

... With ... BOOK and VERSE

By "John O'Dreams"

Jottings

"THE RUNNING FOOTMAN" is a story of the eighteenth century, when romance ran riot, and where men and women were decidedly more callous toward the sufferings of their employees than would be tolerated in these enlightened days. Its author, Mr. John Owen, may be relied upon to tell his tale with subtlety and appreciation of the less obvious beauties of life and love; and in this tale of John Deere, who took service with an arrogant aristocrat, there is a wealth of delightful detail. The life below stairs is done excellently well, even at that far-back period there existing bravely socialistic rebels within the social order, who loudly insisted that all men are equal. But it is upon the menial who runs before the great one's coach that interest centres—the gentle and chivalrous menial, with his hopeless, chivalric love for the governess, whose humble and true knight he becomes.

IN "Less Than the Dust" Mr. Joseph Stamper gives his readers the odyssey of a down-and-out. Nothing is extenuated, and the poverty that brings strange bedfellows, the horrors of a night in the doss-house, and the apathetic attitude of society are presented without fear or favour. All sorts and conditions of men and women are encountered in the hopeless trek of an out-of-work, with unexpected gestures of kindness from a criminal who has done time for manslaughter, a bit of human flotsam belonging to an alien race, and a frank and friendly daughter of joy, now too old to continue to follow her immemorial calling. The book gives a tragic picture of life in the raw, and raises many questions, or rather reasserts apparently insuperable difficulty of adjusting, with any degree of success, the industrial and economic problems at present confronting the world.

STILL another Wodehouse riot of uproarious adventure, compact of the usual popular mixture. In "If I Were You" sport a lovely manicurist, a Socialist barber, an earl's son who is the fiancé of the metallic daughter of a millionaire soapmaker, and the rest of the jovial crew. There is much play on mistaken identity and a skeleton in the family cupboard, we have the fine flower of the witty Wodehouse tradition, and the mixture can be recommended to those who do not tire of this particular brand of literary merry-go-round.

Our Fortnightly Book Review

MAPP AND LUCIA

By E. F. Benson

MR. BENSON'S literary facility loses nothing as the years pass, his wit retains its mordant quality, and his gift for hitting the nail on the head in characterisation is arresting as when he electrified the novel-reading world by the creation of "Dodo."

In his latest book, "Mapp and Lucia," the plot is slight, but there are excellent portraits of denizens of a small provincial town; and the struggle for social supremacy of the two female protagonists, their activities, strategic powers, and feline hypocrisy, are depicted with mirror-like fidelity and all the penetrative detachment of a skilled psychologist.

There is Emmeline Lucas, just emerging from eminently discreet and becoming year of widowhood. With an assured income, ability to play Bach and Mozart, Italian patter, lust for leadership and gifts in acquiring objective, she is an opponent more than equal to the predatory Elizabeth Mapp, who comes off second best in each encounter with the unscrupulous and attractive Lucia, a delightful humbug, full of feminine art and craft, subterfuge and dissimulation.

Quite masterly are the thumbnail portraits of the entourage of the leading lady. There is the carpet-knight Georgie, the best-dressed man in Tilling, with his toupet, his croquet, and his dread of matrimony; quaint Irene, possessed of a low but formidable weapon of mimicry; the clergyman who talks broad Scots but hails from Birmingham; and Mrs. Wyse, with her ostentatious M.B.E., her enormous Rolls Royce and sables in summer.

It is the chronicle of the doings of a small society, told in a most un-Cranfordian manner. The annual exhibition of the Art Society is thus described: "From the Treasurer came a study in still-life of a teacup, an orange and a wallflower; the Secretary sent a pastel portrait of the King of Italy, whom once in Rome she'd seen at a distance; quaint Irene had some sketches very strange and modern—a harmless but insane effort, entitled 'Tilling Church by Moonlight,' depicting a bright green pinnacle rising crookedly against a strip of purple sky and the rest of the canvas ebony black. There was also the back of someone with no clothes on lying on an emerald sofa; and, worst of all, there was 'Women Wrestlers,' Miss Mapp being forced to avert her eyes from these shameless athletes."

And surely we know that jumble sale, with its contributions of an old kettle, a boot-jack, a rug with a hole in it and one stair-rod; one prosperous lady disinterred a pair of tongs, perfect except that the claws twisted round when one tried to pick up a lump of coal and dropped it on the carpet; another delightful donation being a scuttle with a hole in it, through which coal first softly dribbled. We sympathise with Georgie, who disconsolately wandering round, comes across a large cardboard tray, holding miscellaneous objects with the label, "All 6d. each," and among the thimbles, photographs with damaged frames, and chipped china ornaments, discovers the water-colour sketch he had himself donated.

Mr. Benson is subtly satirical regarding the two Platonic lovers, modern prototypes of the two in "The Statue and the Bust." "It had always been supposed that he was the implacably chaste but devout lover of Lucia. But now that her year of mourning was over, there loomed in front of Georgie the awful fact that there was no earthly reason why he should not claim his reward for those years of devotion, and exchange his passionate celibacy for an even more passionate matrimony. It was an unnerving thought that before the summer was over he might have the right to tap at the door of communication and say, 'May I come in, darling?' The words would freeze on his tongue."

It is all wildly amusing, and the end sheer brilliant farce. By catastrophic war of the elements, the rival social aspirants are whirled from safety, on the waters of a flood, into the unknown. Tilling, outwardly mourning, is thrilled to the marrow by drama of the situation, and after decent interval of awaiting news of the lost ones, builds a cenotaph to their memory, holds impressive memorial service, and delightedly grasps unexpected bequests. In the midst of this chastened rejoicing, however, the wanderers return, still unreconciled, the story of the reactions of friend and foe being in the best comic tradition. It is delightful fooling, and a welcome contribution to the gospel of gaiety.

ALTHOUGH he admits playing editor, Major Wren would have us take "Sowing Glory" not as fiction but as the real memoirs of "Mary Ambree," an Englishwoman who joined the French Foreign Legion. Whether it be fact or fiction or a cunning mixture of both—and it is known that a woman once did manage to join the Legion with her twin brother—the book is good to read. Mary duly joins up with her pal, the disgraced Terence Hogan, and not only hears the most exciting stories from her comrades, but meets with exciting adventures herself. In other words, Mr. Wren is at his brightest and best.

MR. ANTHONY GIBBS has chosen in "The New Crusade" a subject that periodically crops up and never fails to cause a flutter in the conventional dovecots. Surely in a merry mood the author created Lord Surbiton, an altruistic Croesus, who dreams dreams of a race of supermen who, with their female mates, shall always be healthy and happy and nude. But his plans go awry, as is the way of plans the world over, and though his crusade is ultimately established it is at considerable material and spiritual cost. But money speaks, and after a time the leader, the excellent and courageous Dawk, has numberless disciples. We are introduced to the world in the very near future, where hundred-story skyscrapers rear themselves in Fleet Street, and London rollicks along in the wildest form. Mr. Gibbs's novel is broad burlesque, and excellent of its kind.

TWO decades ago everyone read "The Roadmender" and "The Grey Brethren," and now the complete works—a regrettably slim collection—of the author of those tender, thoughtful, wise sketches have been published in one volume. "Michael Fairless," to give Margaret Fairless Barber the pen-name she adopted and which became so beloved by a very large circle of readers, was a valiant worker for the maimed, the halt, and the blind, and known as the "Fighting Sister" of the London slums, where she literally fought a good fight in street brawls, in her endeavour to succour the perishing and oppressed. Only thirty-two when she died, her last years were spent in the enforced leisure of an invalid, and it was then that she found time to write those books, which have proved a solace and joy to thousands, in which were mirrored her brave spirit, artistic gifts, and mystical faith.