

## Letters to the Editor: *An Idea for Mr. Santayana; Some Notes on Reading Habits*

### Best-Sellers

SIR:—Current fluctuations in the leadership of best-seller lists pose this profound problem: Is it morally worse for the customers to read "The Last Puritan" from a combination of the sense of duty and intellectual snobbery (as most of them almost certainly do), or to read "Sparkenbroke" because they like it?

Reflection on this question will conduct the reflector into the most obscure recesses of ethics and esthetics. I can think of no one better fitted to pursue such a research, and to present his findings in a monograph for *The Saturday Review*, than Mr. George Santayana.

ELMER DAVIS.

New York City.

### Book Buyers and Book Borrowers

SIR:—Some experience in running a lending library, and also a college department of English, has led me, of recent years, to an analysis of the reading habits of the time. Lately, I have been also making a special study of lending libraries available, and also of their patrons, by means of questions as to types, books wanted, and previous book-habits of patrons. The results make me disagree sharply with those publishers and authors who claim that the lending libraries are ruining the sales of books. I am of the opinion that at least seventy-five per cent of the sales to lending libraries are pure "velvet." The books would not have been sold otherwise.

It is said that the lending library public is almost wholly feminine. In that statement there is a catch. Most of the men from whom I have obtained information get books via their wives, since women have rather more opportunity during the day to go to a lending library. This is not true of the "loan collections" maintained by some public libraries, which, the librarians inform me, are largely patronized by men, since they are open in the evenings. The person who takes the book is no certain indication of the reader or readers. There is every indication that the "lending library public" is by no means over-feminine.

I have inquired among borrowers, of as many kinds as I could, "why do you patronize a lending library, instead of buying books?" It is worth noting that only once did I receive the specious alibi, "I haven't room, and we travel so much." That was also a special case. Books do not, actually, take up so very much room, if one wants them at all.

What I did hear, in unanimous chorus was, "the books put out today aren't worth investing money in. If I invest \$2 to \$3.50 in a book, I want something worth keeping, something to put on my shelves, to reread, to make a friend of. I've been stung too many times by reviewers' puffs, and publishers' blurbs, and I'm not buying any book any more until I've read it. If it is worth keeping, I buy it. And that goes for non-fiction, as well as novels. The writers and publishers seem to think all readers want is



"SHE STARTS OUT IN A GARRET AND ENDS UP IN A PENT HOUSE,  
VERY DISILLUSIONED."

filth. I can get all of that I want without paying for it."

As an operator of a lending library, and since, I have been besought to recommend "something we can read aloud. Most of these books have such language, and such situations, that I just couldn't pronounce the words." It seems to me that the complaint that the habit of reading aloud is over, is without justification. But I am put to it to recommend a suitable book. Another question has been, "can't you recommend a book where the characters are decent people, who have some religion left, and meet their difficulties decently? I want a book that shows me fellows who have the same sort of adverse circumstances that I meet, every day, and surmount them."

Two types of novels I found in special disfavor—the novel without a plot, where nothing ever happens, and the so-called "proletarian" novel. Oddly, among a "proletarian" group that I happen to know rather well, the proletarian novel was in extreme disfavor. Readers of such novels seem to be chiefly the yeastier sort of college student, who procures supplies from some lending library.

Age distribution is generally reckoned of importance in such a study. I found very, very few under thirty who ever bought books. From thirty to sixty, people generally have more settled incomes, and also abodes. This is the potential book-sale public. Among this group, I paid special attention to the ages 30-45. And here I found my loudest complaints about the quality of offerings. To quote a young matron, probably around 35, "We used to buy a good many, perhaps 15 or 20 at the lowest, a year. But so very few were possible, that we stopped entirely, or almost so. . . . All that most novels published today are worth is two to six cents over a week-end."

I conclude, therefore, that the public that is willing and able to buy books is a very dissatisfied public, at present. It is a large, comfortably situated, middle-

class public, of decent men and women, most of whom support churches, and sundry "good works." It is a well-educated group, of normal, generally well-adjusted men and women, working hard at bringing up and supporting families. It resents novels attacking or lampooning religion and family life.

The writer-publisher combination seems to me, à la Alice, to be engaged in "uglification and fainting in coils." And it has all but killed the real buying public. To quote again the significant comment of the young matron: "Two to six cents over a week-end is all most novels are worth."

Newton, Mass.

C. E. MACGILL.

### No Excuse for Alibi

SIR:—I read with genuine interest and appreciation your leading article in the May 30th issue, "Colby, Criticism, and Common Sense," by Professor John Abbot Clark, department of English of Michigan State College. Professor Clark's critical comment and appreciation of Colby's ideas on the *raison d'être* of American literary criticism appealed to me as fundamentally sound and logical. However, on page 18, col. 1, I found this sentence, one word of which gave me a mild shock as coming from an English professor of literary attainments:

That oldest of American traditions, our youth, and that oldest of literary *alibis*, an unfavorable, if not actively hostile, *milieu*, have been so unceasingly brought to our attention that even men who should know better take them for granted.

Know all men by these presents that this word, *alibi*, should never be used for the word, *excuse*. This word, *alibi*, has a very specific, limited, and legalistic denotation that does not permit its being used as a synonym for *excuse* in any connection whatsoever.

Pittsburgh, Pa.

GEORGE W. LYON.

# Merlin Speaking

THREE NEW PLAYS: *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, *The Six of Calais*, *The Millionairess*. By Bernard Shaw. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

THIS new volume of Shaw's proves nothing except that he is getting old; and, like Merlin, is a wizard still, even in old age. His prefaces, or at least one of them, are still brilliant. His plays, or at least one of them, are still dramatically effective. But he is discursive where he used to be cogent, truculent where he used to be impudently witty, and confident in his philosophy of a possible society instead of powerful in his exposure of the follies of the present one.

Can't a man be allowed to write just a play, for good actors to shine in? he says of "The Six of Calais." And that is all to be said of this item. It is a grand piece of character action, and unless, which I doubt, he is really interested in showing that a king with power is more of a man than a constitutional monarch, I see no other point. Certainly King Neddy with his opposite in the sixth Calais burgher who was also a rugged individualist, has no lesson for England, Hitler, or Franklin D. Roosevelt. This is just a play, and a good one. I wish he had written more such.

But the "Unexpected Isles" is wearisome. You can grant everything in his Preface and still be bored. Our world as the play presents it has lost the vitamin of morality. The characters of this allegorical drama try to recover it by grafting a narrow-minded clergyman on the

younger generation. He is sterile, and when Judgment Day comes, and the useless are winnowed from the earth (Shaw's definition of Judgment Day), the younger generation just disappears in a puff of nothingness. I agree as to the next-to-youngest generation. Morality did seem to have leaked out of Western civilization in the twenties; but it is coming back now in monstrous forms, like the Anabaptists of the Reformation. We may well be asking to be saved from too much ill-digested morality before the decade is out. Shaw's younger generation are four beautiful creatures the product of eugenic planning, fascinating morons of exquisite bodies seeking for slogans to satisfy their lack of ideas, and chasing love to keep from being bored. This Maya and Vashti and Janga and Kanchin are packed with symbolism, like everyone else in the cast, but I do believe that the whole play was made up from a desire to slap their suburban bottoms with the Fabian idea that only the useful deserve to stay alive.

"The Millionairess" is another story—a familiar one with Shaw. The play seems to me rambling and dull, but I should probably (as often before) change my mind should I see it on the stage. Shaw is still a wizard. But the Preface is brilliant, well knit, and important in its theme. If governments from now on must be run by competent realists, supermen above inhibitions, inefficiencies, and law, then who is going to control the supermen? If we let them become despots we run a terrible risk—especially since they are cannibalistic and will eat up, not each other, which would be quite all right, but the other kind of supermen, the great constructive minds whose purpose is not

to govern but to know. It is the tyranny of the talented he is writing about in his Preface on Bosses. And the answer in the Preface seems to be that we must order our institutions so that the despots will neither oppress us, nor leave their power to unworthy children. I thought that was one of the purposes of the United States Constitution, but you could scarcely expect Shaw to wind up a Preface by praising the system of checks and balances in the United States! So I look at his play, and find there that the superwoman millionairess, whom no one can live with, is tamed at the end by an Egyptian scientist who is not in the least impressed by her riches or her genius at money-making, but fascinated by her super-energy, which apparently he expects to be able to control. Is the Egyptian doctor the socialistic state, about to make a marriage of convenience with a dictator, divorce being available if the union does not work? I think so, and this seems to be the lesson Shaw wishes to preach. The Preface on Bosses is worth five ordinary books of sermon and satire as such go in this degenerate post-Shavian age. "The Six of Calais" is velvet for the buyer. The rest of the book is clever words.

## Metropolis

CITY FOR CONQUEST. By Aben Kandel. New York: Covici-Friede. 1936. \$2.50.

MR. KANDEL'S novel of New York covers the two decades of gigantic growth between 1907 and 1927. The city is the hero and villain, the foreground and background both. There are characters we meet and follow along, more than a dozen of them, but they do not make the history but are made by it instead. The city moulds, the city proposes and disposes. Every kind of city dweller of every race and condition makes his appearance. We observe the young East Side boxer, then the traction magnate, the girl in Greenwich Village, the real estate dreamer in the Bronx. The lives converge, with others, knit together, make a pattern more important than any strand of it, the city's life.

This was an exciting book to write. We feel Kandel's exhilaration in the racing tempo that pounds through chapter after chapter. He stands eagerly at our elbows, points out the characters; see, see, he cries, look at this, this is what the town does, this is how it acts. There are occasional apostrophes that break in, uncontrollably, upon the narrative. Sometimes Mr. Kandel sings a little at his work. But he doesn't preach and he doesn't whitewash. New Yorkers will like "City for Conquest" and feel that it is one book worthy of the town. It is recommended to others as an exceedingly readable, lively, understanding study of this unfathomable city.



A SCENE FROM THE THEATRE GUILD'S PRODUCTION OF  
"THE SIMPLETON OF THE UNEXPECTED ISLES."