New Books and Old

IT has become a best-seller, and is delighting thousands of readers. I mean Mr A. S. M. Hutchinson's "If Winter Comes" (Little, Brown). Yet perhaps its best service will be to make many readers, who are still ignorant of it, read that earlier novel by the same writer, that novel with the finest of all titles—"Once Aboard the Lugger—" I suspect that that is why I am going to be grateful for "If Winter Comes." The latter has many of the qualities of a fine novel. Once it gets going, once the war is reached, it becomes interesting, even thrilling. After that things begin to happen, the harpies begin to swoop about the head of the hero, Mark Sabre.

They gather and swoop in such clouds, and he proves so defenseless—although innocent of wrong-doing—that the book at this point reminds me of the heroine and the snowstorm in Jerome K. Jerome's "Stage Land." Mr. Jerome speaks of the way in which a stage snowstorm likes to go for a stage heroine; how maliciously it persecutes her. He writes: "I have known a more than usually malignant snowstorm to follow a heroine three times around the stage, and finally to go off R. with her." So do misfortunes dog the footsteps of the hero in "If Winter Comes." He puts his head into a noose, into two or three nooses, in the chuckle-headed manner of heroes created by less able writers than Mr. Hutchinson. The long arm of coincidence begins to swing its club, not in his favor, but invariably against him. And finally he loses all ability to say a word in his own defense—although only recently he has been voluble enough. And like Mr. Jerome's stage-heroine, he sits on one side of the street in a blinding snowstorm, when the other side is as dry as a bone. It never occurs to him to cross the street.

The book which I took up after "If Winter Comes" was the late H. B. Irving's "Last Studies in Criminology" (London: Collins), which is, I hope, to be published here. In these four essays, about as many miscarriages of justice, perhaps some justification might be found for the fearful run of bad luck which afflicted Mark Sabre in the fictitious story of Mr. Hutchinson. Here is an account of the actual case of the harmless Norwegian named Adolf Beck, who through the mischance of coming down to his door in London one evening to post a letter found himself accused of a series of mean crimes of which he had not the slightest knowledge. There followed a number of legal blunders with the result that Beck served a term of years in prison (protesting vigorously, however) and after his release had actually been arrested and convicted again, and only escaped a second term of imprisonment by a fortunate chance at the last moment.

Mr. Irving also relates the story of Lesurques (the stage counterpart of whom his father and he often enacted in "The Lyons Mail"), whose almost certainly undeserved misfortunes, ending at the guillotine, began when he casually and innocently accompanied a friend into a magistrate's office where an inquiry was proceeding about the robbery of the Lyons mail-coach.

Why does the light verse written by Englishmen last a while, and that penned by Americans vanish like dew before the rising sun? My guess is that the Americans try to be too frightfully up-to-date. You have to read most of the magazines, all of the newspaper columnists, and look at all the comic-strips to appreciate, for instance, Keith Preston's "Splinters" (Doran). But his comments upon books and writers are neat, very neat. Witness:

EFFERVESCENCE AND EVANESCENCE

We've found this Scott Fitzgerald chap
  A chipper, charming child;
He's taught us how the flappers flap,
And why the whipper-snappers snap,
  What makes the women wild.
But now he should make haste to trap
  The ducats in his dipper;
The birds that put him on the map
Will shortly all begin to rap
  And flop to something flipper.

REFLECTIONS

(Upon reading recent criticisms of Mark Twain)

They say the Ouija and the Freudian flit
About the Courts where Wisdom dwelt and Wit;
Mark Twain, our Laughter Lord!—the Solemn Ass
Brays o'er his Head nor fears the Lash and Bit.

Nowhere so thickly twine and densely spread
The Twaddle Vines as where some Genius bled;
Each Poppycock that Letters bring to Light
Wraps groping Roots around some Hero dead.

Once, when the Hindenburg line was cracking, and I was sitting all day long gazing at great bunches of documents in which people had started inquiries, about, say, the address of Private Jack Nevinsky, Army Serial Number 355,607—an inquiry beginning in Texas, mounting up and up to the Secretary of War, thence to General Pershing across the seas, and then (the General giving it up, apparently) after its forty-sixth indorsement, to my exalted presence—once, I say, when these things were going on, a fat wad of papers lay before me with one of the first of them in a handwriting strangely familiar. It seemed to lack the curious pictures which had always, before, accompanied that style of penmanship. The signature was "Clarence Day, Jr." And I saw it and smiled and wished I could do something about it. So I gave it its forty-seventh endorsement, and added, "Tell the President to see Tumulty about this and get some action" (or words to that effect). Then I affixed the signature which is at the bottom of this page, and for greater effect added something like "Second Acting Assistant Deputy Adjutant"—not by way of ostentation, I beg to say—and sent it along. I hope Mr. Day got what he wanted; it was, I think, to help his cook to get her husband's army pay properly assigned, or a matter of that kind. For Mr. Day draws rollicking pictures and writes queer books. He sees the world without traditions; he looks at mankind and the animals as if he were an unusually perspicacious baby. Take, for example, his remarks on cows, in "The Crow's Nest" (Knopf). He begins: "I was thinking the other evening of cows. You say, why? I can't tell you. But it came to me, all of a sudden, that cows lead hard lives." But you had best read it for yourself. I have used all my space just to say how much it pleased me then to see Mr. Day's handwriting in such a sober place.

D. H. Lawrence, novelist and psychoanalyst, compares Walt Whitman with Dostoevsky.

"Dostoevsky has burrowed underground into the decomposing psyche. But Whitman has gone forward in life-knowledge. It is he who surmounts the grand climacteric of our civilization. He really arrives at that stage of infinity which seers sought. By subjecting the deepest centers of the lower self, he attains the maximum consciousness in the higher self: a degree of extensive consciousness greater than any man in the modern world."

I wondered for some time what this recalled. At last I remembered: it is George Ade's fable of "The Preacher Who Flew His Kite." In the course of his sermon the preacher remarked that it was Quarolius who disputed the contention of the great Persian theologian Ramtazuk, that the soul in its reaching out after the unknowable was guided by the spiritual genesis of motive rather than by mere impulse of mentality. And nobody dared ask the preacher if he understood what he was talking about.

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