

# Mr. Cabell on Turtle Meat and Broomsticks

By JAMES BRANCH CABELL.

**I**N writing *From a Southern Porch* Dorothy Scarborough has produced a book which calls for cordial gratitude. No doubt it would be possible to find fault with the volume on divers counts, since perfection rarely graces the outcome of human endeavor, even upon paper. A big deterrent, though, from any such fair minded criticising is the fact that here the really appreciative reader lays down the finished book in the mood of one who leaves the porch of a particularly engaging hostess, and is magnanimously unwilling to consider the contingency of any fault finding anywhere with his recent entertainment.

With so much candor must the present reviewer avoid the rôle of devil's advocate, and indeed the rôle of an impartial judge, by confessing he has so utterly enjoyed Miss Scarborough's book that he is loth to concede it has any fault except the awkward defect of being indescribable.

For, although it would be a pleasure, and seems in fact a sort of duty, to indicate to readers of *Books and the Book World* the precise abracadabra of this volume's charming, one is at outset tripped up by the difficulty of cataloging *From a Southern Porch*. The book is not exactly a series of essays nor of nature studies, nor is it, to the foot of the letter, "impressionism" or comedy or folk lore. You might call it a love story without being far wrong, but with equal justice might you appraise it as a study in the supernatural, or for that matter, as a collection of verse, or as satire, or (more cruelly and obtusely) as nonsense. Moreover, there is intermingled, beyond question, some stark "realistic" tragedy, as in the episode of the hapless traveller who lost his trousers out of the car window.

Upon the whole then it appears the part of wisdom to fall back upon the author's own words: "The colored people of Virginia have a saying that all kinds of meat are to be found in the turtle's flesh. This volume might be considered mock turtle's meat, for it is a joyous irresponsi-

ble jumble of things I like. It has written itself, breaking all the laws I know of unity, coherence and continuity."

## II.

Avocationally Miss Scarborough has been "a poreher—that is, one who lives on a porch." And she has "porched in the South, where the porch is the true centre of the home, around which life flows on gently and graciously, with an open reserve, a charming candor."

Far more important, though, is the fact that she has "porched" with really percipient senses actually employed, since the full exercise of all five wits, in any place, reveals a world unknown to myopic, sluggish brained and custom drugged humanity. Living, as it happened, on a Virginian porch, Miss Scarborough has perceived what in and from the vistas of this porch was to be gleaned of illogic and prettiness and humor, and has with honesty recorded her perceptions.

Any other milieu, one fancies, would have proved quite as fruitful. It merely chanced to be the Porch that Miss Scarborough has described, with a thoroughness which might be termed encyclopædic were it less richly shot with such levities as no imagining can well conjoin with a tome.

Thus is first rendered the history and main geographical features of the Porch, with due consideration of back porches, gardens, roadways, arbors, fields and lakes and all other such contiguous provinces. Thereafter is discussed seriatim the fauna, entomology, reptilia, ornithology and flora of the Porch. Turning thence to anthropology, Miss Scarborough considers the inhabitants, both aboriginal and migrative, of the Porch, with appropriate disquisitions as to their industries and racial peculiarities and customs. Nor is the local mythology slighted, since the book thereafter passes to depicting the existence after death of these inhabitants, in a chapter glitteringly characteristic of the author of *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*.

Capt. Lemuel Gulliver, in short, could not with a more grave exactitude describe the kingdom of Lilliput; and *From a*

*Southern Porch* is a preposterously delightful volume.

The Porch thus furnishes the book's nominal theme, and the needful trellis to support bright phrases and colorful fancies the while that much graceful writing rambles over and about the Porch with something like the irresponsibility and glow of a flowering vine. Dorothy Scarborough, self-confessedly, has attended "a word party, given by several famous lexicographers, to which all the words were bidden"; the entertainment, indeed, is described in considerable detail; and readers pleasurably deduce that Miss Scarborough persuaded a number of the more attractive guests to visit her and frolic about the Porch.

## III.

So does Miss Scarborough discourse to you of the Porch very much as Lamb discoursed of Old China and Clainne Sweeps, and Montaigne of Coaches and Cripples. The theme does not matter. Were it not porches, but partridges or paleography or penpoints, say, these topics would serve equally well to reveal not alone the writer's art but the writer's arch and gracious and caustic personality.

That says all. Since *From a Southern Porch* is not a book to be savored piecemeal you need not apprehend here to be tantalized with snips and gobbets of "selections."

Rather does it appear expedient to emphasize a trio of facts. First, that the right minded, upon reading this book, will fall cordially to liking the author as a person. Second, that here is a woman who, in the happy ancient phrase, can write beautifully about a broomstick. And third—if one may here quote Pater not quite paternally—that Miss Scarborough has, in this inconsequential ollapodrida, very delightfully disclosed herself to be "a humorist; in the old fashioned sense of the term, to whom all the world is a spectacle in which nothing is really alien to her, who has hardly a sense of the distinction between great and little among things that are at all, and whose half pitying, half amused sympathy is called out especially by the seemingly small interests and traits of character in the things or the people around her."