

## BOOK PREVIEW \*

# Mister Splain and the Chickens

BY DON MARQUIS



Main Street in the nineties: "the country to the north and east of Hazelton is so flat that . . . a person might see for miles and miles" . . .

**H**AZELTON, ILL., in the eighties and nineties of the last century was . . .

But here is an editorial which appeared in the *Hazelton Weekly Banner* the same summer that Aunt Matilda began to fear that Jack was a liar:

Our thriving and progressive little city, which now numbers some eleven hundred and twenty-seven active and enterprising souls, proffers exceptional inducements for all those who would wish to have a look about them before going ahead and buying land in this part of the most up-to-date corn-raising county of the finest state ever settled by our sturdy pioneers. We refer, as is a well-known truism, to the state of Illinois. In the last ten years our little city has greatly increased in population. Westward ho! the coursers of empire take their sway!

There is even talk of three churches instead of two in the future, although many think it would be overdoing it. Many people now living can remember when there was but one. Uncle Jake Ashby, who paid us quite a visit yesterday, leaving with us a sack of new potatoes, can well remember the days when there was no church at all in Hazelton, and no railroad either. Many thanks, Uncle Jake! Call again.

The hog- and cattle-raising industry, which has progressed by leaps and bounds, until now it is quite an industry on the rapidly settled-up farms which surround us round about, on all sides, is an industry that has increased considerably. But while we have earthly and remunerative prosperity in abundance, let us not forget the moral side of life, which all will find amply attended to by the endeavors of the Rev. David Hamlin and the Rev. Alexander Sprague, the two divines of the two religious edifices referred to aforesaid. Let us all pull together to make Hazelton bigger and better yet. A new horse trough at the town pump is sorely needed; City Fathers please take N.B.

Whatever doubts even a sympathetic observer might sometimes have had as to the activity and enterprise of the "souls," there was no question concerning the importance of the cattle, the churches, the hogs, and the corn. The

country to the north and east of Hazelton is so flat that from the roof of either one of the "two religious edifices referred to aforesaid" a person might see for miles and miles. And he would see more maize than anything else. In August when the stalks had their full growth but had not yet felt the frost, the village was like a cape thrust into a great, green whispering sea of corn. And when the corn sheller was abroad in the land, and the thousands of cribs were giving up their treasure, the principal street of Hazelton was so jammed with wagons waiting to unload at the grain elevator that barefooted boys who liked the "feel" of the warm grain on their feet could walk from the grain buyer's scales to Miss Matilda Stevens' dressmaking shop, clambering from heaped-up wagon to wagon, without once getting down upon the ground.

A great deal of grain always spilled from the wagons, to the delight of Aunt Matilda's chickens. Aunt Matilda could never make them understand that this corn did not belong to them; that their actions were not honest—that it was just as much *stealing* for them to pick the grain from the street as if they had flown into the wagons for it. They appeared to have no moral perception.

There was a dissolute tinker who lived in a room over the hardware store, which adjoined Aunt Matilda's place, who was also lacking in moral perception—or perhaps it would be more correct to say, in moral continuity. For his perceptions of right and wrong were not so much lacking as was the consistent will to act on these perceptions. He used to angle out of his window for Aunt Matilda's chickens with a fishline, baiting the hook with bits of meat. It was his favorite Sunday morning diversion; but it was not merely diversion. After having caught a chicken and pulled it up to his window, the tinker would kill it, clean it, and cook it, adding insult in injury by casting the feathers down into Aunt Matilda's garden.

And, if he were somewhat alcoholized at the moment, he would sing, as he picked and cleaned the stolen chickens:

*Mister Splain was oncet a robber  
With Frank and Jesse James.  
And many a bank and train he robbed—  
Oh, Mister Splain!*

It was an idiosyncrasy of this tinker that he usually referred to himself as "Mister" Splain. He insisted on being called "Mister," and the entire village humored him. At the rare times when he had occasion to sign his name, he signed "Mister" as if it were a Christian name.

Splain was one of Hazelton's most notorious backsliders. They were forever having revival meetings in Hazelton, at one church or the other, and the reprobate Splain was forever being "converted." His "salvation" never lasted more than a few days, and no one ever expected that it would, least of all Mister Splain himself. He was a sensationalist, and he could no more resist the emotional appeal of a revival meeting than he could the blandishments of a bottle of liquor. It was one of his chief delights, when under the direct influence either of a traveling evangelist or a pint of whisky, to confess to having been a companion of the notorious James outlaws in some of their bloodiest escapades—a confession which nobody believed. He particularly loved to incriminate himself in doggerel verses, improvised and chanted in a cracked and tuneless tenor. He found a deep, deep joy in the contemplation of his own iniquities, or those which he claimed for himself.

It pleased Aunt Matilda to imagine that it was the chickens of the most immoral propensities, the ones which had been the most froward and flagrant in stealing grain, which were caught on the tinker's hook. She impressed this notion on Jack and bade him take note how retribution follows crime.

But the effect of this was to make Jack watch for the tinker's punishment. For, certainly, Mister was a thief!

Perhaps, Jack thought, an enormous hook would descend from heaven one day, and dangle just outside the tinker's window, baited with something appetizing. Mister Splain would stick his head out and "bite," and the next instant be

\* This week *The Saturday Review* presents an episode from Don Marquis's last book—a novel called "Sons of the Puritans," to be published by Doubleday, Doran on February 17.

whisked off the earth, with agonized gesticulations!

This was a spectacle which Jack greatly desired to witness. He was afraid it might happen when he was not about, and he used to stare at the tinker with a solemn expectancy which puzzled that grimy dog. The tinker's workbench was in the rear part of the hardware shop itself, and several times Jack penetrated that far and stood and stared. The tinker would say to him facetiously: "I don't suppose you could lend Mister a chew of tobacco, could you, Bub?"

"No sir," Jack would answer, "I don't chew tobacco."

"Never learn," the tinker would invariably reply. "It shortens your life. It's shortened Mister Splain's life for him. If Mister Splain had never chewed tobacco he'd be nigh onto a hundred years old today." Then he would solemnly wink, take a plug from his trousers pocket and bite off a prodigious chew. "It was through learnin' to chew tobacco," he would sometimes add, "that Mister Splain and the James boys went from bad to worse, until they finally become outlaws."

Jack thought it possible that when the big hook did descend and dangle in front of the tinker it might be baited with a plug of chewing tobacco.

One day Jack saw the tinker repairing the sloping tin roof of the hardware shop itself. Splain was seated astride the ridge of the roof, when something happened. He slipped and lost his balance, perhaps, and rolled down on the other side. One long branch of a great maple tree which grew in his aunt's yard had partially obscured Mister Splain from Jack's vision, and it may be that the wind blew the leaf-laden branch against Mister Splain, and that he reared back his head with a jerk just before he fell off the roof.

Anyhow, the effect was startling to Jack. He had been gazing at the tinker, and the tinker was there—was there and chanting:

*'Twas many a bank and train he robbed—  
Oh, Mister Splain!*

And, a blink of the eyes, and the tinker was gone! In the spot where Mister Splain had been, gaily warbling of his crimes, there was nothing whatever. Jack continued to gaze, minute after minute, with his own mouth open, but Mister Splain did not reappear. The thing that he had been expecting for so long, the child concluded, had finally happened; it had happened so quickly that his eyes could not follow it. And his expectancy and his imagination got together in his mind; within two minutes Jack actually believed he had seen a hook descend from the sky, had seen the tinker "bite" and disappear. He remembered, now, all his former inward mental visions of this hook descending, and the tinker "biting"; he put this repeated mental vision

in the place of what he had really seen, and put it there honestly. He really thought he *had* seen it with his physical eyes.

Still, he might never have said anything about it had he not met the tinker on the village street the next day.

"I thought," said Jack, going to the heart of the problem directly, as was his way, "I thought you *bit* yesterday!"

"Huh?" said the tinker, wondering. "Bit?"

"I seen a big hook come down out of the sky, and you bit on it, and they pulled you up," said Jack.

"Oh, you seen that, did you?" said the tinker, taking off his cap and scratching his head, while he stared at Jack no less interestedly than Jack was staring at him.

"Uh-huh," said Jack.

"When did you say you seen it?" said Mister Splain, his brow contracted with mental effort.

"Yesterday," said Jack.

There was silence for a few seconds, and then the tinker murmured to himself:

"So *that's* what happened to Mister Splain yesterday, is it?" And then, to Jack: "Where *was* Mister Splain when it happened?"

"On the roof, fixing it," said Jack. "And how did you get back here again?"

"I don't s'pose," said the tinker, following his own line of conjecture and still staring solemnly at Jack, "that neither one of us two could have had too much to drink yesterday, huh?"

"No sir," said Jack, speaking for himself; "all I had was two glasses of milk for my dinner."

"Well," said the tinker, "that lets *you* out, so if you say you seen that, I guess you really seen it. But Mister Splain, the old outlaw, *he* had more 'n milk to drink yesterday, he did."

He paused and devoted some moments to painful thought; and when he proceeded, it was in the first person: "I remember bein' on that roof, and then I remember pickin' myself off'n the ground, kind o' lame, but I don't remember nothin' in between, and there must 'a' been an hour or so in between. You tell me again what happened, Bub."

Jack told him again.

"What Mister Splain can't get into his head," said the tinker, again scratching that part of himself vigorously as if to stimulate thought, "is *where* that hook would come from! Or why Mister Splain would *bite* on it. Bub, could *you* make out why Mister Splain was bitin' on that hook?"

Jack then told him about his aunt's prophecy of retribution for the thieving chickens, and of his own notions, and how he had been expecting the tinker to "bite" for some time. Gradually a light broke on the tinker. He understood. He was of precisely the temperament to understand. And being a solemnly fa-



Don Marquis: drawing by Joseph Cummings Chase

cetious reprobate, he carried the thing along.

"How did you get back here again?" Jack persisted.

"Bub," said the tinker, "the old outlaw squirmed loose from that there hook and dropped! He dropped so fur and he dropped so hard that he lamed himself!"

To prove that he was lame indeed, he limped a little up and down the street. "How high did you go?" asked Jack.

Mister Splain looked up the street and down the street. They were unobserved. He beckoned Jack into the doorway of the hardware shop and bent over and whispered to him, mysteriously and dramatically:

"Cherubs, Bub, cherubs!"

"Did you see 'em?"

"Mister Splain *hearn* 'em!" said the tinker somewhat evasively. "He *hearn* 'em singin'."

"What were they singin'?" asked Jack, not doubting, and, as usual, avid for details.

"Well," said Mister Splain, "they were singin' what you often must 'a' heard *me* singin'." And he piped up in his whisky-rusted tenor:

*Mister Splain was oncet a robber,  
With Frank and Jesse James.  
And many a bank and train he robbed—  
Oh, Mister Splain!*

It seemed to Jack a strange thing for the cherubs to be singing; but then the whole occurrence was strange, and it might well have been the cherubs' way of rebuking Mister Splain.

"Don't you never tell, now," advised Mister Splain, wiser in the ways of the world than Jack, "for if you do, you ain't going to be believed, any more than Elisha was believed when he said he seen them *she-bears* going up in fiery chariots in the Bible. But any time you see me and say, 'Cherubs, Mister Splain!' or I see you and say, 'Cherubs, Bub!' we'll know what each other is getting at! Huh?"

# The Marrying Kind

GOING THEIR OWN WAYS. By Alec Waugh. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

**A**LEC WAUGH'S latest novel is about marriage, very much about marriage. It invites us to inspect, in more or less detail, as many as five marital relationships, and it exhibits the inception of a sixth. The Fanes were the marrying kind, and they appear to have done about as well and about as badly in their common enterprise as the majority of their contemporaries in their own class.

John Fane, paterfamilias and London publisher, whose first marriage ended in divorce in 1930, seems to have found at least physical rest and refreshment in a second legal union with his once adulterous Mabel. I say "seems," because Mr. Waugh's interest in this character quickly dwindles. Fane's daughters and son fare variously. Barbara, the actress, financially outstrips the husband who adores her and whom she adores, only to learn that the art of living on one's wife's earned income is not among the subjects taught in England's public schools. Of Muriel's marriage we hear little, save that she raised children while her husband raised hops, and that the hops market was ruinous after '29. Basil Fane, the young publisher with vaguely

progressive ideas, marries a pretty young thing who is transformed with inexplicable speed into a shrew, and thereafter, just as inexplicably, into a polished and gracious woman of the world who knows how to play the game of modern marriage—compromise marriage—with good taste and even elegance. Basil, perforce, has learned with her. As the story ends, Joyce, the baby of the Fanes, has just given her all to a pushing young Australian, and is facing the world with the light of holy wedlock already shining in her eyes.

Mr. Waugh describes these several relationships, and reflects upon them. His descriptions are strangely uninteresting because he has failed to breathe life into the plot-counters that he moves around in lieu of characters—he comes closest to success with Barbara and Hugh—and his reflections are entirely commonplace. The gist of it all, if there is a gist, is that, even if the odds are a million to one against "love" proving to be

"the real thing," marriage is the only answer to the problem of two persons who believe they are in love.

The man who wrote "The Loom of Youth" in his teens now writes with a practised but uncreative and unpersuasive hand. We follow the moves of his characters as we do the fall of cards in a friendly game, with a mild curiosity as to what will come next, but with no

deep involvement of thought or feeling. Biography assures us that Mr. Waugh is familiar with the literary-theatrical scene of much of his action, but his familiarity has not flowered in re-creation. People and scene alike seem to have been taken out of stock, to have been warmed-over and written-over at several fictional removes from reality. The literary fare provided by "Going Their Own Ways" would not sustain one long on an ocean voyage, but the book should answer the ordinary reader's requirements for a short train journey.

## Broadcasting Books

(Continued from page 4)

William Maxwell's "They Came Like Swallows." Some of these adaptations were compressed within a period of a half hour, but the majority were given a full hour's production. Of them all, Hilton's works, James's dramatic biography of Old Hickory, and Guedalla's historical parade proved the most popular with the listeners, judging from the fan mail—the only criterion available—received by the broadcasters.

The Federal Theatre Project of the Works Progress Administration has been alert to the usefulness of radio. Part of its work has been the adaptation of short stories over the Mutual network. Beginning last March and continuing until September, it presented a series of twenty-six programs under the general heading of "Their Greatest Stories." Though the list was chiefly and, perhaps, commendably confined to American writers—we note such names as James Farrell, Manuel Komroff, Richard Connell, James Thurber, Jerome Beatty, Robert Buckner—exceptions were made occasionally to permit presentations of vivid tales by Galsworthy, Stacy Aumonier, and others. There is also a vast amount of serial drama and fiction on the air, some of it making an appeal to intelligence and imagination, but the larger proportion of it carrying tedious make-believe, under sponsored auspices, continuing from day to day or from week to week.

Strangely, the radio men have not paid much attention to the rich field of the one-act play or, with the exception of WPA's adaptations, to that of the short story. The reading of poetry—even dramatic poetry—also has attained to date only meager representation upon the airwaves. Network schedules show at present two brief periods devoted to recitals of verse. Only sporadically have the broadcasters taken advantage of the many eloquent and experienced voices at their command to bring to interested listeners first class presentations of the world's great poetry. The most notable poetry-reading programs yet to reach the microphone were those which Margaret Anglin offered a few years back on WOR.

The broadcasters, meanwhile, resolutely keep pegging away at their task of entertaining enlightenment. The Univer-



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## To Mary

BY PAUL ENGLE

**T**HINKING of you is natural now as breathing,  
You move with the wind's walking everywhere.  
I fill my lungs with you and feel you wreathing  
My face in that loved element the air:  
Even as you its life is all in touch,  
Handlike wanting but to be aware  
Of all a woman or a wind can clutch.  
I watch a blown leaf bend. I see you there.

My eyes hunger for their far taste of you.  
I have not learned the patience of the year,  
Waiting a season till the change is due.  
I know the earth is warm where your foot stands,  
I know that good is but to have you here  
And all our human truth the touch of hands.