

WHEN THE HEAVENS ARE DARK

By Raymond Weaver

SINCE Copernicus, the heavens have changed. Though Galileo in his seventieth year, a prisoner on his knees, having before his eyes the Holy Gospel which he touched with his hands, publicly abjured, cursed, and detested the error and the heresy of the movement of the earth, the earth in its movement was not balked. And on this lukewarm bullet that scuds around a minor sun, the stiff necked pride of the upright gorilla was broken to an admission of humility. We have been forced to relinquish the flattering myth of the cosmology of Genesis; we have traced our descent beyond the time when Adam and Eve walked with God in the Garden, to a remoter period when our hairy ancestors, in the mordant terrors of the jungle, climbed a tree for the night. Our vision of the physical universe has been transformed. One by one the veils of myth have been stripped from the external universe, and the naked reality has chastened to tameness the wildest myths. And now the universe

of subjective reality is bursting the bonds of incredulity. And again, within the memory of living man, this time in the realm of human nature, the heavens have been swung off centre.

That each of us humans is essentially and preponderately what he believes himself to be in consciousness; that we are in fact what we are in awareness; that our motives and our moods can be truly accounted for by a sincere turning of the attention within ourselves: that is the Ptolemaic psychology. But man can no longer rest in this agreeable delusion. The white light of our consciousness, we are forced to believe, is not the core and pivot of our being. Rather is consciousness like a flickering Jack o' Lantern, dancing above an unplumbed reservoir of purposeful but unconscious life. The human mind is now viewed in the figure of a floating iceberg that hides below the surface of the sea most of its bulk; and from the depths of thought and feeling below the level of awareness, long silent hands are ever reaching out, molding our actions and passions, urging us to whims of the blood and tension of the nerves whose origins we never suspect. A new realm of reality has been annexed, and we are challenged to take a nearer view of our fatal facility at self deception, to relinquish our dearest myths and preconceptions about human nature, and to face the startling discoveries of what lies within ourselves. Many of the reports of such findings are distortions of fancy; most are tentative at best; but none can be dismissed without examination, since so many of our basic preconceptions about ourselves have been demonstrated to be false.

To those interested in this new exploration into the human spirit, "Dead Reckonings in Fiction", by Dorothy

Brewster and Angus Burrell, with an introduction by James Harvey Robinson, will be found to be a thrilling departure among books of literary criticism.

"It would be a simple matter to get started on a book of criticism," the authors begin, "if one had a theory to prove or disprove, if one had an axe to grind. Theories we enjoy, and expect to play with. But our proposition is distressingly simple. We like certain novels and stories, and wish to talk about them; and we are halted at the threshold by wondering why we like them, and why anyone should care to listen to our talk about them."

This promises. A book of criticism without either moral or æsthetic preconceptions is an encouraging novelty. And the book, we soon learn, is not concerned (except humorously) with orthodox literary dogma. It starts off rather with a problem of fact: What and why do men read? and, Why of the making of books is there no end? What, in terms of behavior and post-Ptolemaic psychology, is the meaning of the fact of literature? Though these questions are approached from the angle of psychoanalysis, they are approached with exemplary humor, and without a touch of that jaunty Freudian finality that has worked to render contemptible one of the most important discoveries in human history.

Religion, debauchery, and literature may, of course, be various expressions of the same impulse — the impulse to escape from reality into a more congenial world of makebelieve. When literature is so used, life and literature, fact and fiction, become antithetical terms, and both author and reader are in a league of blasphemy against what is sometimes called God's masterpiece. When not an escape from real-

ity, literature has largely existed in the past to illustrate the working out of some social or moral "law". Critics, as a result, have been pretty generally either connoisseurs in narcotics or censors of lapses from herd prejudice. Literature has a third possibility, however. The writer may divest himself of all moral bias, of all thesis, and set himself the task of a truthful recording of the human spectacle. The result, when successful, is likely to appear more incredible than the most irresponsible romance. Then, in so far as the writer comes to be perfect recorder, in so far he comes to be perfect artist; and in his achievement the goal of science and of art merge into one. It is with books of this third type that "Dead Reckonings in Fiction" is concerned — books for adults, not for romanticists. And realism, in the most splendid and realistic sense of that word, is made the final justification of fiction. It is to such books that we go to escape from our inner conflicts and dumb isolations into a dramatization of our psychic tensions; and through the truth and insight of such imagined experience we may come more nearly to self recognition and inner freedom.

From this it must appear that, unlike the traditional books of literary criticism, "Dead Reckonings in Fiction" is concerned not with literature as an end in itself, not in making the generous distinction between "nice" and "nasty". It is primarily interested in the very intricate puzzle of human personality. There is an introductory chapter "Towards a Critical Point of View", and a concluding chapter, in dialogue, between the authors and imagined readers in the mood to deny something. The eight intervening chapters are on books of Henry James, Anatole France, Chek-

hov, Katherine Mansfield, Joseph Conrad, Dostoyevsky, May Sinclair, and D. H. Lawrence. But the authors are considered, as well as their books; and herein lies another originality of this volume: the marvelous modern recognition that the personality lying behind the book — the poor bewildered chap who wrote it, his sad harassing experiences, his weary conflicts, defeats, and conquests — is not irrelevant to the judgment and understanding of his work.

“Dead Reckonings in Fiction” is a study of the imaginative records of individual souls in search of a successful way of life. “Such literature records no doubt more failures than successes, but it furnishes the best and perhaps only really important material for the study of that art of life which grows ever more complicated as we demand that it be more complete and beautiful.”

Dead Reckonings in Fiction. By Dorothy Brewster and Angus Burrell. Longmans, Green and Co.