

# A Letter from England

By AMABEL WILLIAMS-ELLIS

"HAVE you been to any good plays lately?" This was the inevitable polite conversational opening of my youth. It was thought suitable by elderly statesmen and proconsuls (whom my father, St. Loe Strachey, used to gather at his table) thus to begin a chat with a young woman. There was an old lady who was reputed to have two alternative openings, "Do you like string?" and "What do you think of the moon?" Alas, I never met her.

A truthful reply to the stock question that I encountered would—any time these last three years—involve serious and prolonged blasphemy, plays in London being as a rule of such an extreme dreariness that when blasphemy was out of order the only answer was that you never went to the theatre. But for a wonder there are now several good plays to be seen. There is, for example, a full-dress, large-scale Cochran revue, "Streamline," which is good, and an exceedingly funny revue of the intimate sort at the Gate Theatre—members and guests only. Originally the Gate had a decidedly Greenwich Village clientele—which arrived covered with beards from Bloomsbury, Chelsea, and Hampstead—but lately they have been coming covered with Molyneux creations, by car from Mayfair to see a variety show remarkable for intelligence and broad speaking. The white slaver's laments over the trade cycle, the song of the three too, too elegant young "gentlemen authors" about the sweet pansies that they find "Up the garden path!" and "Not a dull page" or the song of the reviewers' mutual admiration society—convulsed an audience who followed all the more venomous personal innuendoes with particular pleasure.

"The Moon in the Yellow River," by Denis Johnston, an Irish play, is also good, and there is a small pleasant piece called "Lady Precious Stream" by a Chinese dramatist, an exceedingly good production of "Hamlet" with Mr. Gielgud as the prince, and Webster's "Duchess of Malfi." This was played in London about ten years ago by the Phoenix Society of happy memory. On this occasion, however, the play rather disappointed its many admirers. Beautiful as was the verse, it seemed to act much less well than we had all hoped, nor could we blame its failure on actors or production. But somehow Bosola's and Duke Ferdinand's villainies failed to convince. Snobbery and a desire for territorial aggrandizement seemed not to supply a sufficient motive for all the cruelties that are heaped on the unfortunate lady on her marriage to one who was after all a respectable fellow—"What was the meanest of her match to me?"—The new producer has suggested an additional motive. He suggests that there had existed a more than fraternal love between the duchess and her brother. Whether we accept this idea or not, there is no doubt that the picture of the Duke as suffering torturing jealousy, and yet more unbearable remorse after its wreaking, adds greatly to the poignancy of some of the most beautiful lines ever written in our tongue.

But even this new production fails to reconcile most of the play's admirers to the pile of corpses at the end of the last act. Why would they do it? One corpse—tragedy; six corpses—farce.

What are English authors doing? What can be said with certainty is that they are not publishing books. The *Times Literary Supplement* has been here and small, and the long reviews are given to ancient

diarists and the biographers whose work the reviewer calls "painstaking and thorough."

It is the close or breeding season. So imagine the authors of England in garret, cottage, flat, and palace, typing like mad, sucking the end of their pens, or—rather sanctimoniously—(because it means they are so well up to time) correcting proof sheets. And in the intervals—for no one can pound a typewriter all day long—what do these creatures do? Shokoloff, the Soviet author of "And Quiet Flows the Don," was in London recently and I asked him that question. "What do you do for fun?" "Fish," he said, "and shoot marsh fowl," he added. "And what would you say was your greatest literary asset?" "The fact that I live 180 versts from the nearest railway station." Every author knows very well what he meant. A taste for conversation has brought more writers to ruin than drink. And what sort of conversation is it that Colleague-of-the-pen-Shokoloff is saved from by his 180 versts? Russian conversation is copious, exhaustive, varied, and pursued as an art. Once as I sat writing an old unknown Russian sat down beside me and opened thus: "So you can read and write! I wonder how you learned? I learned as quite a young man in prison in Siberia." The talk was launched, I wrote no more. Definitely a better gambit than "Do you like string?"

We have a whispy, leading-note, unfinished way of conversing, we exchange brief bleats, and there is even some foundation for the universal European belief that the English are a silent people.

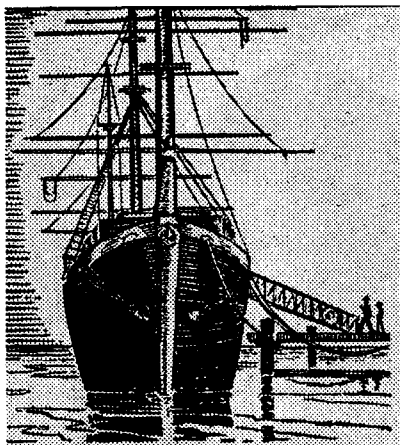
"And pray how do you, with your fair hair and blue eyes, always pass for a Spaniard?" I asked Ralph Bates (author of a novel "Lean Men" that I commended to the attention of *Saturday Review* readers a month or two ago).

"Easily enough," he said. "Of course I always say I come from some province far from the one I am in. But you see I love talking and when they hear me chattering away they know I can't be an Englishman. Spaniards know that Englishmen never speak."

When did that legend grow up? I was given advice on the point when young. My grandmother spoke thus "When you go out, my dear, you must not sit like a lump! Talk about anything! Talk about a leg of mutton, but don't sit without a word to say for yourself." A Strachey cousin of avuncular age also gave counsel: "If you've nothing to say, don't say it." Many tales are told by those who went to see one or other of Lytton Strachey's many brothers and sisters. The rule of the house was that anyone might bring in a guest but that this was no concern of the others. If the guest and host were a little late, they would be confronted on entering the dining room by two long rows of long Stracheys male and female, each with a propped book and eating in amicable but complete silence. It was an intimidating experience. Lytton Strachey's capacity for silence indeed served very well as a substitute for Shokoloff's 180 versts. Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the actress, sat next to him one night at a dinner party. "I admire your work so much, Mr. Strachey," she began in her deep, resonant, yet velvety voice. "I want you to write me a play!" She enlarged, she described what the play was to be, what her part was to be like, her voice became deeper, more and more splendid, and her whole demeanor more and more impassioned: "You will write it for me, won't you, Mr. Strachey?"

"No," said Lytton Strachey.

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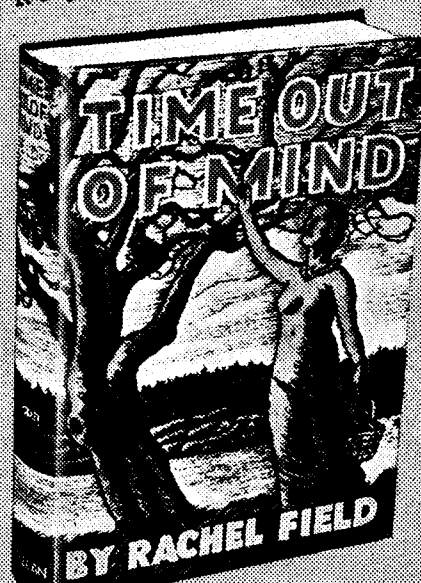
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## Over the Counter

The Saturday Review's Guide to Current Attractions

Trade Mark	Label	Contents	Flavor
OUTLAWS OF HALFADAY CREEK <i>James B. Hendryx</i> (Doubleday, Doran: \$2.)	Western	Corporal Downey of the North-west Mounted finds work in the crook-infested border town.	Standard
THE INDULGENT HUSBAND <i>Colette</i> (Farrar & Rinehart: \$2.50)	Light Novel	Further chronicles of Claudine who discovers husbands and lovers.	Colette
SHE FELL AMONG THIEVES <i>Dornford Yates</i> (Minton, Balch: \$2.)	Thriller	The boys poke their schnozzles into one of those remote chateaux about which things have been whispered.	Boo



## Mother Knows Best

THE LITTLE CANDLE'S BEAM. By Isa Glenn. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN CARTER

WITH the exception of Samuel Hopkins Adams's account of the high-hearted horse-play of the "Ohio Gang" under the administration of the late President Harding, in "Revelry," no good novel based on life in Washington, D. C., has appeared in modern times. The author of "Heat" has tried to break this record in a psychological novel of mother-son relationships in an old Washington family, but has failed quite definitely to capture the mood, the surge, and the hurly-burly of life in Washington.

To be precise, "The Little Candle's Beam" is, as a novel, not a very good or convincing story; its characters are not especially credible or attractive or even interesting; and the fact that the action takes place in Washington is offset by the fact that Mrs. Glenn almost completely ignores the political life of the capital and makes only minor use of the rich material which lies ready for the taking.

The story is the story of a Washington girl, Cecilia Tabor, who came of a conservative family of "cave-dwellers" and made a correct marriage with one of our ineffable pre-war diplomats. Her husband died of typhoid abroad, and Cecilia returned to live in Washington with her young son Tommy. Her life was unbearably complicated, first by her mother's effort to manage her life, second by her own weak character, and then by her son's interference with her own plans. In the end, frustrated in everything else, Cecilia became a woman like her mother and devoted herself to the task of managing—and frustrating—her son. "Mother knows best."

Such a theme, properly handled, and divorced from the adventitious backdrop of life in the political capital of the country in the days of the Bonus Marchers, is worthy of respect. Unfortunately, the characters do not stand out, their problems and sufferings do not enlist sympathy, and the climaxes of the story are badly swallowed up and mangled in a rather irrelevant confusion of incidents.

Such glimpses as Mrs. Glenn gives of Washington political life and of national affairs are well handled, and the atmosphere—though attenuated to the tea-table level—is convincing. On this account, it is a pity that she did not write a Washington

novel instead of a novel whose characters happened to find themselves in Washington at the time. If it be argued that this is true of most Washingtonians, it is also true that Washington owes its existence to the force of politics and public affairs and nothing else. To write of a Washington which is non-political, unless the story is deliberately ironic (which is not the case of "The Little Candle's Beam"), is to omit Hamlet from the play which bears his name. Or, if you prefer a fresher image, it suggests the action of Hollywood in producing a film of "Without Benefit of Clergy" in which—for the sake of censorship—the guilty couple were lawfully married from the very start.

## Climax of Evolution

BIOLOGY FOR EVERYMAN. By Sir J. Arthur Thomson. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1935. 2 vols. \$5.

Reviewed by HOMER W. SMITH

SIR J. ARTHUR THOMSON, whose recent death is regretted by all biologists, had the fortune to complete his *magnum opus*. Combining an extraordinary knowledge of the structure and habits of living creatures with an ever alert sensitiveness for the significance of both, he has produced something worthy of that designation. It combines a non-technical and wholly popular description of the multitudinous plants and animals of the earth with authoritative accounts of their inter-relationships and life histories. It was not intended as a textbook, but as a presentation of the whole of biology in a compact and easily read form for Everyman, not too difficult for the young, nor too dreary for the old.

"Biology for Everyman" departs from an encyclopedic form by the ever recurrent question, why? With all the strangeness of living things, how can one keep that question out? We are told that the biologist should not ask why, that it is his task to discover, describe, and label neatly all aspects of form and function, and then quit. Considering our admittedly great ignorance, which is possibly predestined to be eternal, and considering the awful possibilities of the answer we might get, we should let well enough alone. Sir Arthur has voiced this doubt once or twice, but on the whole he was not one to be afraid, and in this book he not only asks the question frequently, but frequently finds an answer, putting "survival value," "struggle for existence," and "genetic mutation" to good use. But every questioner encounters ultimately a question that is unanswerable, when he must fall back upon whatever faith he has. Such a question, foremost always in Sir Arthur's mind, was the meaning of this climax of evolution, man. Man differs from the gorilla by being more youthful, primitive, less specialized, and Keith once suggested that the gorilla's peculiarities were due to an increased activity of the pituitary gland. But, remarks Sir Arthur, the ingenious theory leaves us asking: What makes the pituitary vary? As regards the causes of this ebb and flow of the living tide, we must still confess with Darwin that "our ignorance is immense." To him the implication was inadequate. Never slackening his conviction of man's solidarity with the rest of creation, at the end he held firmly to the theory that man was something uniquely apart. Perhaps he may be among the last of prominent biologists to hold this separatist view.



CHILDREN AT WARGEMONT. Painted by Renoir, 1884.

## Renoir's Development

THE ART OF RENOIR. By Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia. New York: Minton, Balch & Co. 1935. \$5.

Reviewed by FRANK JEWETT MATHER

WITH unflagging zeal and tenacity Dr. Barnes and his collaborator follow every phase of Renoir's development as a pure painter. In this quest they profess an entire objectivity—the elucidation of what is indisputable in a great artist's pictorial form. This involves some three hundred pages of descriptive writing reinforced by about half as many reproductions of pictures.

These verbal analyses are generally of a high order of clarity and reasonableness. For the small and privileged group of students who have access to the upwards of eight-score Renoirs in the Barnes Foundation, this analytical material should be most valuable. For the outsider who depends on the illustrations and memory, the book is appallingly repetitious. Whatever is available in it could have been conveyed better in about a third of the space. As it is, the study has much value as reference material. Particularly the treatment of the poorer Renoirs is very enlightening. What is the matter with the Moulin de la Galette? After first enthusiasm subsided, I have often asked the question without finding an answer. It is simply that the color system is not integrated with the light system, while both serve intermittently and unsatisfactorily the purpose of construction. Here is a solid, one may say an objective, explanation for a disquieting ambiguity which I could feel but not explain.

The general development of Renoir from intelligent assimilation of Courbet and Manet, through restudy of the French eighteenth century tradition to a synthesis based on the practice of Venice—all this has been fairly understood, but it has never been so concretely and richly illustrated in any previous criticism. Almost everything in this mass of *Quellenlehre* is convincing, but rather little of it is really objective. It is a question of parallels which are always interpreted as influences. But such an interpretation is a pure assertion of opinion, however reasonable, and much that the authors offer as evidence of influence a more cautious opinion might regard as simple coincidence. However the general line of demonstration is convincing, and the appeal to origins casts new light on the methods of the Venetians and the *Ecole galante*.

The conclusion is that in Renoir's last phase we find a renovation of the Venetian manner more completely integrated, more delicately modulated, in every true sense, more painter-like than anything the great Venetians painted themselves. The authors do not push this conclusion to the absurdity that Renoir is a greater artist than Giorgione or Titian. Yet they leave the case in such shape that the unwary reader may readily take the leap. In short, there is here some danger of perversion of values, for as an artist in the broad sense Renoir never is comparable to the great Venetians. His real affiliations are with the French eighteenth century.

The authors are firm as to the late or "red" Renoirs. These are the logical culmination of his great gift. It will be recalled that for the last twenty years in his life Renoir yielded increasingly to arthritis; in his last eight or nine years he painted with a brush lashed to the helpless fingers of an arm which was prac-

tically disabled. A great craftsman usually manages to capitalize his disabilities; long before Renoir, Titian, Hals, and Rembrandt had done so gloriously. With much that seems to the present writer merely approximated and unachieved, some of the greatest Renoirs, notably the later bathing groups, were painted in his final years of decrepitude. It seems to me likely that his simplification of his tonal register to a gamut of reds may be not a deliberate choice or development but merely what he could do under restricting conditions. If he no longer made the extraordinarily rich, intricate, and expressive surfaces of the pictures painted in the late '90's, may it not be that he could no longer make them? In any case the problem of the red Renoirs needs reconsideration in view of the artist's physical condition. A number of the later pictures suggest, even in the illustrations of this book, a hand feeble and out of control. It should be clear that I am not deprecating the late work as a class—to praise or deprecate any part of an artist's work generically is equally absurd—I am merely asking for a more careful interpretation than the objective method permits. Are we dealing with a culmination or progress, or with a superb recoil and detour forced by circumstances? It is an issue that will gradually lose urgency, for in a generation the "red" Renoirs will all be as bleached and chalky as the originally rosy Sir Joshuas.

Whoever considers this book as a mine in which at need he may dig will rarely come away disappointed; whoever tries to read it through is likely to be arrested by acute indigestion. After all the work of art lives only in opinion, that is subjectively, and no amount of telling that a thing is painted in one way or another tells us why it was painted that way. In short, this very able book ends just about where criticism of Renoir really begins.

## Content to Be Little

NO SWANK. By Sherwood Anderson. Philadelphia: The Centaur Press. \$2.

BITS from this book have appeared in *The New Republic*, *Today*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *American Spectator*, and in the Virginia country newspapers, *The Marion Democrat*, and *The Smyth County News*. It's a lot about people Mr. Anderson has met. The opening anecdotes of Ring Lardner are entertaining, and read the paper on Gertrude Stein, whom Mr. Anderson sincerely thinks is a restorer of "the word." But the little book is of very slight importance in the list of Anderson's works. One likes Mr. Anderson, he is a companionable fellow with a lot of the best American qualities; but he is no longer the significant figure he once was in American letters. Near the end of this book he says:

But I, the writer, am also a shrewd enough man to know that, now—in our time—nothing can be done on the grand scale. "Be little." I constantly say to myself, "Be content to be little." It has become a kind of song in me.

That is a confusion in Mr. Anderson's mind. "Nothing on the grand scale"? Really. Whatever you may think of the two vastly different books, both "Anthony Adverse" and "Of Time and the River" are on the grand scale. And we don't believe for one instant Mr. Anderson wants to be little. He means something else. But he can't say definitely enough *what* he means, any more. That is his trouble. It has almost become a disease.

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