

The Rise of Kirby Harron

SING FOR A PENNY. By Clifford Dowdey. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. An Atlantic Monthly Press Publication. 1941. 366 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

IN this story of the rise of Kirby Harron, Mr. Dowdey deals with a period of Southern history that has been, on the whole, neglected by most of our novelists. We have had plenty of novels about the Civil War and plenty of novels about Reconstruction. We have had share-croppers and plantation-owners and Colonel Carters of Cartersville. But the building of the industrial South in the eighties and nineties, particularly in its cities, has not attracted many pens. It did not happen without conflict—and that conflict is Mr. Dowdey's theme.

Kirby Harron was a city man, a poor relation and a child of his age. The Harrons had owned a debt-ridden but cheerful plantation in Henrico County, in the days before the War—but the War had settled all that—the War and the Bowers family, who had lost nothing but their field-hands and were so successful in Richmond that they could still stay on top. So Bonny Harron, who had ridden with Stuart and married Emily Bowers, found himself unsuccessfully trying to run a harness-shop in Richmond.

Kirby knew that the family was going down hill. And nobody—or so he thought—seemed to care about it but him. They were content with the street on the wrong side of town where “the old people dreamed of their lost life and the young people dreamed idly, drifting through the slow-flowing days.” But Kirby wasn't content. You could get where the Bowers were, if you had the money—and he set himself out to get it. “Sing for a Penny” is the story of his failure and his success. He got the money and broke his business enemies. He won and lost Nancy Pendleton—and won her again, in the end. He drove and dragooned his own family, ruthlessly, toward a goal they did not desire. Some, like Willie Costello, dropped in the harness—others rebelled against him. But he made himself “the Boss-man”—he and the hard-bitten spirit of the times. “He had started out . . . trying to win security for his family and new wife by making good paper to sell at a reasonable price. He had become a corporation . . . and he had grown into what the newspapers called an ‘empire’ to save his corporation.” The very end has a touch of the conventional business titan but throughout the book Mr. Dowdey is less concerned with caricaturing Kirby than with

trying to show how he got that way.

He is excellent, too, in showing three levels of society—the Bowers, who kept a gracious tradition of living but had to descend to the marketplace to keep it up—the nouveau-riche Meades, descendants of old Wash Meade, the scalawag peddler, who built a mushroom empire on the bones of Reconstruction—and the Harrons and their kin. For relief, we have sturdy Grandma Harron who didn't think it quite decent to have a bathroom put in the house, and Uncle Gracchus, the ex-cavalryman, given to store-bought liquor and three-voiced soliloquies, who lived according to his lights and didn't hurt anybody and, in spite of being a trial to Kirby, had satisfactions that Kirby did not. But then Kirby Harron wouldn't have known what to do with a light heart.

A thesis book in some ways, “Sing for a Penny” suffers somewhat from its thesis as such books are bound to do. With the business side of the novel, Mr. Dowdey has taken enormous pains, and it is convincing. And his gift for the delineation of minor character grows. There is a brief sketch of a Con-

federate reunion toward the end of the book as honest as it is touching. What he lacks, as yet, is the power which even the most painstaking realism will not give—the power to go one step beyond. Once Kirby Harron's character is set, he becomes less a man than a symbol of forces. The forces are carefully checked and balanced—there is no cheating about that. And yet, neither Kirby Harron nor Nancy Pendleton has quite the easy vitality of some of the lesser figures, though great labor has gone to their making. They do not live beyond the book—and that is something which happens or does not. And, when it does happen, the novelist is lucky.

Nevertheless, it is more informative to call attention to Mr. Dowdey's virtues than to criticize his defects. It ought to be apparent by now that Mr. Dowdey is a novelist who keeps on growing. His three novels of Virginia have a fine sincerity of approach and a gift for freshness of material. Put together they already form a considerable achievement. Mr. Dowdey isn't flashy, and he is sometimes pedestrian. But his grip on his subject increases and his honesty is unflagging. He should become one of the real figures of his time.

The Delafield Approach

NO ONE NOW WILL KNOW. By E. M. Delafield. New York: Harper & Bros. 1941. 306 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

THE heart of this novel is in the English 1890s. As the title implies, the book is by way of being a mystery; why did Lucian Lemprière die in the south of France, hardly mentioned by his family; why did Fred Lemprière, his elder brother, retire to Barbados and rum; and whose child was Callie Lemprière, Fred's or Lucian's? Fred and Lucian were both passionately in love with Lucian's wife, Rosalie, and she was fatally obsessed with Fred. All this took place in Wales, where the Lemprières, a Barbados family, occupied their time in doing nothing whatever. But first we learn about Lucian's grandchildren in 1939; then about his daughter Callie's adventures in England in 1910-18; and so at last we come to Wales.

It is a long approach, and E. M. Delafield seems to be tying and untying a somewhat unnecessary number of knots. Indeed, one is inclined to ask oneself whether this is a plot or a rather untidy puzzle. Actually, it is a plot, and a good plot: for the passions of “No One Now Will Know,” though fiery and destructive, are leisurely passions, the world it describes is a lei-

surely world, and a corresponding plot is in order.

Since it deals with the melodrama (which Miss Delafield curbs but does not attempt to conceal) of the loves of three charming but quite useless people, we need not bother ourselves with inquiries as to whether this is or isn't an important book. It isn't. But it is charmingly written, emotionally satisfying, its minor characters are skillfully drawn, and it allows us to escape into a vanished world which—since we are not asked either to admire or regret it—we can enjoy.



E. M. Delafield

A Fuller Anthology

THE WRITINGS OF MARGARET FULLER. Selected and edited by Mason Wade. New York: The Viking Press. 1941. 608 pp., with index. \$5.

Reviewed by TOWNSEND SCUDDER, III

IT is clearly an act of justice to have Margaret Fuller at last come before the public as author and critic. Her colorful personality, her unusual and tragic career, were too much of a temptation for biographers, and they presented her as a personality rather than as a writer. Even Mr. Wade, editor of this excellent collection, is not entirely above reproach, for his recent life of Margaret Fuller, by its very title, "Whetstone of Genius," suggests that her interest and influence were largely personal. In this book, he has made amends. Here are her more important writings, to be read and judged on their own merits. Her widely scattered work, conveniently brought together, makes a volume well qualified to take its place in the library of every literate American who values the nation's intellectual heritage. Though by no means of equal literary merit, these "writings" deserve a place beside such compilations as H. S. Canby's one volume "Works of Thoreau," for like Thoreau, Margaret wrote with purpose, had ideas, and those ideas still speak today. At her worst, Margaret Fuller had an upholstered style. She could stuff pages with convoluted sentences. But when her first-rate mind is at its keenly analytical best, she forgets to be literary and writes with terse, vigorous directness.

Mr. Wade partitions this book into five compartments—divisions by and large chronological in arrangement. First comes Margaret's account of her Western trip, published in 1844 under the title, "Summer on the Lakes." Here Mr. Wade has done an excellent job of cutting. The fledgling author, unwilling to make sacrifices, crammed into her pages every experience of her journey, whether an actual adventure or merely an impression of some book she had just read. The non-essential shoots have now been pruned away and left the main trunk standing. As a result, Miss Fuller's narrative of travel, and her sage analyses of the problems and future of the West, emerge more clearly than when first published. The development of the West interested her, but so did the plight of the natives. While most observers were gloating over the expulsion of the Indians from lands they had regarded as their own, Miss Fuller saw the injustice of it.

The second section, "Woman in the Nineteenth Century," today will make slow reading for most persons. It suffers from the turgescence Miss Fuller is guilty of when most aware that she is engaged in writing. But as an important document in the cause of feminism it deserves the preservation it here receives.

The third section makes far better reading. In it Mr. Wade has concentrated those critical writings, done for the *Dial*, for Horace Greeley's *Tribune*, and for other papers, which establish Miss Fuller as one of America's few great literary critics. She was no emotional, subjective, impressionistic judge. She sought standards in criticism, and on these she based her own dissections.

The fifth section is given over to a selection of letters, the fourth to the record of Margaret's experiences in Italy during the troubled years 1847-50. She was not only an eyewitness of the heroic defense of Rome during Mazzini's short-lived Republic; she was a participant, serving as head of an overcrowded military hospital, where the blood and agony of the unjust siege were most apparent. Yet she was more even than this: she was a foreign correspondent getting her dispatches through to the *Tribune* in spite of every obstacle. There is a strangely modern ring to this last, most dramatic period of her life. In



Margaret Fuller

reading her account, now almost a hundred years old, one is inevitably reminded of some present-day newspaper men and women. She wished Americans to realize the struggle going on was their own struggle for liberty. "I earnestly hope," she wrote, "for some expression of sympathy from my country toward Italy. Take a good chance and do something; you have shown much good feeling toward the Old World in its physical difficulties—you ought to do still more in its spiritual endeavor. This cause is *ours* above all others; we ought to show that we feel it to be so."

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

MORE FAMOUS WORDS OF FAMOUS PEOPLE

What famous characters from the pages of literature spake the words that are quoted below? Allowing 5 points for each one you can name, a score of 60 is par, 70 is good, 80 or better is excellent. Answers are on page 13.

1. "Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on!"
2. "Since I left Plum Tree, down in Tennessee, this is the first time I've been warm."
3. "God's nightgown!"
4. "Please, sir, I want some more."
5. "Out, damned spot!"
6. "To be, or not to be: that is the question."
7. "I am a lone, lorn creetur, and everythink goes contrairy with me."
8. "My strength is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure."
9. "Boy, you'd better jump, 'cause there's two locomotives that's agoin' to bump!"
10. "Pigs is pigs!"
11. "God bless us every one!"
12. "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"
13. "Open, sesame!"
14. "I 'spect I growed. Don't think nobody never made me."
15. "Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him!"
16. "An' the Gobble-uns'll git you ef you don't watch out."
17. "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?"
18. "Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink."
19. "Lord, what fools these mortals be!"
20. "The quality of mercy is not strained. It falleth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath."