

## Portrait Gallery

**THINKING IT OVER.** *The Reminiscences of Hesketh Pearson.* New York: Harper & Brothers. 1938. \$3.50.

Reviewed by MARGARET BREUNING

**T**URNING from his successful biographies to write autobiographies, Hesketh Pearson has been felicitous in his choice of title. For "Thinking It Over" affords him a latitude in treatment, a freedom from chronological sequence and explicitness of record that may well be irksome to the professional biographer. At times latitude veers into expansiveness of negligible detail. One could well spare much of the early data such as the description of the Hampstead landlady, or the many inclusions of indifferent verse, or the analyses of some of the author's biographies. This is to carp, however, for the book presents unusual accounts of unusual people, often through verbatim conversations and always from first-hand knowledge.

As may be surmised, biography has always been one of Mr. Pearson's passions; Shakespeare is the other. The devotion to Shakespeare led to his acquaintance with Beerbohm Tree, who was then playing "Hamlet" and to his becoming an actor, himself. The early career of Mr. Pearson on the stage, even in walk-on parts, was a series of disastrous blunders including the dropping of a heavy shield on Tree's foot during a performance of "Macbeth." Tree's sufferings were so great that he did not have energy to avenge himself on the inept actor. Tree appears in these pages as so fantastic a person that he becomes entirely credible; no one could have thought him up. Many of his long, completely *non sequitur* monologues are here set down carefully. They afford incomparable examples of how the English language may be used to the bafflement of an English auditor.

In fact, the reminiscences of Tree form the most fascinating part of the book, and offer endless temptation to quotation. This does not invalidate the interest of the Shaw episodes, from which Shaw emerges, not shorn of his wit, but, also, imbued with an unexpected urbanity as a kindly counselor to Pearson, and as a chivalrous friend to Frank Harris, when Harris was in eclipse. A conversation between the paradoxical Shaw and the paradoxical Chesterton—verbatim—is a marvelous example of verbal prestidigitation. The author, who models his biographical technique upon a combination of Boswell and Lytton Strachey (*mirabile dictu*), did not hit it off at all in his first and only meeting with Strachey. Lunching together in a café, Pearson found that Strachey's "high-pitched, tinny voice" made the "frail, whiskered, piping god, impressive to look at but not tuneful to listen to." Conan Doyle, Galsworthy, Barrie are other vivid portraits in a varied gallery. Even the "Gloomy Dean," not a dean then or gloomy, was heckled by the author when a youth and aflame with his Shakespeare fever, into making some excellent dramatic criticism of Tree's production of "Antony and Cleopatra." With so much variety in his experiences, one does not wonder that Mr. Pearson enjoys "thinking it over."

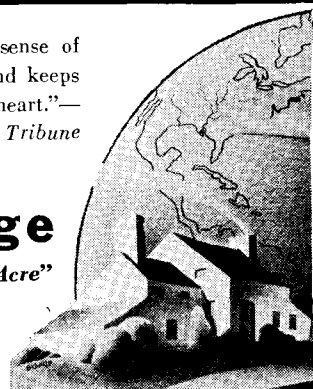


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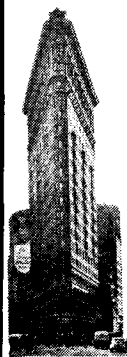
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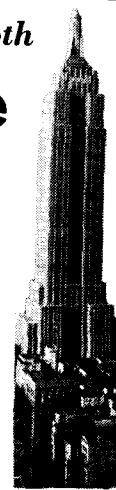
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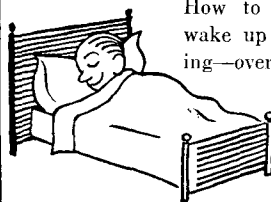


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# The New Books

## Fiction

**HORNS FOR OUR ADORNMENT.** By Aksel Sandemose. Knopf. 1938. \$2.50.

The horns are not what one might expect from the title, but the rutting-horns of the young stag, and the book is mostly about the sex life of young men. Specifically, the bucks who lock horns over a doe are Captain Claes Winckel, a repressed and intelligent gentleman, and one of his sailors, a young giant with an IQ so low he consists mostly of impulses. You can guess which one wins.

Both are exhibited against the background furnished by another sailor, the super-giant Gullhest, a kind of Nietzschean superman, well beyond good and evil. The supporting cast consists of a degenerate, unfrocked preacher, despised by everyone aboard the small tramp schooner; a mate just out of navigation school; a Lapland cook; a rat; and a blonde lay figure of a woman who just walks across the horizon as a focus for attention. The action takes place during a transatlantic voyage staged in June-September, 1914, for no apparent reason but to show that the war has comparatively little effect on the mind of rutting stags. It ends with the destruction of the Nietzschean Gullhest by forces to which he is a bystander.

So far, good; everything is worked out with considerable narrative skill and an adequate knowledge of psychology. Unfortunately, there are some soft spots. Up to the point where Helga enters the story, about half way along, it drags. There are incidents not convincing in fact, as when we are asked to believe that the preacher grew a full beard in two weeks, and others not valid in fiction, as when the

mate is disposed of in an inexplicable accident because his place aboard the ship makes it impossible to have him around at the dénouement. The chapters are set apart by interpolated passages somewhat after the manner of Dos Passos's *Camera Eye* and *Newsreels*; but as both the field of action and the number of characters are sharply restricted, there seems far less reason for them here. Moreover most of them have only the vaguest relation to the central theme, some are mere fine writing, and a few utterly unintelligible.

There is an excellent chance that the book will get itself attacked in Boston, Dublin, and several other jurisdictions both for the central theme and the free use of four-letter words.

F. P.

**MALICE OF MEN.** By Warwick Deeping. Knopf. 1938. \$2.50.

Mr. Deeping seems to be in the happy position of knowing exactly what his public likes and of liking the same thing himself. In his credo he says, "I believe in the great simplicities, in the human urges at the back of us. I believe in love, courage and compassion,"—but he believes also in sentimentality, in meekness inheriting the earth, and in dwelling upon the suffering of men only in order to throw into brighter relief the rewards that invariably follow honest endeavor. "Malice of Men" illustrates both the acknowledged and the unacknowledged credo.

This last novel tells the story of John Lancaster, "a young man of humble origin" who is constantly and painfully conscious of his lack of standing in his

(Continued on page 26)

# The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place, Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
A PUZZLE IN POISON Anthony Berkeley (Crime Club: \$2.)	Arsenic disposes of retired English engineer. Welter of suspects all discarded by professionals but friend of deceased finds solution.	As neat a bit of bafflement as you'll meet in months with surprise ending that may leave reader gasping.	Excellent
THE CASE OF THE SHOPLIFTER'S SHOE Erle Stanley Gardner (Morrow: \$2.)	Chance meeting in California dept. store leads Perry Mason to double murder, which he solves with courtroom dramatics.	Ingenious clue-spotting, rather technical at times, gives vivid interest to swift story in spite of flat characterizations.	Good
MURDER BY BURIAL Stanley Casson (Harpers: \$2.)	Cave-in "accidentally" smothers amateur archeologist. Expert excavator scents murder and scotches clever killers.	Soberly paced, highly analytical affair, with Fascist-plot furbelows and some British—but acceptable—humor.	Competent
APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH Agatha Christie (Dodd, Mead: \$2.)	Obese tyrannical matriarch poisoned in Petra. Need it she did, but H. Poirot, who can't condone murder, gets busy.	Starts well and progresses beautifully against rich background and interesting characters—but then the durned thing blows up in your face.	Disappointing