

A Realistic Novel of Adolescent Struggles

PASSIONS SPIN THE PLOT. By Vardis Fisher. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

MR. FISHER is the young man who conceived the idea of taking the titles for a tetralogy of novels all from the sestet of one of George Meredith's best-known sonnets in "Modern Love." This goes Miss Rosamond Lehmann three better, who took only "Dusty Answer" from another Meredith sonnet.

In tragic life, Got wot
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:

We are betrayed by what is false within.

"In Tragic Life," Mr. Fisher has already used, and I hope he gets round to "God wot." God wot, I got thoroughly sick of Vridar, his hero, by the time I was through with Vridar's inhibitions and cowardly bullying and loutishness and pale-wormness. In the other novel we had a youngster reasonably—well, at least recognizably—plagued by sex, scared by it, almost ruined by his adolescent struggle with and against its power. The book had its impressiveness. The present book is not without its impressive moments. Mr. Fisher is an honest writer. "McClintock would take a virgin to church on Sunday and seduce her on Sunday eve." That gives a fillip. But I knew a man like that at college once. He was not a particular friend of mine. I have always detested the type. Therefore I don't like to read about them.

There is too much McClintock in this book. He is there for Vridar's sake, because "the way to perfection is through a series of disgusts." So he is as repellent as something called a man could well be. And, really, Vridar's chastity is just as disgusting. Well, there the book stands. You can take it or leave it. It is an honest book, written with an honest motive. And yet I should prefer to leave it. Now that I have read it, parts of it will probably linger with me for some time, particularly the narrow-minded viciousness with which Vridar attacks the girl his puppy-love had worshiped, after he finds out she has been promiscuous. It is hard to think back to one's youth and imagine how one would have felt had the same thing happened to oneself. Perhaps a certain kind of boy would have been as cruel to the girl, as stuffed with egomania. But Vridar is throughout the book such an intensely boring kind of egotist, such a "dumb bunny" to the limit, that one wonders just how any girl could ever have found him attractive in the first place.

I have always had a particular sympathy for "sensitive souls," as they are mockingly called. A sensitiveness does exist in cer-

tain spirits that is far superior to most of the evidences of life around them. But Vridar's agonies I found only occasionally heartrending. He more frequently irritated me profoundly. One wanted to exclaim, "Oh, so what? Get it over with; what are you trying to prove?" For if Mr. Fisher is trying to prove that "life is like that," it isn't. It is so only in unusual instances, which make the best copy.

What I really miss in Vardis Fisher's work is any sign of subtlety. He is a realist who sets himself no very difficult tasks. And now in two books he has harped upon the same theme. He is what is known as a "strong" writer. As such he has much ability. I am not ready to hail him as the modern Zola, but I like his intellectual honesty. Only, as we grow more mature, we demand more subtle psychological detail. Adolescence is frequently a period of great torture, and worthy of a novel—but not, perhaps, of a tetralogy, if that is to be. I should say that Mr. Fisher is a young realist who will certainly bear watching—and that I think his particular method is rather main-travelled and outworn. Were I twenty-two I might think it immensely powerful.

The 137th Foot

GENTLEMEN—THE REGIMENT. By Hugh Talbot. New York: Harper & Bros. 1934. \$2.50.

THIS voluminous first novel happens to arrive at a moment singularly favorable to any "romance in costume" of its type. In addition, Mr. Talbot has found an element of some novelty to exploit in his book,—the traditions and customs of British regimental life. While the rest of his material is fairly conventional, it is so closely interwoven with the story of the 137th Foot that it takes on a new and pleasant significance. There is plenty of accurate and often amusing detail in regard to Victorian manners and methods in love, accompanying the lengthy descriptions of the Chappell and St. Quentin families, whose rivalry provides ample plot whenever the romance which finally unites them takes time to pause for breath.

Too many incidents and too much detail are perhaps involved to allow any very clear picture of the period to emerge. The faults are due more to a lack of pruning than to inexperience of writing, and if Mr. Talbot never succeeds in making his central personage, Alistair Chappell, come completely alive as a vivid and picturesque figure, he is at least a brilliant outline. His book is an admirable first novel within the confines of the romantic convention, and is in the main well executed. It should be read with avidity by the large and evidently thirsty public which has seized on all similarly large frescoes of late, particularly as it is very British, and hence thoroughly to the present American taste.

Star for a Night

ALBERT GOES THROUGH. By J. B. Priestley. New York: Harper & Bros. 1933. \$1.50.

Reviewed by MARION C. DODD

HERE is a bit of light reading which has at the same time—being in a gently satirical vein—plenty of meat in it and one quite unique achievement on Mr. Priestley's part. English authors are notable for their inability to absorb and reproduce American dialects and colloquialisms. Here the amused reader finds not merely one form of these but three, in the different brief sections of the book, with—to top off—a beginning and an end in English idiom of both high and low variety. This is a linguistic feat, exercised as it is in some ninety pages.

Movie-struck, callow young Albert goes for the evening to his favorite screen palace, in spite of a sick spell and a violent dose of patent medicine administered by his zealous landlady. He passes out,—not through the looking-glass but through the silver screen, and adventures literally delirious occupy his evening, and eventually cure him of a passion for his deceptive actress-idol and simultaneously of his indifference to the highly eligible flesh-and-blood young lady who shares his daily office job and is only too eager to share much more. His sick imaginings carry him,

protesting, through first a sugared Balkan romance in the American style, second a cowboy rough-and-ready "Western," third the ominous wiles of city gangsters, and finally into an English society scene with comic opera trappings,—the various characters, with a sly wink on the author's part at the repetitiousness of movies, reappearing each time in different and yet quite similar guises.

I was the hero all right [says the unfortunate Albert]. I could tell that, and so I wouldn't get killed in the end, but it looked as if I'd have to do an awful lot of galloping and jumping and shooting first. It was all right for Felicity Storm and I was still gone on her and all that, but I wished I could meet her in a quiet sort of picture where we'd have just a bit of a misunderstanding and then make it up and kiss and be happy ever after. And it was so awkward getting into the middle of the film like this. Why couldn't I get in just at the end?

We are glad he couldn't; we'd have missed much of the fun if he had. "Of course," he concludes complacently, "I've seen a lot of these films; that's why I know what to say." We agree delightedly that he certainly does.

Wilderness of South America

(Continued from first page)

it was lack of firmness with people rather than inexperience of Brazil that let him down? Especially in the case of that extraordinary man whom he called Major Pingle.

Major Pingle was unknown to the party before they arrived in Sao Paulo.

You must [says Mr. Fleming] visualize him for yourselves. I shall only give you the minimum of help. He is a tall, thin man of about forty, with a ragged moustache and phenomenally small ears. There is something of the camel in his gait, and he has that short, mouse-colored hair which looks as if it never grows. His appearance is in no sense attractive. But you would, I think, have been intrigued rather than repelled by that scarecrow figure: a Rough

Diamond, you would have said, a Character.

This Character, this Diamond, proved very rough indeed. Hired on the strict understanding that the expedition was to look for traces of Fawcett, he was entrusted with all the funds and told to go ahead. And he went ahead. He took the party to the junction of the Araguaya River and then said blandly that Fawcett-hunting was a silly game. He, personally, was going straight down to the coast. Anyone who struck up the tributary in the direction of where Fawcett was last seen did so at his own risk.

Now Major Pingle's attitude was untenable, and everybody knew it. If Mr. Fleming and his friends had been a little more resolute there would have been no trouble. I have known my share of explorers, amateur and professional, but I can imagine none of them doing what Fleming did. He sat down and wrote a letter absolving Pingle from all responsibility provided

he would wait at the junction for three weeks. Then, with two friends, he set off across country. Pingle, of course, kept the money.

The three friends had a horrible time of it. Almost, I was going to say, they deserved it. For they went out into the blue with nothing more deadly than an emotional .22 rifle. They lost themselves and starved and went without water. They came within easy distance of being eaten by natives. They pushed canoes

for days up fetid, choked-up rivers. They were devoured by insects. And what did they get from it? Nothing of value, except the memory of a very daring, very courageous, very foolish raid into unsuitable territory. Those three weeks will probably remain their most precious remembrance until they die.

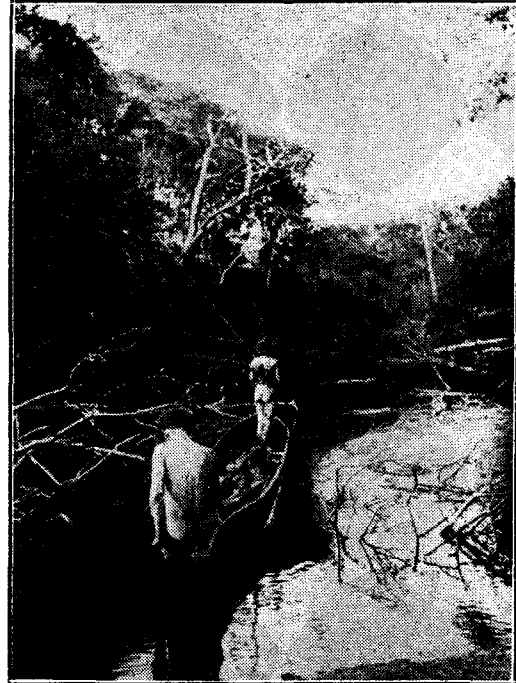
It was when they returned to Pingle that the really incredible occurred. The Major had been thinking matters over. Old soldier that he was, he tried a bluff which worked. He remarked in a perfectly dignified way that, as they had disobeyed his orders and cut themselves out of the expedition, they should find their own way home. "Home" was Para, two thousand miles downstream! With huge generosity he offered to give them sixty of the thousand dollars of their own money.

Now, surely, was the time when they might have dispensed with gloves. A fist in Major Pingle's face or a revolver in Major Pingle's stomach, followed by a curt request for cash, would have seemed the obvious course. But Mr. Fleming always did dislike the obvious, even when it was vital. He and his friends just sat on the bank and watched Major Pingle disappear.

There followed a race which is the most exciting part of the book. Two thousand miles of desperate hurry. For, not only did they wish to beat Pingle to the Consulate, but the last boat sailed for England on October 4. After an enthralling battle, in which both sides took the lead, they arrived six hours ahead.

This is a gallant, childish, irritating book, which has the merit of being absolutely truthful. Also, I hope, it will stem the tide of those who try to attract glamour to themselves by going to look for Fawcett. Whatever his shortcomings, Mr. Fleming never did that. From the beginning he was convinced that his trip would bear no fruit. And said so.

Julian Duguid's own South American adventures are recorded in his book, "Green Hell"; the Tiger Man, who figures in that book, has just landed in the United States.



STARTING HOME

From "Brazilian Adventure."



JACKET DESIGN BY GRANT WOOD FOR "PASSIONS SPIN THE PLOT."

The BOWLING GREEN

HUNTER'S MOON

THE restless, horned moon is high
Above the woods and snowy plain;
No one awake but only I;
And quiet, such as this, is pain.

Last night, the stealthy bears were out
Ringing the green bark of the cherry;
And reckless deer were holding rout
On scarlet ash and elder-berry.

Beside the house, the lilac wears
Her heavy, heart-shaped leaves of white;
No sign of hibernating bears;
No thirsty deer will run tonight.

On lovely things, on lonely men,
The magic charms of winter creep;
And bears are sleeping in their den;
And I must close my door and sleep.

MARY BYERS SMITH.

PHONETICS IN THE MIRROR

Somewhy I have confidence in any book about language written by a studious alien. Birthright usage of any tongue probably sets the user in habits of hearing and feeling which are congenitally limited. The most pleasing work on English which I have examined is Dr. Otto Jespersen's *Essentials of English Grammar* (Henry Holt, \$2), and Dr. Jespersen writes from Copenhagen. I wish he would tell us how he learned so much about our puzzling and faulty lingo; how did he first use it, under what instruction, and what were his impressions? Even his comments on American usages are far more accurate than those of most British "logists. Has he been in this country?

ways get an enormous pleasure in con- sidering the bewildering differences of English and American speech. On Christmas Day, when representatives of various nations told us hullo by radio, an English child piped up "Merry Christmas to American boys and girls" and the enormous oddity, in my ear, of just that way of saying "boys and girls"—irreproducible in print—was enough to keep me grinning for the rest of the afternoon. And then, by chance, we went to an Edgar Wallace picture that same evening—something so terrible that it was enchanting—and heard more of that phonetic queer-ness. In a function so intimate as speech, variations are a chief source of human delight. In a bookshop on 47th Street there's a bookseller from North Carolina. . . .

But what I had in mind was, the publisher of Dr. Jespersen's book really ought to give away a small mirror with each copy. I had to take it home from the office, for I couldn't keep going out to the washroom to verify the phonetic passages. "In our rapid survey of the organs of speech," says Dr. Jespersen, "we begin with the lips, because they are most easily accessible to immediate inspection, and then move gradually inwards." Thus it is that the washroom mirror becomes necessary:—

By means of the tip of the tongue are formed first the three stops [t, d, n], then three fricatives as in *thin*, then, against the front teeth, and [r] against the gums, often with a distinctly "flapping" movement. . . . With the blade of the tongue (immediately behind the tip) are formed the two hissing fricatives [s, z] as in *seal*, *zeal*, characterized by a chink in the tongue through which a very thin stream of air passes. If the air-channel is made a trifle broader, and the tip of the tongue is turned a little farther back, we get the sounds as in *she*, *mission*, *vision*.

The soft palate is movable, and is either raised so as to shut off the mouth from the cavity of the nose—then we have purely oral sounds—or else it may be lowered, in that case we have nasal sounds. . . . If the vocal chords (in the larynx, popularly called "Adam's apple") are brought together and made to vibrate, the result is a voiced sound. . . . Originally *r* was a full point-trill everywhere. In order to pronounce this trill the tip of the tongue is made thin

and elastic, and then raised and made to move rapidly to and fro . . . the bulk of the tongue-muscle must be shifted backwards, sometimes accompanied with secondary trillings of the uvula. . . . R is now not trilled except in out-of-the-way parts of Scotland.

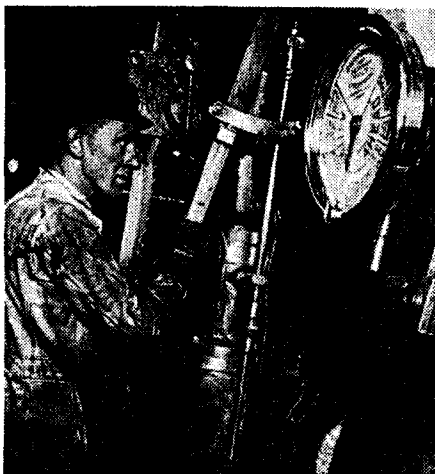
I was wondering what our old friend Captain Bone, a keen student of philology, would say about this, and practising a "secondary trilling of the uvula" with some success, when someone else came in to wash his hands. I pretended to be admiring the mass of the RCA building, which is very beautiful from our washroom in the dusk.

Dr. Jespersen says in his preface, with excellent wisdom, "It has been my endeavor to represent English Grammar not as a set of stiff dogmatic precepts, according to which some things are correct and others absolutely wrong, but as something living and developing under continual fluctuations and undulations." And speaking of the continual necessity for condensation, he remarks:—

Not only is the writer's art rightly said to consist largely in knowing what to leave in the inkstand, but in the most everyday remarks we suppress a great many things which it would be pedantic to say expressly. "Two third returns, Brighton," stands for something like: "Would you please sell me two third-class tickets from London to Brighton and back again, and I will pay you the usual fare for such tickets."

And as the Doctor says that, somehow there appears to me in a vision the long hall of the Gare de Lyon in Paris and myself inwardly formulating what I hoped would be an idiomatic request for the transportation I needed.—And as any variation from the expected may always be a source of humor, it is sometimes best for the foreigner (unless the train is leaving immediately) to expound his desires as best he can with complete and pedan-

WILLIAM MCFEE COLLECTION OF JAMES T. BABB



"You know where you are with steam" (Bookplate for a special collection. The photo shows Mr. McFee in his days as ship's engineer.)

tic fullness. It often puts the ticket seller in an agreeable cackle, especially if you can do a secondary trill on the uvula.

A casual note such as this can give you no fair idea of the richness and interest of Dr. Jespersen's treatise. He eases me (somewhat) of one old anxiety, a feeling that the expression *all of a thing* (which we all continually use) is indefensible. My notion was that of is necessarily a partitive, and therefore that one cannot have *all of a thing*. But he states conclusively that of is not always partitive but sometimes appositional, as for instance in the *City of Rome* (= the City which is Rome)

or that little wretch of a Rebecca (= that little wretch who is Rebecca).

Dr. Jespersen is interesting on such familiar anomalies as the cases of pronouns. "The natural tendency in English," he says, "has been towards a state in which the nominative of pronouns is used only where it is clearly the subject, and where this is shown by close proximity to a verb, while the objective is used everywhere else." He gives interesting examples—some of which cause pain:—

"Oh!" she instantly replied, "he began it, not me."

[Strachey: Queen Victoria]

We've had our little differences, you and me.

[Arnold Bennett]

Another fellow, probably him who had remained below, came to the door. [R. L. Stevenson]

But the most interesting of these examples are the familiar exclamation "Dear me!" and such a sentence as "He saw it himself."

The same influence has been at work, Jespersen notes, in the interrogative pronoun *who*; but with opposite effect. Since the interrogative comes first, and usually followed closely by the verb, it has been generalized in the nominative case. "Who is now practically the only form used in colloquial speech," Jespersen says, and this has been so for at least three centuries. E.g. Shakespeare:—

Who didst thou leave to tend his Majesty? Pray you, who does the wolfe love?

It would be pedantic, says our authority, to insist on "From whom is that letter" rather than the colloquial "Who is that letter from?" But he adds that grammarians have been so severe in blaming this anomaly "that now many people feel proud when they remember writing *whom* and even try to use that form in speech."

In the matter of relative pronouns, *who* also tends to displace *whom*. He quotes a sentence from E. F. Benson:—"I met a man whom I thought was a lunatic," without stating pointedly whether he considers it wrong. To me, the error here is in misplacing the *was*. It should be either:—I met a man who was, I thought, a lunatic—or, I met a man whom I thought [to be] a lunatic.

But so are all of us [we all] if we brood too long on English grammar.

Passing from grammar to higher phases of language, I thought there was much wisdom in what Mary Colum said not long ago (in the *Forum* magazine for November) about "style":—

One of the surest ways of telling whether any book or poem or essay or story is real literature is by its style. Now style is not at all what so many teachers and professors tell us that it is: it is not necessarily the careful picking of words, the avoiding of clichés, the tasteful arrangement of language—any educated person with a literary bent can do all that. But what style really is is the translation into language of an inner rhythm of the mind, an inner rhythm which is the essence of the writer's personality, of his gifts, of his passions, his emotions, his psychic energy. A writer may with practice become more skilful at expressing his inner rhythm, but style can never be taught or acquired—all that can ever be taught or learned is a graceful use of words. At some times a writer is better able than others to express in language his inner rhythm; the inner rhythm itself may not last him all his life any more than youth or beauty does, though there have been men of genius like Sophocles and Goethe in whom it lasted to extreme old age, outwearing beauty and strength and youth.

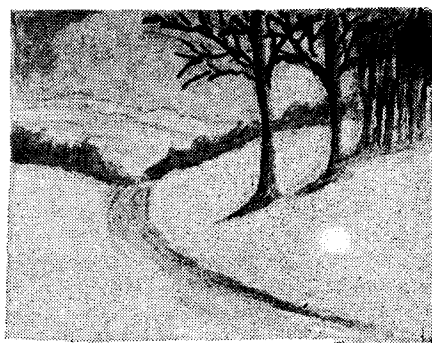
WHO WROTE IT?

Mr. Don Marquis somewhere came across the following verse, and asks if anyone knows who wrote it:—

The golf links are so near the mills
That almost every day
The working children can look out
And see the men at play.

GOUGLUFF

Terence Holliday, of the admired Holliday Bookshop with its mystically satisfying address (49 East 49), writes of a recipe for Gougloff—the *gâteau alsacien* which other clients also refer to as Kugelhopf, Kugelkopf, etc.



A BOOK MARK for WINTER

Drawn for the Bowling Green by R. J. Bucholz.

Mr. Holliday says:

I find KOUGLOUFF in the "Good Fare" of M. Edouard de Pomaine translated by Blanche Bowes and Doris Z. Moore under the imprint of Gerald Howe, London. The French title was "Le Code de la Bonne Chère." An earlier work of M. de Pomaine, "Bien Manger pour Bien Vivre," has been crowned by the Académie Française—and could I crown you for starting this! Thus Kouglouff: "8½ oz. flour; 2 eggs; ¾ oz. butter; ¾ oz. castor sugar; 4½ oz. currants; salt, quant. suff.; 1 oz. yeast, and 2 table-spoonfuls milk. Mix eggs, salt and sugar. Add melted warm butter, flour, yeast mixed in milk, currants and (if need be) a little milk. Knead the paste by hand until it no longer sticks to the palm. Pour into a deep buttered mould, only half filling it. Put in a warm room for 2 or 3 hours. When the dough is well risen, bake in a hot oven for about ¾ of an hour. Wait till cold and then turn out. Sprinkle with icing sugar." But with what? A very dry sherry? A Madeira? Julian Street can finish this.

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND COCKTAILS

SIR:—Last year—on what evidence I cannot guess—you announced that January 6 was the date of Sherlock Holmes's birthday, and 1853 the probable year. That seemed to be about right: I remember that the beautiful Irene Adler, "the woman," the only one toward whom Sherlock might conceivably have felt an impulse of sentiment, was born ("in New Jersey") in 1858. (Where in New Jersey, I wonder?)

Anyhow, every year about Christmas time I get out my Conan Doyle and read Sherlock again. And your comment lately about cocktails having gone back to 25 cents reminded me that Holmes considered even that price a trifle high. In *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor*, you remember, he examines a hotel bill in which a cocktail costs a shilling and a glass of sherry 8d. He deduces that the bill was from "one of the most expensive hotels."

Will not the Hotel Duane on Madison Avenue, which you say is frequented by Sherlock Holmes's publishers, invent a Sherlock Holmes cocktail in honor of the birthday? I will offer the 2-volume edition of the Complete Stories as a prize for the most appropriate formula.—Of course there should really be two; the *Sherlock* and the *Mycroft*. What a subtle and softly influential philtre the *Mycroft* would have to be!

Another thought: what evidence can you give of Sherlock's religious feelings, if any?

CHARING CROSS.

St. George, Staten Island.

I like Mr. Cross's suggestion about the cocktail, and will be pleased to forward for his judgment any suggested formulae. In regard to Irene Adler ("a face that a man might die for" was Holmes's astonishing description) I have always maintained that she was born in Hoboken.

Of Holmes's religious feelings: I've always supposed that the beginning of his atheistic tendency was the fact that if he hadn't been on his way to the college chapel he wouldn't have been bitten by Trevor's bull terrier. (See the story of the *Gloria Scott*.) It must have been a bad bite; he was laid up for ten days. But he was a student of the Bible (see *The Crooked Man*).

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.