

THE SCARSDALE ARISTOTLE*

By Edmund Wilson, Jr.

WITH what a live awareness he confronts us, this cicerone of mean streets! He seems to beckon us on like an Ariel to venture deeper and deeper into the city, to turn corner after corner in the hope of some indefinable thing, some precious pot of miry gold buried somewhere at the foot of an arc light. All the richness and wildness and abundance, all the mirth and quickening despair, all the slowness and terror and faith and compassion of that noontide world of Tintoretto seems to hang about his lifted shoulders and shadow the fine candor of his brow. His bosom has borne heavy medallions and his eyelids are a little weary.

Yet with the soundness or the unsoundness of the views set forth in Mr. Benchley's book it is not my purpose here to deal: for one thing, space forbids it and, for another, even if it did not, I should probably not deal with it anyway. His thesis may be briefly stated. On the 15th of November, 1917, the Crown Prince came down to Spa with Ludendorff and Lord Alfred Douglas; credentials were demanded and waived; there was no protest from the Polish delegates.

*This synthetic review was composed by Mr. Wilson in an earnest attempt to treat Mr. Benchley's book in the style most appropriate to it. As Mr. Benchley's mind has been reduced to incoherence by financial articles, opera librettos, and speeches appealing for funds, so Mr. Wilson's has been partially impaired by his prolonged bondage to literary journalism. Excessive consumption of "The New Republic", the morning "World", "The Smart Set", THE BOOKMAN, and the literary sections of the "Tribune", "Post", "Times", and Brooklyn "Eagle", has at last turned him giddy, and this example of his noble delirium has been thought suitable to the occasion.

On the 30th it was rumored in the Embassy that the coup had failed again. At a meeting *in camera* it was decided that Andorra should be given to the Turks, with the great snail fisheries on the south coast remaining within the sphere of influence of Egypt. It was now 1892; the guns had opened over Sedan and among the shouts of a grateful people the February Government fell. Mr. Benchley reports that next morning on the streets of Budapest and Berlin street hawkers were hawking postcards of Frederick the Great.

It is in the treatment of these rudimentary types that Mr. Benchley is seen at his best — extracting always the rich earthiness and humor which underlies the middle western peasantry. There is a Falstaffian broadness and hilarity about his picture of the drunken old gin keeper and his brief sketch of Abigail Hunt breathes a warm blast from the cow country. It is only in his focus and his values — so much better handled by Flaubert — that we find lapses almost unaccountable in the work of so scrupulous an artist. — If Mr. Benchley were only a little better we might describe them as "lapses lazuli". We confess that we enjoyed the book but there is one thing that puzzles us about Mr. Benchley. Has he ever heard the long cherished story about the old city editor of the "Telegram"? A young cub reporter had just rushed in from the morgue with the story of a sensational drowning. Old Al Ringling remained stonily calm while the boy hammered excitedly at the typewriter. When the third machine had collapsed under him the old man came casually over and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Never mind, my lad," he said drily. "Remember there's no paper published on Christmas Day."

In brief, a fiction of the first rank, a clout for the dunderheads and slumgullions — a soft sougning of adjectives and adverbs, of pronouns and prepositions. A book to read and to reread. A book to care strongly for. A book to take to bed every night — a devastating book. It will put Mr. Benchley at once in the forefront of American writers. There has been nothing since "A Child's Garden of Verses" which has the delicacy of these little poems. I don't know when a mere written thing has moved me so. It is a superb bit of work. I say that Benchley is a genius and head and shoulders above the mass of his contemporaries. He is, with Mr. Nock and Mr. Rascoe, the chief hope of American letters and upon Mr. Benchley's ample shoulders the chief hope of American letters rests. Like good wine, he needs no bush.

Love Conquers All. By Robert C. Benchley.
Henry Holt and Co.