

.... With BOOK and VERSE

By "John O'Dreams"

Jottings

Our Fortnightly Book Review

JUAN IN AMERICA

By ERIC LINKLATER

THOSE who have made acquaintance with the earlier novels of Mr. Eric Linklater will find pleasurable anticipation realised in "Juan in America," the latest contribution to fiction of this most entertaining writer. It is excellent fooling. Taking America as his happy hunting-ground, with its multifarious types, phases, eccentricities, and vagaries of modes and manners, its kaleidoscopic panorama of scenes, grotesque, bizarre and magnificent, Mr. Linklater makes of it all a background for a frolicsome saga of adventure. Light-hearted romance is keynote of this fantastic odyssey, and a zestful delight in each moment as it flies, with resultant determination to let slip no opportunity accorded by the high gods.

Scion of an opulent and conventional Scottish family, Mr. Linklater's hero is also a lineal descendant of Byron's wanderer, and modern youth blithely lives up to tradition of promiscuity. Nothing of the puritan is apparent in successive amours with kittenish Dora, lovely Lalage, and Olympia, the beautiful Amazon; all related with an engaging light-heartedness quite innocent of offence.

Many adventures are chronicled of vicissitudes of life in that America which had called him from his safe and sheltered existence: "Those miraculously united States lured with their wild harmonious names—Utah, Wisconsin, Oregon, Kentucky—which were the home not only of Republicans and Democrats, but of peacocks and mandrills, and houses of which held gold and ivory as well as rocking-chairs. Fantasy lived there, satyrs walked in the woods, and millionaires built with the unstudied imagination of Haroun al-Raschid." Anything might happen, and lots of strange and unexpected ups and downs awaited him. We follow his adventures, tragic, comic and farcical, with riveted attention; from his temporary deification as a football hero and subsequent collapse, to sojourn on Egret Island with the lovely houri who experimented with passion to gain material for novel writing.

Becoming immersed in the underworld, bootlegging activities, and many inventions, Juan finds himself penniless and for a short span acts as waiter in a speakeasy and attendant in a drug store. He meets a pantherish lady who sings the "Habanera" head downward on a trapeze. Juan she desires, possesses and finally discards; and in love and hatred is equally magnificent. His endeavours to act and sing with this exacting amoureuse are excellent fooling, but finally he wanders forth and goes questing further among those peris, Hebes, snow-maidens, sylphs and undines, which the American moving-pictures had led him to expect in a population composed of "insuperable adolescence of Ireland, sentimental heart of Germany, lively passion of Italy, and all the rest of those who had taken out naturalisation papers and turned American."

There are thumb-nail portraits of all sorts and conditions of men, from the Governor and kindly Mrs. Dekkar, who so deftly exercise the virtue of hospitality, to the highest paid journalist in the world, who seemed to have collected everything in a haphazard way, including his nose, eyes and dinner-jacket, the result resembling a composite photograph of some hundred nonentities. Whether it is some bizarre episode of vaudeville, as for instance Juan and his superb trapezist swinging in air together as they carolled the duet of Rodolphe and Mimi from "La Boheme" or a discourse on the New Thought, Mr. Linklater wields an intriguing pen. "Constitutionally unable to ignore le dernier cri, America leapt joyously to its feet—dropping newest cosmetics, flying machine, murders and please for world peace—and reached with myriad hands to guide-book on Thought. No one had ever thought of thinking before, and here was a Spaniard telling them that anyone could do it."

Observation, imagination, wit, knowledge, and a profound knowledge of the heights and depths of human society in general and American in particular, are encountered in this very modern tale of youth at the helm and pleasure at the prow.

IN "The Lavender Dagger," Mr. Dion Clayton Calthrop gives his readers a series of village vignettes, shrewdly drawn and put together with no little ingenuity. Old Miss Ermaine dies, and leaves her great fortune to her godson, together with a charming private secretary, and a series of notebooks containing her views on the people whom he will meet. It transpires that the young man named Seaton is the dead woman's son, and he does his best to live up to her traditions. She was a wise and keen-eyed old lady, and her son takes after her, knowing how to deal with viragos like the vicar's wife and Lady Biddle. He marries the secretary, of course, in this gentle story, with its unexciting episodes and amusing portraits.

"A MODERN VANITY FAIR," by Mr. Stephen Graham, is an entertaining achievement, half satire and half romance. A young man, who talks with an American accent and seems to have considerable credit, appears in London and drifts into smart social circles in an engagingly casual way. He has some odd friends, the chief of his feminine friends being Phoebe Vindex, a baronet's daughter, who likes to be thought much wickeder than she is, and Lady Juliet Lyminge. He put up for Parliament and wins a seat in the East End of London. There is some mystery about this young man. Who is he? And, quite in the old-fashioned romantic manner, Mr. Ex Riddell turns out not to be an American soldier of fortune but a rich baronet with a castle of the most substantial kind. The story is told very well, with a spice of the risqué, and amusing digressions.

MISS GRACE THOMPSON has done well in "The First Gentleman: The Story of the Regent, afterward George IV." Mr. Lytton Strachy could scarcely have devised a more ironic nickname than that of "the first gentleman in Europe," by which George IV will go down to history. Readers with a knowledge of the byways of Regency gossip are well acquainted with the immense mass of stuff written round this most ungentlemanly gentleman. Miss Thompson has certainly made a most enlivening "conversation piece" of George, who was admirably etched by Justin McCarthy as "the malignant enemy of his unhappy father, the treacherous lover, the perjured friend, the heartless fop, the soulless sot." Without dates, except at the heads of her pages, and with no apparatus of footnotes, she has made an amusingly mordant mosaic of the monarch, whose example, if imitated by his successors, might easily have ended our system of sovereignty.

"THE Key," by M. Aldamov, a Russian emigre, is an extremely interesting novel. Perhaps the most curious thing about it is that a casual glance at it might lead you to suppose that it is little more than a murder mystery. Just before the Revolution a rich banker is found dead in a questionable flat, and one Zagryatsky is accused of the murder. The examining magistrate is convinced of his guilt. The head of the political police, however, has other ideas, which happen to be right. But although the solving of the mystery runs right through the book, and by itself holds attention, the author is also attempting to solve a much greater problem: he is attempting to explain Russia at the time of the great change. And in the most ingenious way the Key of the title is made to serve a triple purpose. There is an actual key, which is of importance in the crime; one of the characters writes a book of the same title, and the whole, ironical picture of so-called liberally-minded circles in St. Petersburg that was falling to pieces provides a key to much that to many people has remained irritatingly vague.

"WOMEN AND POLITICS," by the Duchess of Atholl, M.P., is a notable contribution to feminist literature. This is a peculiarly difficult type of book to write. It aims at providing a textbook of politics for women, and particularly for women who, while "keenly anxious to make good use of their citizenship," have had little time or opportunity for study. The fault of the book is that it is too diffuse, but when this has been said it must be conceded that the author has triumphed over the worst of her difficulties. She gets down to the level of the uneducated woman and contrives to convey to her the basic common-sense truths of politics without ever appearing to "condescend." Here are shrewd and homely, and yet in their way masterly, defences of the principle of private property against Socialism; of marriage against theories of companionate marriage; of capital against unfair taxation. Unfortunately the book does not lend itself to brief summary, but perhaps that is as well since more people may be led to read the original. The author makes a trenchant reply to some of Mr. Bernard Shaw's statements in "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism," and appears to convict him, on official evidence, of some remarkable mis-statements.