

A History of Fortune

DRAG. By WILLIAM DUDELEY PELLEY. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by JOHN CARTER

NOT since Samuel Butler wrote "The Way of All Flesh" has so fierce an indictment of marriage appeared in the English language; "Drag" is a fine piece of literature, marred by occasional spells of uneven writing and lapses into rather broad farce, which will focus attention on the fact that in New England lies the deepest springs to feed the waters of American fiction. This book escapes by a narrow but precious margin the narrowness of satirizing institutions, by the truer method of attacking these institutions as glorified into such stereotyped concepts as The Home and Woman.

The story is built up around the familiar tragedy of the man who marries the wrong girl. In the hero's own words, Dave Haskell's wife is "a selfish, indolent, disloyal bundle of aches and worries who intrigued a green country boy into matrimony simply to provide a home for your mother . . . You didn't want a husband. You wanted a habit. You didn't want a man. You wanted a mint." Piquancy is given this first postulate of tragedy by superimposing the less widely advertised but no less poignant predicament of most American husbands in being required to support a group of sponging and incompetent relatives: all strivings for success are hampered by a fancied moral duty to feed these human leeches. "Fifteen men on a dead man's chest" may be a good drinking song, but fifteen women on a live man's back is a more common and more heart-breaking predicament.

The fault, as Mr. Pelley sees it, lies primarily with man's woman-fostered notion that chivalry demands a double standard of common morality; that is to say—entirely apart from sex—that woman must be coddled in her idiotic notions of what she is entitled to expect of her menfolk. His second point, rather more strongly stressed, is woman's indecent willingness to take advantage of these chivalrous notions for the sake of momentary advantage or personal ascendancy, even to the detriment of her husband's manhood and her own happiness. "Drag" is a satire on women, however, only insofar as it attacks institutionalized Woman; for women themselves the author shows a discriminating fairness and respect; to him they are human beings and must be compelled to take their chance, sink or swim, at the side of their husbands or in their jobs, in what is still a very human world.

The hero gets all the reader's sympathy from first to last, although he deserves pity and some contempt. Dave Haskell was a born writer, but the lines of his career, from the moment he entered the office of the *Paris (Vt.) Daily Telegraph* to the moment when he abandoned a successful play to enlist in the Army as a sure refuge from his voracious relatives, are trampled on and obliterated by a family which hunts and haunts him, battering on his success and blaming him for the failures which it causes. This phase of the novel is overwritten to the point of burlesque, but the main outlines of Dave's emotional progress are etched with a skilled and patient hand, and there is nothing of the cartoon in his struggle with his wife, his not altogether creditable treatment of Lillian, or his affinity with Carrie. The burlesque may well be deliberately introduced to convey to the demi-morons a very fine plea for virility and common-sense in a man's fundamental relations to life; and if such is the effect no one will grudge the author the fact that the story, as written, is admirably, probably designedly, adapted for the films.

For the fundamental merit of "Drag" lies in its humor, using that word in its proper sense. Generous, amusing, wise, it is based on a very shrewd appreciation of the foibles and qualities of human nature. Again, its setting is in rural Vermont, which gives a cross-section of that amazingly tenacious civilization which has moulded America and which is the only well-rounded homogeneous state of society that this nation has ever produced. The writer's feet are therefore on solid ground. He writes of people whom he knows intimately, moving in an environment with which he is thoroughly familiar, faced with conditions which are common to this country, and actuated by motives which are common to mankind. In spite of a tendency to drift into rough-house comedy, he adroitly avoids both pathos and hackneyed expressions. "Drag" is a book which will amuse the man in the street;

unlike many such books, it will excite the interest of the man in the study for its bold and unsentimental exposure of the central tragedy of a woman-ridden age—the hamstringing of virility by femininity and the consequent discredit of those instincts of decency and fair play which hitherto have operated to make life tolerable for the mass and a high adventure for the daring few.

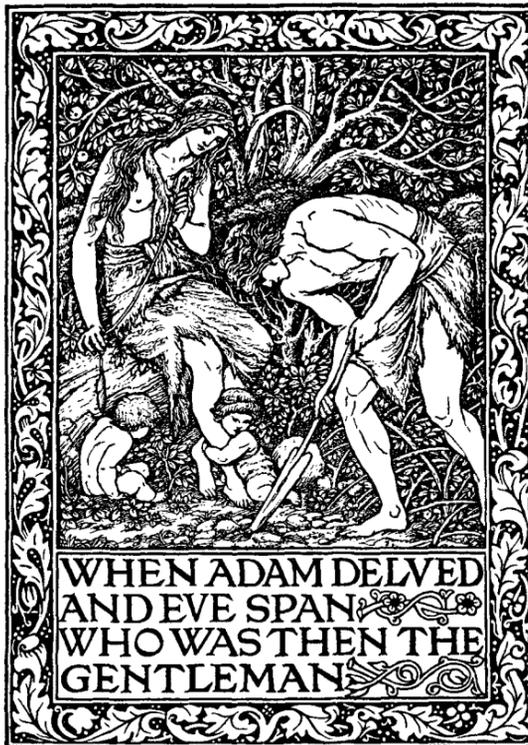
A Unique Book

VAL SINISTRA. By MARTHA MORTON. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by LEONARD L. HESS.

COLOR is perhaps the first quality that strikes one in this book. Nor does the color lie here and there, with the lamentable effect of purple splashes, but it pervades all the pages with a sort of luminous glow; it forms a rich background and it urges on the magnificent emotions and passions which make "Val Sinestra" a rarity among the welter of modern novels.

Here is a novelist, Martha Morton, who has not, maybe, sat down to learn the job of technique, who has not worked by rule and line, who has not succumbed to the furor for documentation, who does not always trouble to write perfectly, who sometimes writes badly, who has not chosen an insignificant theme and then written about it meticulously,



Frontispiece to "A Dream of John Ball." By William Morris.

From "The Kelmscott Press and William Morris," by H. Halliday Sparling (Macmillan).

who has not used the scalpel on the brains of her characters so that one smells the iodoform. Here is a novelist who found a great theme and let herself be swept away by it, without too much rationalizing, often with blunders, but sometimes into very deep waters indeed. She has given herself up to her theme. Therefore is the reader swept with her, so that the book is grudgingly laid down.

I do not know anything about Martha Morton, but I venture to say that she expends little of her time in futile discussions of what art is or is not, and that she is no academician. At a guess I should say that she gives herself up to wandering among the beautiful and grand things of life, the things of a splendid permanence. The technicians will find much in "Val Sinestra" to condemn. The artisans will agree that they could have done the job better. But all these would have to live many lifetimes before achieving a glimmer of the *flair*, the gusto, the beautifully heedless rush of this unique book. It is a book for people who feel rather than for people who merely think. Too much writing, these days, is hand-made.

There is one mood, one harmony that runs through the novel. This is a minor and sad mood, of utter futility. The people appear like dim caverns, lighted by some mysterious lamp. And that, it may be, is not an untrue picture of the human soul. The author knows her psychoanalysis with the best of them, and perhaps all the better for the knowledge being instinctive. And she knows the general movements of the times. She has suggested subtly the changes that took place in New York

City within the last decade, just as she has suggested subtly the changes in the people. She has drawn with large strokes.

It is a short novel, and therefore it is surprising how complex the material of it is. The love triangle made of Floyd Garrison, his wife, Julie, his friend, Martin Steele, is but the foreground. Behind the personal struggles of these three tortured people looms the immense battle of conflicting hereditaries, conflicting religions. Julie was a Gonzola—a family of Spanish Jews converted to Catholicism. The sombre figure of her grandfather, Joseph Abrael, sums up the Jewish orthodoxy that remains in Julie's blood. Father Cabello is the heroic figure of the Church, struggling to retain Julie, and in time struggling to retain Julie's son. These two men, firm personal friends, both die, defeated. For Julie marries a gentile, and thus frustrates Abrael; and her son, Joseph, decides that the feud of religion should be laid, that he is an artist beyond the reach of creeds. The turbulent spirits of Garrison and his wife, she having always loved Martin Steele, are quieted at the last in the calmer regions of oncoming age, and the fiery spirit of Martin finds peace in the home of his ancestry, the Val Sinestra, in Switzerland.

The book closes on a chord of incomplete completeness, like the minor tones that end even the major mood compositions of the old masters of music—the chord that is a fulfilment, leaving yet something to be fulfilled.

Jazz Ruins the Nation

THE VIRGIN FLAME. By ERNEST PASCAL. New York: Brentano's. 1925.

Reviewed by SAMUEL ORNITZ

Author of "Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl"

HERE is a stinging, stirring arraignment of Dollarland with its cheap ragtime reasoning, sophisticated *schweimerie*, jazz morals, and syncopated justice. The author berates, denounces, and flays with every cudgeling phrase he is able to bring to bear, and barely stops to draw breath throughout the three hundred odd pages.

It is indeed refreshing to find our America condemned, for once, by straight, solemn evidence. There are no cynical wisecracks, nor Smart Aleck sportiveness over a hopeless bunch of American boobs. At any rate, Pascal is sincere, although often trivial and taut in his anxiety to be conscientious. After a while, judgment too becomes entangled with compromise. So, he doesn't stop to weigh values, or reflect, but strikes out with blind zealotry, sometimes with vicious thrusts or glorious avowals, in the manner of a robust crusader. He is so busy administering whacks that he has no time to stop for style. In general, the book suffers from hasty, heated composition.

You may recall how the late Bert Williams in the rôle of a doleful clergyman groaned lamentfully, "Syncopation rules the nation." His bathos was lovely, even as his unwilling clerical legs began to yield to the hellish rhythm. But Pascal's wrathful voice rises above the lustful din of jazz. He calls America to account as she teeters on the brink of perdition. In his way, the author has made of his chief character a dour American Jean Christophe and a righteously unflinching New York Goose Man.

Michael Cardovan comes under the influence of a musical idealist who implants in his soul a hatred for compromise, and appoints him High Priest of the Music Temple. He supports himself by teaching slum children in a music settlement. But Angie, his dark-haired sweetheart can't wait. She loves him but marries a business man to get handsome clothes and a Riverside Drive apartment. Angie does not understand why Cardovan refuses the profits of ragtime. Nor do his Greenwich Village friends, who advise him America is hopelessly unartistic.

His first opera is rejected. It is "unlyrical and unconventional." Its rejection calls forth finely furious fulminations against America's indifference to her creative geniuses. His friend Bardenbury, an Englishman, who describes himself as a "literary prostitute," counsels Cardovan to amuse the herd. There is money in sinful surrender to jazz. Best of all it enables you to escape the herd. Money bags build a barricade against the mob. But Michael remains true to his Temple.

When Michael kills the lover of his "flower-like" wife, Olivia, a jazz defense and justification are arranged for him. The "literary prostitute"

collaborates with a lawyer and a cloying sob-story is manufactured to entertain the ragtime intelligence of the jury. Cardovan is pictured as the protector of the sanctity of the American fireside. It was not murder but noble frenzy. *Dementia Americana* of the Thaw case, rewritten. But here the author succeeds merely in writing a travesty of the criminal trial of two decades ago. Cardovan is acquitted and returns more lovingly to his Olivia, but she conspires with a jazz composer to steal his two best arias and pervert them into popular jazz tunes. She needs money to pay for clothes. He is more pained by the desecration of his conception than the treachery of his wife.

One thing is certain. Cardovan never had a sense of the comic, and he was blind to the colors, and deaf to the tempo of his own time. Perhaps his interpreter did not understand him. Anyway, jazz continues to corrupt Cardovan's America, with solemn jazz rites in erstwhile orthodox Temples of Music. And even visiting European conductors and composers see glamour, color, and strange promise in this monstrosity of jazz—and welcome it as America's contribution to music.

The Inimitable Spectator

THE ILLITERATE DIGEST. By WILL ROGERS. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. 1924.

Reviewed by DAVID McCORD.

SOONER or later most of us go the way of the printed page. For Will Rogers it might just as well have been sooner, and probably would have been had not the exigencies of his post as first lariat of the Follies, the lure of the wicked screen, and a summer with the Democrats in New York filled his hours. It might just as well have been sooner because Will Rogers's wit is the kind that blossoms under all administrations. It is as good today as it was yesterday, and will probably be no better tomorrow. He is not aiming at any more of a literary style than the unconscious flux of his rope talk. He imitates nothing. He is not perfecting bad grammar or making a god of the exquisite solecism. He has no quarrel with ancients or moderns. Because he has said much of it before in unpremeditated fashion, his book is a harvest of honest, homely speech. It is Will Rogers.

"Nothing is no good," he says. So few of our humorists realize that. But almost anything is very good for Mr. Rogers's purpose. He can shake down the potential laughter in a farrago of subjects from chewing gum and corsets to the Prince of Wales. Like Mark Twain (but a little differently) he walks with kings and princes and presidents and Henry Ford and Fred Stone. He is at home with the world and its denizens. Somebody once gave him a license of free speech (or perhaps he took it without asking); but, at any rate, in the past few years he has probably turned over more heavy stones and thrown hot sunlight upon the poor human grubs underneath than any man in the United States. Will Rogers is a philosopher and crusader in the tradition of Walt Whitman. He passes generally for a humorist, but that is not the whole of him. Humor is his calyx, not the flower.

Did anyone ever call Mr. Rogers a *poseur*? Impossible. He fearlessly and continually strives to be himself. He continually succeeds. "Defending My Soup Position" steams with honesty. His language, however crude or native, as one may like to call it, dresses the idea to advantage. Politics, bathing suits (one-piece), critics, white breeches, the income tax, California, W. J. Bryan, and the Court of St. James take new life when he talks about them. We will laugh at what he says, and remember whole segments of it no more because it is funny than because, ten to one, it is beautifully true. At least two chapters transcend all banter. One is a tribute to Mr. Wilson, the other an estimate entitled "What We Need Is More Fred Stones."

It has been said of Max Beerbohm, even that incomparable stylist, that many of his essays are decisive matter and will pass as the figures of his times fade from recollection. In all ways how much more is this good natured humanism of the author of the "Illiterate Digest" inseparably linked with temporal names and temporal interests. Will Rogers is for his generation and his day. He is a rare interpreter

of the events of the moment. He is a kind of cowboy Spectator, assimilating the worst of our foibles, or perhaps the best, and making us believe that they may not be so portentous after all.

Political Freethinking

A YEAR OF PROPHECYING. By H. G. WELLS. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by MANFRED GOTTFRIED.

SOME books, and this is one of them, make a poor first impression. "A Year of Prophecy-ing" is a collection of fifty-five brief articles on men and events written weekly during the course of about a year from the fall of 1923 to the corresponding season of 1924, or by political reckoning from shortly before until almost the close of the Labor Government's tenure of office in England. Such a collection is rarely inviting, and the poor first impression of the present volume is aggravated because some of the earlier essays are rather trivial or, as Mr. Wells himself puts it in his closing remarks, "just bad." Moreover, this type of book tempts one to peruse it in snatches, whereas if one is to appreciate the book one must get its general rather than its piecemeal effect.

For it has a unity—the unity which is Mr. Wells's social philosophy. This theme, this type of thought, has been the preoccupation of his later career. In the present work he discusses the League of Nations, the national policies of Great Britain and France, and more casually, of the United States, the future organization of Germany and Russia, international finance, Pan-Latinism, "Pan-Englishism," civil and military aeronautics, armaments and disarmaments, tariffs, communism, socialism, education, dictatorships and democracy, nationalism, sex, birth control and population control, electoral reform, party government. Except for one digression, which is a gracious tribute to Anatole France, he adheres to one theme through all these diverse topics, and that theme is the development of a rational social organization.

This practice of constantly referring particular instances to general principles places these articles, although the conjunction may seem grotesque, in a certain community with the remarks of Doctor Johnson and the columnizing of Arthur Brisbane. To be sure, Mr. Wells has not the dogmatism of assertion which gave pungency to the lexicographer, and he is a great deal more reasonable and intellectually agile. To be sure, he cannot pigeonhole things in such simple categories as Mr. Brisbane, and he is a great deal less uneducated.

His theme of a rational social organization conjures up for him a Utopia—he calls it that—which is not greatly different from the present world except that people are less ignorant and more intelligent. "I live," he explains, "very much in a dream of a saner world." He believes that the present League of Nations is a start in the wrong direction, and looks forward to a "League of Mankind against Nations."

I am for world control of production and of trade and transport, for a world coinage, and the confederation of Mankind. I am for the super-State, and not for any League. Cosmopolis is my city, and I shall die cut off from it. . . . The world is a patchwork of various sized internment camps called Independent Sovereign States, and we are each caught in our bit of patchwork and cannot find a way of escape.

Naturally with this ideal, and with his demand for reasonable procedure, Mr. Wells finds plenty to criticize in the conduct of his contemporaries. He likes to abuse them and knows that he does it well and goodnaturedly. Winston Churchill, Herbert Asquith, Lloyd George, Hilaire Belloc, each receives a share of rating. He makes fun of them directly and by his friendliness with their "bogeys." Communism is to Mr. Wells an intellectual stimulant. "I have a real affection for Communists," he avers, "and a temperate admiration." Socialism he regards as in large measure already at hand.

In America these ideas of Mr. Wells are not likely to find a welcome, principally because they are too new here. He advocates Proportional Representation as the only "approach to political sanity" in democratic elections; yet in this country not one-tenth of the so-called educated class know Proportional Representation by name and not one hundredth know it to think about. He speaks of state

dissemination of contraceptive knowledge; here contraception is not considered except as a matter of individual or at most class morality. He refers to population pressure; but this country has not yet awakened to the idea that such pressure can exist. He looks upon free trade and tariffs as economic devices; whereas here they are tenets handed down in violation from generation to generation, much like moral precepts or religious persuasions. Mr. Wells goes right ahead, however, planning his "reasonable Utopia" without waiting for America—or England for that matter—to catch its mental breath.

The weakness of his plans is that they rest on a gratuitous assumption as to the nature of the driving force of human progress. Progress he sees; evidence of it was preëminently thrust upon him when he wrote his memorable "Outline." Something had urged the little unicellular bit of life onward and upward to man, and from mere man through barbarism to civilization. But in drawing plans for his Utopia he is actuated mainly by what he deems desirable and reasonably attainable. Yet the limitations of any Utopia to which man can aspire depend on the nature and direction of the driving force which has moved man upward. It is quite futile to plan a Utopia in some other direction than that toward which this force aims. The matter of the direction of the driving force is all important. There is no probability that the force itself can ever be altered. It has obviously made man all that he is, and doubtless it is immutable, but even if it were not, the man who undertook to change it would be very brave indeed; for there could be no pretending what would come about. The practical object of Utopias is rather to anticipate the workings of this force. When man fails in this anticipation, nature corrects him, painfully. Mr. Wells bothers little about the direction of this force. He has a general idea and that is enough for him; on the basis of it he is willing to try to save the world its spankings for stupidity.

In this connection he has an amazing faith—amazing in one generally so skeptical—in the advantages which the material improvements of science may bring to man. It is faith akin to that displayed by the Victorians. The idol of his faith is aeronautics; he sees in the conquest of the air a new lifting of man's burdens; he even grows petulant with the political organization of Europe because it interferes with the pleasure of unrestricted riding in aeroplanes—a form of travel to which he is very partial.

"A Year of Prophecying" is really an epitome of a political free thinker. It is a strong dram of intellectual stimulant. Ever and again Mr. Wells produces a sentence at once titillating and full of insight, as when he says of Mr. Lloyd George that "he has with him the affectionate distrust of a multitude of his countrymen"—that "the most fundamental fact about youth is its disrespect for its elders and the past," or that "the people of the United States, for a time the spoilt children of the human race, are so fortunate in their isolation and their vast unity that the efficiency of their government is a matter of no immediate concert to them." Such things may be said, and said to a purpose—and with a penalty.

When you censure the Age
Be cautious and sage.

Mr. Wells is not cautious. If he were a little more cautious the Age might be less inclined to ruffle up its back and turn away when he is talking at his best.

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