

## MINUS ONE-THIRD

by BRANCH CABELL

ODD seems the fact that, when you come to think of it, there does not appear to exist in American literature, whether in its maturity or during its prolonged infancy in England, any full-length dream-story which obeys the actual and well-known laws of a normal dream—with the ever-memorable exception of the two Alice books by Lewis Carroll. Nobody else has as yet published a dream-story combining any considerable length with even the most shadowy pretense to veracity.

Here and there one finds a short story which, in its stunted way, stays veracious enough. But Lewis Carroll alone of mankind appears to have written books which deal, and which deal only, with the true stuff of dreams; which cover entirely the course of a normal dream; and which progress at all times, as a dream does normally progress, under the local regulations of dream-land.

Odd it, I repeat, seems. The two Alice books, alone of all books, preserve the peculiar, the unremittent movement of a normal dream, and the peculiar logic of a normal dream, and the peculiar legerdemain through which the people one meets, or the places visited, in a normal dream, are enabled unostentatiously to take visible form or to vanish, quite naturally, without provoking in the beholder's mind any element of surprise; just as these books preserve, too, the ever-present knowledge, common to many dreamers, that, after all, they are dreaming. But I forbear to particularize the true somnial touch with which matters are handled. My point is that these two books remain inexplicably unfellowed in to-day's literature, as the sole known æsthetic instances—I believe—of an elaborate and unflinching naturalism applied to the lands beyond common-sense.

Even here the precise might file an objection. Alice smells pepper in Wonderland, she smells the "scented rushes" in Looking-Glass Land; and, upon several occasions, Alice partakes of food, and of physic also—tasting, as you may recall, an unusual medicine which had "a sort of mixed flavor of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast." It is my strong personal belief that in no dream not induced by black or by gray magic did anybody ever smell or taste anything. So that small objection to the scientific exactness of Lewis Carroll is recorded in this place, for whatever it may be worth,—with the glad supplement that, in every other important respect, one finds his books to be triumphs in naturalism, with which the works of Flaubert, or of Zola, or of Tolstoy, let us say, cannot easily be compared.

Meanwhile it becomes increasingly needful that some other author should treat a full-length dream, at full length, realistically; for the trend of our time stays definitely averse from any form of too timid restraint such as continues to enslave our creative writers. I mean (of course) that professed realists have given us, very multitudinously, the stark, the grim, and preferably the sex-flavored truth about man's life during his wide-awake hours—the truth about just two-thirds of human existence,—without ever daring, it would seem, to venture beyond that rather vulgar fraction. All their novels display a quaint devotion to insomnia.

For the eight hours, more or less, which every human being devotes to sleep appear to repel the professed realist; to bother him, in some obscure fashion; and to be a theme which no realist cares, or perhaps has the courage, to handle. Dreams have been analyzed and interpreted, *ad*, as the learned say, *infinitum*, and even, the impatient append, *ad nauseam*; but never since 1871 has any English or American writer dealt with any complete and convincing dream completely and convincingly.

All this, too, in face of the plain fact that every normal person spends some third part of his existence in sleep, during which (according at least to such eminent authorities as Kant, Leibnitz, Descartes, and yet other reputable philosophers) every sleeper dreams continuously, and so, for eight hours *per noctem*, lives among supernatural surroundings and exercises supernatural powers. Yet Lewis Carroll alone of our better-known realists has considered this huge field, this entire third of human life, with any seriousness or any veracity. And even this great pioneer confined his explorings to the south temperate zone, as it were, in the callow, the sexless dreams of a child.

It follows that nowhere in English prose literature is an adult dream represented from the actual point of view of a dreamer; and that some thirty-three per cent. of human experience remains untouched by any living creative writer at all truthfully. Since Bunyan's time there has been an abundance of books which purported to record dreams; but thus far only two of them have tried honestly to obey the conditions of dream-land, wherein all human beings pass a third of their lives.

It really does seem a default which ought to be remedied.