THE HIGHWAY TO AVALON

By Myles Tierney

NO one, I take it, who has read "The Secret Glory" can have forgotten Mr. Machen's protagonist in that golden book. Vincent Starrett, in collecting the items for "The Shining Pyramid", has given us two short sketches anent this same Ambrose Meyrick — addenda which, presumably, the author did not see fit to include in the original story. In one of these pieces — "In Convertendo" — I especially cherish the following passage as being indicative no less of Arthur Machen's own philosophical tenor than of Ambrose Meyrick's elevated and highly unpopular trend of thought.

He understood the difficulty of the great Act of Faith, which must be renewed day by day, again and again, by a constant exercise of the will, or else the abyss, the fall into the

black pit of nonsense and despair which most people think of as the world, "and not half a bad place either, if you take it the right way". It was so simple, the "not half a bad place" creed; one fell in with it so easily, without any conscious effort of acquiescence; one conformed even against one's own steadfast convictions unless these were constantly renewed and proclaimed. One knew better, perhaps — one had been vouchsafed sure proofs from within and from without; and yet it was so entirely natural to believe that man is sustained by loaves from the baker and meat from the butcher, and to take one's measures accordingly . . . he resolved that this should be amended, that for the future he would daily remind himself that he was fed not by baker's bread and butcher's meat, but by miracles and wonders.

And so, throughout the many remaining essays and tales in "The Shining Pyramid", we read discourses of manifold miracles and wonders by that finished stylist who is, himself, the miracle and wonder of literary England today. Mr. Machen is so far behind the times as to find material for panegyrics in Dickens, Cervantes, and Homer. Nay more, here is a man who would disparage the industrial revolution, who bewails the splendid new factories of Manchester, who has even the temerity to gird at the admirable G. B. S.! But when he seriously repeats to us that dictum of man not living by bread alone, when — as in the matter of the loaves and meat — he affirms, to put it briefly, the world's need of visions rather than provisions, then we realize that we are coping with a belated idealist of the old school — one of the few who have managed to survive that irrationally scientific nineteenth century. And, if we have a remnant of the old wisdom, we might be grateful to Mr. Machen and take grave counsel with this mad visionary; but, somehow, I think we shall do nothing of the kind.

In "The London Adventure", as in the author's two former volumes of autobiography — "Far off Things" and "Things Near and Far" — we are given to see the magnificent conquest of poverty and sordidness by one whose Act of Faith in the things of the spirit never wavered, nor sanctioned those paltry compromises wherein weaker men take timid refuge. With a quiet humor that all but conceals the underlying pathos, Mr. Machen relates the picaresque tales of his days as a Fleet Street reporter.

One is not surprised to learn that, to this alchemistical mystic, the most absurd errands and most foolish of reportorial assignments were but baser matters to be transmuted into the gold of high adventure. Thus was the everlasting search for "copy" turned into a quest for that strange beauty that the artist's eye is given the light to see even in the most squalid of London's slums. Just such an eye had Dickens, and the rare discoveries — æsthetic, dramatic, and historical — in "The London Adventure" are not unlike those odd flashes of vision of the author of "Pickwick Papers".

The London of Arthur Machen is a far cry from the eternal museums and traditional relics beloved of Cook's tours. The reader will journey through Islington and Clapton, he will hear mention of Edmonton and Spa Fields, and, if he be a knowing and appreciative soul, he will sigh with relish at the good hearty ale in certain small taverns of Soho. Then there is the author's love of antiquity for its own sake — a characteristic affection omnipresent in his work:

I can look with a kind of pleasure on a very doorstep, on a doorstep approaching a shabby grey house of 1810 or thereabouts — if the stone be worn into a deep hollow by the feet of even a hundred years and a little over. . . . The feet of the weary and hopeless, the glad and the exultant, the lustful and the pure have made that hollow; and most of those feet are now in the hollow of the grave; and that doorstep is to me sacra-

mental, if not a sacrament, even though the neighborhood round about Mount Pleasant is a very poor one. For, it seems to me that here you have the magic touch which redeems and exalts the dull mass of things, by tingeing them with the soul of man.

One turns from the quaintly casual manner of "The London Adventure" to the jeweled style of "Ornaments in Jade" with a hope that the Machen of "The Hill of Dreams" has given us another volume of his resonant prose, rich imagery, and spiritual beauty. But these few fugitive pastels, although in format the handsomest of the author's books, are slight and nebulous things filled with suggestions of enormities and horrors that stimulate one's risibility too often to produce their intended effects. To add, in extenuation, that they are exceedingly well done as to style, is quite unnecessary when we remember that they are from the pen of Arthur Machen.

The Shining Pyramid. By Arthur Machen. Edited by Vincent Starrett. Covici-McGee.
The London Adventure. By Arthur Machen. Alfred A. Knopf.
Ornaments in Jade. By Arthur Machen. Alfred A. Knopf.