not always understand himself. . . . Naturally, then, I do not endorse all the judgments in this book. Its scale of values, on which my sociological work appears so insignificant, and the most negligible sex episodes—or absence of episodes—appear of supreme importance, could be justified only in a book avowedly dealing with my sex history only. I never discussed sex with Frank
(Continued on page 328)



FRANK HARRIS AND THE ARTIST.
DRAWN BY MAX BEERBOHM.