

Life and James Branch Cabell

Of Course It Is True His New Book Is Called "Beyond Life,"
But That Only Means It Is Likely to Be Beyond Some Readers

JAMES BRANCH CABELL'S latest book, *Beyond Life*, has a quiet cleverness, an audacious originality that will delight a good many readers. In fact, this mosaic of essays on books and things in general should be sufficient to convince any one not actually in the mental bread-line that here is a thinker worth attention, a writer in bondage to no exterior ideas, a dreamer who follows after beauty and lets the dollars take care of themselves. Considering Mr. Cabell's value it is astonishing that he is not better known. He is one of the most original writers that we have now in America, and those of another generation than our own will discover, or rediscover, his queer, arresting charm.

There are many intelligent persons who would greatly enjoy Mr. Cabell's work if only they knew about it. There are also many who would not care for it at all, who could not, in fact, be induced to read it. He makes you think. To think is exhausting, sometimes painful and generally needless. Many persons do better to read Harold Bell Wright or Holworthy Hall. Mr. Cabell's books are provocative of thought. Readers who find thought stimulating should make his acquaintance quite irrespective of the fact that they may not agree with him. That is a trivial matter.

Beyond Life is Mr. Cabell's first volume of essays, his previous books including novels, short stories, poems and genealogical treatises. He remarked to the writer one afternoon last summer, at his home in Virginia, that he greatly liked essay writing, but that because of the limited market for the essay in America he usually compromised by inserting little essays in his novels and as forewords to his books. Those who have found these digressions peculiarly delightful will be prepared for the pleasure to be derived from this new volume devoted wholly to ideas apart from narrative.

An All Night Job.

The book is in the form of a dialogue between two friends, one of them, John Charteris, a novelist who figures elsewhere in Mr. Cabell's works. Charteris, in attempting to expound his philosophy of the "life beyond life," which by Milton is attributed to good books, talks until dawn without wearying his actual or his vicarious listener.

"Off hand," began John Charteris, "I would say that books are best insured against oblivion through practice of the auctorial virtues of distinction and clarity, of beauty and symmetry, of tenderness and truth and urbanity." On this as a basis for judgment, Charteris—or Cabell—discourses concerning books and their makers with a keenness of perception which only urbanity confers and with a satire that is delectable. America has too few satirists of a sane and healthy character to neglect this one.

Underneath the surface seriousness of this exposition is a puckish drollery directed against various persons and publications which the author is inclined to think will not escape forgetfulness, but (which, lacking the auctorial virtues mentioned previously, are "passing in limousines to oblivion." He is meditating aloud in an apparently timeless fashion (somewhere he makes a capital distinction between timeliness and timelessness) and editorial foot notes naively explain certain allusions for the information of the future reader.

For instance, in speaking of the neglect accorded Arthur Maehen, who has been undeservedly ig-



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nored, perhaps because he believes that all enduring art must be an allegory and rarely express directly what he can subtly suggest, Charteris or Cabell says:

"It is perhaps on account of this rash reliance upon intelligence and imagination as being at all ordinary human traits, that Mr. Maehen has failed to appeal as instantly as, we will say, Mr. Robert W. Chambers appeals to those immaculate and terrible ladies who languidly vend books in our department stores and with Olympian unconcern confer success upon reading matter by 'recommending it.' The foot note on Chambers is as follows:

"A novelist of the day, appropriately commemorated by Captain Rupert Hughes (another writer of fiction) in the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* for June, 1918. 'Mr. Chambers does not run about the world shaking his fist at the sky or spitting in other people's faces. . . . There is eternal summer in his heart. The world is his rose garden.' Mr. Chambers, according to the same authority, has written 'masterpieces,' 'triumphs of art,' 'superb fantasy,' 'thrilling drama,' &c., dealing for the most part, with 'well groomed men and women in their stately homes.'"

Other foot notes repeat equally astonishing praise by *Hearst's Magazine* and the *Cosmopolitan* of other writers frequently appearing in their pages. Mr. Cabell finds amusing the trick of hiring staff writers to praise each other with reciprocal extravagance. Another foot note speaks of the *Saturday Evening Post* as "a widely circulated advertising medium which printed considerable fiction; published in Philadelphia."

Booth in a Tragic Role.

Mr. Cabell's critical comments are not all satirical, however, since he genuinely admires certain contemporaries, as H. L. Mencken and Joseph Hergesheimer. Concerning Booth Tarkington he speaks with scornful affection, believing that his easy popularity is ruinous to his genius:

"Mr. Booth Tarkington, also, is a very popular novelist. But that I take to be one of the most tragic items in all the long list of misfortunes which have befallen American literature. It is a fact that

merits its threnody, since the loss of an artist demands lamentation, even when he commits suicide." He considers that while to write best sellers is, "by ordinary men, a harmless performance, in Mr. Tarkington's case it is a misappropriation of funds."

Mr. Cabell refrains from inserting his publisher's blurbs at the back of his volume, printing instead the most sarcastic criticisms which have appeared concerning his previous books. He warns the prospective reader of them that he, James Branch Cabell, is not in favor of a public or with critics that prefer "ostentatious impermanence."

There is many a sly bit of humor in these pages. For instance, in speaking of poetry he says: "There is Nicholas de Caen, for instance, who in his *Dizain des Reines* (with which I am familiar, I confess, in the English version alone)—" The jest lies in the fact that some years ago Mr. Cabell published a volume of verse containing various "adaptations," as he called them, from Nicholas de Caen, "a mediæval French poet." Not until some earnest student tried to find biographical material in the archives of Caen, and wrote disturbedly to Mr. Cabell that he couldn't unearth anything about Nicholas, did the Virginian confess that he had invented

Nicholas and that the verses were wholly his own.

Mr. Cabell's work has been almost entirely in romance, and much of the discussion in *Beyond Life* concerns the power of romance, which he believes to be a "world shaping and world controlling principle." His idea is that romance controls the minds of men, and by creating force producing illusions "further the world's betterment with the forces thus brought into being. . . . The sum of corporeal life represents an essay in romantic fiction. . . . And so it comes about that romance has been the demiurgic and beneficent force, not merely in letters, but in every matter which concerns mankind; and realism, with its teaching that the mile posts along the road are as worthy of consideration as the goal, has always figured as man's chief enemy. . . . It is by the grace of romance that man has been exalted above the other animals.

Some Sample Sentences.

"Man alone of animals plays the ape to his dreams. That a dog dreams vehemently is a matter of public knowledge; it is perfectly possible that in his more ecstatic visions he usurps the shape of his master and visits Elysian pantries in human form; and awakening, he observes that in point of fact he is a dog, and as a rational animal, makes the best of caninship. But with man the case is otherwise. . . ."

"To me who wonder at the irrationality of all this, to me, also, life has been an interminable effort to pretend to be what seemed expected. . . . And I have suffered as yet no open detection. The neighbors seem to accept me quite gravely as the head of a family; the chauffeur touches his cap and calls me 'sir'; publishers bring out my books; and my wife fairmindedly discusses with me all our differences of opinion, so that we may without any bitterness reach the compromise of doing what she originally suggested."

But these detached bits are not fair to the author. The attracted reader should enjoy James Branch Cabell's books for himself.

BEYOND LIFE. BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL. Robert M. McBride & Co. \$1.50.