

# A Born Fool Is "Vamped," With Benefit of Clergy

THERE are two kinds of fools—the splendid ones who rush in where angels fear to tread, and the others who insert themselves with the aid of measuring rod and shoe horn after meticulous consideration to the intense disgust of everybody, including the angels. *The Born Fool* in John Walter Byrd's novel by that name is of the second order. If ever a mortal let himself in for trouble deliberately Kirk Clinton did, and we are about to discuss how he did it, and why, whether we think he should have done it, and what the consequences are likely to be—everything, in short, that invites discussion. If there are any of you who during the course of the long and uninteresting address which we are about to make intend leaving, will you kindly pass out quietly now? . . . Thank you.

Mr. Byrd's novel reads as-if Hardy, Phillpotts and W. B. Maxwell had collaborated. Conan Doyle says it is the best novel he has read in a year, which fact alone should make it worthy of consideration. It is a story of English country life involving class entanglement and has for its main objects the assertion of propinquity's triumph over the more lenient forms of contact, the danger of mistaking cowardice for courage and the ease with which a cruel parent sometimes wrecks a child's life. It is, moreover, valuable as a warning to mothers and youths—to the mothers against dying unless it is absolutely necessary, and to the youths against lodging in houses which have daughters. A monstrously gloomy book when all is said.

If Kirk Clinton's mother had lived his father's cruelty as depicted in many a bloodcurdling scene would probably not have left any lasting impression, being more than overbalanced by her devotion and comradeship, but she was killed off in one of those regular old-fashioned scenes in which the reader is allowed the freedom of the death chamber, and Kirk was left with practically all the odds against him. He longed for just law, for harmony, for permanence and fixity, for ideals; occupied himself with fishing, geology and engineering, and finally when his home became intolerable struck out for himself, shorn of ideals but still a potential idealist. In connection with his geological work the Rev. James Blenk had proved a liar and a scoundrel, and this combined with his over religious father's cruelty and injustice so shook his faith as to deny him the comfort of the church.

Kirk left home at 20, a gracious, tender hearted and susceptible youth, fit prey for the woman who was sure to be lying in wait. He lived within arm's reach of the

beautiful and cultivated Beatrice Lucy without registering a throb, but when he went to the grim town of Bruside in the north of England Marian Gisburn, in whose house he lived, fastened her piteous talons directly upon his heart. Marian was a weaver by profession and a sensualist by choice, and she had a stepmother and an obscure ailment which made weaving difficult. She was quite frank in confessing to Kirk that it was his legs which took her fancy first. She also confessed doubts about immortality. In this wise:

"Do you remember, Kirk, I once said I wanted a man who'd kiss me and that . . . that's my idea of love. . . . I've always felt miserable that after we're dead . . . we've no bodies . . . there'd be nothing sweet."

## II.

Mr. Byrd differs from many English novelists in that he does not overcome his hero with physical methods. True, Marian hurled herself upon Kirk after the approved modern fashion from time to time, but she never took him by storm or even attracted him, and long before the morning when Kirk finally declared himself he had come to find her actually repulsive. Coldly and deliberately, with only pity in his heart, Kirk assumed the position of Marian's lover and almost before the process was complete tried to kill himself—put the muzzle of a revolver to his full temple and pressed his finger on the trigger—harder—harder—as hard as he could. . . . The safety lever had been drawn over, we need hardly say.

Taking up his life where he had left it, Kirk came to this comfortable way of thinking and mistook it for bravery—that "one must go to bed and get up each day and live through that day without outlook, and be philosophical, and in due course all would come to a blessed finality and oblivion—if one did one's duty." There followed the occasion of his first public appearance as a lover, when Marian and the other girls by the interchange of warm glances indulged in "that secret eternal triumph of women over men of which women are always aware."

We hardly know what to think of this book. Sometimes we like it and often we hate it. It is long and goes slowly, and before you know it has become a habit. We jog along in a dumb, driven way, bracing ourselves for the impending tragedy, and meantime experiencing that pleasure which is born of pain. While we do not wish to appear to bite the hand that feeds us, we cannot help feeling that Mr. Byrd might have made Kirk's capitulation appear inevitable, in have been no regret. As it is we can think of a thousand ways in which he could have made a perfectly fine escape if he had had the backbone of a jellyfish. It is a good thing for women to be deceived sometimes. They ought not to be allowed

too much secret triumph—and besides it makes better literature. If all Englishmen were as fastidious as Kirk there would be no Hey Nonny Nonnys in history. Women of Marian's sort are made to be deceived, and when well treated become obnoxious. Her own stepmother knew this—in fact it took her some time to accustom herself to a marriage. Finally, accepting the inevitable, she gave her blessing.

"We shall be glad to see ye married, Marian. We thinks better to ye than ye seem to believe, though we're your own kith."

Deep gloom fastens upon the reader as he approaches the end. The wedding morn is more truly harrowing than the mother's death scene.

"Time dragged painfully this bright and sunny morning. Kirk had that uncomfortable sense of being in the way, the unpleasant feeling that men have in hat and corset shops, or during birth of their children—a vague sense of one led captive in the train of some woman conqueror. It has been known to men when their partner in the dance was very lovely, well aware of it, and radiantly arrayed."

## III.

The unfortunate bride and bridegroom are discovered shortly, at the waning of the honeymoon, sitting on a beach, "Kirk in a calm mind, the deathly calmness that precedes typhoons." Still, we take it he was none too calm even so. His hands,

if we are to believe the author, "crept unconsciously to his heart and nerves," a sort of Swedish movement probably, unknown to us but no doubt useful in moments of distress. Even Marian's dull sensibilities were more or less affected by the sense of coming disaster. "Each foreboded, for each beheld in spirit the distant shadow of the inevitable that approached them from beyond this lovely place and day."

Still the gentle reader must not feel too miserable over the fate of these young persons who have become so much of a habit. Every typhoon has its silver lining, and even idealists and sensualists unduly mated have been known to come to terms. While we were in Mr. Byrd's hands we were more or less helpless, but now that the book is done and we are our own masters there comes a resurgence of animal spirits and we are not inclined to be bullied into submission to gloom. Taking a base view of the situation, we feel that the match has as good a chance of success as most. Marian undoubtedly cooked well and she was used to hard work. Many a man has less than that to be thankful for.

She was pretty well bowed down by work and disease in the second place, and there is small reason to believe that she lived more than a brief span, so let us look on the bright side, slough off care and regret and be ourselves once more.

THE BORN FOOL. BY JOHN WALTER BYRD. George H. Doran Company. \$1.50.

## Set Up for Spite

By GEORGE GORDON.

YET in spite of his title—which is intended to attract attention, it being in some sort an attractive title—Mr. Gerald Cumberland has his enthusiasms. He mentions his scarce limited admiration of Mrs. Pankhurst's brave and proud gifts; he tells us that "perhaps the most exquisite and the most fragile thing in the world at present is the Chopin playing of Vladimir de Pachmann"; he apparently appreciates Yvette Guilbert; he speaks a good word for Miss Elizabeth Robins; he does what he can to attest the "genius" of Hall Caine; he plays his game somewhat after the manner of Frank Harris.

His book is, I think, worth reading; though he has degraded Whistler's gentle art of making enemies into the ungracious and too often unfounded backbiting of a disappointed lover of the arts. But he will pay (in the general respect of his fellows) dearly for what he says—not so much concerning Mr. Arnold Bennett, who can take care of himself; nor concerning Mr. St. John Ervine, who, apparently, knew what he was doing when he failed to make a confidant of Mr. Cumberland; nor concerning Mr. Shaw, who gets very much the best of their tiff; but concerning the late Stanley Houghton, author of *Hindle Wakes*, whom he patronizes, and Dixon Scott, by long odds the most promising critic lost in the war—and because of such all-wise sentences as that in which he says that "only G. H. Mair, Willie Yeats and high school girls think Synge great," or again and again where he belittles the honest and extremely valuable Sidney Webb, or boasts that he can see nothing but Jones Robinson-brown in Mr. Arthur Hepserson and very little in Mr. Max Beerbohm.

Not that he should worship all or any of these people—they are, I make no doubt, idols with feet of clay—but that he reviles and mocks at them primarily because he knows they are the little tin gods of others. The effect is that of a free-thinker, one who refuses to acknowledge the Divinity of Christ with head covered, smoking an old and comfortable pipe, sightseeing among the various chapels scattered about Christendom and in a loud voice pointing to the crudity of the construction, the colorless windows, the hard benches. It is in poor taste; it is not done deliberately—no missionary, though he be certain the heathen are misguided through superstition, acts familiarly toward Baal or hangs his hat on the bowed head of the graven image.

Nevertheless, since Mr. Cumberland must pay the piper, there is some reason why he should be allowed to dance—and I am all for having you read this book of his. It has raised something of a teapot tempest in England. It should amuse those who are anxious to know that Mr. John Masefield is painfully diffident and

rather fussy about his tea, and that Mrs. Annie Besant, for all her earnestness, will not argue theosophy with every chance interviewer, and that Augustus John wears his hair a bit long.

SET DOWN IN MALICE. BY GERALD CUMBERLAND. Brentano's. \$2.50.

The first volume of the uniform edition of Leonard Merrick, *Conrad in Quest of His Youth*, with introduction by Barrie, was published by E. P. Dutton & Co. early in April in an edition limited to 1,500 copies. Within three weeks the last copy was gone, and people were clamoring for more, which has resulted in a popular price edition of the novel. At the moment of writing a similar popular edition of *The Actor Manager*, introduction by Mr. Howells, has just appeared.

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