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v. 37, no. 445
J2 1936
c. 2

January

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be. It is in the power of collateral factors to stand Mr. Chase's analysis on end, deflate Mr. Lippmann's vaticanism to nullity, make my own most trusted expectations ridiculous, and even perhaps—if one can imagine such sacrilege—eviscerate the whole Marxist-Leninist prognosis. Moreover, no one now knows or can know what those factors are, or if any such exist, or whether or when they will be released, or what will release them. Therefore reading these books need give no one the blues. Their tone of certainty, their more or less gentle dogmatism about the inevitable, throws the reader back at once upon the reassuring testimony of experience that the inevitable seldom, almost never, actually happens, and his spirits rise accordingly.



Romance and the Novel

BY BRANCH CABELL

MISTRESS OF MISTRESSES, by E. R. Eddison. \$3.50. 5¾ x 8¾; 463 pp. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.

THIS book I esteem to be a romance composed by a very gifted dramatic poet who writes here, as he writes habitually, in prose. It will find, I am certain, no large number of readers. And it prompts me in this place to urge a distinction through not making which the most of us are beguiled into prattling considerable nonsense when we discuss fiction.

For *Mistress of Mistresses*, as I have said, is a romance. Now, in approaching fiction it is needful, I would suggest, to distinguish between the romance and the novel. Does the proposal seem trite? Then your verdict (as I can but very gently assure you, O reader more or less gentle) is but a by-product of ignorance. You can-

not possibly know what I am talking about, for the distinction which I suggest has not ever yet been put into practice. None the less does it seem to me the part of rationality to distinguish with precision between the novel and the romance. I take it that a novel is a fictitious narrative, by ordinary in prose, aiming to present the life of human beings among circumstances such as actually exist or else once existed. And a romance is a fictitious narrative, either in prose or in verse, aiming to present the life of human beings in a world contrived by the author of that narrative.

The distinction appears obvious: beyond question, it is as simple as it is fundamental. Yet this distinction has not been faithfully observed by literary critics or—so far as that goes—by authors. Any number of quite so-so romance writers have died under the delusion that they, who had not ever produced a novel, had given over a reasonably long lifetime to the writing of novels. To the other side, one grieves to think of how many dozens upon dozens of similarly so-so reviewers, at this very instant, must be dismissing this or the other lately-published romance as a negligible novel so deeply tainted with frivolousness (with the frivolousness, let us say, of Aeschylus or of Dante) as to present no grave consideration of lower-class life in the more uncourtly corners of America—to do which, as every properly cultured American well knows, is the sole end of ponderable fiction. So does this widespread confusion of two differing forms of art force me here to suggest that all fiction should be divided, rigorously, into two classes: the fiction of the novelist, who, almost always in prose, reproduces human life as it is, or as it has been lived in some actual era; and the fiction of the romancer, who, whether it

be in prose or in verse, reproduces human life in a cosmos invented—or, to speak more strictly, “compiled”, or it may be merely “rearranged”—by the author of this fiction. In other words, the affair of the novelist is to copy human life; and of the romancer to create for human life conditions among which (to his finding, at all events) human life may be conducted more satisfactorily from his art’s standpoint. In brief, it is the business of the novelist to copy, just as it is the business of the romancer to create, the surroundings among which it is the business of both to place human beings. Thus is the romancer’s method, all-comprehensively, the method of Homer and Shakespeare, of Walter Scott and the elder Dumas, and as I might add likewise, of Ouida and of Shelley and of Conan Doyle and of Milton.

For this distinction applies, as I have said, “to all fiction”. Every avowed poet of any fair consequence has been a romancer who, with more or less frankness, has labored to place human beings among surroundings which were not ever familiar to mankind in any era, but among which human beings might live more adequately, more movingly, and more interestingly, from his art’s high and unhuman standpoint. In passing, we touch here, it may be, the reason of that unexplained homage, or in any case of that lip-service, which is paid to poetry. We tend, I believe, to assume that a poet labors in the most lofty fields of literature, not, I submit, because his medium is the most nearly perfect (since, indeed, verse is quite obviously not anything of the sort), but because the poet’s attempt—as we feel, if but cloudily—is creative.

Toward no true novelist can we harbor this feeling, this shadow of awe. The copyist, it matters not what he copies,

nor how noteworthy may be his original—even though his copying embrace all mortal life, in its highest aspirations, its most serviceable lies, its beauty, its hopeless heroisms, its carnalities, and its hemorrhoids—remains none the less a copyist. His work may be useful, edifying, entertaining, lovely, or what you will; one virtue alone it may not display: it is not creative. He pursues an art which, if he respects it with sincerity, will at no time pretend to create anything. Through the attempt it can but become perjury; for it is an art which, in its honest and most satisfying exercise, remains sturdily reportorial, as indeed its name assures you. So the best novelist brings to us *des nouvelles*, the “news”, unaffectedly, very well content to be a journalist who is about the beneficent task of increasing our knowledge.

But the poet—the *poietes*, the “maker”—when his toil prospers, then makes for us a new world, evoking the implied claim upon reverence such as we grant always to the divine task of creation. And to do that is the attempt, still, of the “maker” when he far more ambitiously elects to write, not in verse, but in the more variously-faceted, the less fettered, the more copious, the more complex, and the more highly-civilized medium of prose. That is my point in this place. In brief, he continues actually to create—as here, in *Mistress of Mistresses*, Mr. Eddison has created most liberally. To serve the needs of his story the author has, indeed, created an entire planet, diversified with its own nations, its own geography, its own uninterrestrial laws of nature, and its own special workaday atmosphere of pure magic. The effect is gigantic; it is beautiful and wholly glorious: but with life, as men know it in Brooklyn or South Dakota, this book has no concern; and the

demands laid on the reader are, in consequence, huge. I do not think, in fact, that its right audience has trafficked with book dealers, to a remunerative extent, since the contemporaries of Shakespeare went dustward; for here is the sort of romance which one can just dimly imagine Fletcher and Webster to have composed in collaboration, with the more learned pen of Ben Jonson revising their proof sheets judiciously.

Yes: a large number of Jacobean would have delighted in this chronicle of strange happenings in the principalities of King Mezentius (the aforesaid tyrant of Fingiswold, of Meszria, and of Rerek) after the death of this formidable monarch in his island fortress of Sestola. But our modern minds remain rather more parochial: and it follows that for us to encounter any such romance among today's publications seems not unlike finding a unicorn stabled in a public garage. One does not know quite what to make of the phenomenon; and inclines therefore to sidle away from it unobtrusively.

It follows likewise that I say to you only: for all lovers of literature's best things I would recommend a sampling of *Mistress of Mistresses*; and I recommend also a frank harking to one's own inclinations after finishing, let us say, some twenty pages of it. If you be fitted to appreciate this book, you will then need no persuader to read on to its end; nor will any cataclysm less forthright than a tornado be likely to put a stop to your reading. If the tale merely bores you, then should you by all means lay it aside, in favor of something more epoch-making and rather more serious, by the standards of this week's advertising.

For, as I have admitted, *Mistress of Mistresses* is well qualified to bore the better-class patron of book clubs and of lend-

ing libraries, that docile art critic who has been so far broken in spirit by his high school education as to be capable of reading the dull "photographic" novels which he demonstrably does read, by thousands upon thousands of copies every year, with a conscience glowingly plauditory, and even with a bland sense of acquiring culture. So if you too (O reader more or less gentle) prefer to avoid the unpractical, star-spurning jaunts of imagination, here are *hors d'oeuvres* not for your palate. If you be blessed likewise with that delusion which has made of current American literature an incredibly debased form of journalism—I mean, of course, the delusion that the contemporaneous happening, supremely and only, is of importance—then *Mistress of Mistresses* must perforce seem to you to be nonsense. Only if you be afflicted with more noble endowments, and with inhibitions less democratic, may you—it is at least possible—perceive this book to be the work of a very greatly gifted dramatic poet who is writing, in his own brightly-colored barbaric prose, a strange and lonely masterpiece of creativeness.



The Ideal Wife of a Genius

BY WILLIAM MCFEE

JOSEPH CONRAD AND HIS CIRCLE,
by Jessie Conrad. \$3.75. 6¼ x 9½; 279 pp.
New York: E. P. Dutton and Co.

THE circumstances of Joseph Conrad's life and the nature of his personality have combined to create a romantic legend; for the man was, in every sense of the word, a legendary character, even during his own lifetime. It has become impossible, apparently, ever to learn the