



Trib-ulations

Edited by Martin Levin

Critic's Crisis

(A few notes from a friend's diary, which may throw some light on the distressing malady that lately affected G. Hardwick Brasenose, the literary critic.)

FEB. 2—Called on Brasenose this afternoon. Doctor and psychologist there. Psychologist handed patient a book to read. Excessively dull book, I was told. As doctor anxiously watched, Brasenose made cursory examination of opening pages and shook his head. "I can't put it down," he said. Face flushed. Tired quality in voice. Temperature normal, pulse rapid.

FEB. 10—Read Brasenose's review. Quiet, thoughtful, searching appraisal of emptiness. "A book hard to put down," he wrote. Very sad.

FEB. 14—Can't get away from idea that I am in some way responsible for Brasenose's trouble. Nobody knows, of course, and doubt that Brasenose himself would acknowledge it or blame me. Feel quite wretched when I think of it.

MARCH 1—Mrs. Brasenose telephoned today. Her husband had tackled two books. Dreadful trash, she said, but he held on to both books to the end despite planned distractions such as ringing of telephone, slamming of doors, and noise from radio and television sets both going at same time.

MARCH 8—I trace it to a night some years ago when Brasenose and I discussed an English novel that was having a wild commercial success. Brasenose derided it. I defended book and urged him to give it another reading when he could. "For my part," I said (and how I wish I could recover those words), "I was unable to put it down." Two days later he called me. "You were right," he said, "It is good. I was unable to put it down."

MARCH 12—Brasenose ordered to bed. Needs rest. Still reading and reviewing. Doctor had idea of trying an especially long and heavy book on patient. Brasenose outfoxed him by propping book against a pillow and dozing off only when he could no longer battle drowsiness. Waking after a few minutes he had finished book. "Should be a surefire hit," he wrote. "Couldn't put it down."

MARCH 16—Cunning Brasenose. Called in carpenter, who constructed bed-reading desk. Elaborate affair of several levels and angles that permits

Brasenose to read while sitting up or lying on his back or his side. Matter of levers.

APRIL 2—There seems to be no help for Brasenose.

APRIL 9—Incredible news. Would not have believed it if hadn't been shown proofs. Doctor and psychologist had collected page proofs from several soon-to-be-published books and had mixed them indiscriminately. Brasenose had taken the pages in stride. "Couldn't put it down," he wrote.

MAY 21—Brasenose phoned me. Terribly excited. Could I come over next day.

MAY 22—Filled with trepidation. Poor Brasenose. Unprepared for shock awaiting me. Brasenose out of bed and dressed. Lively, fresh of cheek. Handshake firm. Smiling. Doctors have withdrawn from case. "I beat them. I beat them all," Brasenose told me. Gloating. "I beat the publishers. I beat the doctors. Do you know what I've proved? I've conquered fatigue, boredom, irritation, revulsion. I think I may say without sounding boastful that there isn't a publisher who can produce a book I can put down. I was a sick man. Nobody will ever know how sick I was but my will power brought me through."

—JOHN FERRIS.

Night Sports Desk

OF all the departments in a great newspaper, sports seems to attract the most colorful characters and, more often than not, the best writers. Heywood Broun was a sports writer. So were Ring Lardner, Red Smith, Westbrook Pegler, and Damon Runyon. At the *Herald Tribune* in its heyday Stanley Woodward and Caswell Adams jointly coined the immortal phrase "Ivy League," and one would have to go a long way to equal the writing talents of such famous *Trib* sports writers as Don Skene, William H. Taylor, Al Laney, Bill McGeehan, Grantland Rice, Bunk Macbeth and Joe Palmer.

But one of the best in my time was not a writer but a copyreader, the broken-nosed little night sports editor, Eddie Logan. Gentle, an expert handler of words, Eddie seemed filled with an inner radiance quite in contrast to his façade. For in early youth, so the story went, someone in Eddie's neighborhood had smashed his face in, and I mean literally smashed it. Eddie had everything else but he had no nose. Because this made him—and the paper—self-conscious, Eddie had turned al-



cuckoo clock weight?

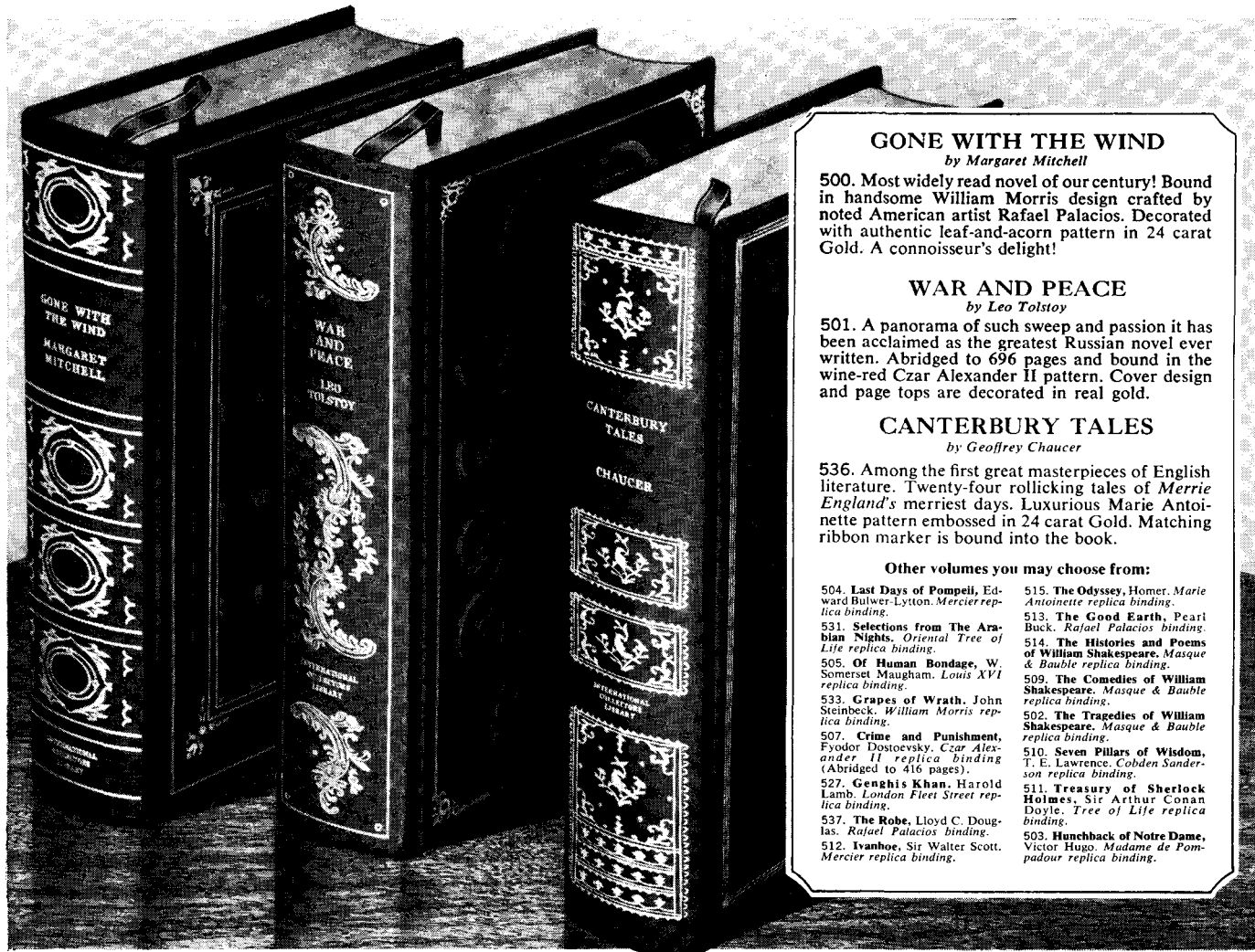
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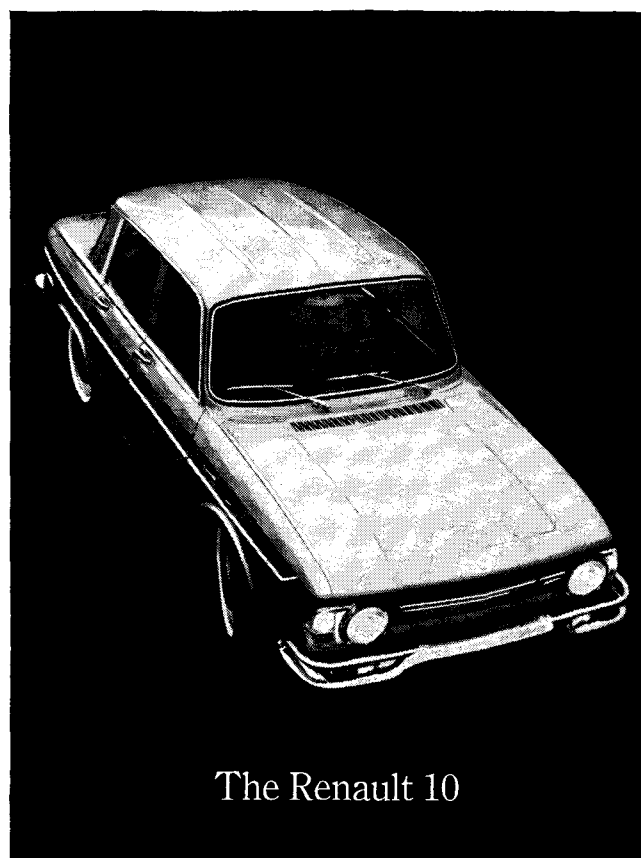
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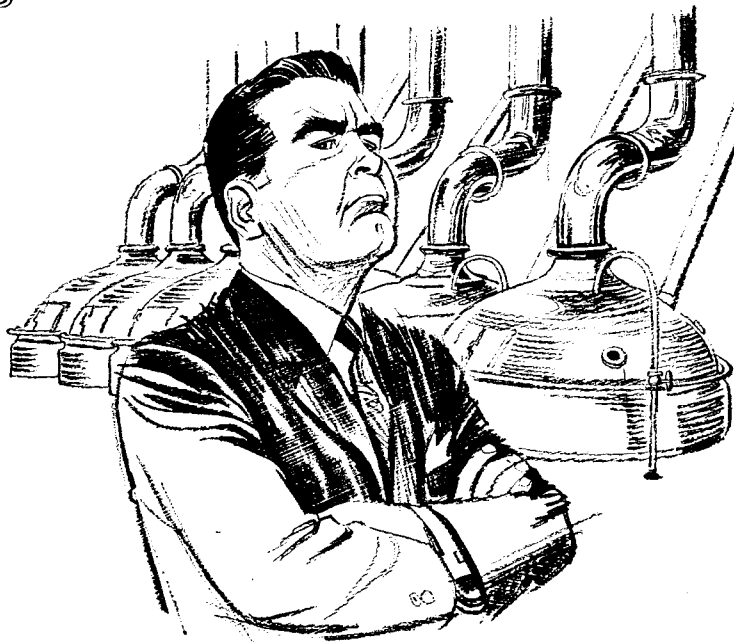
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most immediately to the desk rather than risk ridicule in the cruel outside world of sports reporting. That he came to know his important profession of word-handling superbly no one on the staff ever for a moment doubted.

No one, that is, except the rather stuffy sports editor, George Daley. Daley was a dandy, a smooth operator with the management, and in his way probably an effective administrator. But Daley couldn't write and didn't know it. He insisted on doing a sports column a couple of times a week and the column was always about horse racing, which he adored and understood, even if he couldn't express himself in print. Calvin Coolidge's famous line, "When a great many people are out of work unemployment results," was pure Daley. And Eddie Logan, who was born knowing good writing and had a reverence for it, as all good copyreaders have, had to handle George's sports column whenever he batted it out.

On one occasion a famous Australian racehorse was being brought to the United States for racing and breeding, and George Daley's enthusiasm knew no bounds. The horse bore the unlikely name of Phar Lap, and for weeks nothing passed George's lips but words of awe and wonder for the animal, en route from Down Under. But soon after Phar Lap's arrival in California the beast caught American sniffles and promptly died. George Daley happened to be in the ticker room when the flash came over, and he raced to the copy desk, waving the bulletin and screaming. Eddie Logan looked quickly at the AP flash (it was early afternoon and the paper didn't go to press until 10 p.m.), glanced up at George, then said quietly through his flattened nose: "Well, George, if the boys are sending flowers count me in."

One night long after George Daley had gone home and left the sports department to the professionals, the editor ambled over to Logan from an adjacent desk with a long galley proof waving from his right hand.

"Hey, Eddie," he said, "they've left George Daley's column out of the first edition."

"That's all right," said Eddie without a moment's hesitation, "we'll put it in the late city, next to the reading matter."

—RICHARD L. TOBIN.


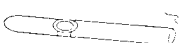


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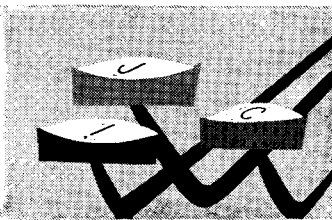
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Manner of Speaking



What Is Your Definition of Poetry?

There is never a shortage of students who are eager to have me do their homework for them. Come term-paper time, the mail runs full of dull questions from students who have not discovered the location of the local library and who have been left to assume that the word "research" in the phrase "research paper" means "write a letter to some writer or editor and ask him to tell you what to say." Sometimes they ask for one's philosophy of life. Or with equal impartiality they ask for a bibliography, a personal opinion of the collected works of William Butler Yeats, an interpretation of the major trends in modern poetry, or a list of my ten favorite poems with my reasons for choosing them as favorites. But the one question that dongs through practically all such letters is, "What is your definition of poetry?"

What on earth is there to answer? It might even be worth the effort of a reply if one could make them see the

futility of hunting for pat definitions where no definition is possible. But what impels them to that futility? Why do they have teachers, if they are not made to understand that there are concepts and bodies of experience too various and too elusive to submit to definition. What is their definition of life? What is their definition of an idea? Can they define themselves?

One may, to be sure, identify, if only tentatively, some of the things that would have to be considered in trying to identify poetry, life, idea, or individuality. That sort of speculation is always likely to be fruitful. But what remains forever dreary in the dully stated question is the assumption that a definite answer is available. And behind the dreariness of that assumption lies the drearier recognition of what their teachers must be in order to permit them such assumptions.

It is possible to quote many definitions of poetry, but the simple fact is that

none of them define. The father of the late John Holmes, as I mentioned in this column once before, came up with his own definition, and perhaps it turned out to be as accurate as any other. "Poetry," he said, "is where every line begins with a capital letter."

Had he read Latin poetry or E. E. Cummings, of course, he would have known better, and might have written instead, "The school system is where every line in a poem begins with a capital letter, and where every idea begins by being deformed into a neat and inadequate definition."

But if I move my finger to the other end of the line, I think I can put it on something like an everlasting difference between poetry and any other form of writing. Whether or not the line begins with a capital letter, *it ends not at the right hand margin of the page, but against white space*. Some of the lines in a prose play and some passages of dialogue in works of fiction also end against a white space, but they do so with the difference that they have no more to say.

IN a poem, the line comes to rest against a white space because the white space is part of the poem's particular notation. "Notation" is intended here exactly as in music, as a system for indicating the pace, the pauses, the glides, the emphases, and the loudness with which a given passage should be read.

Loudness can be indicated by as simple a device as capitalizing all the letters of a word: BOOM! Emphasis can be indicated by many different metrical and non-metrical devices, the most effective of the metrical devices being the terminal monosyllabic foot, as in Frost's:

What if it wasn't all it should be?
I'd
Be satisfied, if he'd be satisfied.

"I'd" is annotated for extraordinary stress, first because of the metric effect, second because it is an unusual rhyme, and third because it is an odd way of breaking off a line. But note that once "I'd" has been punched, the force of the parallel construction throws a similar stress on "he'd" in the next line. Perhaps the simplest, and most overworked device for special stress is the use of italics: "Now, I say." Pause can be indicated simply by using a period, though there are many subtler notations for it. And pace is indicated by all sorts of devices, including alliteration and internal rhyme, though the first basic principle to note is that the line will read faster when unaccented syllables are brought together, and more slowly when accented syllables are brought together.

But of all these notations, and of many others that could be set forth, the

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