

## EMBALMING BOOKS IN CATCH PHRASES

By Arnold Mulder

THE opening sentence of an Associated Press dispatch in my morning newspaper, under dateline from Belgrade, caught my attention: "What the Balkans now need to prevent new wars is a humorous Don Quixote, according to Premier Ves-nitch, of Jugo-Slavia." The headline writer had caught at this same sentence and he had captioned the story "Balkans Need Gay Quixote, Premier's View". A premier of Jugo-Slavia is presumably an educated man somewhat acquainted with world literature. A headline writer one can't be so sure

about; some I have known would cheerfully have accepted the statement that "Don Quixote" was a book of the Old Testament, while others I have known could have given pointers to H. L. Mencken on the art of Theodore Dreiser. But if premier and headline writer had read so much as a single chapter of the "Don Quixote" of Miguel de Cervantes, they could not have spoken of a "humorous Don Quixote". For if there was one quality of mind that did not characterize Cervantes's famous creation, it was humor. It is doubtful if there is to be found in all literature a character more devoid of a sense of humor than Don Quixote. He was as humorless as the Congressional Record, though a great deal more entertaining; we laugh *at* Don Quixote, not *with* him.

But there are innumerable people who believe that Don Quixote was a gay bird. "Don Quixote" is one of those books that are seldom read but that everybody refers to at one time or another, one of the books that just seep into the public consciousness unread. There are a number of them sprinkled through the history of literature. They are found in every public library as a matter of course but are not drawn out once in five years. Bookish persons are always intending to read them but are always putting it off. I myself kept intending for twenty years to read "Don Quixote" but I put it off until the newspaper reference brought me to the sticking point. And an extremely pleasant experience it was. Cervantes is so funny that it is no wonder the generations who have not read him and who only know of "Don Quixote" by inheritance and tradition assume it is the knight errant himself, not his author, who is the humorous one. My great wonder is that the movie producers have not

discovered the story. Even though Cervantes did not laugh Spain's chivalry away, as Byron would have it, a screen version of it might laugh the world's troubles away, and that would be something.

Speaking of Byron, his well known line convinces me that he never read "Don Quixote", thus proving my contention that the great Spanish satire is not read but owes its fame to tradition. If Byron had read so much as two pages of the book, he would have known from internal evidence that chivalry had been dead in Spain for hundreds of years when Don Quixote set out on his preposterous adventures. The whole point of the book in fact is that Don Quixote tries to revive chivalry and knight errantry. There is where the fun comes in. The populace who watch his career think him a madman. He meets the same reception that anyone would meet with today who should try to revive the knee breeches and cocked hat of the days when Hendrik Hudson sailed into New York harbor. The average person would simply call such an innovator a "nut", which is very much what the other people in Cervantes's book called Don Quixote. If there had been chivalry in Spain in Cervantes's day, the book would have been meaningless. There is comfort in the thought that Byron no more read the book than did you and I who glibly polish off a sentence with, "like the humorous Don Quixote", or who use the adjective "quixotic". We have all pretended innumerable times, by implication at least, that we have read Cervantes's thousand pages or so of satiric fooling, and to catch the great of earth at the same game is reassuring.

"The Compleat Angler" is another one of those books that have soaked into the public mind without being

read. Before I had myself read it I had written the phrase "disciples of Isaak Walton" at least five hundred times. Each spring as the fishing season was opening I took the phrase out of the attic, dusted it off, polished it up, and gave it anew to thousands of newspaper readers eager to know all about fishing prospects — and as innocent of first hand acquaintance with old Isaak as I myself was. They never read him, and not one in five thousand ever will. But they know about his work in that extremely vague way in which most of us hold most of our information about most things in solution — the kind of way in which the vast majority of people, for instance, sum up in their minds all that Charles Darwin wrote in the concept that man is descended from the monkey. After I had read Isaak Walton I left off using the phrase, because nothing could be more untrue than that the average fisherman is a disciple of Isaak. The only thing that the two have in common — with exceptions of course — is that both go after fish. But callow young newspaper writers will continue for another thousand years perhaps to throw Walton at the news consumers without either side's knowing exactly who he was.

Darwin is an extreme case of one who is known about by all kinds of people without having been read. He is somehow in the marrow of the public's bones, all the more surprising since he published but sixty years ago. With Darwin it is not a case of a single book getting into people's heads without being read, but a whole philosophy contained in a number of books. Most people have Darwin all wrong, but that is of minor importance. He and his disciples have so colored the thought of the world that all our

thinking has been changed by them. We all read Darwin et al. at twentieth or fiftieth hand in our poetry, fiction, history of today, as well as in our science.

Perhaps "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" is the outstanding example of a work of fiction of our day embalmed in a phrase that everybody uses. The book has been widely read and the stage and motion picture versions have been seen by many thousands. But for every one who has read the book or seen the play or film there are today perhaps a thousand who use the phrase without knowing what the letters R. L. S. stand for.

Especially among the newspaper fraternity. I counted references to the book seventeen times in a few weeks in widely scattered newspaper headlines; yet I have met plenty of newspaper men who have not more read Stevenson's classic than they have read the Koran. But they all somehow, vaguely, know the general trend of the book, and it must be confessed that

the phrase is almost always used fairly correctly in the newspapers.

Then of course there is the old classic remark, "He is So and So's Boswell." Thousands of people who use that expression constantly know Boswell only by tradition. I myself have been intending for the past twenty years to read him, and the other day when Don Marquis confessed that he had been nursing the same intention and had finally read him during a sick spell — finding him unutterably dull, by the way — I felt distinctly better. But people will go on using Boswell to hang their phrases on, with only the vaguest notion of just exactly what Boswell wrote.

It makes one wonder which books of today will be similarly embalmed in the phrase of tradition a century hence. To be so embalmed is the height of something — exactly what, I don't know. I recommend the idea to F. P. A. Perhaps he can squeeze a moral out of all this; or if not that, at least a titter. I can't.