BOMBINATION

CROME YELLOW. *By Aldous Huxley. 12mo. 307 pages. George H. Doran Company. $2.*

THE name of Huxley is suggestive. The eminent sceptics of the Victorian age remained the children of an earlier time. While they destroyed traditional opinions and beliefs, they retained themselves traditional habits of mind and of feeling. They remained as earnest, serious, and moral, as their religious opponents.

Now their work is producing its fruit. We have a generation sceptical and sophisticated beyond the dreams of the destructive Giants. It has carried the work of its grandfathers to its logical end, and welcomes the psychological determinism of Freud as the confirmation of its deductions. Taking a particular and detached view of things, it is remarkable for intelligence rather than for intellect. The centre of interest has shifted. Instead of a division into good and evil, or fit and unfit, or beautiful and ugly, we have a new standard and a new dichotomy.

We say that a thing is or is not "amusing." That does not mean that it is comic, or even that it is bizarre. A picture by a Primitive, a sermon by Donne, the music of Rossini, the character of Gladstone—these are all "amusing." If the meaning of the word could be successfully analysed and defined, it would contribute something to the critical understanding of much modern work and feeling.

I fancy that the taste for the "amusing" consists largely of an intense and intellectualized appreciation of things for their own sake, of their *ipseity*; of what is characteristic in them, and peculiar to them; of the differentia which makes it possible to label them. Thus the actions of historical personages are "amusing" just in so far as they are "mannered," "of the period," and appear to us to be antics. It is by reason of the difference between them and ourselves, that we find people "amusing."

When the "amusing" becomes the principal interest, and the

only criterion, all capacity and inclination for moral judgement naturally disappears. Its place is taken by a dilettante attitude which seems eventually to be rather sentimental; it seeks by this intelligent appreciation of things to compensate for an absence of emotion.

The beginnings of this attitude are, I think, perceptible in the Correspondence of Flaubert, and the Goncourt Journal. It is strong in Laforgue, and now there are several English writers who in their different ways are remarkable for it, Lytton Strachey, Norman Douglas, and Pearsall Smith eminent among them. But Mr Huxley is perhaps the furthest gone. The one thing impossible to him is any sort of earnestness. To him the world is a vast aquarium peopled by fantastic goggling creatures; and only in so far as they goggle, do they interest him.

Mr Huxley has produced a number of poems and a book of short stories called Limbo. We are now given a desperately clever discursive novel. Crome is an English country-house complete with farmyard and village. In it Henry Wimbush and his viraginous wife, the gorgeous Lady Priscilla, entertain a house-party of some eight persons. They spend their time chiefly in conversation; and what they chiefly talk and think about, and dabble in, is venery. (The word is not used in the sense of *la chasse*; never was a house-party less sporting.) The party includes a modern painter, a modern poet, a New Thought philosopher, and a real philosopher, Mr Scogan, who is a cross between Cannan's Adrian Stokes and Norman Douglas's Mr Keith; there are also several cultured and nubile young women. It might be called Foible Farm, you suggest? Mr Huxley will admit Peacock in his genealogy. Rather like South Wind, someone else will murmur. It is certainly collateral; not that Mr Huxley imitates Mr Douglas. But their subject is similar, though the scene is different. Characters could wander from one book to the other without doing much damage, and some of the Cromians will certainly end in the Bay of Naples. But for the present they are in the country. The War is responsible for that. Those who did not object to it were often billeted on farms: those who did, performed Work of National Importance on the land. This return to Nature is very different from that sought by Rousseau and the makers of the Petit Trianon. "Farming seems to be mostly cruelty or indecency," the Cromians declare; not that they have much objection to either.

They are disaffected to a degree rarely achieved except by certain English types who chiefly appear in French fiction, and from whom they must be descended:

"Fantastic English aristocrats. I like to think of them all: eccentric milords rolling across Europe in ponderous carriages, bound on extraordinary errands. One is going to Venice to buy La Bianchi's larynx; he won't get it till she's dead, of course, but no matter; he's prepared to wait; he has a collection, pickled in glass bottles, of the throats of famous opera-singers. . . . Others are bound on crusades—one to die miserably among the savage Greeks, another, in his white top hat, to lead the Italians against their oppressors. Others have no business at all; they are just giving their oddity a continental airing."

They are futile and sterile and ironical and delightful. The name of Crome might after all be Heartbreak House; Shaw would find them far more heart-breaking than his own characters. He could not create people so alien to his temperament. Brain has become an illness, a parasitic growth: in Mr Huxley's own words, it "bombinates in the void," like the Chimaera in Rabelais. It is a machine that races, having nothing to propel.

But the inhabitants of Crome are not alive; they are *fantoches*, with gutta-percha entrails, and behind them is always the enigmatic figure of Mr Huxley. Listen to him speaking through Mr Scogan's mouth:

" 'Eros, for those who wish it, is now an entirely free god; his deplorable associations with Lucina may be broken at will. In the course of the next few centuries, who knows? the world may see a more complete severance. . . . An impersonal generation will take the place of Nature's hideous system. In vast state incubators, rows upon rows of gravid bottles will supply the world with the population it requires. The family system will disappear; society, sapped at its very base, will have to find new foundations; and Eros, beautifully and irresponsibly free, will flit like a gay butterfly from flower to flower through the sunlit world.'

" 'It sounds lovely,' said Anne.

" 'The distant future always does.'

"Mary's china blue eyes, more serious and more astonished than ever, were fixed on Mr Scogan. 'Bottles?' she said. 'Do you really think so? Bottles . . .'"

There is no criticism of Mr Huxley that he does not forestall you by making himself. You complain that he is too literary. He admits, and deplores, it. He reckons the books he has read by their weight in tons. He demands "a mental carminative." His favourite subject is the young man so clever and well-read and sophisticated that he is incapable of action. You can divine behind all this ingenuity and *dandysme* and *pirotecnia*, a certain bitterness, a suffering from the inability to be simple, a deep-rooted feeling of what the French think we call spleen.

To divert him he has the engaging religion of words. They are for him as for Villiers, almost miraculous. Ekbatana and Pompanazzi are objects of his hyperdulia, and he is even in danger of repeating his phrases, so piously does he consider them. He is a master of the just epithet, but when he wants to describe direct and simple beauty, he is at a loss, self-conscious, blushing, and he generally fails.

I doubt if he is a story-writer at all. He does not care to concentrate, to dig. All the time his fancy, which is monstrously alive, meanders into attractive side-paths, in pursuit of the "amusing." His sensitiveness to the atmosphere of a period or *milieu* would make him an admirable critic. But Mr Huxley takes nothing seriously: least of all his own talents. In Mr Douglas and Mr Pearsall Smith this attitude is the not unbecoming cynicism of men who were young in the Nineties. In Mr Huxley it is a sort of precocity, and in one who has published three or four books, precocity is no longer decent. At the risk of feeling, as well as of appearing, ridiculous, I must insist to him upon the importance of being earnest.

RAYMOND MORTIMER