

VOL · IX

SEPTEMBER 1926

No · 33

THE AMERICAN MERCURY

A MONTHLY REVIEW

EDITED BY H · L · MENCKEN



50¢

FOR ONE COPY

\$5.00

BY THE YEAR

ALFRED · A · KNOFF · PUBLISHER

The American MERCURY

September 1926

BETWEEN WORLDS

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

THE Bishop of Valnères awakened with something of a shock to his unclerical circumstances. To be abroad in his nightgown was bad enough: but it seemed out of reason that, in such informal attire, he should be floating thus through a gray void, upborne by what appeared an unusually thick and soft and gaudily colored rug, and sharing its tenancy with this young woman.

"Can you by any chance inform me, madame," he inquired, with the courtesy for which he was justly famed, "what is the meaning of this exercise in the humorous; and what person has had the impudence to put me up here?"

"Do you not fret, poor Odo!" she replied. "It is only that you also, my dear, are dead at last."

And then the Bishop recognized her. Then he knew that, somehow, some praiseworthy wonder-working had conveyed him back again to the girl Ettarre whom he had loved in the fine unregenerate days of his youth. And for that instant nothing else whatever appeared to matter. For this adorable fair pagan seemed lovelier and even more desirable than he had been used to remember her about her witcheries in the palm-groves, and in her little green and lacquered room, at Marna: she was near to him: and age and all the sedative impairments of age had very

marvelously gone away from the good Bishop of Valnères.

Yet in another instant his handsome countenance was a bit vexed; and he looked not altogether happy as he sat upright upon the smallish gold- and salmon-colored cloud.

"Nevertheless," the Bishop said, "nevertheless, this is an illogical situation. I do recall now that I was suffering, very slightly, with indigestion last night. And at my age, of course— Yes, yes, all that was to be expected, and for me to have passed away in my sleep is natural enough. Yet this continued survival of my consciousness—howsoever pleasant and surprising be the result of that consciousness," he added, with a gallant inclination of his head toward the winsome love of his youth,— "is a very sad blow to science; it upsets all philosophy; and it is a trouble to my common-sense."

"My dearest," replied Ettarre—in that so well-remembered, grave voice which was to him the loveliest of all imaginable music,— "you are now quite done with such frivolities as common-sense and philosophy and science: and but for my fond intervention there would have remained for you, as I must tell you frankly, only the consolations of religion."

"Most charming Ettarre, my own heart's darling! let us not jest about professional

matters, not just at present, for everything seems very topsy-turvy here, and I am in no mood for sprightly sallies. So do you instead tell me whither this cloud is conveying us!"

The girl regarded him now with a humorous and, yet, a very tender sort of mockery. "Whither, you ask—with that nicety of diction which has so long characterized your public speaking,—is this cloud conveying us? Well, there one must distinguish! I only came for the ride. But you, my dear doomed Odo, are at this moment on your way to the heaven which you were used to promise to your parishioners: and, in fact, you may already see, just yonder, the amethyst ramparts of the holy city."

"This is surprising beyond words!" said Odo of Valnères. "Dear me, but this is terrible!"

And the Ettarre who in her mortal life had been the merriest of the witches of Marna replied, soberly enough: "You will be finding very few to agree with you yonder, my darling, where you will find, instead, all that quaint heaven of yours aflutter in honor of your arrival. For in the eloquent excesses of the fine career just ended you have converted many persons. Indeed, you have allured into eternal salvation—as the Archangel Oriphiel has officially announced in this morning's report—no less than one thousand and a hundred and seven souls. In consequence, the blessed everywhere are at this instant preparing to welcome home the strong champion of heaven, with sackbut and with psaltery and with the full resources of the celestial choir."

"Alas," said the good Bishop Odo, for the second time, "but this is truly terrible!"

And with that he thoughtfully rearranged his nightgown, he pulled up more neatly about his ankles his red flannel foot-warmers, and he fell into a moment's bewildered pondering. Nobody of his well-known modesty would have believed the total to run to four figures, but his eloquence and his lively flow of imagery had,

of course, at odd times, converted many persons into accepting the comforting assurances of religion. Nor could the Bishop honestly detect anything blameworthy in his action, even now, upon the part of a convinced materialist intent to face things as they actually were.

No: he had acted logically. The plight of the lower orders of mankind in the world which Odo of Valnères had now left behind him demanded just this faith which was, for a being of a peasant's or a shopkeeper's far from admirable nature, at once a narcotic and a beneficial restraint. An altruist would therefore dissuade the evilly inclined from the practise of all uncivic vices like murder and rapine and arson which, even when practiced upon an international scale and under the direct patronage of the Church, tended always to upset the comfort of society. And an altruist would also endeavor, to the untrammelled extent of his imaginative gifts, to sustain the cowardly and the feeble-minded, and the aged and the ill and the poverty-stricken, and all other persons pitiably afflicted by the normal workings of the laws of life and of human polity, with the appropriate sort of romances about an oncoming heritage which made their present transient discomforts, from any really considerate point of view, quite unimportant.

"The situation is perplexing," the good Bishop said aloud, "yet, even so, I stay convinced that if only I had been lying there would have been no flaw in my conduct."

But the charming girl who had now cuddled happily beside him, as though once more to be in touch with her dear Odo were all-sufficient to her faithful heart, said nothing, as yet.

However—Odo of Valnères went on with the outlines of his self-defence,—however, it was the intention which ought to count, in a universe where everybody made mistakes. He had quite honestly believed himself to be preaching beneficial nonsense to his little flock, because these

men and women in their uncomfortable and thwarted living had needed, to the best of his judgment, just the ever-present threat and the ever-present promise of true religious faith, to keep them sane or, for that matter, to keep them at all endurable associates. And he adhered, provisionally anyhow, to his belief that, in the world he had now quitted, religious faith was highly necessary to the well-being of the lower classes, and was even serviceable and comforting to the gentry as one got on in life. But to a well-thought-of Bishop, discarnate and adrift in space, clad only in his nightgown and his red flannel foot-warmers, and with a dead sorceress dozing at his side, it did appear a bit upsetting thus to find religious notions exceeding their justifiable arena, and pursuing him beyond the grave.

II

Upon reflection, though, the unreasonable-ness of this outcome for his long and honorable career was not its only troubling feature. For Odo of Valnères looked now toward the nearing huge bright wharf above which gleamed the portal of heaven. That entrance really was an enormous pearl, with a hole in it for you to go through, and above that hole, as he could now perceive, was carved the name Levi.

Odo of Valnères recalled his Scriptural studies; and, with augmenting uneasiness, he poked at the velvet-soft ribs of his companion upon the little gold-and-salmon-colored cloud. "Do you wake up, my darling Ettarre, and tell me if this place is much like the Biblical description?"

The lovely girl sat up obediently. "Just!" said the Ettarre who in her mortal life had been the merriest of the witches of Marna: and her slow meditative smile upon the less luscious lips of any other person would have seemed unfeeling.

"Ah, well, but, in any event, I make no doubt that the city has been modernized and has been kept abreast, so to speak, with progress?"

"In heaven there is no variableness nor any shadow of turning, as you should well know who used to be so fond of preaching from that text."

"Oh, my God!" said the good Bishop Odo, from mere force of habit; and the benevolence went out of his plump face.

For now, at last, contrition of the very sincerest sort had smitten him. He thought of his parishioners, of his misled, lost flock, all decent, civilized, well-meaning communicants, entrapped, just by his overfondness for rhetoric, into that fearful lair of multi-headed dragons and of all miscellaneous monstrosities. For these preposterous beasts, it seemed, were not mere figures of speech: there actually before him was one of the twelve pearls through which he had promised his little flock a glorious entry into heaven: and the Book of the Revelation of St. John the Divine was, in the teeth of all rational interpretation, turning out to be much worse than high-flown unintelligibility which you had to pretend to admire.

Inside that shining wall the hapless peasantry and the burghers, whom his oratory had betrayed, were now looked after by no benevolent Bishop, but were abandoned to the whims of unaccountable overlords with hair like wool and with feet made of brass, who spent their time in blowing trumpets, and in opening vials full of plague germs, and in affixing sealing-wax to the foreheads of the helpless dead: and his little flock were now the appalled associates of huge locusts with human heads, and of wild horses with the tails of serpents, and of calves with eyes inset in their posterior parts. Nor were the perplexing customs and the patchwork animal-life of this kingdom at all atoned for by enjoyable climatic conditions, because every moment or two there was—so near as the Bishop could recall his sacred studies—an earthquake or an uncommonly severe hailstorm, the sun turned black, or the moon red, or else the stars came tumbling loose like fruit from a shaken fig-tree; and seven thunders were intermittently

conversing, for the most part about indelicate topics.

And Odo of Valnères, he also, who was so wholly dependent upon peaceful and refined surroundings, would presently be imprisoned in this place, for no real fault, but just through his well-meant endeavors to make living more rational and more pleasant for his little flock. Already that infernal automatic cloud had moored itself beside the bright wharf of heaven. He and the sorceress had disembarked perforce, since there seemed no alternative. And now behind and below the Bishop was only an endless gray abyss; beneath him showed great gleaming slabs like yellowish and bluish glass; and before him loomed inexorably the gate carved out of a giant pearl.

"Come, come!" a somewhat desperate prelate said aloud, "but even now there must be some way of escape from the existence which I was used to promise, in my unthinking way, as a reward?"

"There is," Ettarre replied to him, very proudly and happily, after still another tiny yawn, "for against love nothing can prevail. Why, but do you not yet understand? I am permitted to tempt you. Upon a cloud, of course, one feels a trifle insecure. But here we touch firm jasper and lapis lazuli. And with such allurements as you have not yet, I do believe, my dear outrageous, wonderful, enormous darling, quite utterly forgotten the way of, I am going to preserve you, even now, from all sorts of celestial horrors."

"Eh, and is it possible, even at the last, for the well-doer to avoid his doom? Is there some other and more suitable place yet open, upon post-mortem repentance, to a well-thought-of Bishop?"

The dear heathen child said then, still with that very touching fondness of which he felt himself to be unworthy: "At the cost of just one, tiny, pleasant indiscretion, even now, my own sweetheart, you may return with me to the merry paradise of the pagans. And that is nothing like your old-fashioned kingdom of heaven, but in-

stead it is a democracy which lacks for no modern improvement in the way of culture and civilization."

Thereupon Ettarre began to speak of her present abode, in somewhat the opulent descriptive vein of an exceedingly young poet. And the good Bishop Odo, looking upon her with the old fondness and with unforgotten delight in her dear loveliness, was aware of that in the large and curiously glittering eyes of Ettarre which, he was certain, nobody in that dreadful Oriental phantasmagoria just ahead could ever understand with quite that sympathy which moved in him at this moment so rebelliously.

Ettarre, no doubt, was overcoloring some of her details: in fact, the little darling had always lied with much the unction of a funeral sermon. Even so, this adorable and cuddling witch—whom the scandal-mongers about Marna had been used to call a vampire, too,—was the one person whom Odo of Valnères had ever loved, in his fine unregenerate youth, with quite whole-hearted passion and with a variousness not ever utterly to be put out of mind. And for the rest, the Bishop could, he felt just now, be happy enough in rewarding the warm loyalty of his Ettarre among those cultured and broad-minded and intelligent circles which she described. . . .

There remained only to allow reasonably for that slight girlish habit of unveracity. . . .

Thus pensively did the Bishop begin to appraise the probabilities, what while from mere force of habit he made the sign of the cross, as he waited there, withholding his eyes for a moment from the strangely large and glittering eyes of his Ettarre, and looking downward, all through that rather lengthy moment in which he half-paternally caressed the soft and the so lovely little hand of the dear pagan love of his fine unregenerate youth, and she cuddled closer and yet closer to him and wriggled very deliciously in her candid and quite flattering affection.

III

Yet, at just this amiable season, the serenity of their reunion was overcast by the arrival of yet another cloud. It moored: and a child disembarked, a boy of seven or thereabouts, but newly dead and come alone through the gray void between earth and heaven; and this little ghost passed by them as the child now went uncertainly but meekly into the holy city.

Now also Odo of Valnères had raised his very generally admired eyes from the neighborhood of his red flannel foot-warmers, toward that huge and dazzling, perforated pearl. "You know," he observed, with somewhat more of gentleness than of any plain connection, "you know, I rather, as they put it, get on with children. My people are so flattering as to say I have a way with them. I could, I really do believe, have cheered that forlorn little fellow tremendously, with one of my simpler confirmation addresses, if we had travelled through that abyss together. In fact, a clergyman of real talents, and of my rather varied experience, could probably cheer every soul in yonder, in view of what must be the local average of cheerfulness—"

"No doubt, you could, my wonderful, kind-hearted, clever darling," Ettarre replied, a bit impatiently; "but now that fearful place, my precious, is a place with which you have no further least need to be bothering."

But Odo of Valnères was smiling with something of the enthusiast's fervor: then, for one instant only, he again looked downward, with the air of a man as yet perplexed and irresolute, and again he crossed himself, and he drew a deep breath which seemed to inform him through and through with unpersuadable resolution.

Gently he put aside the love of his youth: and, with that frank, fine air of manliness which had always graced his professional utterances, he spoke. "No, sweetheart. No: one of my cloth must not be wholly selfish, and at a pinch a well-thought-of

Bishop must choose for that which seems to him a more noble and a safer investment than is the happiness you promise me. You see, I had believed religion to be only a narcotic and a restraint for men's misery upon earth. I was wrong. I confess it, with humble contrition. And my heart is aglow, Ettarre, with no ignoble fervor, to discover that the profession to which I have devoted all my modest abilities—such as they are, my dear,—must always satisfy for the better-conducted of my fellow beings no merely temporal but an eternal requirement. Even after death, I now perceive, I am privileged to remain the guide and consoler of my flock—"

"Well, but, my darling, the poor dears are already saved beyond redemption: and so to me that sounds like nonsense."

"That is because you reason hastily, my pet. For yonder, inside that shining wall, my people need me as never before. More sorely now than in their mortal living they require the sentiment that some capable and tactful person mediates between them and the uncomfortably contiguous contriver of their surroundings. Now, as not ever in their merely earthly misery, they need the most eloquent assurances that these inconveniences are trivial and will by and by prove transient. They need, in this unsanitary, zoöplastic, explosive and decidedly unsettling place, as they did not need in the more urbane atmosphere which I was always careful to maintain in my diocese, to be sustained with salutary faith in the oncoming rewards for prudent and respectable conduct. So you perceive, my dearest, I could not honorably desert my little flock after having in some sense betrayed them into their present condition. All these strong arguments are passing through my mind, my darling, and they are reinforced by my firm conviction that the Ettarre whom I remember about her witcheries in the palm-groves and in a little green and lacquered room at Marna, did not use to have cloven feet like—shall I say?—a tender-eyed and very charming gazelle."

But now the dead Ettarre who in her mortal life had been the merriest of the witches of Marna, and the most delectable of Satan's traps, had drawn a little away from Odo of Valnères in uncontrollable sorrow and disappointment.

"You have," she stated, "and you always did have, Odo, a mean and suspicious nature, quite apart from being a long-winded, fat hypocrite. And you can talk from now to Doomsday if you want to, but I think that to make a cross like that, when I was doing my very best for your real comfort, was cheating!"

"*Noblesse oblige*," replied the good Bishop Odo, with that impressiveness which he invariably reserved for any remark a trifle deficient in meaning. Then he went slowly but unfalteringly toward the gate marked Levi.

Yet he looked back just once, through a mist of unshed, unepiscopal, and merely human tears, upon the grief of that delicious and so lovely Ettarre. Her distress over this final parting was becoming so passionate and extreme that it had turned the adorable child all black and scaly, and had set her to exhaling diversely colored flames. And Odo sighed to notice these deteriorations in her appearance, and in her deportment also, as his lost love assumed a regrettably dragonish shape and with many frantic lashings of her tail swept whooping down the abyss. After that, he removed his red flannel foot-warmers, as introductory of an undesirable chromatic note; he tidied his nightgown into the general effect of a surplice; and the Bishop of Valnères went on toward the gate, composedly.