

American

DECEMBER 25 CENTS

MERCURY

THEY BURIED ME ALIVE

by James Branch Cabell

High School Library
Nazareth, Pa

ADVICE TO GENERAL EISENHOWER

WHY EUROPE WON'T FIGHT

by David J. Dallin

HOT LICKS AND HIGHBALLS

by Eddie Condon

BUCKLEY VERSUS YALE

THEY BURIED ME ALIVE

James Branch Cabell

GOD AND SHAKESPEARE. At least, I suppose I do thank God for William Shakespeare, with an indefinite cordiality.

I am grateful for Shakespeare, in fine, somewhat as I nowadays render heavenward my uncertain, tentative thanks for an as yet unimpaired liver; and for the droll dearness of that peremptory person to whom, how all incredibly, I am now married; and for the beauty of moonlit nights; and for the continuance, in howsoever qualified a degree, of my sexual desires; and for the possibilities of English prose; and for the elations of alcohol; and for my memories of divers once amiable and adored, long-perished women; for the wistfulness of sunsets; for the savor of poached eggs; and for the so impressively multitudinous horde of my books, books which were not anywhere before I created them; and for yet a many other miscellaneous amenities of my current quiet living.

For about God, I find, I do not often think nowadays, either one

way or another, except only with this constant but vague sense of gratitude for His past and present favors, in the event of His indeed being somewhere upstairs.

I can recall, with an exceeding clearness, just how I used to think about Him during the earlier eighteen-eighties, as an elderly Jewish gentleman, addicted to wearing dressing-gowns, who after the Crucifixion had joined the Catholic Church, and later had become an Episcopalian.

WHY I WROTE BOOKS. I long ago, in common with my nearer and more candid relatives, gave up guessing at why I needed to write books, that problem which nowadays so very many of my reviewers also dismiss loftily, as being without any conceivable solution. I know only that since I was sixteen or thereabouts, I have had this wish to be writing; and that the indulgence of this wish has proved to me a singular pleasure.

In most cases I have desired to

see published that which I wrote; and as befitted my Scots ancestry, I have desired to be paid for my writing as much money as I could extort from its publishers, those not over prodigal accountants. These two desires, and especially the latter one, still seem to me comprehensible, nay, even rational.

Yet I beyond doubt did write so incredibly much without any special expectancy of its publication, during the first eighteen years which I devoted to failing at authorship; and I have been guilty of an intolerable amount of both verse and prose to the printing of which I upon no terms would ever have consented. Such conduct seems to me far from rational. I cannot explain it. I know only that I have enjoyed the interminable and finicky labor of doing so much writing, which later on I typed, and then retyped, with zest, even though I was planning, when once its vocabulary and its cadences and its sentence structures and its prose feet and its other verbal kickshaws had been tinkered with enough to content me, to destroy every line of it.

The main drawback to this pursuit of writing as a virtually sensuous form of self-indulgence, as a sort of drug-taking, so do I concede nowadays, is that it has prevented me from earning any considerable amount of money. During the last fifty years, I reflect, I (with my so wide and my so widely squan-

dered opportunities) might have far more thriftily appraised each current trend of literature — or at any rate, of reading matter — and I might have written so as to conform with the spring or the autumn vogue, or even with the mental declivities of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, perhaps, if only I had not found any such intelligent behavior to be, for my limited talents, a physical impossibility.

Always I have been able to write only that which at the time I desired to write, whether it were a legend or a short story or a bit of archaic verse or a one-act drama or a novel or a dirty limerick or a flagrant romance or a dialogue or a river's history or an essay or an intimate letter to some deceased personage or even a dry-as-dust genealogical book. If I attempted to write about anything else than what for the moment had snared my fancy, then almost instantly I found myself unable to write at all.

ON REVIEWS. As I have remarked in another place, whenever since 1920 I have published a book it has evoked always the same brace of reviews — one of which regretted that here was *Jurgen* all over again, whereas the other deplored that my latest literary indiscretion was by no means another *Jurgen*. Yet even these inveterate acquaintances do not often fail to comment upon my "style," as a sort of staple commod-

ity, or, so let us put it, as a verbarian Worcestershire Sauce which lends to everything its own distinctive and uniform, unvarying flavor, such as you may or may not like, but cannot mistake for anything else.

To this sole end (upon all such occasions do I reflect guiltily) have I adapted and blended one with another — in varying proportions, self-consciously and pharmaceutically, with a meticulous preciseness — the literary manner and the phrasing and the sentence building of scores upon scores of authors, selecting always those two or three or perhaps yet more writers who for my book's purpose seemed best imitable, to the sole end that these piddling labors should half-drug and content me, selfishly, in a cloistered privateness.

And nobody ever caught me at these nefarious, so multiform alchemies; or at least, nobody of large prominence has been at pains to expose me. The majority of virtuosi have continued to print commentaries — and for the most part, not uncivil commentaries, I dare boast — upon that staple commodity, my "style," that "style" which, developing with *The Eagle's Shadow* in 1904, has prevailed steadfastly and unchanged throughout some fifty books, yes, even down to *The Devil's Own Dear Son* in 1949, so should I infer.

Only, I don't infer anything of the sort. My deductions have ranged quite otherwhither, with an im-

penitent thankfulness, toward that time-wasting of which I enjoyed every moment.

IN DEFENSE OF HACK WRITERS. In the teeth of a half-century's unarguable and all-profitless hedonism, I dare not affect any high-minded indignation over the far more rational practice of so far "prostituting one's art" as to write, more or less candidly, that particular sort of balderdash which "the reading public," or which some special magazine editor, may at the instant be buying with avidity. I likewise would have followed this sane businesslike course, and with a laudable oftenness, I assure my rebuking conscience, if only I had ever been able to.

For nowadays (and it skills not what I may have thought yesterday), nowadays common-sense bids me perceive nothing at all unpraiseworthy in the manufacture of such sleazy and impermanent reading-matter, not any more than I would condemn a reporter upon the staff of my morning paper, not any more than I would raise a lament over the

This article marks the return of James Branch Cabell, distinguished author of Jurgen, to the pages of the MERCURY. A book review by Cabell appeared in the monumental first issue of Mencken's MERCURY. His frequent contributions created a great deal of public interest during the stormy period from 1924 to 1935.

manufacture of chewing gum or of contraceptives or of motor cars. A popular need is being supplied, harmlessly and with financial profit; that is all, so does common-sense assure me.

Nor does common-sense find it to the purpose, not nowadays, that the writer who is turning out such lucrative pishposh may be capable of writing with more dignity and more art and more urbaneness and more truth, and in brief, of contributing his or her quota by-and-by to that astounding hodgepodge which we describe as American literature. To be ranked as an American classic, along with James Fenimore Cooper and with John Greenleaf Whittier and with the James brothers (but not as a co-equal in ever-living legendry with Frank and Jesse James, of course) and with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and with Walt Whitman and with William Dean Howells and with Willa Cather — or perhaps even along with the Swedishly admired Mr. William Faulkner and Mrs. Pearl Buck — appears to be somewhat compromising, says common-sense.

And besides that (says charity), most writers need to consider their indebtedness to the landlord and to the local liquor store and to the local grocer and to a wife or so, in the form of overdue alimony, and to the local Collector of Internal Revenue, and to their yet other legal obligations in general, as befits a

good citizen, before they can find enough time in which to consider their indebtedness to an after all, remote and problematic and a less over-urgent posterity.

POSTERITY, COMMON-SENSE AND DREAMS. Nor of course has posterity ever done anything for their benefit — or for your benefit or for my benefit or for anybody's benefit — such as would establish an indebtedness. Here is a truism which reason tends to neglect, and most orators to defy. Common-sense assures us, however, there is no sane motive for writers to be bothering about posterity. We instead ought to profit, so does common-sense tell us, by observing the remunerative forthrightness of our better statesmen, who, without too much unseemly boasting as to their acumen, concede always the unimportance of posterity's verdict upon their babbled imbecilities and frank skulduggery — or for that matter, the unimportance of posterity's annihilation — as compared with the results of an oncoming election.

So common-sense tells us, I repeat; but I need to repeat also that I nowadays have come to esteem with a marked distrust the upshot of common-sense and of man's rationality and of human logic. I very much regard as being more vital our human dreams, our requisite endless illusions, which defy common-sense, and of some of these

I have spoken, alike in this book and in all my other books.

Yet I do not mean merely those so useful tarradiddles with which the prisoner in every human skull must bedrug his captivity. I refer, now, to those how far more noble fictions such as we have-all known; such as demolish the fetters of logic overnight; and such as, at least now and then, escort each of us away from his legal post office address into this or the other resplendent kingdom beyond common-sense. I mean, in a word, those high adventures which some of us at any rate are privileged to encounter during that superior one-third part of our living which is given over to sleep.

WHEN I NEEDED TO DIE.

One has Scriptural assurance that for whosoever survives three score and ten years all the remainder of his living is but labor and sorrow. Yet is it wisdom's part to recall that David, the son of Jesse, was not remarkable for complete truthfulness, either during the conduct of his homicides or throughout his hymn-making. And he spoke here, midcourse in his ninetieth psalm, I submit, with an extreme poetic license.

Because being rather older than is ordinary isn't, to my finding, no, not of necessity, quite so bad as all that comes to.

To the contrary, there is, almost always, I believe, a certain smugness

and a mild sense of individual achievement begotten by the knowledge of having outlived one's seventieth year. I have observed its parade by any number of septuagenarians. Yet, as concerns myself (whom I confess herewith to be my leading theme hereinafter), I at least was not overconscious of this small vanity upon the most unhappy birthday of my life, when I came to my Davidicly permissible three score and ten an exact two weeks after those so wholly dear imperfections which for so long a while, and which alone, had made living worthy of endurance — because it was thus that the grim outcome then seemed to me, howsoever transiently — had been buried in Emmanuel churchyard. I preferred not to go on living after the death of my first wife.

Howsoever transiently, do you let me repeat. Because by-and-by, very gradually, during the gray months which followed, why, but then as I awakened from the deeper stupors of misery and of solitude, I appeared, somehow, to have entered into a new atmosphere of acquiescence with what, at this season, I took to be life's over plainly revealed, naked and brutal ruthlessness. Life had hurt me, I felt, to the utmost extent of life's malignity. And so, all further misfortunes must, by comparison, become trivial. Whatever might happen to me henceforward could not, not really, matter.

Which was far from logic, of course; it was an emotional response to my entire anguish. And yet (as I noted with some interest), yet I found this cast of mind to be alike a tonic and a narcotic throughout that upset and bereft and bewildered period during which I attempted to confront unaided, but how very futilely, an existence which the not ever tiring, all-loving woman — whose beloved body, once as familiar to me as my own body, now lay remote and motionless and corrupting in Emmanuel churchyard — could not any longer keep cheery and easeful, or superintend.

AFTER ONE HAS PASSED SEVENTY. Today — now that I have regained love, along with a mild share of interest in my fellow creatures, and have yet another highly competent and most dear person born under practical-minded Virgo in complete charge of me and of all my doings — well, but today (with a continuing sense of impersonal detachment from my own merely personal emotions, such as every author acquires by-and-by), today I observe that this half-stunned acquiescence with life, as human life actually if a bit regrettably is, has become alike more genial and a vast deal more comprehensive.

For I lack, so do I reflect, no physical comfort. Unopulently I possess — so far as runs my knowledge — virtually all that for which, after

all, at my belated stage of existence, any rational derelict could well ask; and with life, in consequence, I today am satisfied, both tolerably and tolerantly, without any large fervor perhaps but without any tinge of resentment. I have nothing to complain of, I concede, handsomely, the conditions of human life being what they are for each and for all of us when once we have risked being born.

And yet I feel, I feel in some measure, that I am thus nobly broadminded because whatever may happen, or what currently is happening, whether to oneself or to others, and whatsoever is reported to have happened before the mendacities of today's morning paper, they also, had become a part of human history, does not seem so very much to matter, not with their former acute profoundness, after one has passed seventy, and when one of necessity has put aside man's customary delusions concerning tomorrow's being a new and more glorious day.

Because with one's own tomorrow, and with its imminence, one is but too familiar. And over the future of all other persons likewise, so one now knows, one has not any control. Meanwhile (and yet for no long while) a gentleman will attempt to meet the future with civility.

Thus at any rate does the affair appear to me now that Time has

remarked premonitorily but, even so, with a sufficing gentleness — “Quiet, please.”

THE VIRTUE OF EGOTISM. I become, it may be your criticism, not wholly unegoistic. Yet in this same paragraph must I exhort the rational to squander no unlimited faith upon any writer when once he deviates from egotism. About himself he, just possibly, may, should he so elect and strive earnestly, be telling you the truth. That the odds are strongly against this off-chance, one need hardly point out, in the light of every human being's desire for self-justification, or for self-glorifying rather, which tends always to embellish an attempt at self-portraiture. Still, the chance does exist.

But when a writer touches upon themes other than himself and his own endurances, his own joys, but above all, his own personal delusions, then that chance expires. He henceforward must write as to affairs about which perforce he stays dubiously informed.

For he, like everyone of us, he too, is serving his life sentence inside the cell which we term a skull. He knows only that which happens inside it. His confinement there may be enlivened, it is questionless, by as many as five radios — which it is our custom, severally, to call sight, or hearing, or touch, or odor, or taste — and the one or the other of

them almost constantly fetches in reports as to what is going on outside. Yet would it be over-optimism to fancy that these news announcements all reach the attendant prisoner unmarred by atmospheric conditions, or even that they stay uninfluenced by the whims of their unknown sponsor, who is under no constraint to be reporting the truth.

About other persons than himself, in fine, nobody knows anything whatever with assurance. Here is a stark truism from which I deduce that through egotism alone may any writer hope to attain veracity or ever to be esteemed credible. And for this reason, among yet other reasons, do I (at least hereabouts, at this present writing) consider egotism to be alike an aesthetic virtue and, in mere logic, a moral obligation which is laid upon all persons who desire to avoid repeating tarradiddles.

THE CEMETERY OF MY SCRAPBOOKS. Remarkably few persons appear to read any of my books, nowadays. I cannot wonder reasonably over this omission, in view of the fact that I myself do not ever open these books by choice, but only when I have need to look up some passage or another (as I have been doing lately), in connection with the glad taskwork of writing still another book. Yet do I find it perceptible — here to riot in understatement — that I, who was once

a leading personage in and about those scanty playgrounds of human interest which we nickname literature, seem now to have become, for all practical results, unheard-of thereabouts.

To the youthful, or for that matter to the middle-aged, flamboyant virtuosi of literature who at this present instant are discussing the transcendent merits of Francis X. Flubberdub and Gideon Gibberish and Natalie Babu English, as well as of Laura Caconym Nugatory (and who will be joined to other idols long before this is published), my name, and beyond doubt my writings, I infer to be unknown, yes, even by spruce judges who stay always so far too scrupulous-minded to deny being omniscient. Otherwhere, a bare handful of senile dodderers do seem to recall, just here and there, infrequently and with languor, that once upon a time, a most ancient time, somebody of my name wrote a very much over-rated something or other which was called *Jurgen*. Such must, I take it, be regarded as the extent of my repute, alike among the stentorian intelligentsia and as concerns "the reading public" at large, nowadays.

And to the bleakly rational this must appear a sad comedown for any writer who in a majority of our newspapers' book pages and literary supplements, in that ancient time, was spoken of with fervor, upon every Sunday morning, almost as

often as Jehovah. He was honored by our then current virtuosi as a supremely gifted prose artist; as an unequalled satirist; and as an American Anatole France, as well as an American Walter Pater, an American Lucian, an American Arthur Machen, an American Congreve, an American Oscar Wilde, and an American Swift, so nearly as I can now recollect his varied prototypes. He was acclaimed, here to repeat my pet eulogy, as an ideational oriflamme in the battle of the nineteen-twenties against puritanism; and he was likened to I forget precisely what other large inaccuracies.

I forget because I do not haunt the cemetery of my scrapbooks, revisiting it only when a need arises to verify some date or some far-off happening. But with a suitable gravity, I can recall, even nowadays, that all these tributes and judicious analogues and ecstatic paeans are to be found in this cemetery entombed forever.

MY NATIVE STATE. With the pride natural to a Virginian, I recall also that by this impostor my native state was never hoodwinked. His books were not purchased in Virginia; they were not talked about except, just in passing, shruggingly; nor at all often were they even borrowed gratis from his birthplace, which, through time's purification, had been converted alike into a free public library and a shrine to the cul-

tural achievements of Major James H. Dooley in the stock market and the enlargement of railways.

Not ever was this ephemera spoken of in the same breath as were the ingenious Mr. So-and-So and the scholarly Dr. Somebody-or-Other, or as were the all-gifted Mrs. What's-Her-Name and the perhaps yet more widely famous Miss Thingumbob, whensoever their ever-living genius was acclaimed by the exiguous yet exigent "reading public" of Virginia. Because all these were Virginian writers in whom Virginia might take pride. They wrote real fine books, so you had seen in the *Times-Dispatch*, only last Sunday; and Miller & Rhoads (which at this period was Richmond's largest department store) was still selling a whole lot of their books, after having given them an autographing tea-party, with just heaps and heaps of people at it. Thus quoth all Richmond admirably.

But that pretentious lewd humbug, that midnight assassin, that no doubt homosexual halfwit, who did not even have sense enough to know that — alike in novels and in children's stories and in biographies and in editorials — a Virginian must write always about the beauty and the chivalry and the peerless moral standards and all the yet other outstanding features of Virginia in fiction, why, but he most properly was ignored throughout our fair com-

monwealth, even from Lee County to Accomack County, except only when in Richmond the elite for-gathered to discuss, in happy whispers, the turpitudes of his how very far from private life. Because he was just like all the Cabell men, only much more so, and in more directions.

Outside Virginia, however — so may I dare assure a generation who never heard of me — my books were quite highly thought of, here and there, throughout a full decade. In fact, my books became the theme of that which exaggeration might term a nation-wide controversy during this period. And today, to so much of ecstasy and of clangor and of denouncings and of high disputation, Time has whispered — "Quiet, please."

THE TRAVAILS OF AUTHORSHIP. Well, but today, in my unknownness, I find I do not especially regret, or rather, I do not desiderate, as we niminy-piminy "styl-ists" might phrase it, that put-by pre-eminence into which I was catapulted by accident. Its one pleasing personal feature, to my remembrance, was the attendant plumpness of my royalty statements; and even that led me into incessant trouble with various Internal Revenue Agents, who do not esteem me an alluring quarry today. Otherwise, I found that being a famous writer interfered too much, and far too

often, with the pursuit of writing, with my main interest in life.

Because always and continuously my professed idolaters were attempting to trap me into doing something dislikable and laborious, such as autographing a few dozen first editions (each with an apt individual inscription) or answering the same inane questions over and yet over again, such questions as I have indicated in *Special Delivery* (if ever, through any out of the way chance, you have heard of *Special Delivery*), when upon Saturday after Saturday I replied to my postulants' so repetitious letters; or else into participating in varied forms of futile time-wasting, such as fornication with some hitherto unknown gentlewoman whose husband did not understand her, or revising a nitwit's typescript, or sharing "strange pleasures" with Wilde-minded young men, or addressing book fairs and women's clubs. Upon one occasion, as I must still recall with an incredulous shudder, I was invited to speak before a Chamber of Commerce.

I, who was born taciturn, was beset throughout my heyday by interlocutors desirous, babblingly, to find out whether I wrote in the morning or in the evening; what I thought about death and my ideal woman and capitalism and Calvin

Coolidge; whether my (non-existent) secretary opened all my letters; what would be the title of my next book; and who, in my opinion, was the most promising of our younger Southern writers. Moreover, I, who have always viewed my own personal appearance with a rational disfavor, was exposed over frequently to the cruel candors of photographers and of portrait painters.

And finally, I, who ever since I quitted my last diapers had been reared alike to be thrifty and considerate of all persons, including myself, I was faced hourly by the choice between submitting to these tedious evils, along with yet many other requirements no less distasteful, or else of disregarding my own personal bank account (along with my publishers' very faint faith in my common-sense) and the certainty of being adjudged, as my nearer friends among the intelligentsia of Virginia put it, just simply too stuck-up and too swell-headed for anybody to have any least patience with.

For throughout America these varied fawnings upon "publicity" were, even in my remote heyday, as they continue to be, a recognized branch of authorship. From every well-known writer such antics are not requested; they instead are demanded as a matter of course.