

MOSTLY MERIDIONAL

by BRANCH CABELL

INASMUCH as I can think of no civil way of avoiding the intrusion, I must now write to you, my dear sir, that, should you call at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon, your advent will be to me a source of considerable pleasure; and that with unbounded delight I will then "give" the newspaper interview for which you have misguidedly asked. The affair is thus settled. And yet it really does seem rather an unexhilarating manner of wasting our time.

I am virtually sure of this because, under varying names, and wearing slightly different very young faces, you have called on me aforesaid, very, very often, at the bidding of one or another of the local papers. Your questions (during the last twenty-five years) have varied in their objectives, but never in their depth and seriousness and futility. Nor indeed have they varied widely. Not ever, for example, during the last twenty-five years, has any representative of the Virginian press failed to inquire, "What will be the future trend of literature in the South?" and, "Whom do you consider to have the most promising future among our younger Southern writers?" I am forlornly convinced therefore that, at not later than two minutes after four to-morrow afternoon, you also, my dear sir, will have asked me both these questions, quite gravely.

Not at all will your polite summons to unveil the future perturb me. I shall face both queries (I can assure you) without replying "Alackaday!" or "Miserrime!" or even "Ototoi!" For whenever anybody, in any walk of life, is "interviewed," then as a matter of course he is called on to prophesy. It is possible to unfold no morning paper without facing a half-column instance or so of magnates vaticinating as to next month's stock market and the next quarter's upswing, or of tourists just off the gang-plank who are reassuringly conversant with Europe's future (specializing, at this present moment, in the destinies of Russia and of Germany), or of realtors lyric over the impending boom in real estate. And what publicist anywhere (save only, perhaps, Mr. Roosevelt) remains ignorant as to what the President intends to do next? It seems but fair that in this welter of omniscience the most obtuse of writers should know all about the future of literature in the South.

So I shall not reply to these perennial questions truthfully, "I don't know." To admit any such nescience would be humiliating beyond human endurance, I reflect, so long as at least a dozen persons continue to subscribe to the *New Republic*, and thus find all future happenings made plain as an equal number of pike-staves. I dislike appearing unique in my ignorance. I prefer to hedge; I elect to answer all "interviewers" with a civil pretense of taking them seriously: and therefore, at two minutes after four o'clock to-morrow afternoon, I shall attempt to disguise (in resonant and shifty babblings, modeled after the general style of the *New York Times'* editorial page) my lack of any firm interest in literary trends or in any of our younger Southern writers.

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It is not that even in my most private thoughts I disparage these matters. I mean only that, if any author dared venture into printed frankness, I would have to say to you, necessarily, that it was my appointed task to construct the Biography of the Life of Manuel. I was thus forced (I would continue) throughout the passing away of a highly en-

joyable twenty-eight years, to run counter to all current literary trends, and to disregard them. You question me (I would point out) as to a subject with which I have cultivated, resolutely, throughout twenty-eight years, all possible unacquaintance. Inasmuch as I have never taken holy orders, I do not believe that complete ignorance of the topic in hand can peculiarly qualify me to dispose of it with authority.

Even so, I prefer to be fair. I remark that, perhaps throughout the entire South, but most certainly in the State of Virginia, the liberal arts now flourish to an unprecedented extent. Mr. Charles Gilpin, the noted actor, who but lately created the title rôle of "The Emperor Jones," I would remind you, was a native born Virginian. So, I believe, was Miss Peggy Hopkins Joyce. Mr. Bill Robinson, the famous tap dancer, is yet another jewel—as one should say, a black diamond—in the cultural diadem of Virginia. In still another field of æsthetics may Virginia point with maternal pride to that gifted cantatrice, Miss Kate Smith. And in what state, I demand of the welkin, was reared and nurtured Mr. Freeman Gosden, that pre-eminent exponent of Pepsodent's never-ending *comédie humaine*? Echo answers, I admit, "Maine." But her answer is not true. The world knows that Mr. Gosden likewise is a native-born Virginian.

Do not think me a mere boaster, in the best Southern tradition! It is needful for a Virginian thus to catalogue at the top of his voice these finer flowers of our present-day cultural renaissance. And my point is not merely that all these Virginian artists prospered through the simple and unarduous recipe of leaving Virginia. What seems to me far more important, and more instructive, and more full of promise as concerns the future, is the attested fact that Virginia nowadays honors her leading artists liberally. Did Charles, the great emperor, stoop to pick up the brush of Titian? With a celerity no less imperial or gleaming, so often as Miss Smith delights Virginia with a visit, does the Governor of Virginia, attended by his gold-braided staff, arise very early in the morning to meet her Pullman with plenary homage. And when Mr. Robinson frequents Richmond-in-Virginia, then even in the lobby of our most fashionable hotel is Mr. Bill Robinson to be seen dancing nimbly with this or the other fair Caucasian maiden, his pupil, amid the respectful applause of our city's élite, so properly have we learned to esteem the art of Mr. Robinson as weighed against yesterday's taboos.

Concerning the enthusiasm with which Virginia greets the most widely known of her children, Mr. Gosden, I can but remark that it staggers belief and checks traffic in the public highways. It does not seem enough that *en grande tenue* the citizens of Richmond have conferred upon this all-conqueror the appropriate gift of a sword. The pomps of that chivalrous ceremony did but feebly indicate our fond and inexpressible pride in the most famous of living Virginians. Everywhither do such throngs attend the passing of our supreme artist that (as you will no doubt remember, my dear sir) when with his confrère he last entered a Richmond bank it was found needful to put a placard in the window explaining that no "run" on the establishment was in progress, but that "Amos 'n' Andy" were inside.

We Virginians have taken, in short, the main step toward autochthonous art: we have evolved, we have learned to revere, our own æsthetic.

With the cultural ideals of the South in a condition thus thriving, I do not doubt that in the late Confederacy literature will begin, by-and-by, to share with her sister arts in public esteem. I look forward, in fact, to the time when every Southern household of the better class will contain its book as well as its electric refrigerator; when painters and musicians will be regarded in the South almost as seriously as aldermen; when its statuary will serve needs not wholly canine; and when Southerners will accord in brief to the career of every kind of creative artist a quota of condonation.

~~My point is merely~~ that the dawn of this approvable day is not, not quite as yet apparent. And so I admit that, to my finding, for any young Southerner to commence author, just at present, does show such disregard for the opinions of his more mature and better-thought-of neighbors as (even before I have looked over his book and decided that, after all, I do not have to read it) does prejudice me as to his mental balance. One who forfeits thus wantonly the respect of his daily associates, and of his abashed family, is not, I reflect, the exact person with whom the judicious would foregather, even in print. So I do, it may be, avoid the books of our younger Southern writers somewhat more expeditiously than I shy away from the newest balderdash by oncoming American authors spawned in some other section of the Republic. I do it unconsciously, because of my respect for the common-sense standards of my own better-thought-of neighbors.

I shall say no one of these things to-morrow afternoon, although I believe you would sympathize did I become thus loquacious. As behooves a normally intelligent and well-reared young Southerner, you also are no whit interested in such flimsy make-shifts for personal rapture, and for personal experience, and for personal notions, as literature keeps in stock. You prefer these substitutes at a higher voltage in the moving pictures. You are being sent me-ward, by an irrational city editor, to get a "story" out of our talk to-morrow afternoon, a "story" which will appear unobtrusively, some four days later, interning my alleged "philosophy of life" along with my portrait very far inside the paper, between the quips of the local humorist and the day's special bargains at the cut-rate drugstore. And I am abetting you because of my publisher's firm belief that such not-ever-read reading-matter makes valuable "publicity" which will enable him (so lively is the Baptist faith) to sell books in remunerative quantities on the south side of the Potomac.

The impendent "interview," in brief, must be for both of us a nuisance to be endured restively. We two are the victims of circumstance. None can help us. Nobody will help us. We can but try to make our shared boredom as lenient as may prove possible, with the aid of a few *hors d'œuvres*, and of Ravished Virgin cocktails, and of much continuous cigarette smoking, in the while we discuss the future trend of Southern literature, and which one of our younger Southern writers has the most promising future, in the North.