

Man's Humanities to Man

BY IRWIN EDMAN



Irwin Edman

Disraeli

IT used to be possible to make a case for a liberal education in its own terms. Those terms may not have been very precise, but they were sufficiently clear. Any young man went to college to become acquainted with the best that had been known and thought in the world, and the best was mediated through the classics, through the sciences, and through mathematics. The classics, though they were taught largely as grammar, were the common avenue through which one became acquainted with the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome. The sciences gave one a knowledge of nature; and the sciences, and it used to be argued the classics, too, gave one a mental discipline. Whether these results were accomplished by these disciplines is beyond the point. The point was the intention, and the intention was that of a well bred, well informed, cultivated gentleman, an American replica of the nineteenth century Oxford ideal, Matthew Arnold with a Boston accent.

It has long been difficult, it has of late become almost impossible, to make the case for a "liberal" education in the old Olympian terms. After the arrival of Darwin and of the experimental laboratory, it was difficult to insist on the exclusive prerogative of the humanities. With the lapse of the classical languages or their degeneration in schools into mere grammatical exercises, it became impossible to insist on Greek and Latin as the sole, or even as plausible, avenues to culture. With the rise of social sciences and professional education, the whole liberal education ideal came under suspicion. Now with the rise of dictatorships and of the threat of destruction, the whole ideal of a liberal education is on the defensive. If we are to plead for culture, it must be with a realization that whatever it is, it must have its career in the midst of chaos. Sweetness and light, if they are still to persist, must do so in a society increasingly marked by bitterness and darkness.

Yet the odd fact remains that in many different colleges and universi-

ties in this country and for many different reasons, there has been a recent and marked re-emphasis on humanistic studies, and at Columbia, at Chicago, at St. John's in Annapolis, to take just a few examples, an exposure to, a training in, the great monuments of thought and writing and art in the Western tradition has with relative suddenness come to be regarded as a must for undergraduates; and at the very beginning of their college careers Freshmen and Sophomores, all of them, are required in these institutions to undertake courses of study in which the materials of education are "great books," not read about, but actually read. In some institutions there is requirement, too, in the acquaintance with masterpieces of painting and music in the Western world. Culture, if the makers of college curriculums have anything to say, is coming in for a renaissance.

The first question to ask is, "Why?" Why at this particular juncture of affairs when today is black with disaster, should students suddenly be expected again to become acquainted with the great works of the past as part of their equipment for dealing with the future, of part of their life as living contemporary human beings? There are several incidental reasons,

and these have to do largely with the failure of some of the other things that have been tried.

The experimental laboratory is for the general student not an exercise in scientific method but an obstacle race to come out with the answer in the back of the book. The social sciences have given a vast deal of miscellaneous information and miscellaneous theory, but they have not provided for the average student any deeper or even more exact human understanding. The courses in the history of literature have traced influences and given names and periods, but they have not promoted a love of literature or an appreciation, in any precise or illuminating sense, of the art of writing. College curricula have been miscellany subjects. One is reminded of Stephen Leacock's parable of

the young American student he met one summer who explained that in the autumn he proposed to study Turkish, music, and architecture. "What," asked the author, "do you expect to be a choromaster of a Turkish cathedral?" "No," replied the student, "they come at nine, ten, and eleven."

There was, at least, in the older dispensation a common body of material and a common discourse. Educated men could understand each other; they spoke the same terms and the background of their imaginative heritage was the same. Moreover they dealt at first hand with first-rate things. For the convenience of pedagogy adapted to colleges with large classes or with small libraries, the American college had degenerated into the use of textbooks. Now a text, apart from being a convenient source of income to a professor, is easily

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taught and, considering what it is, easily learned. It is capsulated for easy consumption by the student mind. It can be regurgitated on re-examination. It is second-rate provender for second-rate minds by, normally, second-rate minds. There have been a few textbooks that were real books. Paulsen's famous "Einleitung in die Philosophie" was one of them and James's "Psychology" was another and a greater. But the textbook is a classroom device, and students even more than their professors knew they were not in the presence of releasing or illuminating literature or first-hand science or original thought. Students no longer studied the great tradition. What they studied was not great and it had no tradition.

Even when colleges still offered "great books," it was not their greatness or their beauty that was the preoccupation of the student or of his teacher. Shakespeare was used as an exercise in grammar, archeology, or history; Virgil became a Roman grammarian's holiday.

The results of all this on or as education have long been patent, not simply on campuses or to those professionally concerned with college education. They have long been notorious in the quality of the intellectual life and imaginative taste in the presumably educated classes of America, those who have had the advantage of a college education. There is no longer a common cultural heritage, unless the fact that everybody has conjugated Hamlet in high school may be said to constitute one. Questionnaires of alumni ten years out of college show a shocking lapse, if it ever existed, of the habit of reading. The classics are books noted in the textbooks on the history of literature or used to illustrate grammar or literary archeology. Philosophy is a system of isms and dialectical controversies confined largely to conferences and congresses of the authors of philosophical textbooks.

Meanwhile the social sciences, which vary, too, with the teacher and the textbook, have succeeded only in producing a vocabulary at once pretentious and vague. Neither the love of ideas nor the understanding of them has been nourished by the new disciplines, and the older ones have almost promoted a distaste for them. If in many colleges the students take other things more seriously than their courses, find the football coach more genuinely scientific than the sociologists, and the sports writers more interested in living speech than their teachers of literature, edged and important ideas elsewhere than

in the textbooks of philosophy or the lectures of professional philosophers, many have thought their preferences plausible.

It is no wonder that, since the routine program of college education has failed at so many points, there should have been so much tinkering with the curriculum in the past twenty-five years. But in attempting to make education an equipment for understanding the present and facing the future with courage, serenity, and understanding, it has dawned upon educators that the old tradition of a humanistic education had something to say for itself. The world may be going to smash but a good book remains a good book, and there is a curious datelessness about the first rate. The plays of Sophocles, even in translation, are astonishingly good reading to the surprised student, and the Greeks, talking about things that always matter and talking about them with directness and the simple art of genius, are, also to the student's surprise, astonishingly relevant. They date incomparably less than the novels of ten years ago.

It began to occur to college teachers in various parts of the country that something like the values of the old classical curriculum could be revived, and some of the futilities of mere lip service to the classics avoided. Why not ask students to read first-rate books instead of second-rate ones? Why not ask them to read the books themselves instead of manuals about them? There might not be anything like universal assent as to what constituted the greatest books. But if one examines the list of books in any one of the new Humanities courses, there will, I think, be very little disagreement that the books particular college faculties have chosen are books of the highest interest, entertainment, and art. They are important in dozens of ways; they each reflect a period; they have influenced generations of men; they are long standing embodiments of central human feelings, interests, and ideas. But what is more important, they are excellent books in their own right and in their own terms. Anyone coming upon them would find his experience ripened and deepened, his delight intensified, his mind stimulated and liberated. Older professors raised their eyebrows. Freshman read Plato's "Re-

public," Aristotle's "Ethics," Dante's "Divine Comedy," Goethe's "Faust." These books have made a lifetime of study for trained scholars. How can youngsters read them and hope in a week's reading devoted to each of these concentrated works of genius in translation, to enjoy, understand, or get anything out of them?

The experiment has, as a matter of fact, been tried for three years at Columbia now. The results are at once natural and astonishing. These books were written originally to be read, and every book must be read, if it is going to be read at all, some time for the first time. Freshmen, even those least likely to respond to them, the students headed for engineering, for instance, have read them with care, with enjoyment, and with understanding. They have been reinstated into the great tradition and come early, as they probably would not have done had they not been required to do so, to travel in the realms of gold. They have been made early to realize that there is nothing necessarily forbidding about a classic and they realize that classic is a name for something not simply conventionally called good, but really good, interesting, provocative,

entertaining. Some of the books in the Columbia, Chicago, or St. John's list are difficult, Spinoza's "Ethics," for example. But part of the stimulation of the new plan lies in the fact that the material has a bite and a challenge to it. The young readers, with sounder instincts and more intellectual capacity than we are generally ready to acknowledge, respect what they read



William James

and have a capacity not touched off by the second-rate to deal with the first-rate. They have the inestimable early advantage of being brought into intellectual and responsible relation with the processes and the results of clear thinking and disciplined art. The whole tone of education is raised, and it becomes genuinely educative when books of the first order are used as the instruments for exercising the minds and imagination.

The revival of the humanities is thus not an attempt to pulmotor into life books long dead. The books in these new humanities courses are not dead; they are studied as living literature and thought, and as preëminent examples of literary art. Insofar as they are alive, and students like hun-

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Before the Boer Trek

WATCH FOR THE DAWN. By Stuart Cloete. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1939. 489 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

MR. CLOETE'S mastery of the background of South African history and his singular knowledge of Boer character were demonstrated two years ago in that saga of the great northern trek, "The Turning Wheels." It was a novel not easily forgotten. The broad honesty of its realism, the tenseness of its action, and, above all, its firm emphasis upon the rugged, earthy, primeval elements of life gave it a quality by no means always found in narratives of adventure, however factually accurate their progress. Now, with much the same material and with exactly the same skill, Mr. Cloete does it again.

The period is earlier. The Napoleonic wars are just over, and the English government at the Cape, more confident of its power, is pursuing its policies with greater strenuousness. Rebellion is already stirring among the Boers, particularly among those who have planted their homesteads along the northern outposts, under the very shadow of Kaffirland. They have fled sullenly to these regions to escape the dominion of their rulers, but even here the tax-officers and the courts harry them. To this country comes on a trading expedition the promising son of a rich southerner, young Kaspar van der Berg (nephew, but equal in age, of the Hendrik whose exploits are a feature of "The Turning Wheels"). Frank, innocent, still little more than a boy, he is caught in the border troubles. Almost accidentally he kills a British soldier, one of a squad trying to carry off old Frederik Bezuidenhout who has refused to appear when summoned to court. The old man is shot, and Kaspar, escaping with his life, is turned into an unwilling outlaw who must spend the rest of his years avoiding the established order of the Cape's dominion.

He joins the body of picturesque renegades who have pitched their camp north of the Great Fish River, and who flourish on a hatred of England. He goes trading into still further northern fastnesses, becomes the friend of the king of the Matabele, with whose permission he leads a hunting expedition into the country of the elephants and returns rich in ivory. He plays his part in an abortive and tragic uprising of the border Boers and again escapes from vindictive British justice, almost by a miracle. But all the while his only desire is to become the simple Dutch farmer that his father was

before him, to settle down with the woman he loves on the acres that he can wrest from the wilderness, to have about him the horses, the cattle, and the sheep that are the pride of a Boer's heart. Eventually he can achieve this, but only by penetrating ever further north, by braving the savages, by choosing a site to which the British advance may not reach. Such, in one man's case, was the beginning of the struggle which was to last through several generations and to disappear only in that cruel war at the beginning of our own century.

This is Kaspar's book. He is the typical Boer, in whom all the men of his race are amalgamated. His life is the epitome of their lives, pious, forthright, genuinely well-meaning. It was their tragedy that they were too honestly independent to endure the not always unjust exactions of another well-meaning people. They and the whole of South Africa suffered for it. Out of their sufferings Mr. Cloete has understood and loved them, and has known how to pour that love into the pages of this book where it vibrates warm and alive. May he do it again and still again!

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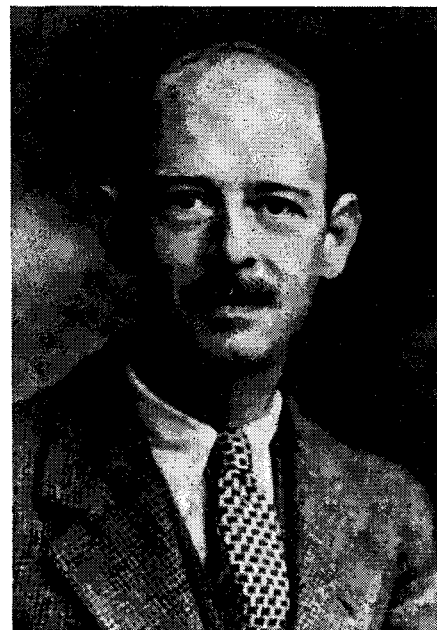
Stalking a Dictator

ROGUE MALE. By Geoffrey Household. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. 280 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

A FAVORITE theme for parlor discussion among detective story addicts used to be "How would you commit a murder?" Recently, this has often been superseded by the more difficult question, "How would you go about killing a dictator?" The question of method, at least, was easy for the anonymous narrator in "Rogue Male" (you will find at the end that he has a good reason for writing down his experiences and for concealing his name). He was, we gather, an Englishman of good family, with some reputation as an explorer; and he was a big game hunter. He set out to hunt the biggest game of all—man, the best-guarded man. He sets out from Poland, but after that his geography also is carefully vague, so that though in all obviousness his quarry is Hitler at Berchtesgaden, it could, if you insist, be Stalin, and begins his stalk. This is the story of how his attempt failed—his first attempt, that is; of how he was taken in the act and managed to get away from his captors, only to find himself in a strange country, with a man-hunt after him, disabled for a few days and conspicuously disfigured for many more; of how he got back to England, to find the man-hunt continuing, with deadly persistence. Neither he nor his pursuers wish to involve their governments, and the affair is fought out as a private war, first across London and then in the country where the hero stands a regular siege.

Those who remember Mr. Household's first novel, "The Third Hour," which was a remarkable combination



Percy S. Smith

Geoffrey Household: "Those who remember Mr. Household's first novel, a combination of the adventure story and the novel of ideas, will expect much of this; and they will not be disappointed" . . .

of the adventure story and the novel of ideas, will expect much of this; and they will not be disappointed. It keeps to the level of the pure action-story; but on that level it could hardly be better. One criticism that should be made is that of the motive; for a good part of the book the hero protests too much that he stalked the dictator out of a purely sporting spirit, to see if it could be done; toward the end he acknowledges, rather shamefacedly and unconvincingly, that he had been in love with a girl whom the dictator had put to death, and that is why he is going out now to have another shot. Of all the worn-out conventions of nineteenth-century