THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

FABRE'S "LIFE OF THE SCORPION"

By William Beebe

Mr. Beebe's review is the tenth of a series of longer book reviews to be published each month in THE BOOKMAN. *The books discussed will not necessarily be new nor will they be books which have never before been reviewed in the magazine. The aim of the editors is to present, in the selection of volumes and reviewers, articles which shall constitute solid pieces of criticism.*

"THERE is hardly anything but magic abroad before seven o'clock in the morning", as Stella Benson says and as Fabre knows, and to this fact is due much of the point of view which people in general exhibit toward the master entomologist. Those who use the most adulatory phrases and marveling hyperboles are usually quite as far apart from Fabre's life and life work as those who see only the comic side of a bug man — and there is a host of comedy in such a one. An octogenarian solemnly absorbed in the courtship and life tragedy of a scorpion is pure culture Briggs-Ding-Fox material. But so is a man messily immersed in the inorganic innards of his car, and so is a first night critic seriously commenting on the simulated emotions of an actress. I have driven cars and planes for many years, but when anything wrong develops, my thoughts and impulses turn garage or hangarward, and I hold the thought of a mechanic. I could easily worship my engine, perhaps because I can never understand it — it is to me a terrible golemic thing, exhibiting inexplicable, inhuman, orthogenic life, or else absolute death. If I could think of it as a small piece of thunder and lighting, a bit of canned cosmic energy, it would help. A play, on the other hand, is to me never a thing to criticize — it is life itself, and if sometimes it seems a weak or pitiful life, it is still of a piece with the so called real life of many people I know. And if it is a magic life which is enacted, why it only reminds me of a caterpillar and butterfly, or a hen pheasant acquiring brilliant cock plumage through mutilation.

Now Fabre, or any naturalist, deeply concerned with the strange and terrible courtship of a scorpion, is dealing not with a mere mechanism of steel and gas, nor with any pretense, rehearsal, or imaginary situation, but with a phenomenon directly comparable with similar emotions in ourselves. All this I record solely because of its relation to B.-S. Magic, which itself is only a shedding of some of our city bred fear and absurd human apartism.

Fabre was not a martyr to science, nor a personality to be pitied because of his poverty and long delayed recognition. If he had been born a millionaire he would probably have done much the same things that he did, a little harder and faster and less thoroughly. As it was, he was not obsessed with the study of insects from childhood — it came later, almost casually, when

he was eighteen years old, in the year 1843. In the room in which he learned his alphabet (which was also "a school, a kitchen, a bedroom, a dining-room, and, at times, a chicken-house and *porcherie*"), he pondered on chromos far other than scientific — crude pictures of the Wandering Jew, Golo, Mr. Credit, and Our Lady of the Seven Dolours. Not until, as a young schoolmaster, he began to teach geometry in an open field — a pragmatic, Squeersian method of sorts — did Fabre begin to notice insects. His pupils neglected his rods and chains in order to suck out the honey from the nests of wild bees, and an incipient chemist and mathematician became one of the greatest of field naturalists.

Many of us have read and reread his "Souvenirs Entomologiques", but now for the first time his complete works appear in English. The final volume is "The Life of the Scorpion", translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos and Bernard Miall. To the former is due the credit of phraseology of all the preceding Fabre volumes, and the achievement is worthy of the subject matter. De Mattos does not hesitate to modernize his material as when, referring to young scorpion gallants, for "*Il leur faut des tendrons*" he writes, "They must have sprightly flappers." Seldom has the spirit of an original tongue — the wit, the excellent diction, the apt word — been so satisfactorily translated as in these fourteen volumes.

The ultra technologist will complain of the padding, the asides, the casual references, the indirect approach, but it is an exceedingly good thing for the ultra technologist occasionally to find his naked truths clothed in something besides type and paper, to have to wade through similes and worthy metaphors, and digest a reasonable amount of literary pulp, before reaching the concentrated factual seeds. The keenly interested naturalist will regret Fabre's boasted neglect of book learning, for too often a whole chapter of most important observations will be found to refer to an insect identified only by some local, native name, applicable to any one of a half dozen species. But the strength of this writer lies in the fact that entomologists *must* go to him for many observations which no one else has had the patience to make, and the interested layman *can* read and enjoy him without reference to dictionary, textbook, or scientific tutor.

Comparisons are not always odious but often mutually enlightening. Fabre, like Burroughs and Thoreau, was essentially a back yard naturalist, but in the matter of concentration on any given subject, Fabre is to Burroughs as Burroughs is to Thoreau. In an average paragraph Burroughs is inclined to direct the reader's glance around the complete horizon, while Thoreau often indicates the ground beneath and the heavens above as well. Fabre holds steadily to the monocular vision, not only of a particular bee or spider or wasp, but of some single phase of its life, and yet with no lessening of literary variety, no slackening of cosmic interest in this almost atomic happening.

There is no need to criticize Fabre's books. This has been done to repletion. The last volume of the scorpion is interesting and worth reading by both dramatic critic and naturalist and all between. On the very first page Fabre shows his genius: "The Scorpion is an uncommunicative creature, secret in his practices and disagreeable to deal with, so that his history, apart from anatomical detail, amounts to little or nothing. . . . He has at all times appealed to the popular imagination, even to the point of figuring among the

signs of the zodiac. Fear made the gods, said Lucretius. Deified by terror, the Scorpion is immortalized in the sky by a constellation and in the almanac by the symbol for the month of October."

In late April and early May the scorpion forgets his lethargy and sets forth a-wooing. He meets an attractive *tendron* and clasps her pincer fingers in his. They then may remain absolutely quiescent for hours, or he gently leads her to the shelter of a neighboring potsherd. During this antenuptial promenade mysterious rites are performed. Both stand upon their heads — "*Pour déclarer sa flamme, le Scorpion fait l'arbre droit.*" Fabre is tempted to say that the affectionate couple kiss repeatedly, for the foreheads touch, the two mouths come together. But head, face, lips, cheeks, all are missing. When we look for a face we are confronted with a dead wall of hideous jaws. Lest the sensitive human reader should close the book at this point to return to more pleasant thoughts of human physiognomy, may I recall the photographs of our lip-distended brothers in Africa which recently appeared in some magazine? Or if a more personal touch is desired, let anyone look at his clean and velvet skin under a microscope. If the scorpion is loathsome or at least unæsthetic, we shall have to look elsewhere than to ourselves for a truthful substitute. The trouble lies not with either, but with our "thinking makes it so."

We men cannot but cheer the diminutive scorpion of corresponding sex, for he is a very brave fellow creature. Courtship is for him often a time of danger, and success means only death. All his strength and blandishments are concentrated on persuading the chosen one to enter his little castle — while the marriage morn will in all probability reveal the lady absentmindedly devouring the last remnants of her husband. As Fabre says, "The ritual demands that he shall be eaten after the wedding. What a strange world, in which the victim drags the sacrificer by main force to the altar."

So if we do not look at ourselves with a devastating microscope, and if we can always materialize a mechanic, and never are disillusioned by bad actors, and can kneel with Fabre and watch a scorpion as well as a butterfly with breathless interest, we are worthy to know Before-Seven Magic.

The Life of the Scorpion. By J. Henri Fabre. Translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos and Bernard Miall. Dodd, Mead and Co.