A MAN met a reviewer of books upon the street. "Tell me something to read," he said. "I want a good yarn—you know my kind. I don't like problem stories, nor any of this sex stuff, nor anything morbid. What's been written lately? Something new, you know. I've read three or four you told me about two years ago, and liked them. What would you suggest now?"

The other hesitated. "Well, everybody's reading—oh, no, you wouldn't like that. You might try—no, that would never do. Or there's—let me see, you said not a problem story (meaning the eternal triangle, I suppose), and no sex stuff, and nothing morbid—well, how about—oh, heavens, no! The one I'm thinking of is all three of those things at once. There is—no, that is nothing but problem; and there's—no, that's all sex; and there's—no, that's hardly the thing, it's all about insanity and tuberculosis and degeneracy."

He paused a moment and then added, inelegantly, *"There ain't anything at all!"*

A day or two later he found that he had been too hasty. A book-dealer told him that there were two novels which men who like a good story are simply "eating up." One of them has the rather difficult title of "Andivius Hedulio" and the other is called "Scaramouche." But as I am pledged to refrain from comment this week upon books so recent as these, I will pass on.

I forget who it was who said: "When a new book comes out, I read an old one." (To be honest, I never knew—so how could I forget?) But this rather priggish saying, like so many of the sayings about books, has always struck me as offensive. The affectation of being behind the times is no more admirable than a strained endeavor to be ahead of them. The honesty of Max Beerbohm, in the note preceding "A Christmas Garland," is refreshing. He writes that "all our higher-toned newspapers" keep Stevenson's remark about "playing the sedulous ape" to the great writers of the past "set up in type always, so constantly does it come tripping off the pens of all higher-toned reviewers." Mr. Beerbohm adds: "I, in my own very inferior boyhood, found it hard to revel in so much as a single page of any writer earlier than Thackeray. This disability I did not shake off, alas, after I left school. There seemed to be so many live authors worth reading. I gave precedence to them, and, not being much of a reader, never had time to grapple with the old masters."

This is an unusual confession to find in print; it may be unique. The poor reviewer is almost the only man who has to read new books. The book dealer is happily exempt from reading anything. As for all the others, the literary critics, wherever they are, the authors, professors of literature, and librarians—they speak as persons who carry "a well-thumbed Horace" in the pocket always. I have heard groups of them talk in a manner which made me think that a personal search would reveal two or three incunabula apiece.

The trouble is with the definition of a new book. It has come to mean one published not earlier than yesterday afternoon. An author who has not written a book for a year, it has been said, has something gravely the matter with him, and probably he's dead. The gloomy reviewer of books quoted at the beginning of this page was thinking of books of the present season. It is a great comfort to set your limit at some convenient date, say, 1593, and declare to yourself that you will worry about nothing earlier than that.

A colleague of mine has even a simpler solution; he declares in all sincerity that nothing of any importance whatever has been written since 443 B. C., the year of the death of Pindar, and he lives up to this belief. Mr. Dooley had another good plan. The Bible and Shakespeare were the only books in his library, and he sat serene behind their bulwarks. "Do you read them all the time?" somebody asked him. "I nivir read thim," he said. "I use thim f'r

purposes of difinse. They sthand between me an' all modhren litrachoor. I've built thim up into a kind iv breakwather, I says, an' I set behind it ca'm an' contint while Hall Caine rages without."

Perhaps there is something to be said for the old fellow and his "When a new book appears I read an old one." An *earlier* one—with that amendment, I accept the statement, in principle. It has already been recorded on this page that the best thing about "If Winter Comes" is that it has set many people reading Mr. Hutchinson's better work, the comedy, "Once Aboard the Lugger." My enthusiasm for Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer, in the light of his new book, is muffled. But that does not spoil my liking for "Java Head," and, indeed, it has started me reading the three stories in his book, "Gold and Iron." The first of these seems to be published by itself as "Wild Oranges"—I quote from it as an example of its style:

"Night had fallen on the shore, but the water still held a pale light; in the East the sky was filled with an increasing, cold radiance. It was the moon, rising swiftly above the flat land. The moonlight grew in intensity, casting inky shadows of the spars and cordage across the deck, making the light in the cabin a reddish blur by contrast. The icy flood swept over the land, bringing out with a new emphasis the close, glossy foliage and broken facade —it appeared unreal, portentous. The odors of the flowers, of the orange blossoms, uncoiled in heavy, palpable waves across the water, accompanied by the owl's fluctuating cry. . . ."

If Compton Mackenzie's new novel does not take your fancy, the question arises, Have you read that amazing story, "Sylvia Scarlett"—a sort of modern "Peregrine Pickle," with its scenes changing as rapidly as a flickering moving picture? If Booth Tarkington seems to have fallen, temporarily, into the valley of gloom, you may go back to the stories of Penrod, the one boy in American literature who follows not unworthily in Tom Sawyer's footsteps. H. G. Wells is engaged, in the genial manner of the lover of all mankind, in a little war against France. But this is a good time to get his "The Country of the Blind"—a volume of short stories which in their especial field have never been surpassed. Conan Doyle's spiritualistic researches make many readers long for the days of the great detective of Baker Street—and these days are beginning again. In the meantime some of us will reach for the shelf which holds "Round the Fire Stories," "Sir Nigel," and "The Refugees." Max Beerbohm has never written more characteristically witty pages than in the opening of his "The Happy Hypocrite," now handsomely republished. Edgar Lee Masters has not repeated, lately, the fine simplicity of the "Spoon River Anthology." The epitaph on Anne Rutledge, Lincoln's sweetheart, from that book has recently been carved on her gravestone. And, a good lesson to our piffling realists, Arthur Morrison's "Tales of Mean Streets" is now available again in the Modern Library Series.

EDMUND LESTER PEARSON