

CERTAIN STORIES OF SOPHISTICATION

By Parker Tyler

WHEN Mr. Norman Douglas wrote "South Wind" fifteen years ago, he created a norm for a certain genre of sophisticated novel. The scene was an island made notorious by the profligate, Tiberius, and the resident colony echoed that tyrant's excesses and obliquities with a frailty which mocked them; nevertheless the more typical members among the inhabitants were shocked and scandalized by it. Mr. Douglas's form in this book was trivial, but it concealed an epic commentary on modern society, signifying a serious protest against its ignorance and hypocrisy. In *Vestal Fire* (Doran, \$2.00) Mr. Compton Mackenzie has done the same thing, and with equal brilliance. His method is somewhat more *bravura* than Mr. Douglas's, his canvas, as a character in "South Wind" says of Nepenthe, being overcharged; this is a small mark in form, larger against Mr. Mackenzie than Mr. Douglas; but by the grace of its profusion, one is released in "Vestal Fire" from the chief characteristic of literature, boredom. It should be remembered that it is not an easy or common feat to write as Mr. Mackenzie has written, and, signally, to make the pathos at the end of his book authentic; that demands a divine comprehension of values and a major skill in writing fiction. "Vestal Fire", however, remains chiefly a dense bouquet of the choicest flowers of venom and irregularity; it is, with "South Wind", one of the twin bibles of sophistication, gestures exquisite and, in a manner, completely satisfactory.

Passing on to Mr. Anthony Gibbs's *High Endeavour* (Dial Press, \$2.50), one encounters another anisette of the sophisticated brewers, but one written with different purpose. Dickens seems to have assisted in the broad characterization of this comedy, a certain magnification of dimension being effected. In fact, Mr. Gibbs would seem to draw from satirists more serious.

His hero is an Oxonian Don Quixote who starts out on a timid search for romance, which is the name given in the twentieth century to self-expression. It occurs to one that he might be intended by Mr. Gibbs to be an indication of a lamentable post-Wilde generation.

Mildred Evans Gilman's *Count Ten* (Boni & Liveright, \$2.00) provokes one to think of Mr. Lewis and his "Main Street" and "Elmer Gantry". Miss Gilman's minister, however, is not half so beguiling as Mr. Lewis's, and it is a pity that the Main Street note should be so loud that certain meritorious moments in the book should be completely obscured.

A sad misalliance with the Muse has been formed by Mr. Vernon Bartlett in *Topsy-Turvy* (Houghton Mifflin, \$3.00), episodes in the upset of post-war Europe. Mr. Bartlett should have been persuaded not to exchange his journalistic pen for the scalpel of literature. His imaginative power is deficient, so much so that the themes of his stories have the appearance of dredgings from the whole anonymous body of literature. The common man, if he were articulate, might write as Mr. Bartlett writes, grasping truth intuitively but lacking all consciousness of being engaged with a creative art.

What a genuine pleasure it is to pick up Mr. Geoffrey Dennis's *Declaration of Love* (Knopf, \$2.50), on account of its exquisite little binding. One looks forward to the contents and is not disappointed in an expectation of novelty, taste and brilliance. Mr. Dennis's book is a love story unsurpassed at once for a curious intensity and an up-to-date modernity. There is managed herein, through the medium of a series of letters, a strange collusion of the sentiments which according to general opinion are not in the conscious control. The gentleman, sexually almost indifferent to the lady, and poignantly aware, indeed, of many of her

faults, convinces himself by autonomous will that he loves her, and as if responding to a hypnosis, she reciprocates. Mr. Dennis's mannerisms, which he has chosen not

to work into the body of a style, are inclined to jar a little, but they contribute ultimately to the effect of unique and passionate sincerity which is found in this little book.

NOVELS OF THE CURRENT SEASON

By Louise Maunsell Field

LIFE as the majority of middle-class people know it, with its frustrations and compensations, its disappointments and satisfactions, is truthfully presented in Ben Ames Williams's chronicle of a newspaper man which he calls *Splendor* (Dutton, \$2.50). The narrative covers fifty years, beginning with Henry Beeker's childhood. At fifteen he becomes an office boy on the Boston *Tribune*, and from that time his existence is bound up with that of the paper: "Office boy, reference department, reporter, bicycle editor, copy desk, State House, make-up, copy desk promotion, and back to reference again". Henry ends almost precisely where he began. He had seen visions of himself as a great editor, a world force; he had written short stories and a novel. But no one of his editorials was ever printed, and the short stories and the novel were "returned with thanks". Henry married young; at twenty-five he had the responsibilities of a wife and children, responsibilities which conditioned the rest of his life. All this is told with a perfect verisimilitude; we see Henry's friends and relatives, feel as he did the reverberations of the great events in which he had no share. But what lifts the story above mere photographic accuracy into the realm of beauty is the character of Henry himself. As we travel with him through the fifty years of the narrative, seeing the changing world as he saw it, we learn to love and to respect the outwardly commonplace little man who always found it so much "easier to look ahead".

A changing world is clearly reflected in that history of an English bank and a typical bank clerk of the last century, *Our Mr. Dormer*, by R. H. Mottram (Dial Press,

\$2.50). Opening in the year 1813, the novel closes in 1920, when the portrait of Our Mr. Dormer is at last removed from the wall of the bank where it had hung so long and is placed in a museum. Narrow, unimaginative and rigid, but loyal, brave and of an unvarying integrity, Our Mr. Dormer typifies the men who planted the great and flourishing tree of the "English Credit System, founded on integrity — on a workaday belief in the genuine character of a promise". It is a social document, this story of the bank founded by a pair of Quaker brothers. For the history of Doughty's Bank is an epitome of much of England's history, the steady expansion of that great web of international credits, whose spinning was to so very great an extent the achievement of the Mr. Dormers. Without dullness or pedantry, with a touch here and a phrase there, Mr. Mottram quietly shows us a century and more, the century in which both the outer material world and the inner one of thought altered more rapidly and more strikingly than in any other period.

But however times and ideas may change, personal relationships remain, to the individual, the most important things in life. *The Casement* (Doran, \$2.50), Frank Swinnerton's admirable novel, which, though written some years ago, has only now been published in this country, is a tale exclusively concerned with personal relationships. Loraine Trellas looks at life through the casement of her girlish dreams; when she is summoned to enter life instead of merely surveying it, she hesitates until the opportunity is almost lost. No one can handle this sort of thing with a defter touch than Mr. Swinnerton's. He understands and