

## The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

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### Nymph

APPLE blossoms break out across the countryside, the hylas have spoken for the third straight night, the whippoorwills complain from hill to hill, and the young gentleman from New Haven, Cambridge, Princeton, and the lesser elms is in town for a day to choose among his opportunities. If an oblique question in his eye tarnishes his nonchalance when he gets to this office, one learns that it has to do with a marked copy of the *Advocate*, the *Lit*, or the *Nassau Lit* which he sent us last December. He explains that if he dealt with *The Saturday Review* severely in that editorial, it was because only for *The Saturday Review* can he feel any hope at all. We can be plucked from the burning, but for our competitors, all of them, there is left only a folding of the hands for sleep.

He lectures. To begin with, we should double our size: literary leadership can not be exercised in less than sixty pages. Reviews must be longer; we must give reviewers space to bring the eternities in. But first a more fundamental reform must be made; he finds our reviewers without exception stodgy, uneducated, and timorous, and he would sweep them all out clean. Literary articles are, of course, an essential, but we should publish better ones than we do and we should run at least three a week. A number of new departments must be established at once, one to keep in touch with the college magazines, one to appraise the coteries, one devoted to the art of the unconscious mind. Four pages of poetry would be about right, but nothing can be expected from any living poets except the very youngest and we must publish only those who have gone beyond Day Lewis. Our advertisers must be rigorously censored and as soon as possible it will be well to dispense with advertising altogether.

After another cigarette he discusses his relationship to all this. He will be in New York next September and it will take him some months to establish himself. His novel (inquiry reveals that it is to combine the methods of "Men of Good

Will" and "Work in Progress") may not sell more than seven or eight thousand, and he can expect little remuneration for his poetry. Frankly, he must for a time support himself by writing articles for such magazines as *Harper's* . . . and running one of our departments would not trespass on his novel and he will be able to review three or four books a week.

The intrepidity and the informed knowledge that our reviewers lack is thus offered to us. He willingly answers questions. Thus, it would be a service to literature and a kindness to Mr. Hemingway if the Hemingway myth were to be done away with now, once and for all. The Thomas Mann cult is a vast reservoir of sentimentality, and in these desperate days it is our duty to root out the sentimental. Mr. MacLeish has too long impeded the progress of poetry and, for his part, our young man would be willing to slay Mr. MacLeish. Dos Passos?—a bungler. Lewis?—a bestseller. Robert Frost?—a Victorian. The only form of fiction competent for the new order is the group novel, and poetry must be stamped from steel like the machines it must deal with. Where then shall we look for the meritorious?—a grave, sad smile, an explanation that, candidly, there is none now, but the newness is about ready to begin. So he leaves, but first he acknowledges that, though primarily interested in poetry and fiction, he knows something about economics, history, metaphysics, the fine arts, and psychology. If something like Spengler comes in, for instance, or when Dr. Freud publishes another book. . . .

Thus the nymph or pre-adult stage of the literary person. He and the hylas trouble the heart these spring days, stirring a fragrance of other springs. There is nothing you can tell him for you cannot speak on any wave-length he can tune to. Intrepidity of thought, oh, yes, Lord! but like cleverness it is a dime a dozen, and what we are in the market for is a costlier and rarer thing: skill in the fingers and judgment that has tanned in a lowlier pickle than the *Advocate* or the *Lit*. You cannot make that carry through to him, and you cannot tell him that writers are made not by appointment but by election. You cannot tell him that of ten like him there will be only one left by September, of fifty but one left two years from now, and of a hundred hardly one whose blend of Joyce and Romans will ever see print. You cannot make clear that of the survived one-hundredths something less than half will ever make moderately good reading.

What is inconceivable to him is the bitter fact of apprenticeship. Except when he is an accident, the biological aberration so rare that it seems monstrous, he will not be able to write readable prose till he is thirty or have anything to say in it till he is thirty-five. After ten years of writing sentences for some hours a day he may be able to construct them well

enough so that only one rewriting will do, so that they say what he means them to and give the reader a small dividend of pleasure as well. After publishing a half-dozen books that sell between five hundred and fifteen hundred copies, he may have learned enough craftsmanship so that he can plausibly count on the next one's selling seven or eight thousand if luck is on his side.

By the time he has acquired skill he should also have lost his certainties and so have become eligible for reviewing. The trouble with the young reviewer is ignorance of how a thing is done, for which there is no help but the experience of doing it, and a habit of final judgment. He has the ruthlessness of the untested and his college press condemns the best work of the day with a finality that the Miltonic deity refrained from after the wars in heaven. He worships the principle, he has no pity for the workman. College has given him a sackful of principles but he has written no books. He knows what a writer ought to have done and how he ought to have done it, but he has no conception of the possible and allows nothing for the grain and cell-structure of the medium, the viscosity of the material, or the limitations of the tools. He has been schooled in abstractions deduced from traditional classics on the one hand and from the preciosities of the most advanced art of the moment on the other, and he has never learned that books are written as needs must. He has the intolerance common to all idolators of the ideal; he has not had to forgo perfection in order to write a book. He has—sometimes—read widely but he has not read deeply; he has written cleverly and intrepidly but he has never faced the need of writing well.

There is no definition of skill: it is, simply, something that comes after many repetitions of an act for which you have some natural ability. Still less is there a definition of judgment: it is something that comes, rather later than skill, from intelligently associating the specific instance with what you have intelligently learned from and about a good many other specific instances. Skill and judgment do not come in matched sets, and they are not born of a miracle. A benign fortune may have endowed the young literary person with everything else that makes for excellence, but he must get these for himself. He has made the first step when he realizes that they do not come easily, but it is the first step that ninety and nine never take. Writing, they have always thought, is easy, for they have always written easily. Why not?—they are gifted, they have a natural ease, a natural brilliance. So the ninety and nine drift off into circumstance and other inspirations—"I am willing," one of them writes, "even to do office work." The hundredth has made his start when he has at last recognized that it is harder than he thinks.

## Letters to the Editor: "The Little Lady of the Big War"

Myrta Lockett Avary

SIR:—There is a story going the rounds in Margaret Mitchell's home town of Atlanta about a certain copy of "Gone With the Wind," and an inscription in it. The story suggests Lincoln's accolade to Mrs. Stowe as the little lady who started the big war, and is none the less worthy of preservation in American literary history. When "Gone With the Wind" was first published, and a tea was given by an Atlanta bookstore for the local but not yet famous author, she sent a copy of her book and the roses from the tea table to a little lady of eighty who, invited to be an honored guest at the party, was confined by illness to her home. The inscription in that copy of "Gone With the Wind" reads

For  
Myrta Lockett Avary, who broke the trail for writers like me. For without you and your books, this book would never have been written.

With much love,  
Margaret Mitchell.

The little lady whom Miss Mitchell thus saluted happens to be a friend of the Mitchell family, but it was not family friendship that inspired that inscription. The inscription acknowledges a debt owed by a young writer to an older one, and owed not alone by Margaret Mitchell. For there is probably no present-day writer on the South after the war who is not indebted, directly or indirectly, to Mrs. Avary. She was a trail-breaker who opened a rich land of literary opportunity to a generation that no matter how familiar with conditions produced by the Civil War was amazingly lacking in understanding of them.

Born Myrta Lockett, in Virginia (December 7, 1857), Mrs. Avary went after some years of married life in Atlanta to New York to do sociological research and literary work. She wrote stories on tenement life, character sketches from the settlement houses, articles on the work of metropolitan charities. She interviewed celebrities. She helped Dr. Offord edit the collected sermons of Dr. DeWitt Talmage. And out of the recollections of her friend Mrs. Joseph Van Holt Nash and of her own faint memories of the Civil War she built her first book, and her only novel, "A Virginia Girl."

D. Appleton and Company accepted the manuscript but wished the book to appear as fact, not fiction. It appeared in 1903 as "A Virginia Girl in the Civil War, 1861-1865: Being a record of the actual experiences of the wife of a Confederate officer," collected and edited by Myrta Lockett Avary. But the book was as much fiction as "Gone With the Wind" is—and as much history. It is also partly a biography, and partly an autobiography.

And it proved a success, reissued at various times until 1917. G. W. Cable had written romantically of the South and the war. Mary Johnston was beginning



"I THINK HE'S HAD AN OFFER FROM HEARST."

to. But Mrs. Avary wrote realistically, created a heroine without bitterness, and presented Northern soldiers who were as gentlemanly, as chivalrous as were her Southern heroes. And her book is pervaded with the spirit of reconciliation that Lincoln and some Southerners had urged, but that few, North or South, had been willing to practise.

By 1903 reason and common sense were beginning to prevail in the South, however. The unsentimental, unromantic, but devoted and appreciative point of view of Myrta Lockett Avary was not considered by Southern people either in bad taste or an insult to the memory of their honored dead. Rather, the success of "A Virginia Girl" justified the publication of the wartime journal of Mrs. Mary Boykin Chestnut of South Carolina whose husband, one time United States Senator, was an aide to President Davis and a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army. This diary, kept from day to day throughout the war, is filled with vivid pictures of the uninterrupted social life, of the pressing economic conditions, and of the morale of a people confronted with defeat. In publishing "A Diary from Dixie" in 1905 (reprinted 1929), Mrs. Avary, the editor and the author of an excellent introduction, gave to posterity an enduring classic.

And immediately there were rivals to "A Diary from Dixie," to share the popularity it enjoyed as a successor to "A Virginia Girl." A large number of very good diaries and journals appeared to have been kept by Southern women. Among the best of those published at this time were Mrs. Pryor's "Reminiscences of Peace and War" (1904), Mrs. Clay-Clop-

ton's "Belle of the Fifties" (1905), and Miss Andrews's "Wartime Journal of a Georgia Girl" (1908). From various other such journals, and from similar sources, Mrs. Avary herself compiled "Dixie After the War" (1906).

The New York Sun called "Dixie After the War" a book "that enables Americans to understand one another better." The Chicago Dial greeted it as the first book on Reconstruction by a woman, the first comprehensive treatment of the subject by any writer. It remains one of the best. "An Exposition of Social Conditions Existing in the South During the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond" the subtitle reads. The book reveals what the Southern people—white and black—were saying and thinking, doing, eating, and wearing in those terrible years.

And at eighty Mrs. Avary has ample proof that her work has been appreciated. Hardly one of the leaders among Northern writers on the South has failed to consult her writings. Gamaliel Bradford borrowed heavily from her account of Stephens for his portrait (in "Confederate Portraits," 1914); Joseph Hergesheimer, in "Swords and Roses" (1929), quotes as history—with due credit—Mrs. Avary's imagined account (from "A Virginia Girl") of a meeting with Belle Boyd, the spy. "Dixie After the War" heads the bibliography to W. L. Fleming's as authoritative "Documentary History of Reconstruction" (1907) and W. E. Woodward made good, and acknowledged, use of it in writing "Meet General Grant" (1928).

AUBREY STARKE.

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