

ST. MARKS APARTMENTS
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My dear Miss Tarbell:-

I am not at all sure that you recall my name, Sidney A. Reeve, as the author of the book The Cost of Competition, which, I understand, you were instrumental in persuading Mr. McClure to publish, twenty years ago. I am sorry that we have never met. I am still writing ponderous sociology which no one wishes to publish or read. I see that you are still turning out your splendidly popular essays. I had chanced to bring home with me a copy of A Reporter with Lincoln just before I was asked to write this letter.

The real errand of this note is to introduce to you my dear young friend, Miss Barbara Brewer, whom I have recently had the pleasure of coaching through Barnard, and who has now had her thesis accepted for her Master's degree and is anxious to crash into the literary field somewhere, in a self-supporting way — book-reviewing or what not. She will tell you her own story. Any help which you may be able to give her will be well deserved.

Most sincerely,
Sidney A. Reeve

Polemic.

("Elmer Gantry" by Sinclair Lewis. New York, Harcourt, Brace. 1927. \$2.50)

There is a whimsical, fantastic short story of Kipling's wherein he describes with relish a particularly painful inferno for authors. In this hell he out-Dantes Dante: the torments are not the hackneyed fire, brimstone and pitchforks of Puritan theology, but consist ingeniously of each author's being tortured inevitably by his own created characters, not as he conceived them, but as they appeared to others:--- that is to say twisted, distorted and impossible. Their unanimous complaint is:

"You meant well, but you did not understand."

It is pleasing to contemplate that if there were that hell awaiting authors, Mr. Sinclair Lewis would be in for a peculiarly hectic time in the hereafter, judging him solely by his latest perpetration. Possibly "Arrowsmith" might redeem him in the books of the Recording Angel (if there is one, as Mr. Lewis would say) and possibly the virtues of the earlier masterpiece would counterbalance the vices of the later novel, but it seems doubtful.

For of all the unnatural, unrealizable, preposterous animals ever evolved from an author's typewriter, "Elmer Gantry" is the worst. It isn't that he's overdone; he isn't even half-baked: he simply never materializes as pseudo-human. He is a monstrous figment of Mr. Lewis' too-ambitious imagination---and it is not going too far to hint that the refuser of the Pulitzer Prize may be feeling his hatband too tight! No such man as Elmer Gantry ever walked this long-suffering earth, Heaven be thanked. He is a puppet, a ventriloquist's mannikin, through which Mr. Lewis vents his spleen against religion and the Christian Church.

Undoubtedly the Church offers itself as a tempting target for such spleen, and equally undoubtedly a good satire on the subject would be timely, and as salutary as good satires always are. But "Elmer Gantry" is not a good satire. It is that saddest of all literary phenomena, a satire that falls short of the mark. It is bitter and unfair. Flowing through the four-hundred odd pages of recrimination one is led to believe that Mr. Lewis has been reading James' "Varieties of Religious Experience" from entirely the wrong angle. He seems to have imbibed just that amount of philosophy which, as Bacon admitted, "leadeth men's minds to atheism" and to have stopped short before reaching that deeper penetration which "bringeth them to religion".

Moreover it is not the unutterable, boresome stupidity of much of the attack which is so objectionable: it is the one-sided bigoted attitude of the argument. Mr. Lewis gives only his side (through his mouth-piece Frank Shallard) and doesn't let McGarry speak at all.

"....just what were the personality and teachings of Jesus? I admit it's the heart of the controversy over the Christian religion: aside from the fact that, of course, most people believe in a church because they were born to it. But the essential query is: Did Jesus---if the Biblical accounts of him are even half accurate---have a particularly noble personality, and were his teachings particularly noble and profound?.....I'm appalled to say that I don't find Jesus an especially admirable character!

"He is picturesque. He tells splendid stories. He's a good fellow, fond of low company---in fact the idea of Jesus, whom the bishops of his day cursed as a rouser and a wine-bibber, being chosen as the god of the Prohibitionists is one of the funniest twists in history. But he's vain, he praises himself outrageously, he's fond of astonishing people with little magical tricks we've been taught to revere as 'miracles'. He is furious as a child in a tantrum when people don't recognize him as a great leader. He loses his temper. He blasts the poor barren fig-tree when it doesn't feed him.....

"Just what were the teachings of Christ? Did he come to bring peace or more war? He says both. Did he approve earthly monarchies or rebel against them? He says both. Did he ever---think of it, God himself taking on human form to help the earth---did he ever suggest sanitation, which would have saved millions from the plagues?.....

"There's just one thing that does stand out clearly and uncontradicted in Jesus' teaching. He advocated a system of economics whereby no one saved money or stored up wheat or did anything but live like a tramp. If this teaching of his had been accepted, the world would have starved in twenty years after his death!"

It is not that these arguments are heretical (though sundry pious churchmen have already denounced the book as heretical or worse), it is that they are so speciously stupid. Mr. Lewis has apparently tried to be provocative in the laudable sense understood as stimulating. He has merely succeeded in being exasperating. It is unworthy of anyone of his proven brilliance so deliberately to misunderstand the teachings of Jesus. In the first place, he has made the common error of assuming that Jesus called himself the Christ, whereas he did nothing of the sort. In the second place, Lewis has chosen all the petty, non-material, contradictory points of Jesus' teaching and slurred (it must have been intentionally, for Lewis is not a moron) the great central idea which has and always will prevail: Love, subordination of self.

Furthermore, Jesus did not pretend to be original. He merely restated in rearranged terms old doctrines that had become unfamiliar through the predomination of the overpowering idea of the Hebrew God Yahveh--- the God of Fear. The great incongruity of the Christian Church, which Mr. Lewis does not score at all, is the incompatibility of Old and New Testaments. That is the reconciliation it is difficult if not impossible to make, and that is what Mr. Lewis has shirked.

Now assuredly there are frauds and charlatans in the Church, but even that corrupt, feeble, and about-to-disintegrate body (I draw my terms from "Elmer Gantry") would not have allowed such a transparent scoundrel as Elmer Gantry to have bamboozled them quite so easily. That is---leaving polemics aside---the main trouble with the book as a novel: all Elmer Gantry's triumphs come about with the minimum of opposition,

and the effect on the reader, be he never so credulous, is not one of belief. Gantry is shown as an utterly selfish, lustful, malignant influence who blasts, (intentionally or carelessly) every sweet and honest person with whom he comes in contact. His professor at the Seminary (a dear, doddering old German sketched with not a tithe of the sympathy bestowed on that Austrian research-scientist in "Arrowsmith"); the little country girl whom he seduces, abandons, and, fifteen years later, recaptures as his mistress only to discard when he tires of her; above all the groping, but (as Lewis unnecessarily makes him) boob-like Frank Shallard--- the trail of the Gantry-serpent beslimes them all. One would have more sympathetic indignation over their several fates, if their creator did not make them, like his chief clothes-horse, hopelessly inhuman.

The only two persons in the book who read as though they might conceivably exist are Jim Lefferts, Gantry's room-mate in his unregenerate days at Terwilliger College, and the woman evangelist, Sharon Falconer, née Katie Jonas of Utica. They are represented as being the only two people in the world (beside his mother, for whom he had a mawkishly sentimental awe) that Elmer Gantry cared for, with his extremely limited capacity for caring for anyone other than himself. Jim was the only friend he ever had. Sharon was the only mistress who ever influenced him to any extent. They alone are at times real, and as if scenting the incongruity of sentient beings among his passive lay-figures, Lewis eliminates them as rapidly as possible.

The whole book is crude, lumbering, cheap, and after the fine achievement of "Arrowsmith", utterly unworthy of Mr. Lewis' better self. It is dedicated "To H.L.Mencken, with profound admiration". It is safe to say that is the only profound thing in the book. It is such an egregious waste of good material, that, as has been said before, the effect is one of exasperation. How anyone, capable of "Arrowsmith", could produce "Elmer Gantry" is an unpleasant puzzle that perhaps the author will solve.

Oh, Mr. Lewis, how could you?

English As She Should Be Spoke!

**(THE KING'S HENCHMAN. By Edna St. Vincent Millay.
New York, Harper & Bros. 1927. \$2.)**

It is a prerogative of genius to take unremarkable, even unpromising material, and, treating it with magic alchemy, transform it into something rare and vivid, bright with strange beauty. This is what Edna Millay has done in her "King's Henchman", a story in its essentials a ^{not} very original variation of the "Tristan und Isolde" theme. But under her expert manipulation the tale of truant love and treachery has taken on depth and passion, so that even in its appropriate setting of archaic terms it breathes and glows with life.

"The love of levely words" is very streng in Miss Millay, nob is this exemplified better anywhere in "The King's Henchman" than in the opening song of the harper, Maccus. Alliteration and onomatopoeia are old devices, but in the hands of Miss Millay they never pall.

".....Wild as the white waves
Rushing and roaring; Heaving the wrack
High up the headland; Hearse as the howling
Winds of the winter; When the lean wolves
Harry the hindmost; Horseman and horse
Teppled and tumbled;-----"

The story is that of the youthful but widowed King Radgar, who, eager to rowed, and hearing of a beautiful maid, daughter of the Thane of Deven, would fain have her for his bride. But press of state affairs prevents his going in person to inspect the damsel, so he sends his faithful henchman and fester-brother, Aethelwold, a gentleman young in years but already a confirmed woman-hater, who likes his errand not at all. However, at the King's urgency he consents, the two pledge eternal loyalty, and Aethelwold, with Maccus and retinue, departs for Deven.

Act Two takes place on Hallow E'en. (Just why it should take a month to travel from Winchester to Deven, even in the tenth century, remains obscure.) Aethelwold and Maccus have mislaid their retinue and lost themselves in thick woods and a thick fog. (The corresponding thickness of Aethelwold's head has already been implied in the first act.) They sup, and Maccus goes to hunt for the road again while Aethelwold takes a nap. Enter Aelfrida, who has come to test the superstition that if on All Hallow Mass a maiden chant a certain rune while holding a light behind her, she will see her lover's shadow beside her own. She chants, with gratifying results, for the mist opportunely clears and a full moon discloses Aethelwold. The situation of Prince Charming and the Sleeping Beauty is directly reversed, but Aelfrida, (evidently a pioneer feminist) wakes him in the traditional way, and even in his sleep Aethelwold protests! There follows a touching and swift-moving love-scene; Aelfrida discloses her identity, and Aethelwold, properly horrified, at first is loyally determined to give her up to the King. But passion is too strong for him, and he ends by sending Maccus back to Winchester with a message which for skilled ambiguity and terseness deserves quoting:

"Maccus, go back unto the King
 And say to him as follows:
 (He pauses, then continues rapidly)
 That I have seen the maiden,
 And found her nothing fair.
 A comely maid enough, and friendly-spoken,
 But nothing for the King."

Act Three is set the following spring. Aelfrida is her father's housekeeper, the honeymoon is over some time since, Aethelwold's conscience has made itself no easy bedfellow, and he is about to take his bride into what will be for him perpetual exile, but for her a great adventure: to Ghent in Flanders. Dramatic necessity dictates that he

does not decide quite soon enough: King Eadgar is already on the way to congratulate his foster-brother. Aethelwold is frantic, and in desperation tells Aelfrida the whole truth---(which is for him a blessed relief:

"Oh, the good smack of truth on the tongue again,
After a winter of lies!)"---

He then bids her, for his sake, for his love and his life, to make herself hideous that the King may not discover the deceit. She protests, but agrees. Eadgar arrives, and he and Aethelwold are about to visit Aelfrida in her bower when she appears suddenly before the assembled company, decked in all her finery and surpassingly beautiful. Eadgar takes one glance at her, another at Aethelwold---and the secret is out. (Naturally, this is the most dramatic instant in the play.) Eadgar makes dignified and sorrowful oration, and Aethelwold cannot stand it. He stabs himself. Eadgar then speaks a brief but feeling eulogy over his body, the people chant the Lament for the Untimely Dead, and as the King's Lords bear him tenderly and reverently out, the curtain falls.

This eulogy of Eadgar's is powerful in its simplicity:

"Have done, Aelfrida.
Thou hast not tears enow in thy narrow heart
To weep him worthily.
Wherefore have done.

"Nor all of us here, nor all of England weeping,
Should weep his worth,
That was so young and blithe and bold,
That the thorn of a rose hath slain.

"Wherefore let us heard our tears for a little sorrow,
And weep not Aethelwold at all."
(Underscoring mine.)

That is one of the most moving characteristics of this lyric drama---its superb simplicity---a simplicity that marks Miss Millay for one of the truly great. The various characters are sketched with sure deftness, sympathy and humor; they stand out clearly in no uncertain light, yet it is all done with a minimum of words. It seems like a

facile accomplishment---until one tries to do it. This deceptive simplicity is akin to that found in the novels of Professor John Erskine, whose "Galahad"---the book, not the character---has much in common in its subtly unpolished polish with "The King's Henchman".

It would do no harm to authors like Sinclair Lewis (who takes four hundred pages or more to express not half of what Professor Erskine accomplishes in two hundred) to observe and emulate the achievements of Professor Erskine and Miss Millay. It is an exploded cliché that the "English as she is spoke" is not flexible enough for modern literary usage without the intrusion of barbaric slang-phrases. It has remained for Miss Millay and Professor Erskine to show us what can be done with English pure and simple, to disclose it in its essential dignity, power and beauty. Needless to add, there is not a word of slang in "The King's Henchman", yet it is as easily colloquial as "Galahad", and scores its effects through the same method: diligent, meticulous choice of words,---- choice so fine, discriminating and subtle as to be all but undiscernible to the uninitiated.

"The King's Henchman" and "Galahad" inaugurate a new era in American literature, and so long as their respective authors continue to do such superb work---More power to their pens!

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