

It Isn't Done with Mirrors

NIGHTMARE ALLEY. By William Lindsay Gresham. New York: Rinehart & Co. 1946. 275 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by FRANK K. KELLY

WE ARE all vulnerable to one form of magic or another, especially now when the triumph of our science over the very essence of matter has aroused in us a terrible fear, and driven into us the lesson that things we cannot see may dominate our lives. Magicians and sorcerers have held great power in all ages, using different techniques in different times, and ours is an age in which we have witnessed the rise of masters who could throw willing nations into states of trance.

In the present novel Mr. Gresham has torn apart the gaudy veils covering the tricks of phony "mentalists," fortune-tellers, astrologers, fake mediums and their ilk and has spread before us with a detachment at times a little too remote his thorough knowledge of how the tricks are worked and why the suckers fall. Calm, sensible people who smile at the advertisements of astrologers in their daily newspapers, reading his swift and chilling narrative, carried along by the jetting force of an unusual story in a lurid milieu and set on edge by the bitter sharpness of his perception, may at first nod wisely to themselves and say: "Of course, this is the way it goes, and what a pity, what a shame—but these things do go on, and the ignorant keep falling." And then, if they consider the meaning of the book on another level, if they are honest with themselves, they will admit that the pressure of guilt might make them figures in a nightmare, victims of a violent defeat, as most of Mr. Gresham's people are.

Before he begins his novel, Mr. Gresham quotes the passage from T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" concerning Madame Sosostri, the famous clairvoyante, who was "known to be the wisest woman in Europe, with a wicked pack of cards." He uses a wicked pack of cards—the Tarot, the ancient deck used by fortune-tellers—as sources for his chapter headings and as commentaries on the events which carry Stanton Carlisle, his central character, to a queer destiny. He also quotes from "The Satyricon" these words: "For at Cumae I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl hanging in a bottle. And when the boys asked her, 'What do you want, Sibyl?' she answered, 'I want to die.'"

After he stumbled upon his mother in an act of adulterous love with his



father's best friend, Stanton Carlisle had a strong urge to die but he did not realize what the urge was. He felt that he had taken upon himself part of his mother's guilt, when he accepted from her a box of magician's equipment as a reward for deceiving his father and covering up her affair. His sense of guilt and horror was reinforced when his mother finally abandoned the family and his father in a fit of anger beat his beloved dog to death. He also ran away, carrying with him a bottled, buried memory of shock and destruction.

In a carnival he found a home. He became adept as a professional magician; he tried to make love to Zeena, the "mind reader," and finally succeeded after getting rid of her drunken husband, Pete, by giving Pete a bottle of wood alcohol. Then he developed a lust for Molly, a girl who made a living by appearing in a scanty costume before the carnival crowds but clung to her virginity and her remembrance of her gay father, who had protected her from all suitors.

Molly fell in love with him when he saved the carnival from a raid by sheriff's deputies in a Puritan-minded town of the deep South. The scene in which he turns the chief deputy's religious obsession into a tool for controlling the man's mind marks one of

the high points of the book. Here Mr. Gresham achieves a fine quality of style which is lacking in other sections, and he convinces the reader that Carlisle does have a rare ability to interpret the subtle signs which betray the deepest nature of a man's mind to the alert psychological observer.

In fact, one of the most curious aspects of the entire book is that Mr. Gresham tells in elaborate detail how the shoddy tricks of mental magic and spiritualism are performed, and yet he leaves a residue of uneasiness even when he dispels the illusions, because he creates the feeling that persons who become skilled in such esoteric lines are really rare and strange. Such people are often cynics and deceivers, as Stanton Carlisle certainly is, and yet they are wizards of psychological power, able to influence the unconscious selves of others without realizing scientifically what they are doing.

Stanton Carlisle rises to success with the aid of Molly, and brutally presses her from degradation to degradation after he meets a stronger magician than he is—Lilith Ritter, who uses her conscious knowledge of psychology to make him utterly helpless and dependent upon her. With Lilith, Carlisle climbs high, and then partly because of her and partly because of the urge to self-destruction hanging bottled within him, he stumbles just before he reaches the pinnacle of his ambitions and he plunges down. His eventual fate hits the reader with overwhelming power.

Joseph Conrad once declared that the task of the writer was "before all, to make you see." In this sense Mr. Gresham has undeniably succeeded. If you read this book, you will carry a vision of what happens to Stanton Carlisle with you for a long time.

Late Knowledge

By Marguerite Janvrin Adams

THIS bitter knowledge is brief part of me:
this taste that lies like aloes on the tongue;
for there have always been ecstatic, free
words to be sung.

This is no season for an old regretting:
fragrance is in the fields, bunch-berries lie
close against earth, stars ride the astral setting
of windy sky.

So the mind closes tight within, is shutting
the world outside, with tides that meet the shore;
this bitter knowledge has a blade more cutting
than ever before.

Irwin Shaw's Wartime Stories

ACT OF FAITH AND OTHER STORIES. By Irwin Shaw. New York: Random House. 1946. 212 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

THESE are chiefly stories of the war, and military adventures of the peace, told in Mr. Shaw's clean, economical, and skilful fashion. The author's plots are plots of mood and emotion, a hint and a gesture, rather than action, but there isn't a story in the book whose mild climax does not leave the reader satisfied.

The two best stories to my mind—but they are sufficiently exemplary—are "Faith at Sea" and the title story, "Act of Faith." The first of these appeared in some magazine, probably *The New Yorker*, several months ago but this reviewer found as much pleasure in a second reading as he did in the first.

"Faith At Sea" is the simplest stuff in the world—that is, the most difficult to write—and Mr. Shaw has done this one perfectly; it should go into the textbooks. There is a young lieutenant in charge of a gun crew on a freighter which has lost its convoy. One of the crew has a violent attack of acute appendicitis.

The freighter captain says simply, "That son-of-a-bitch'll die," but he does remember that somebody once left a medical book on the boat and produces an ancient, ragged volume, which he bets has appendicitis in it. Once the lieutenant begins to study this book, the sick man's Italian buddy is quite certain that everything will be fine, in the hands of his lieutenant.

The lieutenant operates successfully and Constantini watches over his buddy till morning shows that the patient will recover. (I am still wondering how the officer learned to take surgical stitches, but that is a small objection.)

"Act of Faith" is about a young Jew ready to start out on a leave to Paris with some of his friends. The question is money—the paymaster hasn't caught up with this particular outfit for months, and the captain himself can lend the little band of tourists only four of his eight dollars. Seeger, the Jew, has a Luger taken from a German SS major whom he had shot during the war, and he has a standing offer of sixty-five dollars for this from a staff captain.

He also has a letter from his father, at home, who tells him that his battle-shocked brother is taking cover all over the house because he expects American mobs to kill all the Jews.

Seeger figures that if this is a possibility he will have a use for the Luger—he does not intend to scream and pray like the European Jews.

At the same time, he remembers that his insolvent buddies have saved his life and he has saved theirs on various occasions, so he asks two of them, "What do you think of Jews?"

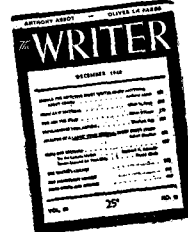
"Jews?" Olson said. "What're they? . . . I'm an uneducated fellow."

"Sorry, Bud. . . . Ask us another question. Maybe we'll do better."

So Seeger sells the gun. "What could I use it for in America?"

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