A Delightful Comedy

THE CHARMED CIRCLE: A COMEDY. By Edward Alden Jewell. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

MR. WILSON FOLLETT has just said that we in America are holding our own well with the British realists of the hour, but are as far behind England as England is behind the rest of Europe in "the art of being serious lightly, or light seriously." We have, he says, plenty of Georges and Cannans and Mackenzies and Beresfords, but no Leonard Merrick. Well, we might say that England has only one Merrick. And we might bring up the later Meredith Nicholson, or the Strunsky of "Professor Latimer's Progress," or one or two younger performers, on our side. But the fact is, Mr. Follett's generalization is sound. Our Younger School, for all its advertised indigenity, is too hard after the British Y. S. to perceive any free Puckish light beckoning them upward from the thoroughfare of sprightly realism. They feel bound, as Mr. Follett further says, to be either solemnly literal or deliberately trivial. And when now and then they grope instinctively for graceful fantasy, what they bring forth is almost invariably mere "literary jazz," a product without artistic integrity. Also we have lately been getting some genuinely artistic comedy from several British storytellers very much younger than Mr. Merrick.

I was going to cite "The Charmed Circle" of Edward Alden Jewell as an exhibit for the defendant, when it occurred to me that I do not know the author to be an American. The informatory jacket of this volume was missing when it came to me. But I infer that it is a "first novel" by an American. It has Merrick's own favorite setting of Paris. It is on something like

his plane of gracious comedy. It does not keep within his bounds of a few characters and a single-track action. Its delayed romance of the Singer and the Mighty Hunter, who in themselves might be almost of the race of Merrick, is involved with a plot more intricate than the author of "Conrad in Search of His Youth" ever bothers with. And the boy Kenneth, the real hero of the tale, if there is any, lies quite beyond the sphere of Conrad or his maker.

At this point I chance upon a publisher's advertisement which quotes the authority cited above, Mr. Follett, as pronouncing "The Charmed Circle" "as sunny as 'Seventeen,' and as subtle as 'The Age of Innocence.'" This strikes me as "going some"—slightly exceeding the speed limit, though in the right direction. One might add, in the same vein, that the tale is as whimsical as "Rudder Grange"; a faint Stocktonian bouquet may be relished by the connoisseur. But it is fairer to the book, and perhaps quite as intelligible, to trace its undeniable charm to an honestly fresh flavor. For the first few pages one may taste something which threatens to be piquant and borders on the banal. But the palate adjusts itself or the savor improves, for in the course of a chapter or two one is yielding without effort or self-consciousness to the enjoyment of the new dish. It is not the style of a stylist which attracts one here, but the quality of a writer with that rarest of endowments, the Comic Spirit. His is the gentle laughter of the gods. Mr. Bromley, the man of Epochs, and his Señorita (or she who was once his), and plump Mrs. Brathers (who is about to be his), are absurd persons: easy to caricature but not therefore easy to despise. Our affection goes with them on their further travels, as our ways part. So it is with the whole personnel of the Maison Bernard, the select *pension à deuxième* in the Rue Jacob which houses, first or last, all our chief characters except the Singer, who lives below under the same roof, and her Mighty Hunter, who has to remain an "Outsider" till the unwinding of the plot lets him in for good. It is a nicely knit and deftly handled plot, based upon a thoroughly satisfactory, if mild, mystery out of the past.

But the best thing in the book, the real hero, as I have said, is the lad Kenneth, whom I expect to recall as one of the few really outstanding boys in a recent fiction which has teemed with juvenile interpretations—and caricatures. How many of the boys you have laughed over, in these novels of the past few years, do you remember as persons? Since "Stalky," the English schoolboy has become a recognized type, a conventionalized figure, as accountable in his humors as in his speech. There was Mr. Phillpotts's "Human Boy," a delight at the moment, but do you recall his name or his features? There was a "Jeremy" we heard about at great length the other day: could you tell him from any other public school boy if you met him? We have our own William Baxter, whom we love, but who threatens to establish another hard and fast literary type. Mr. Jewell's Kenneth is not an imitation of him. He

totally lacks the awkward egotism of Mr. Tarkington's boys. His is a graceful egotism; the "million devils" who inhabit him are devils of harmless mischief, of overflowing joy. He is not an object of affectionate mockery for adults: the shoe is on the other foot. The machine of the story would not work without him as god; and the grown-ups from first to last are his puppets—for their own good. And always, from first to last, there is about his youthful verve, his impudence, his defiant joy, a touch of pathos; but joy always comes out on top. With delight we share the thrill, at the moment when the final curtain threatens to fall somberly on his musing figure, of his sudden ecstatic dive, fully clothed, into the waiting pool. It is his exultant challenge to time and fate; and we have no fear for him.

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