

THE DOUBLE DEALER

JANUARY, 1921

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AND EPIGRAMS

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A Word from James Branch Cabell

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30

1920

Editors of The Double Dealer.

Gentlemen:

Your program, as announced, is ambitious and mellifluous and generally attractive, with perhaps the minor fault of being a trifle beyond the scope of human ability. But that, as touches literary endeavor anyhow, is errancy on the right side.

I do not know how any personal benevolence toward an as yet unpublished magazine can well be voiced save with a formal wish for all imaginable success well merited; this much, however, one may desire for you most heartily. From actual criticism the unborn share with the dead in exemption (although because of, to be sure, more cheery and less immutable reasons), so that, in either case, the bystander's rôle can only be that of tacit hopefulness. The Double Dealer, after all, is committed to sink or swim by virtue of its own inherent virtues. Such was metaphor of the prologue to your Congrevean namesake, you will remember, nor can I imagine any more true and tonic avowal as herald for the second Double Dealer's outset.

Therefore I wish you all the luck you may deserve, in friendly confidence that your merits may thus add up to some quite unexampled prosperity.

Yours faithfully,

JAMES BRANCH CABELL.

Dumbarton Grange,

Dumbarton, Virginia.

MR. CABELL OF VIRGINIA

WE do not think that Mr. James Branch Cabell of Dumbarton Grange, Dumbarton, Virginia, needs any introduction to the country at large, despite the belated and crotchety presentation of a Mr. Gunther in the

November *Bookman*, but we do think that our friends hereabout are as yet unaware of his topping presence in the field of American letters.

Mr. Cabell's art is, at once, so individual and various that we, for our part, should be diffident about either appreciating or criticising it. The

afore-mentioned Mr. Gunther however, after saying that "he (Cabell) manifestly has limitations, his style being frequently annoying, often verbose, his vocabulary *impossible*, concludes by stating that "Cabell is a stylist of distinction, a painter of beautiful images, a suave, a subtle ironist. We have a juggler of ideas, a nimble wit, a skeptical and tolerant philosopher. We have a queer, tricky, and deft craftsman who tells his story well." And he winds up by calling him "the most interesting figure in American letters." Mr. Walpole in the *Yale Review*, Messrs. Rascoe, Hergesheimer, Benjamin de Casseres and H. L. Mencken, have all, with more or less excellent discrimination appraised Mr. Cabell's craftsmanship. Nevertheless, we believe that no present appraisal can be made of a man who is not writing either for or about the present. His material is from all time and his art for all time. Fifty years hence some longheaded, spectacled gentleman may be positioned for a fitting estimate of the Cabell phenomenon in the early twentieth century. In the meanwhile let us make ourselves merry with the enjoyment of his books.

As this is scrivined merely for the purpose of stimulating a keener interest in the Cabellian product we shall begin by suggesting that you first read "The Cream of the Jest" partly because it contains some of the author's finest writing, verve, feeling, and the seed of his latter style; and partly because it is more easily obtained at present having been reissued recently. Next we would commend the perusal of "Gallantry" (Harper's 1907). Mr. Cabell, we understand, is revising the book. The romance and delicate irony of "Gallantry" to one reader at least is exquisite. Then, perhaps, "The Certain Hour," a series of striking episodes in the lives of divers

poets. Either "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck" or "The Soul of Melicent (revised under the title "Domnei") might follow. And, then, "Beyond Life!" And then "Jurgen!"

If you can wade through the sands and shallows of the very early books, such as "The Eagle's Shadow" and "The Line of Love" out into the white-capped ocean of "Beyond Life" and "Jurgen" and manage, somehow, to swim, float, or fly with the author, your efforts will not be entirely unrewarded. The ocean of life and beyond life—romance, legend, illusion, irony—the medley of gust and love and laughter and tears, with a fine courage back of it all facing inevitable defeat at the last—a sad yet buoyant hopefulness whistling a droll second to the obligato of the Gods!

We quote from "Beyond Life:"—"For thus to spin romances is to bring about, in every sense, man's recreation, since man alone of animals can, actually, acquire a trait by assuming, in defiance of reason, that he already possesses it. To spin romances is, indeed, man's proper and peculiar function in a world wherein he only of created beings can make no profitable use of the truth about himself. For man alone of animals plays the ape to his dreams. So he fares onward chivalrously, led by *ignes fatui* no doubt, yet moving onward. And that the goal remains ambiguous seems but a trivial circumstance to any living creature who knows, he knows not how, that to stay still can be esteemed only a virtue in the dead."

Continuing we read: "Indeed, when I consider the race to which I have the honor to belong, I am filled with respectful wonder. All about us flows and gyrates unceasingly the material universe,—an endless inconceivable jumble of rotatory blazing gas and

frozen spheres and detonating comets, wherethrough spins Earth like a frail midge. And to this blown molecule adhere what millions and millions and millions of parasites just such as I am, begetting and dreaming and slaying and abnegating and toiling and making mirth, just as did aforetime those countless generations of our forebears, every one of whom was likewise a creature just such as I am! * * *

"Nor is this everything. For my reason, such as it is, perceives this race in its entirety, in the whole outcome of its achievement, to be beyond all word-ing petty and ineffectual! and no more than thought can estimate the relative proportion to the material universe of our poor Earth, can thought conceive with what quintillionths to express that fractional part which I, as an individual parasite, add to Earth's negligible fretting by ephemerae."

"And still—behold the miracle!—still I believe life to be a personal transaction between myself and Omnipotence; I believe that what I do is somehow of importance; and I believe that I am on a journey toward some very public triumph not unlike that of the third prince in the fairytale."

Here are but two passages, perhaps ill-chosen ones, from a book abounding in quotable matter. In "Jurgen" the wealth of wit and well-turned phrasing make it a difficult task to select an apt paragraph. Space is limited, and one must take the pains and the accompanying pleasure to read an author of the Cabell stamp, however in concluding we glean you a bit from this remarkable book. Here is Jurgen confronted by the brown man with the queer feet, the symbol of All, who states indifferently that he may choose to annihilate him.

Says Jurgen: "None the less, I think there is something in me which will en-

dure. I am fettered by cowardice, I am enfeebled by disastrous memories; and I am maimed by old follies. Still, I seem to detect in myself something which is permanent and rather fine. Underneath everything, and in spite of everything, I really do seem to detect that something. What role that something is to enact after the death of my body, and upon what stage, I cannot guess. When fortune knocks I shall open the door. Meanwhile, I tell you candidly, you brown man, there is something in Jurgen far too admirable for any intelligent arbiter ever to fling into the dustheap. I am, if nothing else, a monstrous clever fellow; and I think I shall endure somehow. Yes, cap in hand goes through the land, as the saying is: and I believe I can contrive some trick to cheat oblivion when the need rises, says Jurgen, trembling, and gulping, and with his eyes shut tight, but even so, with his mind quite made up about it. Of course you may be right; and certainly I cannot go so far as to say you are wrong: but still at the same time"—

"Now but before a fool's opinion of himself, the brown man cried the Gods are powerless. Oh, yes, and envious, too!"

'Tis gallant sparkling Greek wine,
now for God's sake, sweetheart, do but
teach me how the devil you make it.—
Rabelais.

THE SMILE

I sought a meaning
For your smile
As of Leonardo's Lady.

Could it have meant
I was a fool?

LOUIS GILMORE

Comment

Dumbarton Grange,
Dumbarton, Va.

Indeed I think you have made a most interesting beginning with *THE DOUBLE DEALER*, and I shall look forward to the future numbers.

As for "frank criticism," I am too deeply and pleasurably prejudiced—being human—by the things said about me in that first number to be an unbiased judge. I, very naturally, liked the whole thing, and send my compliments to The Editors.

JAMES BRANCH CABELL.

New York City.

Allow me to congratulate you on the first number of *THE DOUBLE DEALER*. Hope it springs a New South on us. Can't you stop our Dear Country from going to hell?

California and New York were the last of the Old Guard of Liberty. Enter New Orleans and *THE DOUBLE DEALER*!

BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

New Orleans, La.

Your initial bow is quite clever, a miniature Smart Set, as it were, whose gifted editor you so justly extol in a number of places.

I agree with your friends, however, that a magazine name which requires such a lengthy and involved explanation as you have chosen, is somewhat awkward.

The material you have chosen for your first issue is up to snuff. Especially meritorious is the Chicago Corre-

spondent's letter. It is to be hoped that we will hear more from him, as he is palpably a Menckinite, and, therefore, clever.

The general typography is good, but by all means *get rid* promptly of that hand-lettered, sophomoric title device on the cover. It reminds the initiated of that famous local periodical, *Old Gold and Purple*. The latter remark is the only destructive criticism I have to offer, and I wish you success and prosperity.

WILLIAM H. SCHULTZ.

New Orleans, La.

Congratulations!

I was a scoffer, but am repentant.

Vol. 1, No. 1, has both brains and art. It is easy to look through, and certainly easy to look at. How an aggregation of amateurs (pardon) could engineer a thing as good is the Eighth Wonder, the sub-wonder being that the contributions of the home talent go better than the high-priced imported stuff.

I like your editorials, your book reviews and your longest poem, in which the Poet of the Quartier gets all the color of the *libre* stuff without working nearly as hard as the Amy Lowell Legion.

Now that Opus 1 has (with some restraint visible between the lines) quite safely and properly established you as a legitimate institution, your friends would like to see you break loose and throw a little red stuff in the eyes of us. You can be devilish without being dirty.

A SUBSCRIBER.