

EMILY'S WANDERINGS IN HADES

The Most Respectable Sketch in "The Undertaker's Garland," a Gruesome Volume by Messrs. Wilson and Bishop, Recounts the Adventures of Emily, an American Ghost, in the Phantom Under-World.

By Prof. W. T. Allison.

Such is the perversity of human nature, such its bravado, that death and the grave are often made the subject of jest and the sexton and the undertaker regarded as comic figures. The last funny story I heard was gruesome in character, for it played around the deathbed of a Scot who was such a long time dying that he wore out the patience of his good wife. There are few of us who have not heard jokes about funerals. In the days of Cheops or Xerxes, I suppose men haw-hawed over pleasant japes concerning the dissolution of the ancient mother-in-law. But rarely does it happen that a whole volume of verse and prose, most of it witty, all of it impious in tone, is devoted to what with most people is the most solemn of all themes. Bound in black and gurple, and illustrated in a ghoulish style by Boris Artshbasheff, "The Undertaker's Garland," by John Peals Bishop and Edmund Wilson, Jr., (The Macmillan Company, Toronto), is one of the oddest books that has come my way in a whole decade, in fact I believe that nothing like it has ever been published in this country, nor perhaps ever will be again. Owing to the flippancy of tone and the Aubrey Beardsley type of illustration in this book, the whole thing seems to me like a hang-over from the eighteen-nineties when "The Yellow Book" was in flower. It could not have been written by the bold, bad descendants of that period, however, for the authors are young Americans not long out of Princeton. Both served in the war and both have been on the staff of "Vanity Fair" at one time or another.

Emily's Trip Through Hades. The flower in this ghastly garland which will attract most interest is a sketch by Mr. Wilson entitled, "Emily in Hades." Possibly it was written in his college days when he was deep in Virgil. At any rate his ground conception of the lower world is that of the ancient poet, although the only character that he picks up from classical story is Charon, the early ferryman. We pass over the circumstances of Emily's death during the influenza epidemic, leave her bereaved husband sitting by the bedside, and follow her ghost as she advances through a grey mist to the bank of the grey river. She sees a clumsy boat and makes her way to it. Old Charon is sitting there, regarding her without interest from dim and lifeless eyes. As he gazes upon her, Emily suddenly becomes aware that she has nothing on but a night-gown and that her hair is down her back. When he tells her to get in, so that he can take her over to Hades, she protests that she is not dressed, only to be told that it does not matter. She accepts his ineluctable invitation, and, as he pulls on his oars, she peers at him through the shadowy and uncertain atmosphere. Charon is dressed in old and weather-worn clothes, as colorless as the barge, and rows with infinite weariness and indifference. As she asks question after question, being answered politely but languidly and succinctly by the old boatman, Emily comes to the conclusion that Hades is a dreary sort of place. "She would have thought it might at least have been horrible or in some other way exciting. If Charon had only been kindly, or hateful, or grand, instead of being simply indifferent and stolidified by his work! Her thrill of adventure faded; and she death going to be just like life!—she did not often indulge in thrills, having learned that nothing ever happens. If you thrilled in anticipation, you were sure to be disappointed. So Emily found life, and probably death was no different. . . . But presently she spoke again: 'Isn't there any music in Hades?' 'No,' he answered, 'No music.' After a moment's pause, she went on: 'Tell me, she said, 'how shall I ever find the people, when I arrive over there?' 'I shall lead you where you belong.'"

Two Shapes Loom Out of the Fog. Charon was as good as his word. It is true he could not land his passengers at any dock; owing to the shallowness of the water on the shore he was obliged to ask her to do a little wading. She did not like the idea but was reconciled when he told her that she would not be able to feel the water. So she descended into the water and made for shore. She could not feel that the water was chill nor that the shore was firm. She made progress, however, and found that she was on a kind of flat wide plain with a misty horizon. "She found it was rather like a fog; you could not see immediately around you, but you could not, except by glimpses, see anything very far away. Once she thought she caught a human shape that passed obscurely at a distance and she hurried on in terror. Then, right upon her, two shapes seemed to come around a corner and passed quite close to her side; and, staring fearfully in their faces, she recognized them as people she had known in the town where she had been born. They were an elderly married couple, who had used to come to dinner sometimes. The man was still wearing the suit he had had on when he was killed in a motor accident, on an election night celebration; and he was still displaying in his lapel an enormous celluloid button with the legend: 'Vote for Taft!' But the woman she was glad to note, wore a night-gown like her own, having died respectfully in bed. They had never been very happy together, but they now walked side by side, as if from sheer force of habit. Neither turned to Emily nor spoke; she could not even tell whether they had seen her. They passed on and dissolved in the shadows, two lifeless, colorless beings, wandering slowly and in silence, without interest or aim."

Emily Finds Her Mother and Aunt. Emily felt huffed because people whom she had known intimately on earth did not trouble to welcome her or express sorrow that she had died so young. But after she had a rather scornful debate with the shade of the headmistress of the boarding school which she attended in girlhood days, she received something of a welcome from a circle of relatives who she chanced to find. The account of this meeting and the dialogue between Emily and her mother is one of the happiest portions of this interesting fantasy. How did Emily know that she was in the presence of her mother? I can imagine that I can see the smile of every woman reader as Mr. Wilson explains,—"She recognized her mother at once, though she was approaching her from behind, by the little hard knob of black hair which she wore at the back of her head. She had always felt that the knob was depressingly old-fashioned and had often wondered why her mother had imitated her grandmother in this, brushing her thin hair-straight back and parting it in the middle." Emily soon discovered that her mother had changed as little in character as in the way she wore her hair. "Her mother raised solemnly upon Emily her large and gentle eyes, in which was neither happiness nor sorrow, but only a prosaic seriousness and a mild sort of wonder. Her long pre-occupation in life with kitchens and house-work and furniture and the more physical aspects of the care of her husband and children had inured her to the soulless dignity of a plain mahogany bed; and now that she had come to Hades, where there was nothing more for her to do, she seemed ready to sit through eternity, as if she were a convict of drawers, content in the conviction of her usefulness and the sense of her duties discharged."

Mephisto Might Have Written This Book. Emily met other people in Hades and always found something interesting to talk about. I cannot follow her further, and part from her by saying how much I regret that Mr. Wilson did not fill his share of the volume with the wanderings of the imaginary Emily in the imaginary lower world. I think that he and his partner, Mr. Bishop, should be ashamed of much of what they do not doubt consider to be very clever poetry and prose in "The Undertaker's Garland." I grant that it is clever, but it is very offensive to its reader who has any regard for humanity or any fear of God. These young Princeton graduates are cynics who have long since said in their hearts that there is no God. "The Funeral of Mary Magdalene," the first selection, is abominably coarse and an insult to every Christian reader. "The Death of a Soldier" is obscene. "Resurrection," a Zolaesque description of the exhumation of an American soldier from a battle-field in France is absolutely nauseating. "The Death of the Last Centaur" is lecherous, and "The Death of God" is blasphemous. Both these writers have great gifts of imagery and of style but it is tragic to see them put to such base uses. They have evidently sold themselves to Mephistopheles and just now they may think themselves very clever, as indeed they are, but it is better to be good than clever, and I feel sure that twenty years from now, when, let us hope, a mild wisdom will have dispelled the foolish cynicism of youth, they will bitterly regret the publication of most of the material in "The Undertaker's Garland."

Where the Traveller Looks from Seaside. Fear is the sight he sees, A girlish imperial city, Guarding the gates of the seas, With a robe of golden English broom Spreading about her knees. Lovely with old-world leisure Gracing her modest state, In youthful pride of dominion She sits by the western gate, Watching the liners come and go Through Juan de Fuca Strait. She is crowned with ivy and laurel Fresh from an ageless spring; Tales of the East and news of the North Her sheltered sea-lanes bring; And all her beauteous days go by, Soft as a gray gull's wing. Child of the strong adventure, Bred to the clean and fine, With touch of the velvet tropics And eyes with the Northern shine, Never to be forgotten— Last of the Sea-King's line.

One of the books read by Lord Shaw of Dunfermline during his recent visit to this country was "The Romance of Western Canada" by Rev. Dr. R. G. Macbeth of Vancouver. He stated that he was "charmed with its solid grip of history and its admirable presentation of a thrilling story." A second edition of Dr. Macbeth's most recent work, "Policing the Plains," is being published by Hodder and Stoughton this fall. That much-discussed book, "The Pomp of Power," turns out to be the work of an expatriated Canadian, Mr. Laurence Lyon, who for some years has been practising law in London. For three years Mr. Lyon was M.P. for Hastings, but during recent years has resided principally in Paris. He is now writing a second volume, hoping that he will be able to spring another big sensation by revealing sayings and doings of prominent politicians.

Canada's Girls in Training. Prepared by the National Girl's Work Board of the Religious Education Council of Canada, Toronto, The Ryerson Press, 226 pages. Price 21. This is an ideal book for placing in the hands of teachers and leaders of 'teen-age girls. A high conception of life with its full development is placed before girls. The four-fold life, physical, intellectual, spiritual and social, as outlined in the first chapter, forms the basis of a study that is as sympathetic as it is helpful to girlhood. Adequate attention is devoted to mid-week activities and the girls are taught the meaning of responsibility and service in the home, school, church and community. An excellent graded book-list for girls and leaders is given in the closing chapter of this practical handbook.

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English Literary Firmament is Mr. Philip Guedella, author of a volume of brilliant essays, "Supers and Supermen." These are largely historical. A new book by this writer, "The Second Empire," deals with the life and reign of Napoleon III. Mr. Guedella produces literary and historical essays as a recreation. His chief energy is devoted to law and politics. Some Englishmen believe that he will one day succeed Mr. Asquith as leader of the Liberal party.

Mr. H. G. Wells is at present extracting some more nuggets from the sands of time. He is preparing "A Short History of Mankind," which will probably be as great a money-maker as his "Outline of History." Here are a few names which friends and foes have called this industrious Georgian writer, Crusader, fantastic romancer, powerful electric starter for international mind-motors, born story-teller, inexhaustible playmate, believer in fairness, articulate man of the people, artist, reformer, inventor, propagandist, pamphleteer. Critics, like doctors and divines, often disagree. Sir William Robertson Nicoll cannot bear Professor Leacock's brand of humor, but Mr. Guedella, who is quite as keen as Nicoll, says, "I have the liveliest admiration for that best of modern humorists, Stephen Leacock. He is probably the best thing Canada has ever exported."

Mr. Hendrik Van Loon, author of "The Story of Mankind," has been awarded the John Newberry medal, which is to be given annually by the Children's Librarians' Section of the American Library Association for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. It was William Allen White's novel, "In the Heart of a Fool," that inspired Dr. Wm. L. Stidger, a prominent clergyman of Detroit, to preach his first "dramatic book sermon," and the interest it aroused has led to Dr. Stidger preaching a regular series of book-sermons once a month. His audience often numbers five thousand, and he finds that the sermons not only create widespread interest in books but are very successful in promoting the sale of books by the women's committee of their Book Table after the service. Dr. Stidger also has monthly Book Prayer-meetings, at which members of the congregation report on books supplied to them by the pastor, and these prayer-meetings attract an average attendance of five hundred.

To achieve note as a literary man or a revolutionary leader in Ireland, it is apparently necessary to be a schoolmaster. The most prominent contemporary Irish men of letters, Daniel Corkery and James Joyce, are both school teachers. Padraic Pearse, the leader of the Easter week rebellion of 1916, was a headmaster of a boys' school. Thomas McDonough, one of the men who were executed with Pearse, was a teacher in Pearse's school. Joseph Plunkett, another of the Easter week leaders, was a teacher. De Valera was a professor at the Dublin University, as was the Dr. Duff, Miss Mary McSwiney, sister of the Lord Mayor of Cork, who died of a lung strike in a London jail, is a teacher.

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