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Wall Street's Control of Railroad Labor Policy

by Frank P. Walsh

When Will Work Begin Again?

by Scott Nearing

Beauty and Wizardry

by James Branch Cabell

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Books

Beauty and Wizardry

Messer Marco Polo. By Donn Byrne. The Century Company. \$1.25.

NOT often does one sustain the sense of having long awaited just the book which time and chance and a kindred desire in another's being have combined to produce at last, and to make at last a vended commodity as easy now to come by as blotting-paper or bad whiskey. I have this sense about "Messer Marco Polo." It is, to me, the most delightful of surprises, a bit of unanticipated flotsam washed up from the wide sunless sea of "realism." Nobody, I think, could possibly have looked for its coming through the auctorial welter—whose susurrus is after all but a more literate vast "Ain't it awful, Mabel"—among those fretful waves of indignation over the dreariness of small-town life and the loneliness of the artist in this unappreciative country, and over how terribly our army swore in Flanders, and over the venality of our press and pulpit and every other institution, and (lonely lisper of good yet to come) over the imminence of several more stupendous wars that will wipe out us and all our sordid existence. And yet through these gray floods of portentous information (here neatly to round off my simile) comes floating this carved spar of loveliness with absolutely startling irrelevance.

That "Messer Marco Polo" should have "happened" at this precise moment seems to me a small miracle so pleasure-giving that I hastily waive all consideration as to the book's ultimate value. I only know that I have joyed in the reading of it, somewhat as the partially starved might rejoice in an unexpected windfall of savory food, without any need to deliberate the viands' durability.

None the less does the tale appear, some two weeks after that first keen greedy gulping of its delights, and after a more leisured second reading, a very fine and beautiful strange book. It is, to summarize, the tale of how young Marco Polo, loitering through youth's amiable iniquities in thirteenth-century Venice, became enamored, through report, of the Khan of Tartary's daughter, and of his adventuring as he crossed Asia to win to her. It is, in brief, the old high tale of Geoffrey Rudel and his Far Princess, adorned with vivid curious ornament, and brought to a denouement no less sad but more soul-contenting.

Yet the essential thing about this book is that it is prodigal in the transforming magic which—heaven knows, in how few books—quite incommunicably lends romantic beauty to this or that not necessarily unusual or fertile theme, somewhat as sunset tinges the wooded and the barren mountain with equal glamor. Mr. Byrne is a practitioner, in fine, of that rare and unteachable wizardry without which one writes only words, and without which the most carefully made sentences tend but to bury one another like neat undertakers.

Technically, though, the construction of "Messer Marco Polo" is to a novelist peculiarly interesting. To Mr. Byrne, in Westchester, N. Y., comes the old Irishman Malachi Campbell of the Long Glen; and it is the Celt who tells of what Cataia seemed to Marco Polo the Venetian in a far golden yesterday. So then does Mr. Byrne set about his magicking, to lure you from the prosaic to the wonderful, and thence to the more wonderful, at last to leave you contentedly cuddled in the lap of the incredible. He raises for you, to begin, the milieu of his Westchester—"the late winter grass, spare, scrofulous, the jerry-built bungalows, the lines of uncomely linen, the blatant advertising boards." It is in, seen through, and continuously colored by, this almost Gopher Prairean atmosphere that Malachi evokes the gleaming world of tall Dermot and Granye of the Bright Breasts and amorous fierce Maeve and Cuchulain in whose heroic looks were love and fire—and evokes thereafter, seen as if beyond and colored by the glow of this Celtic wonderland, not merely the strange opulent sleek life of medieval Venice, "that

for riches and treasures was the wonder of the world," but past even that, illuminate and tinged by all, the Venetian's notion of the inscrutable, good-tempered, shining evil East. So near as I can word it, then, this tale is a fantastic and gracious pageant, saddened tenderly by the evanescence of its beauty, seen through three opalescent veils: or rather, what happens—as we upon reflection prefer to have had it happen—in the Chinese jasmine garden by the Lake of Cranes, is viewed through a rose-tinted gauze of medieval fancies seen through thin aureate Celtic mists observed through the uncolored but glazing window-panes of a Westchester, N. Y., drawing-room. I am not sure this curious tour de force was worth performing, but I am unshakably convinced that Mr. Byrne "brings it off" to a nicety.

And it is all told, too, in words that are "warm and colored," and are so adroitly marshaled as to drive at least one reader to the confessional. I confess, then, to being uncritically seduced by the fact that Mr. Byrne, without apparent effort or shame, writes perfectly of beautiful happenings and seems no whit afraid of elaborated diction. I confess to thinking that many of the episodes, perhaps most notably the efforts of Marco Polo to convert to Christianity the pagan girl who while he talks is merely conscious of the circumstance that she loves the talker, have a queer and heart-wringing loveliness that is well-nigh intolerable. I confess to finding the brief chapter that bridges seventeen years and winds up the story to "the true rhythm of life" a small masterpiece of wisdom and art. I confess, in fine, to have been so agreeably swept off my feet by this book that I indite every word of its encomium with a teasing faint suspicion that I am almost certainly writing high-pitched nonsense which I shall some day reread with embarrassment.

At all events, while the first rapture lasts, I must profess that I most cordially admire this story, and seem to find no praise too exquisite. You may derive from it a more temperate pleasure, you may not even like "this pseudo-Celtic stuff," and in fact, the tale can hardly appeal to any considerable audience just now, since it "exposes" and "arraigns" nothing whatever. With that I have no concern: it is merely my business to tell you that to my finding "Messer Marco Polo" is a very magically beautiful book.

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

It Was a Glorious Victory

What Really Happened at Paris. By Edward Mandell House and Charles Seymour. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$4.50.

The Fruits of Victory. By Norman Angell. The Century Company. \$3.

THERE is a certain superficial attraction in the popular contention that the way to peace is to stop talking about responsibility for the war and the Treaty of Versailles. But we cannot start afresh merely by ceasing to talk about the past. If the Treaty of Versailles was unjust, the plea of the victors to everybody to take a fresh start is a good deal like the exhortation of a successful thief that by-gones should be allowed to be by-gones. The experience of the last few months has made it quite clear that the plainest dictates of self-interest cannot bring about wise economic adjustments of the German indemnity so long as the conviction prevails that Germany was solely responsible for the war and that the peace of Versailles, while not the Magna Carta of the millennium, was at least just in the punishment it meted out to the enemies of mankind. If therefore we are to plan the future we cannot postpone for future research a careful examination of the past. Hence the importance of such a book as "What Really Happened at Paris." The book is a compilation of the addresses of fifteen experts, originally delivered in Philadelphia under the auspices of the *Public Ledger*. These addresses have been edited and published with a cautious foreword by Colonel House.

The title is somewhat misleading, as the addresses are not so much gossipy accounts of happenings at Paris as considera-