Two Serious Efforts

PRIVILEGE: *A Novel of the Transition.* By Michael Sadleir. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

GODS. By Shaw Desmond. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

IN his "Advertisement to the American Edition" of "Privilege," the author replies with vigor and some asperity to certain strictures made by English critics. He thinks extremely well of his work, and is frankly put out by the relatively temperate enthusiasm of others. It was not nice of them to judge his book to be "precocious" and "over-elaborate" and unreal; or to quibble about certain questions of fact. His story, he says, is a romance, written up to the high level of its own emotionalism. The very landscape is conceived in a spirit of sombre luxuriance. It is, he owns, a deliberately stylistic book, which fits "to an impressive and tragic theme a fastidiously and purposely rhythmic prose." Well, after this modest fashion the post-Shavian preface is wont to run. The final question here must be whether the work succeeds or fails in its perilous attempt; for there is no halfway about tragic themes or fastidiously rhythmic prose. They must achieve grandeur or they are naught. The trouble with "Privilege" is that it falls short of greatness, and it is not the kind of book that can afford to fall short. Its net effect is of a clever and elaborate study in the heroic style. Its odd flavor, which belongs to the author, no doubt, suggests a blending of the Galsworthian and the Brontesque. And for all its dating of "Today," this is the rural England of "Wuthering Heights" rather than of the Forsytes or even the Caradocs.

To his story of the Bradens of Whern the writer has essayed to give the glamour of a passing aristocracy, of all that romance of pomp and privilege which our day is passionately and gratuitously lamenting. Blood and birth are not dead yet, by a long chalk; but commiserating the invalid is a pleasant and harmless office, and his day of convalescence is by no means fixed or fixable. The Bradens are a highly colored and sharply charactered group—giving "character" its stage meaning, not its ethical or "psychological" one. "Black Whern," the hunting, hard-drinking old lord, is just dead, having passed with the last tradition of that brutal aristocracy which he has so picturesquely represented. Already the family prestige and the family property are in decay. Mr. Sadleir makes open use, like Poe, of the "pathetic fallacy": "The year was rotting to its end. Along the carpet of trodden leaves, brown-yellow with an occasional slashing of vivid green, the trees crept like mildewed ghosts, an endless procession of noiseless specters, emerging from one tan-

gled mistiness only to blend instantly with another. The solitude of this familiar woodland seemed peopled with melancholy sprites. Each raindrop clinging to a twig was a tear for the decay of Whern, each gurgle of the spongy ground a sob for the late autumn of an ancient race." . . . This is pretty obvious, and so is the characterization, and so the mechanism of the plot, which turns on two sensational hypotheses — *without disqualifying themselves as romantic figures*, an English grande dame could succumb as Lady Barbara does in Chapter IX, or her noble husband blandly permit her continued infidelity, sacrificing his family "honor" in order to protect the family reputation. No, this is not a tragic romance; it is, beneath its cleverness of style and seriousness of intent, a laborious bathos.

It is a pity, for in its cultivation of a Galsworthian gravity and its approximation of a well-ordered and well-rounded action, it is a far rarer phenomenon than the contemporary studies in the chatty amorphous manner of the Wellsians, with which the British presses still more or less groan. Of the latter type, in a general way, is the "Gods" of Shaw Desmond; with the grateful reservation that it concerns a youth's quest, not for the fascinating answer to the amusing puzzle of life, but for an undying God. I should find the book more impressive if he had avoided, instead of cultivating, the humors of portraiture and the vivacities of debate. Finn Fontaine is one of those eager groping idealists who are unable to find a working remedy for the wellnigh overwhelming troubles of the modern world, and can only hope to maintain their reason whole by clinging to some sort of faith in a spiritual being or power other than themselves. Finn Fontaine's wistful feet carry him, under our eye, only to a moment of mystical exaltation. It is the hour just before the outbreak of the Great War, when representatives of peoples of all nations, under the red banner, have met in London to protest against war. Finn sees them before him, helpless, fated, yet not without faith, not without hope for far rescue and beatification. Over the brooding and restless multitude a woman's voice lifts itself thinly in prayer: "And then the heart of the mass was moaning as some living, suffering thing. And then all—the face of Jew and Gentile, bond and free, those about to sacrifice and be sacrificed, had lifted up there toward that high altar—lifted up there with new staunchless hope shining. Shining to the prayer of the woman. . . . 'Love,' she said. 'Love, oh dear God! Love! Let there be love.' . . . Murmuring came the answering litany from beneath. . . . To Finn and Deirdre standing there, it came as a sort of voiceless chorus, all-pervading but noiseless—came as the scourge of countless feet upon the beaten roads of life, the footsteps of humanity shuffling onward to the one, unknown goal."

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