



## The Middlebrows

By LAWRENCE F. ABBOTT

Contributing Editor of *The Outlook*

IN one of my recent articles in these pages I confessed to an inability to read George Meredith with spontaneous pleasure, and added that "this is probably because I belong to the great middle class." This statement has prompted a correspondent in New Jersey, who holds an important and highly responsible office in the educational system of that State, to ask an interesting question. After paying me some compliments (which, I greatly regret, a decent respect for the appearance of modesty prevents my emblazoning here), my correspondent goes on to say:

There is one topic that I have been thinking of for a good while and hoping you might see fit to write on it: What about the classes in this country? Just what differentiates the "middle" class from the "lower" classes? A still more interesting question to me is, When does one emerge into the upper classes? Let us assume that a professor at \$7,500 is in the middle class. If he marries a wife who brings him a million or two, or if he falls heir to that much, does he now read his title clear to a seat in the boxes? Suppose the professor's windfall is only a paltry \$100,000. Has he made the grade, or does he still linger in the somewhat upper limits of the middle class? In other words, how shall he know where he is and how to classify himself—if he cares to?

I SUPPOSE my correspondent's use of the dollar standard is a sly thrust at the tendency in this country—a tendency characteristic of all democracies—to measure a man's status in society by his riches. The time was when a millionaire was such a rare specimen that the very rarity gave him a certain social prestige. He was like a blue rose or a three-legged calf or any other *lusus naturæ*. But that has all gone by. Now that a man can make a million dollars in ten rounds of so-called prize-fighting,

the possession of that once glittering sum of money is no longer a social distinction. Its value as a measure is to aid the income-tax collector in his unpopular work, so that to-day genteel poverty is rather more elegant than brazen riches. We must try to find some other method of classification than that of wealth.

But try as we may, we shall find the task a hard one and the problem almost insoluble. It has puzzled philosophers from the time of Solon and amused social satirists from Lucian to Matthew Arnold and H. L. Mencken.

CURIOSLY enough, the division of society into three classes has been a common practice among sociologists from the earliest times. Whether this tripartite arrangement is in accordance with some as yet unformulated law of nature or whether the number three has some mysterious and esoteric significance like the number seven, I do not know; but social trinity certainly exists. Rawlinson, the translator of Herodotus, informs us that a comparison of the statements of Herodotus, the Greek traveler, Diodorus, the Greek historian, and Strabo, the Greek geographer, led to the conclusion that the society of ancient Egypt was based on three classes—the priests, the military, and the peasants. The Greeks took this triple classification from the Egyptians, and the Romans took it in turn from the Greeks. Thus Rome in its heyday had patricians, plebeians, and slaves.

So it has gone on through the Middle Ages down to modern times. Old England had its barons, yeomen, and villains; modern England has its nobles, commoners, and laborers, whom Matthew Arnold, almost as much of an iconoclast as H. L. Mencken, proposed to call Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace.

Classification of this kind is easy

enough in a titular aristocracy. But when we come to democracies, it takes a very astute scientist indeed to label and pigeonhole properly the various social genera or species. The Revolutionists in France solved the problem by calling every man "Citizen." And Thomas Jefferson, in our own Revolution, tried to settle the matter by declaring "that all men are created equal." But it is not so simple as all this. Montesquieu, from whom both the French republicans and the American Jeffersonians derived much of their social philosophy, saw the difficulties more clearly than his disciples did. He observed that "the greatest difficulty in a democracy is dividing the people into classes in accordance with justice; upon it depend the success and the permanence of democracies."

So we come back to the question asked by my correspondent—How can the American who cares to classify himself tell where he belongs? I certainly cannot answer the question, but possibly two suggestions may throw some light upon it.

The man who regards this country as a plutocracy will have no great difficulty in determining in which of the three classes composing a plutocracy he should be enrolled—the millionaire class, the salaried white-collar class, the trades-union class.

The man who believes that a democracy is a form of government based primarily on intelligence will have much more difficulty. Intelligence is a variable and elusive thing and has almost infinite gradations. A New York wit recently explained that the Chicago weekly "Liberty" is a periodical designed for people who think the "Saturday Evening Post" is too highbrow. And there is a pertinent—or is it impertinent?—story of a chorus girl who,

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# Speaking of Books

Edited by FRANCES LAMONT ROBBINS

## "Jalna," a Prize Novel

**T**HIS book was awarded the "Atlantic Monthly" prize "for the most interesting novel of any kind, sort, or description," presumably by a jury of its peers. Whatever one may feel about prize books, prize hogs, prize babies, the presentation of the laurel wreath is a ceremony dignified by time, and any winner of it is entitled to some attention. There are awards which do even greater honor to the giver than to the recipient (the case with the "Harper" prize novel, "The Grandmothers"). But Mazo de la Roche could scarcely have expected so wide a reading for her book if it had not been chosen from among "thousands of manuscripts" (as the book's jacket tells us) to carry the "Atlantic Monthly" colors.

You read this book for two reasons:

First, in the hope of enjoying it. And you undoubtedly will, because it has the most direct of appeals. It is a picture book. As to the style of writing, that is fresh and brisk; there are passages of able composition, weakened by some pages which read like beginner's work. The plot is familiar; the close-corporation family is invaded by two disrupting young women and is not disrupted. The character development is nil. The personages have no substance, give no illusion of life. There is not a strong or sympathetic or even intriguing figure among them. Maurice, who might have captured an instant's sympathy, is too faintly drawn. The same is true of Renny. The disruptive young women are too shadowy to have broken up a strawberry festival. The theme of the book connotes ironic treatment. But Mazo de la Roche fails to convince us that she is an ironist. She may be like her Whitecaks of Jalna, who conceive themselves to be fierce and hot-blooded and appear as merely bad-tempered.

But this authoress, who once expected to be a painter, has in the matter of her characters established her own alibi. We learn (again from the jacket of the book) that often when she is supposed to be writing she is actually drawing caricatures. And there is the secret of her book's success in catching and holding the reader's attention. There are no people in this book, but there is a series of the best line drawings you could ask to see. They are done with a sharp

pencil on thin paper, and they are very good. There are pictures in "Jalna" as prone to stick in the memory as that horrid frontispiece to the yellow fairy book, "The Witch in the Stone Boat," which has disturbed so many otherwise placid childhoods. The old hag of a grandmother and her abominable parrot reaching out for peppermints with dribbling lips and black beak cannot be immediately forgotten. The *enfant terrible* welcoming the brides to Jalna; the hobbledehoy, sneaking and sniveling; the spinster sister, "who never was able to eat at the table" and who was sex-starved besides, poor soul; the "strong man" watching beside the dying colt; none of these are people, but they are all vivid pictures, and they make the book good fun to read.

Presumably, they won the "Atlantic Monthly" prize for it. This will be the second reason for reading the book—to find out why it won the prize. If you do find out, will you let us know? Our private opinion is that the prize marks a moral victory for the Whiteoak family. We believe that the judges were terrified by that scheming, fighting, bullying crew, and handed over the ten thousand dollars without protest.

What would have happened if they had only clapped their hands and shouted, "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"?

## What They Are Reading

**T**HE FOLLOWING LIST OF BEST-SELLING BOOKS is compiled from lists sent us by telegram on Saturday by the following book-shops: Brentanos, New York; Old Corner Book Store, Boston; Scrantoms Inc., Rochester; Korner & Wood, Cleveland; Scruggs, Vandevoort & Barney, St. Louis; Kendrick Bellamy Company, Denver; Tiolin Pilot Company, Houston; Paul Elder & Co., San Francisco. We asked these stores to co-operate with us each week because we believe that they are representative of the taste of the more intelligent readers in their communities. The books which are most in demand in these shops are usually those which are most discussed. We believe that they are the books which Outlook readers will want to know more about.

### Fiction

**K**ITTY. By Warwick Deeping. A. A. Knopf.

If an ability to use the tricks of the trade, plenty of sincere and "whole-some" sentiment, a talent for catching

and using vague moods, small notions which give life to his characters, suffice to hold your interest, you will enjoy this typical Deeping story of social and personal conflict in post-war England. Old readers of The Outlook will be interested to know that Deeping's first book was reviewed in the magazine by H. W. Mabie in 1903. He found it distinguished by freshness of feeling, intensity of emotion, dramatic power, deep and sensitive feeling for nature. If we miss the first two characteristics from Deeping's later books, we must remember that he was twenty-four years younger in 1903.

**J**ALNA. By Mazo de la Roche. Little, Brown & Co.

Reviewed in this number.

**D**EATH COMES TO THE ARCHBISHOP. By Willa Cather. A. A. Knopf.

If you are receptive to sincerity of feeling, to beauty of concept and of word, you should give yourself the delight of reading this book. Others, less fortunate in sensitivity, will find enjoyment in its gorgeous pictures of the Southwest, the heroic-romantic figures which animate it, the interest of the story. This is biography in the form of a novel. It was reviewed at length in the last issue.

**D**USTY ANSWER. By Rosamund Lehmann. Henry Holt & Co.

If you are interested in new talent in the field of fiction, you will want to read this book. The fact that it is concerned with the fluttering, adolescent emotionalism of a section of current youth, and concerned with that only, has no bearing upon the author's gifts. She is a poetess by feeling, and her prose has lyric quality. If you can survive the lack of humor and sense of much ado about nothing which the book gives, you will find it worth reading.

**T**HE GRANDMOTHERS. By Glenway Wescott. Harper & Brothers.

This is a book which you ought not to miss. It has qualities which delight the mature mind. The chronicle of a frustrated people, it has ageless wisdom and beauty. The most unaccustomed reader of modern fiction may choose it without hesitation, because it is the work of an artist, an almost perfect piece of