POWERS, PERFORMERS, AND PRETENDERS

By Arthur Bartlett Maurice

THAT marked sense of thrift which nowadays seems to be moving English authors, perhaps one should say the agents of English authors, to waste nothing of the byproduct, to see that every fugitive bit of writing, however slight, helps to the building of another book, may add to the bank balance, but not always to the reputation. Here is an example in Philip Guedalla's "Supers and Supermen". Obviously, though there is no printed line to indicate the fact, many of the papers that make up the volume were originally written as book reviews, of a stipulated length, and conforming in general tone to the policy of the publications in which they appeared. For example, Mr. Guedalla writes of P. T. Barnum. Taken by itself, the chapter is clever, but meaningless in its inadequacy. To understand it at all the reader needs the information that it is simply Mr. Guedalla's reactions to Mr. Werner's book on the American showman, expressed in a thousand words.

For all that, "Supers and Supermen" offers vastly entertaining reading. Throughout it glitters with paradox. There is the flavor of O. Henry — a flavor so strong that it suggests direct imitation — in the whimsical distortion of familiar quotations. "It was in the Great War the hand that ruled the railway rocked the world." "Impressionable lovers shocked one another by writing that dope deferred maketh the heart sick." "It is not so long since the late Lord Tennyson warned his fellow countrymen that kind hearts are more than coroners." Or take Mr. Guedalla's adroit balancing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in his chapter on Frederick the Great:

> There is a popular error with an increasing circle of popularity to the effect that the eighteenth century was a barren period. It was typical of the Victorian snobbery of the nineteenth century that it denied its own father because he looked like a walking gentleman in a costume play. The

illusion of futility was fostered by the circumstance that the eighteenth century dressed lamentably well and had deplorably good manners. It was assumed by solemn gentlemen in black coats that a generation which could furnish its rooms could not conceivably furnish its mind; and we were given to understand that the century of the three Georges was passed in a genial blend of alcoholism and deportment.

Like Mr. Guedalla, Mrs. Barrington in "The Gallants" (a companion book to the author's "The Ladies!" of a year or so ago) seems always to be straining after the rhetorical effect; and like Mr. Guedalla, she has succeeded where failure would be positive disaster. At times, however, Mrs. Barrington is a little over diffuse. There is her narrative, "The Beau and the Lady", dealing with a critical period in the lives of the great dandy, the Prince Regent, and Mrs. Fitzherbert. Mrs. Barrington is not content with telling her story. She crams it with all the anecdote that has gathered about the personality and deportment of the Beau. The familiar "Wales, ring the bell", and "Who's your fat friend?" which Mrs. Barrington associates with Lord Moira and not with Sheridan, were inevitable. But the elaborate description of Brummell's rooms carries with it the impression of padding.

Supers and Supermen. By Philip Guedalla. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
The Gallants. By E. Barrington. The Atlantic Monthly Press.