

## Letters to the Editor:

*Moral Standards in Fiction;  
Job and "A Book of Miracles"*

### Potent Capsule

SIR:—Hurray for Margaret Culkin Banning! She has put the whole nauseous dose into a capsule, the contents of which are both pertinent and potent. Every serious reader of *SRL* will send her a mental vote of thanks for the power and timeliness of her appraisal.

Such articles help us to forget for the moment the offensiveness of your new Mother Hubbard; we simply turn it inside out with just a momentary thought of pity for poor Unc Quere—if the heat proves too much for him, you'll have to move him in.

Why, oh why, did you let L. J. H. Jr. review "Seven Grass Huts" when you have some such good reviewers on your list? He cannot see the wood for the trees nor the pampa for the dust in his eyes nor the jungle for the punkies; and to him an orchid is merely a form of plant life. Ugh!

LURA SOLLES COWAN.  
Berkeley, Cal.

### Job

SIR:—The *SRL* has been my most warmly welcomed periodical for almost as many years as it has been published, and its book reviews are read by me each week with close attention.

A review by Basil Davenport of Ben Hecht's "A Book of Miracles" in the issue of June 17th, has aroused my curiosity. This review contains a reference to "a saintly rabbi who, like Job, turned at last and died blaspheming Jehovah." I should be deeply interested in knowing where Mr. Davenport obtained the information that Job died blaspheming Jehovah.

MRS. H. L. MILLNER.  
Morganton, N. C.

### Mr. Davenport Replies

SIR:—Your correspondent is quite right in rebuking me for writing a sentence which could be supposed to mean that Job died still blaspheming. It did not occur to me that any one would take it in this sense, but I ought to have foreseen the possibility, and I have only to apologize for my carelessness.

Since, however, I have received a very courteous note from another of your subscribers, inquiring why I said that Job blasphemed, perhaps I had better take this opportunity to speak briefly of that point. The general purport of Job's speeches is that Jehovah afflicts the righteous, in his own person, and allows the wicked to flourish, an accusation that is made in the most bitterly personal tone. See, for brief citations, IX 17: "For he breaketh me with a tempest, and multiplieth my wounds without a cause"; IX 23: "If



"I don't know a damn thing about love. I only do detective and horror."

the scourge slay suddenly, he will laugh at the trial of the innocent"; XII 6: "The tabernacles of robbers prosper, and they that provoke God are secure," with other passages too long to quote. I think that these charges of cruelty and injustice against the Almighty can fairly be called blasphemy (I acknowledge that the word is perhaps too strong, but I am unable to think of a word that indicates a milder degree of the same thing); and I think it can be maintained that they are felt to be so in the Book of Job. For after Jehovah has spoken out of the whirlwind, Job's final speech is "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Of what does Job repent? Not of anything before he began to complain; both Job and his biographer are agreed that he was a perfect and upright man until that point. It seems clear that Job repents of the presumption of which he had just been convicted by the Almighty. I am aware that there are other possible interpretations of the Book of Job, but I hope this will serve to explain, to any of your readers who may be interested, why I wrote as I did.

BASIL DAVENPORT.  
New York City.

### Nobel

SIR:—Shortly after reading Harland Manchester's splendid article on Alfred Nobel in the *SRL* for June 17th, I came across the following interesting item in the old *Buffalo Express* for February 18, 1901:—

It is reported that the University of Chicago has been selected as one of the nine institutions which will choose the candidates for the Nobel

prizes. The other institutions are the universities of Berlin, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Rome, Leyden, London, Paris, and Zurich. Mr. Nobel was a Swedish millionaire who left a large legacy for prizes to the greatest benefactors of humanity. The prizes go to the greatest discoverers in the domains of physical science, chemistry, and psychology, also to the author of the greatest literary work in the realm of idealism and to the man who is the greatest promoter of peace. The honor was entirely unexpected at the University of Chicago, it is said.

ROBERT M. BOLTWOOD.  
Buffalo, N. Y.

### Edward Bellamy

SIR:—The undersigned will appreciate hearing from anyone who has letters from Edward Bellamy, the author of "Looking Backward," or who knows where any may be found, or who has any significant recollections or information concerning Bellamy or concerning the direct influence of his work.

ARTHUR E. MORGAN.  
Yellow Springs, Ohio.

### Jefferson, Hamilton, Burr

SIR:—This represents the concluding period in my search for material on my book dealing with the impact of Jefferson, Hamilton and Burr on American History from 1789 to 1804. Do you think it possible that the *Review* can inform its readers of a few of my necessities? I seek letters or other data written by:

a. Edmond Genet in the year 1800 concerning the national election.  
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## Birth of a State

*AMERICAN NABOB.* By Holmes Alexander. New York: Harper & Bros. 1939. 473 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

THERE is a lot of novel here, all of it about the transformation of the West Augusta district into the state of West Virginia under the twin influences of petroleum and the Civil War. There is an excellent account of both influences in their earliest stages—the confusion, unrest, oddly mingled motives of patriotism and profit, and families divided in the border states at the outbreak of the great rebellion—the crude derricks among the salt gums, the coming of the Italians, and labor trouble that stood midwife over the birth of oil. There is also in the book an excellent account of the lives, customs, and ideas of those singular West Virginia mountaineers, as firmly fixed to their earth as though they had been in it for thousands of years instead of (at the date at which the book is set) rather less than a hundred. There is some notably fine description of the progress of an oil boom town, and so many good incidents as to suggest that Mr. Alexander must have spent years collecting anecdotes.

Unfortunately there is too much of this good material and a good deal of it lies in the book as undigested as a bedtime lobster. Mr. Alexander has a historical sense so much better than his sense of character that he has produced a kind of history of West Virginia, with a name attached to the spirit of the state. Curtis Larkins is the name; he is the American nabob,



Holmes Alexander

growing up with the country. He is alternately hero and buffoon, coarse and tender, prescient and improvident, quixotic and dishonest in a series of changes not so much those of a complex character as of an incredible one. His wife Edna, representing the tide-water aristocracy in the makeup of the state, also displays variations in character as bewildering as any since Bret Harte tried to write a novel and produced a series of disconnected short stories wrapped round the name of Gabriel Conroy. Thus, when Edna's husband makes a trip to the Secession convention she is all worry, she is all tenderness when he returns; but a few days and a hundred pages later—Mr. Alexander's word for it, there is nothing much in her actions to show it—her husband is "the man she had once loved and had learned to hate."

In spite of these defects, which are serious, and what is probably more important, irritating, the book is not bad reading, especially if taken in small doses. Mr. Alexander's sense of the motives that actuate individuals is often bad, but his sense of motives in the mass is good, and the only pity is that he could not more completely synthesize it into fiction.

## Reading Matter

*THE FLYING DUTCHMAN.* By Michael Arlen. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1939. 302 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

THIS book will distress the admirers of both the earlier and the later Arlen, though they collaborated in writing it. There are flashes of the Arlen who wrote "These Charming People" and "The Green Hat" — notably the first ten pages. They have little to do with the rest of the story and there is nothing much in them—only the conversation of a couple of barflies in Paris. But they are reading matter; and now that most authors are conscious of their duty to save the world there seem to be few people left who care to waste their time writing reading matter.

Also there are flashes of the Arlen who wrote "Man's Mortality"—a man interested in the problem of good and evil, and what lies beyond both; in the mutations and possible destiny of human nature. And there is a great assortment of other material, which perhaps could not have been fused into a novel that would make an emotional impact on the reader, even by the hottest flame of creative concentration. But the fire burned very low when this one was written; it reads like a collection of chapters (or first drafts of



Michael Arlen

chapters) for a novel (or several novels) which never blend into one piece at all.

The three or four leading characters are "men who are so profoundly wretched because they dislike themselves," who know "the self-hatred of the next-best man because he is not the complete man." One of these miserable persons, the narrator, is eventually redeemed by a good woman's love: but since this was unable to cure another character, the narrator must have had some stuff in himself too. The Flying Dutchman of the title is an English newspaper proprietor who had sold his soul to the devil and then tried to buy it back, only to find that he had no money that was good in that market. So long as there is a mystery about what his particular kind of skulduggery was, the story has some suspense; but as with most mysteries, its disclosure is something of an anticlimax.

There may be readers who will get a better two dollars' worth out of this ragbag of semi-finished ideas than they might get out of a smoother product with nothing in it. But from a craftsman so accomplished as Arlen, a thinker so acute and subtle if not particularly profound, we have a right to expect something a good deal better. This reads like a book written by a sick man who was in a hurry to get something finished anyhow before he gave out. Readers of "Man's Mortality" will hope that Arlen makes a speedy recovery, and is able to turn the heat on his material next time.

Elmer Davis, who is best known as a journalist and commentator on the passing scene, is also a novelist. Among his works of fiction are "Friends of Mr. Sweeney," a newspaper novel, and "Giant-Killer," a novelized version of the Biblical story of David.