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BOOKS

SOCIAL UPSTARTS

THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM. By William Dean Howells.
THE REAL CHARLOTTE. By E. C. Somerville and Martin Ross. Oxford University Press (Geoffrey Cumberlege).

MR. CUMBERLEGE must have dug deep into his bookcase to produce these two minor classics of the Victorian era, but what a delight it is to read them to-day in their new *World's Classics* format. *Silas Lapham* is set in Boston in the years after the Civil War, and it describes the attempts of a plain man who has risen in the world by luck and hard work to adjust himself to high society. Silas is vulgar and commonplace, he smells of the paint that brought him success, and Beacon Hill was apparently as blue-blooded then as it appears to-day in the novels of John P. Marquand. But he has a potential greatness about him (for instance, he feels it is morally wrong to descend to sharp financial practices) that makes his struggles with the perplexities of social etiquette inspiring as well as amusing.

The stature of Howells alone makes the book a good purchase, for he dominated American letters for a generation after 1870, and in his 40 novels and his critical writings was their first exponent of realism. He was also the friend of Henry James, and there are similarities in their work—the same air of elegance, the same finely drawn portrait of genteel society, and the same concern for the higher moral codes. But I find Howells the more readable of the two, for his style is forceful, polished, and clear. There is little high passion or tragedy in the book, for like his hero, Howells was matter-of-fact and kindly; he believed "the more smiling aspects of life were the more American ones."

The first result of the collaboration between those two young Anglo-Irish ladies, Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, was *The Real Charlotte*; the second was *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* Those who have read and enjoyed the *Irish R.M.* stories (they were available here in a Penguin edition during the war) should enjoy this reprint of their first book almost as much. It has all the atmosphere of Irish county society, with its horsiness, its worries over the Land Act, and its petty inter-House feuds. The plot revolves about the loves and hates of Charlotte Mullen (a wide-mouthed, money-lending owner of slum property whose wit and intelligence make her socially acceptable to the upper strata), her Dublin niece Francis, and handsome Roddy Lambert. The narrative rattles along at a fast gallop; the speech of the Irish peasants and the haughty manners of the English-born land-owners are reproduced with delightful humour; but beneath it all runs a hint of tragedy that gives solid depth to the novel's sparkling surface.

—P.J.W.

FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

BOOKIE No. 1. A New Miscellany from the Nag's Head Press.

PERHAPS only once in the life of any reviewer does he feel like some watcher in the skies when a new planet

swims into his ken. Such a planet (or perhaps comet, since, like its almost-namesake, it is to appear at irregular intervals) is *Bookie*, the new Miscellany from the Nag's Head Press.

Admittedly *Bookie* bears on the surface a striking likeness to previous New Zealand miscellanies, so much so that I was surprised to find no note on the flyleaf pointing out that any resemblance, etc., was entirely coincidental. For wherever one browses in *Bookie* one is teased by similarities, possibly due to the fact that contributors have drunk too deep and too exclusively of Caxtonian springs. In this respect one cannot help comparing the Short Story from Punters' Paradise, by Tussock Lands, with the very similar effort by Maurice Duggan in a rival miscellany.

In form and layout too *Bookie* owes an immense debt to its slimmer fore-runners. There are the same discreet advertisements for the Press's forthcoming attractions, the same tendency to recapitulate past triumphs. Its art varies from the stark realism (every inch a foot) of W. H. G. van Galsh's frontispiece "Les Orteils" to the equally stark symbolism of E. Raphael Gully's Tailpiece. The publishers have striven to give additional interest and variety to the book as a whole not only by ringing changes in the type-faces but also by employing paper of different tones and surfaces. Even cheque-paper has been pressed into service, but more could have been done to establish a relationship between the kind of paper used and the subject matter. The use of cheque-paper lent weight to the impressive list of Nag's Head subscribers, but why permit the only other page of it available to be used for the relatively unimportant notice of Professor Ent-whistle's Grand Tour of North Island Racecourses?

—M.B.

CRIME CORNER

THE VOICE OF THE CORPSE. By Max Murray. Michael Joseph Ltd., London.

AS Angela Pewsey, a middle-aged spinster, sat singing at her spinning-wheel, somebody struck her with a Blunt Instrument, fatally. To all outward appearance she had been a notable doer of good works, but under cover of social activity in her little English village, she had collected bits and pieces of scandal about her neighbours. These tit-bits she put to paper to send anonymously to the people concerned, which you will at once think accounts for the use of the blunt instrument in the first paragraph of Page One. Well, read and see. Max Murray, who is new to detective fiction, brings off a surprise ending which really is a surprise.

—E.R.B.

"Down Hill with the Brakes Off"

A book by John Gordon, who reviews in entertaining fashion the disturbing course of industrial events in New Zealand during the past eighteen months. A book to read and enjoy. Just off the press. Price 1/-, all Booksellers.