

Fever of the Mind

TROPIC FEVER. By Ladislao Székely.
New York: Harper & Brothers. 1937.
\$3.

Reviewed by HASSOLDT DAVIS

PHYSICAL fevers were least to be dreaded in the Sumatra of Mr. Székely's youth, twenty years ago. Fever of the mind, the frenzy grown of loneliness and continuous exhaustion, the enforced brutality of the jungle and its alien white colonists, was the threat which faced him when, as a boy of twenty with six cents in his pocket, he left Hungary to work on the tobacco plantations.

The greater horror of it was that those who had uprooted themselves so young and sought to plant themselves in the jungle could rarely either love it or leave it. The climate, insects, food, and isolation filled their dizzy minds with dreams of escape, yet if they did escape it was not for long; they who had once been rulers in the jungle returned to it broken, like Dwars, an overseer on the plantation, who came back to sell sewing machines, or Klaassen, the once omnipotent chief, who returned in his old age to sell paper to the natives he despised.

They were as thoroughly enslaved as their coolies, and those coolies, working under lifetime contract, were no better than galley slaves in the ship of commerce. They were flogged regularly; their women were doled out to them at the rate of three or four per hundred; all that was human in them was leveled by the white man's stick. And if they tried to escape they were dragged back trussed like pigs on a spit, and frequently beaten to death. The white man fared little better, though his torture was of his own devising.

Mr. Székely was as brutal as his companions, but he could not ignore native problems which compelled the sympathy of youth, if not its forbearance. He understood the "adat" of custom among the Batak people and respected it secretly. Publicly he had to be the great Tuan who could confront single-handed a herd of marauding elephants (though it nearly scared him to death); he had to be the tyrant to hack a town out of malarial swamps, for eight months the only white man among hundreds of savage coolies. He had to be god and fiend.

This is no pap for armchair adventurers, nor is it toothsome for travelers who like their yarns spiced with romance and moon-mint and derring-do. But it is an accurate and vivid account of the planter's life in Sumatra before the war, of social conditions that were appalling with cruelty—an excellent tale for young communists to teehee on.

Double the pity, however, that the translation should so stagger as to be hard to follow, and that it should at times misrepresent the author's intent. It seems impossible that he could refer continually to the natives of Sumatra as "blacks"; they are of Malayan stock, not Negroid, and this careless implication distorts the sense of the book.

Hassoldt Davis is the author of "Islands Under the Wind."

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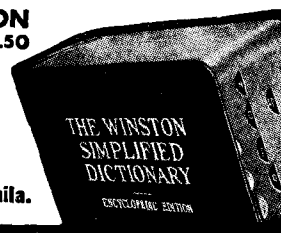


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On the Record

THOUGH one speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and impressionable wax congeal the utterance, still one is not beyond reach of the pervasive bibliographer. Three years ago T. S. Eliot read two poems, "The Hollow Men" and "Gerontion," into a recording phonograph for posterity and the Harvard English department. Now necessarily phonograph records carry identifying labels, lest one confuse César Franck with "Cohen on the Telephone," and Mr. Eliot's vocalization was ticketed in the accepted fashion. But the printer, probably in his intentness on spelling "Gerontion" correctly, set "Hallow" for "Hollow." Glee-ful point-chasers were after him instantaneously. The misreading was corrected, and thus Mr. Eliot was established as the first writer ever to achieve a phonograph record that was divisible into first and second issues.

One of the offending records is impaled like a butterfly (and will so continue until March 20th) in a notable Eliot exhibition in the Yale University Library for which Donald C. Gallup has compiled an abundantly detailed catalogue. Mr. Eliot himself must be amazed at the bulk of his output as here presented. Of course it is not all his output. Few writers of our time have been so lavishly represented in compilations, selections, and anthologies, prose and verse alike. As a consequence of this, and by reason of the inclusion of variants and American editions, Mr. Gallup is able to list 117 books, plus a roster of periodicals and miscellanea (which is where the phonograph record insinuates itself into the exhibition).

This phonograph business is hardly likely to subtract from the complexities of collecting. The question first confronted the world of bibliophily, the Compleat Collector believes, some eight years since with the issuance of two double-disc records by Bernard Shaw, "Spoken English and Broken English." A printed transcript accompanied each set, or it might more accurately be said that the records accompanied the printed transcript, which was, by any definition, a book. (It is a little difficult to distinguish cart from horse in these enterprises.) One bookseller installed a camp phonograph in his shop and gave scratchy Shavian recitals.

The phonograph record is a collector's item in its own right (were there not Tennyson and Browning transcriptions?), but most of its devotees have no more truck with first editions than do numismatists or orchidarians. The primal phonograph occupies a middle ground of antiquity along with the stereoscope and the disc music box, both of which now command collector prestige. Is there a limit to the desirability of acquisition of such gadgetry of the day before yesterday? Presumably not. The Compleat Col-

lector is not in the market for one, but it occurred to him with a mild shock recently that not in a generation had he seen a little boy going down the street with a leather music roll.

Why not a booksellers' anthology? Booksellers', not publishers'. Publishers are as seducible by the muse of reminiscence as statesmen and generals, but bona fide bookseller authors are uncommon. When and if some explorer of fresh woods adopts this freely offered idea, let him turn in his search for copy to Bibliopole Lewis Thompson's "Random Verse," recently (and privately) compounded by the Walpole Printing Office of Mount Vernon with its customary taste and distinction. Mr. Thompson packs ninety-four exercises into 127 sixteenmo pages of text. No one of the ninety-four is athrob over the state of the nation or the drift of the universe. Mr. Thompson's leanings are toward wistful throwbacks to his boyhood and a rowdy irony that is well exemplified in a child's lament for the good old days when father came home tight and happy—which father commendably does once more in the last line. Only four units are concerned with books, and these not with books as "items." Thus "McGuffey's Old Readers" has to do not with the doctor but with the scribblement habitual to flyleaves. Mr. Thompson, bookseller though he is, is sentimentally attracted by these casual inspirations:

Discourage no Shelley—
Some Clancy or Kelly
Or perhaps Martinelli
May be a Poe.

The American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists recently conducted its nineteenth annual meeting at Ann Arbor, and the alert staff of the William L. Clements Library arranged a special exhibition in its sesquipedalian honor, a brief guide to which has been prepared by the University of Michigan Press. Included in the display was a copy of the "Report of . . . the Linnæan Society of New England Relative to a Large Marine Animal, Supposed to Be a Serpent, Seen Near Cape Ann, Massachusetts, in August, 1817" (Boston, 1817). A contemporary committee examined alleged eye-witnesses, and the monster withered into insubstantiality under scientific scrutiny.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 153)

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When one's curiosity is deficient, when one is not eager enough for new impressions and new pleasures, one is liable to value mere academical proprieties too highly—to find the most stimulating products of art a mere irritation.