

Leon Bloy: Ungrateful Beggar

THE WOMAN WHO WAS POOR. By Léon Bloy. New York: Sheed & Ward. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ERNEST BOYD

BETWEEN 1892 and 1917, the year of his death, Léon Bloy kept a journal which was published at intervals, in eight volumes, with different titles. The first of these, "Le Mendiant Ingrat," which admirably describes the series and its author, appeared in 1898, one year after the first publication of "La Femme Pauvre," the novel now translated from the scatological original into decorous English by I. J. Collins. The translator duly apologizes for his squeamishness, although none of our current exponents of the "Anglo-Saxon" monosyllables would have been deterred by Bloy, even if disgusted by his deliberate and unnecessary blasphemies. But as this book is described as having had "an immeasurable effect on all European Catholic writing," the task of making Bloy acceptable to English-speaking, Catholic puritans was a delicate one, and Mr. Collins has done very well.

Whether one calls Léon Bloy "an ungrateful beggar"—with the British implications of that term—or prefers the more pious form of "the ungrateful mendicant," the fact remains that he was all his life an abusive, ungrateful parasite, a past master of vituperation, a foul-mouthed fellow, and according to the testimony of friends who were not impressed by his peculiar form of pathological piety, an incurable lecher. "The Woman Who Was Poor" is the second of his two autobiographical novels, of which the first, "Le Désespéré," published in 1887, would have been an even tougher problem for a translator engaged in presenting Léon Bloy as a model of true Catholic piety. By the way, Mr. Collins observes in a footnote that the only edition of this book authorized by the author is the out-of-print first edition of 1887, although in that year another edition was issued with a special postscript to a friend, and in 1913 it appeared with a new preface by the author and a dedication to Jacques Maritain, whom Bloy converted to Catholicism. Of course, the ungrateful beggar, as was his wont, may have been paid for these and

then denied all responsibility for them. But, if the Bloy legend is to be created in English, it is just as well to get some of the facts straight.

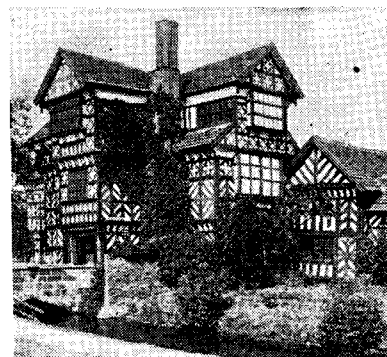
Until his marriage to the daughter of a Danish author, Léon Bloy had apparently a natural proclivity for street-walkers, two of whom provide the essential basis of his two autobiographical novels. One of them imagined that she was Mary and he was Joseph and their sordid love-making was spiced with this blasphemous condiment. The poor creature, having prophesied the Second Coming, in which Bloy was to play an important part, finally went completely insane and was locked up in a lunatic asylum. Many of his friends charged that his pathological mentality plus their carnal raptures played no small part in unbalancing whatever fragments of a mind the woman may have possessed. Another prostitute served for part of the portrait of the heroine of "The Woman Who Was Poor"—the other half being borrowed from his wife!—just as her predecessor became the heroine of "The Man Who Was Desperate."

The present volume contains one of his most famous eulogies of the street-walker as alone capable of sainthood. Bloy was very definitely *persona non grata* to the respectable clergy of his time. In fact, once when he went on a holy pilgrimage with one of his women, they were asked to leave the place for conduct unbecoming to its sacred associations. This did not prevent him from claiming to be the one true upholder of the Holy Faith. His type is a difficult one with which to sympathize, unless one is at least tinged by his peculiar theological obsessions. He was poor all his life, because he had an incomparable talent for losing friends and alienating the very people who might have helped him. He could not work on Catholic papers. He quarreled with Huysmans (the writer most akin to him) with Barbey d'Aureville (whom he would have liked—and tried—to emulate), with Ernest Hello, with almost all his early friends. Then he tried to make a virtue out of poverty, as being something holy, while he revealed in every thought an intense personal hatred and envy of those who had any financial success.

What, then, is the importance of Léon Bloy? Is he readable? The answer is yes, if one is not bored or disgusted by his religious ravings, for which, as I say, a certain theological bias is necessary to induce either horror or respect. Every religion has its own peculiar forms of blasphemy; certainly John Bunyan could never have written "Là-bas," nor would Mr. Gibbon or Colonel Ingersoll derive any "kick" from a Black Mass. "I do not care a damn for the Index," said Bloy, using a much stronger expression, which I have toned down, following the example of his present translator.

This was characteristic of him and expresses that side of Bloy which all admirers of vigorous invective and brutal satire will appreciate. A man who can call one volume of his Journal "Quatre Ans de Captivité à Cochons-sur-Marne," an untranslatable phrase, to describe his life on the outskirts of Paris, is worth reading. This novel is full of excellent talk about art, literature, and music; it contains a marvelous picture of Huysmans (by an ex-friend) and a lively portrait of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.

It will be hard for the non-French and non-Catholic reader to grasp the hold that Bloy could have on men like Péguy, and that he should have led Jacques Maritain back to Mother Church will baffle most admirers of that subtle, first-class mind. There was nothing subtle and nothing first-class about Léon Bloy, and his detestation of the respectable Catholic literati, Bourget, Brunetière, and so forth was heartily reciprocated. But, for better or for worse, he belongs to that curious group of belated romanticists: Ernest Hello, Barbey d'Aureville, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and Huysmans. He deserves as much attention, at least, as they do.



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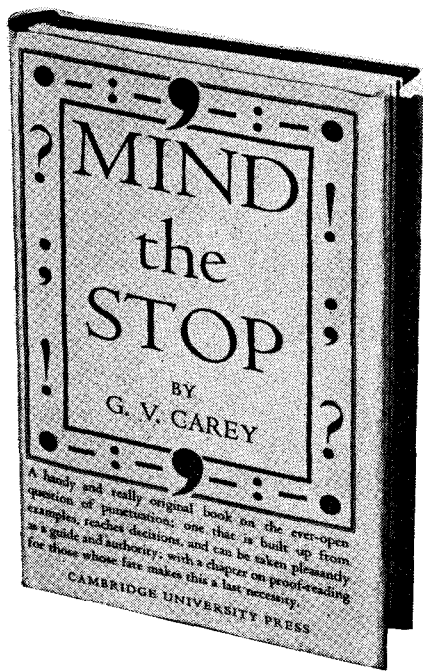
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THE SATURDAY REVIEW
420 MADISON AVE., NEW YORK CITY

Psychic Experiments

THE MYSTERY OF THE BURIED CROSSES. By Hamlin Garland. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1939. \$3.75.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

IN this book Mr. Garland relates a series of psychical experiments which he was led to perform with the assistance of a medium. He received communications from a number of voices, of which the principal one represented itself to be Father Junipero Serra, the great mission priest of California; and by following their directions he found a number of metal crosses, baked into adobe blocks which would be mistaken for ordinary rocks; according to Father Serra, these were pre-Christian Indian relics, which had been thus concealed from the white men. Mr. Garland tells his story with evident sincerity, but ramblingly, with all the repetitions and the intrusions of irrelevant voices which always occur in investigations of this kind; and like too many amateur psychicists, he draws no clear distinction between clairvoyance and telepathy, and between these powers and indications of the survival of the personality after death.

He constantly labors accounts of precautions which would show only that his medium was a genuine me-

dium, which no one who has studied the subject would be concerned to deny; but though her revelations may have been supernormal, it does not follow that they come from departed spirits; they may be clairvoyant impressions, disguised by the unconscious as dreams are — a logical difficulty which Mr. Garland appears not to perceive. At one point in the conversation, the name of Kipling is mentioned by one of the observers, and Mr. Garland asks if Kipling is within reach. "He replied as instantly as if he had been waiting at a telephone booth, 'Yes, I am here'," and exchanges a couple of perfectly commonplace remarks. This is too like a dream described by (I think) Pierre Loti, in which some one warns the dreamer to beware of the wild dogs, and with the dreadful promptness of dreams the wild dogs appear—naturally, for once the dreamer conceives them as an idea, his dream will externalize them; and this punctual popping in and out of Kipling with nothing to say suggests a similar origin in some unconscious mind, individual or collective. Certainly a page by Kipling that sounded as if it were by Kipling would be a better intimation of immortality than any number of artifacts. But the subject of supernormal powers is one about which enough is now known to make it respectable, while enough is still unknown to leave it its peculiar fascination; and readers who feel its fascination will be interested in this contribution to the evidence.

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place, Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
NO HANDS ON THE CLOCK Geoffrey Homes (Morrow: \$2.)	Private investigator Campbell, on trail of missing man in Reno, encounters three murders, blood-thirsty bank robbers, and strange dark woman.	Murderer's identity almost too well concealed, otherwise banner example of tough-talking, hair-trigger school, with eerie graveyard finish.	First-class
THE SINGAPORE EXILE MURDERS Van Wyck Mason (Crime Club: \$2.)	Secret agents of several nations tear Orient loose in search for American's invention, but Hugh North thwarts 'em all.	You may get hopelessly enmeshed in the intrigue, but the action—and the women—will get you out pronto.	Top-notch thriller
DEATH IN THE NIGHT Philip Ketchum (Phoenix: \$2.)	Nocturnal attempts on life of Midwestern banker lead him to call in sleuth George Clay—and then the holocaust begins.	Much bloodshed, intrigue, and rural scandal—along with some perceptive detecting, and bit of romance, packed into rather skimpy compass.	Quickie
Y. CHEUNG: BUSINESS DETECTIVE Harry Stephen Keeler (Dutton: \$2)	Only murder involved is final solution—we hope—of encyclopedic Marceau Case. Major part of tale records discovery of business crookedness.	Typical Keeleranza of brain befogging erudition, fantasy, some (strangely) pretty sloppy writing, and info-swiping device that is really unique.	For Keeler fans
THE NECESSARY CORPSE R. C. Woodthorpe (Crime Club: \$2)	Youthful imbroglio of English dept. store magnate sets vengeful American gangsters on trail. N. Slade helps merchant dodge killers.	Except for sundry cops and thugs, few perish. Quinton's flight, masquerade, and girl secretary's radical activities are diverting.	Fantastic