

The Whispering Gallery

In Which We Consider the Hand-Me-Downs of Fiction and That Illustrious Faker Oliver Blayds, Besides a Word About the American Laureate.

By DONALD ADAMS.

THERE is nothing new in the accusation that a lot of short stories and novels at present consumed by the reading public are machine made and cut strictly to a pattern. We have been told so often that standardization is arresting the growth of the art of fiction in this country that just as soon as we observe a slurring reference to the sort of fiction printed in the *Saturday Evening Post* we know it is the text for a sermon on what our authors are coming to.

We had not realized personally how far the process of standardizing fiction has been carried, how consciously and openly the manufacture of the patterns is being conducted until we encountered recently the advertisement of a news feature syndicate which has included in its service a series of short stories.

These are said to be "true stories" in short story form, and the editors who are urged to buy the service are assured that "the insertion of your own street, names and landmark make each story strictly local."

For a moment or two we stared at the advertisement, reading it over again and wondering if there were editors who could believe that local color is to be so readily obtained. Then just for the sake of imagining what would happen if this were a Big Idea, destined to affect the currents of the literary world no less than Henry Ford has affected the automobile industry, we chose to rest on the supposition that it was.

Well then, to the task of rewriting some of the world's best, and making it equally palatable for John T. Reader in The Bronx and Alfred P. Reader in Winesburg, Ohio, or elsewhere. Take this man Shakespeare, for instance. The setting of a play, the place in which his characters found themselves, meant nothing to him whatever. It would not surprise us greatly if an unknown play of his should some day be turned up, in which a group of English lords and gentlemen are playing a comedy of errors somewhere in the African interior.

What would it matter to the great William if "The Merchant of Venice" and "Lear" and "Macbeth" were put through a little retouching? Why could not Lear be represented as a great breakfast food manufacturer, Macbeth an ambitious sales manager who aspired to be treasurer of the company, Shylock a landlord in The Bronx.

High and Lowbrow.

IN the collection of B. L. T.'s work that has been published by Knopf under the title of "The So-Called Human Race," we found an interesting list of synonyms for the terms highbrow and lowbrow clipped by a contributor from a Boston paper.

Highbrow: Browning, anthropology, economics, Bacon, the string quartet, the uplift, inherent sin, Gibbon, fourth dimension, Euripides, "eyether," pate de fois gras, lemon phosphate, Henry Cabot Lodge, Woodrow Wilson.

Low-highbrow: Municipal government, Kipling, Socialism, bridge, chicken a la Maryland, Shakespeare, politics, Thackeray, taxation, golf, grand opera, "eether," stocks and bonds, gin rickey, Theodore Roosevelt, chewing gum in private.

High-lowbrow: Musical comedy, euchre, baseball, moving pictures, small steak medium, whisky, Robert W. Chambers, purple socks, chewing gum with friends.

Lowbrow: Laura Jean Libbey, ham sandwich, haven't came, pitch, I and her, melodrama, hair oil, the Duchess, beer, George M. Cohan, red flannels, toothpicks, Bathhouse John, chewing gum in public.

Any such list invites violent discussion. Perhaps we are obtuse, but we can see no reason why lemon phosphate should be a synonym for highbrow. Gibbon is not a synonym for anything, but obsolete. "Eyether" to our mind is distinctly low-highbrow, and so is Henry Cabot Lodge.

Living in New York we of course cannot escape taking municipal government as a synonym for lowbrow, and we do not believe we would feel differently about it were we a student of Boston. We have no quarrel with the inclusion of Kipling and Socialism in the low-highbrow list, or of Thackeray, golf and Theodore Roosevelt.

We smiled when we came to euchre, down in the high-lowbrow list, and wondered if they really believe in old Boston that anybody plays euchre nowadays. The sense in which pitch is included as a synonym for lowbrow mystifies us completely. Only Boston would deny George M. Cohan a place in the high-lowbrow list. And why does inherent sin appear as highbrow or as any one of the other three shadings?

Oliver Blayds.

WHY so much fuss has been made over A. A. Milne's new play, "The Truth About Blayds," is more than we can see. We grant readily enough that Milne has made an amusing thing of it, but we cannot follow when it is proclaimed that "The Truth About Blayds" lifts its author from the ranks of those who

write merely pleasant comedy and puts him with those who write significant plays.

Blayds, when a very young man, wrote poetry—from what we can gather, very bad poetry. He roomed with a friend whose poetry was the work of genius, and when his friend died Blayds took his stuff and published it, little by little, under his own name. We meet Blayds in the first act when he is a man of ninety or so, on the threshold of death, full of regrets not rightfully his. The humor of the play comes from a reverent family who believe the old bluffer to have been one of the great Victorians. When he dies, and the truth of the fiction he has lived is made known, some of them still believe.

"But how could it be true?" cries his elder daughter. "when father wrote such beautiful poetry? Why should he want to take anybody else's?"

We enjoyed the humor of that situation, and Mr. Milne makes the best of it, but aside from that we cannot feel that he gets under the skin of Blayds or of anybody else in the play. The younger daughter of the old faker—she is 38 and unmarried—has a speech about how her life has been ruined and the sacrifice she made in giving up her lover was a worthless one. Had it been written by an American dramatist that speech would have been laughed out of court.

It would have been called sentimental piffle. Here is a young lady falling into an audible reverie before her family about the dream child she might have had. "My little girl and I," she repeats brokenly. It

amused us almost as much as the death of the old pretender.

And we should have liked to have seen something of the old rogue, Blayds, in his robusiter days, while he was vigorously carrying off the grand deception. We sincerely admire Mr. Milne, but we do not like to see him made the victim of that too generous appraisal which is the besetting sin of the hour. If there were as many "great" and "big" books as have been announced within the last twelve months, the conscientious American of intellectual interests would need another twelve-month to read them.

The Laureate.

WE have a suspicion that if America's hypothetical poet laureate, as discussed by Brian Hooker in this section last week, were chosen by popular election, as Mr. Hooker assumes he would be, the three candidates whom he regards as most likely—Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell and Edwin Arlington Robinson—would be passed at the post by a gentleman who signs himself Edgar A. Guest and is partial to such titles as "It Takes a Heap o' Livin' in a Place to Make It Home." A few years ago Robert W. Service might have made a good race, but we believe that now he would trail along with his betters. We know he's a Canadian, but he would be voted for just the same.

Mr. Hooker supposes that the laureate would be required to show a full blown Americanism, although he deplores the self-conscious effort to achieve a national tone. It is difficult to say just how a poet is to prove the native character of his

work. Poor old Longfellow chose many subjects which were indigenous, but when he is given recognition as a poet at all he is dismissed as a European echo. Mr. Robinson is not accused of being an expatriate in letters, and yet the major part of his work might have been written by an Englishman.

It was as long ago as 1844, when Emerson published the second series of his essays, that the first call was issued to the poets of the United States to take the stuff for their songs out of the environment in which they were born and lived. Some time after Whitman obeyed that call, a little too self-consciously for the good of his work.

"We have yet had no genius in America," wrote Emerson, "with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials and saw in the barbarism and materialism of the times another carnival of the same gods whose picture it so much admired in Homer; then in the middle age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphi and are as swiftly passing away. Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the Northern trade, the Southern planting, the Western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination and it will not wait long for meters."

Whitman, much as we admire him, took his master too literally.

Literary Venturers of the Day

I. WILLIAM MCFEE.

WHO is William McFee? Simply, he is chief engineer of the United Fruit Company boat Carillo, and, at this writing, outbound from New York for tropical parts, where they will load sugar, or bananas, or pineapples. He has been a chief engineer for a

long for the ride. He has to be a good deal more than a mechanic—an able executive. That is McFee's job. Also he does his writing at sea. He directs the engine room and gets out his novels from the same ten by eight chief's cabin. Only for one he uses a typewriter and for the other a block of common yellow copy paper. His new novel, "Command," was written this past year

that smacks of pose or exploitation. No. He sticks to the ship not only because he loves it but also, we believe, because he feels it was the engine room job that made him the writer he is. Certainly the two callings are closely knit in this man. Ashore, where praise and admiration are waiting to make him feel very much like the literary man, he almost loses that side and is all seaman seeking rest in the different surroundings and feeling very keenly the responsibilities of his official job. Out on a trip the writing side comes prominently to the fore in his own mind, and through it this remarkable man finds expression of views on life culled through countless experiences in many foreign lands.

Born to the sea by inheritance—incidentally he was born at sea—this still young Scotchman, who is now getting to be also in some ways an American, began studying for an engineer's certificate as a matter of course. But somehow wrapped in with the folds of gray matter peculiar to the mathematical minded were some others that make the literary artist.

For a time while still very young McFee ran the risk of getting in with some of the "little groups" in London, where, as elsewhere, gossip and talk about writing often take the place of real work and observation. He went to literary studios and teas because it seemed to be the thing to do. You can read about this phase of life in his "Casuals of the Sea." But some lack of the grace or aptitude to shine in these circles threw him back on his original sailor's calling. In his own words, he would have been lost if his leanings at that time "had not been corrected by a healthy plunge into a world of callous operatives, energetic executives and highly fascinating machinery." Indicative of his literary philosophy is his statement "that the best training for literature until one is well over 25 is to have nothing to do with it." His scorn of writing as a trade is infinite, and training for it considered as such he deems impossible.

It is in contact with reality and coming to grips with life in an unliterary way that McFee sets much store by, and this feeling keeps him by choice carrying on his two professions side by side. When he secured his certificate he began sailing the Seven Seas in the British merchant marine. He saw strange ports and consorted with men of many races. In the course of time he had something to write about, and it began to write itself, little by little in the "watch below."

Turning to the man himself, his personality and the more prosaic facts of his life, he is well considered

as the opposite of the figure his photographs suggest. The pictured face is stern, almost hard in some cases, with every indication of a gruff nature, tolerating no lightness, and ever ready with biting comment. Far from this characterization is the real man. Meeting him becomes a shock of the pleasant sort unless you already know how unlike the traditional "dour Scot" he really is.

Very cheerful, with a boyish look of enjoying the world, and laughing with it, McFee is almost never without a smile lurking in the corners of his mouth, ready to spread over his face at the least excuse. His hearty handclasp and cheery welcome, as well as his easy conversation, make him one of those rare people whom you feel you have always known after the first few words are exchanged.

Time for reading has naturally been plentiful in a life like McFee's, and he has indeed taken advantage of it. His taste is catholic, and in the books he carries with him on his small bookshelf are found a diversity of titles. Plutarch's "Lives" has always been a favorite of his, and among the others he finds valuable as friends and companions there is great latitude of subject and treatment. Books on the sea are particularly well known to him. He can comment at random on any number of them, easily selecting the ones he considers best.

As to the facts of his life, McFee was born on the ship Erin's Isle. He was educated in England, where he earned his certificate. This education, by the way, has not been all mechanical by any means. The early connection with the London literary world was part, while another side is shown by his complete mastery of two languages besides his own. Later on in life McFee affiliated himself with the United Fruit Company, but when the war broke out he went back to England and tried to join the army. Refused there, he succeeded in getting into the navy and became again an engineer on the Mediterranean. About this phase of his life he is very reticent. After the war was over he came back to this country and the United Fruit Company, in whose service he is now chief engineer.

Putnams announce that the first volume of Thomson's "Outline of Science," the publication of which was planned for April, will not be issued until early May. The extraordinary interest, shown in the advance orders, had necessitated the printing of four substantial editions to insure a sufficient supply for first publication.



William McFee.

number of years, principally in the Mediterranean and the Near Eastern waters. He worked up to his position of "chief," and he is proud of it. He is proud of his triple expansion self-oiling engines and he will talk about them.

There is a good deal of responsibility about a chief engineer's berth. An old *Cum gratia* captain once said the engineer was the captain of the steam vessel, the captain just going

on his monthly trips. Its publication beginning in the May number of *Harper's Magazine* marks the author's first appearance as a serial writer.

You might think that McFee, now that he is a novelist, was sticking to his engineer's job as a sort of pose. It sounds like a first class publicity device. You might think so, that is, if you didn't know him and how much he abhors anything