

# Three English Novels

A Review by D. R.

**CARD CASTLE.** By Alec Waugh. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. \$2.00.

**MRS. DALLOWAY.** By Virginia Woolf. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$2.50.

**THE POLYGLOTS.** By William Gerhardt. New York: Duffield & Co. \$2.50.

**T**HREE English novels fresh from the mint, all interesting, in their way successful, and entirely different, one from another. Mr. Waugh follows the most conservative method; he tells a straightforward story of English business and domestic intrigue which the most old-fashioned can understand, although they might not always appreciate his blunt treatment of the modern sex obsession. His book is a Galsworthy novel, *minus* something; a certain distinction, a delicacy of approach and exploration is lacking. Galsworthy might have written the reflections of old Edward Marston sitting in his office experiencing a twinge of gout and thinking on its cause:

It was thirty years ago, on Gerald's christening, that he had laid down that pipe of port. You couldn't get port like that nowadays, only at a few places. Old Jimmie Prowser had some. And there was a pipe or two left at the club still. They didn't put it on the wine list. They had agreed on that, the older members. Why fling away good port on those young idiots who drank mixed vermouths before a meal and whisky and soda during it. He'd never had any truck with whisky.

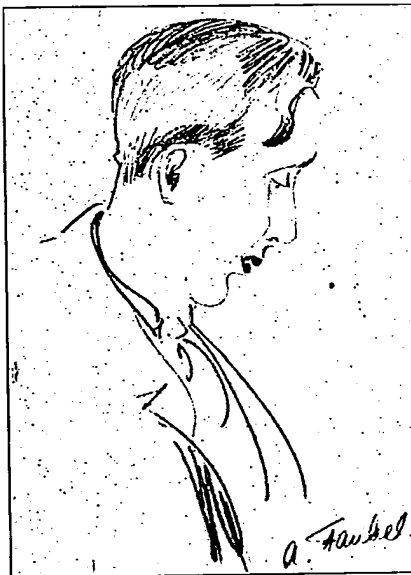
But Galsworthy would have done better with the business intrigue and incomparably better with the various love affairs of the Marston connection. "Card Castle" has a slight curse on it, a touch of that not quite successful imitation in material and handling which makes quite respectable work seem mediocre.

**N**OT so with Mrs. Woolf's lucent and distinguished novel. A day of modern life in London, a cross section of the thoughts of a middle-aged English lady and of the thoughts and memories and personalities of her husband, her daughter, of a man who has loved her long, of her most intimate friend, and of several other sharply drawn background characters who are quite as successfully presented as the most important actors. The style is sensitive, passionate, and yet aloof. Galsworthy again is felt.

As the publishers frankly say, "This novel does not belong to the multitude." The Galsworthy refinement will not always be understood, nor are all readers

proficient in the difficult gymnastic of jumping in and out of other people's skins. But it is a book which will be highly praised by the sensitive minority.

**I** HAVE reserved my one best bet for the last — not because it is in theory the best book, but because it has the immense virtue of novelty. If — a most unlikely supposition — a bishop coadjutor of the Protestant Episcopal Church were to stop me on the street and



WILLIAM GERHARDT

ask — "*Eb bien, mon vieux Lascar, quoi de nouveau?*" I should unhesitatingly reply — "'The Polyglots' by William Gerhardt."

It is, in our simple metaphor, a scream. The author, himself an Englishman brought up in Russia, describes the post-Armistice adventures of an English captain of similar training but more complicated ancestry sent to Japan, thence to Vladivostok and Harbin. He meets an amazing collection of cosmopolitan relatives who have been blown before the storm. An incomparable crew, surrounded by all the imbecility of a motley military administration out of a job. For example, Captain Diabologh reaches Vladivostok as part of an incoherent military "organization" suddenly confronted with the task of saving civilization. Of this bedlam he says:

I had to work under Sir Hugo (of Vladivostok fame), of whom you may have heard. My chief was a lover of "staff work," and besides the many ordinary

files he had some special files — a file he called "The Religious File," in which he kept documents supplied by metropolitans and archimandrites and other holy fathers, and another file in which he kept correspondence relative to some gramophone records which had been taken from the Mess by a Canadian officer. And much of our work consisted of sending these files backwards and forwards. And sometimes the gramophone file would be lost, and sometimes the religious file, and then Sir Hugo would be very upset. Or he would write a report, and the report — so intricate was our organization — would also be lost. Once he wrote a very exhaustive report on the local situation. He had corrected it very carefully, had, after much thought, inserted a number of additional commas, had erased some of the commas on secondary consideration, had had the report typed, and had corrected it again when it was typed. . . . And would you believe it? After he had despatched the report, marking the inner envelope in red ink "Very Secret and Personal," and placing the inner envelope in an outer envelope and sealing carefully both envelopes — the report was lost.

This quotation is taken almost at random. It will serve to illustrate the charming detachment of the author's comment. But not the brilliant caustic of his characterization. Every person in the book, even the least of them, stands out sharp and clear. On each individual canvas, the author works with the gusto and the disillusion of youth. His frankness is only equaled by the skill with which he skates on thin ice, and the calmness with which he records his own reprehensibilities and those of others.

**A** POLYGLOT family in polyglot surroundings. Yet these linguists are not above errors, which the captain studiously preserves. "Uncle Emmanuel said: '*Les Crapands!* In Belgium they tookéd Bourgmestre Max, they tookéd him and they takéd him, *les crapands!*'"

"Mr. Speak sighed. 'A great war,' he said."

Or the mad-eyed Russian general who "being angry with me and wishing to imply that I was childish, said, 'It is sheer infantry to talk like this.'

"General!" I cried. "General! Will you please believe me when I tell you that you can't —"

"Sheer infantry!" he shouted. "Infantry and nothing else!"

A delightful book, full of mad humors, full of vital pictures of inept, devitalized people, full of strange, preverse attractions. I wish I had not read it. I should like to read it now for the first time.