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Editorial

BOLONEY

The *Abalone Tribune* for August 3rd (the year is unfortunately unspecified) contained a huge advertisement of a circus to be held in Abalone that day, and the description of its wonders was such as to attract the attention of the whole town, from the proof-reader of the *Tribune* itself and the local intelligenzia to the children of the unemployed. The volume before us, *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, by Charles G. Finney, with drawings by Boris Artzybasheff, contains an account of what they felt and saw.

We start with the record of the street procession inaugurating the afternoon's show. According to Mr. Finney it was disappointing: "Only three frowzy little beast-drawn wagons, the first driven by an old Chinaman, the second by a pale bearded man, the last by a Jewish-looking fellow with a cap of goat horns on his head. There was a big coiled grey snake in the Chinaman's wagon, a bear in the second wagon, a green dog in the last." The interesting point, however, was that nobody seemed able to identify with certainty any of the component parts, whether the contents of the wagons, or the beasts which drew them, or, for the matter of that, even their drivers. The "grey snake" and the "bear" and the "green dog" were both like and unlike known animals, and the "fellow with a cap of goat horns" didn't seem to be a fellow at all. The "bear" looked like a man to some, or perhaps a man who walked like a bear; to others he looked like a bear who walked like a man or even (an old lady suggested) a Russian! One may remark in passing that the expressive and almost photographic illustrations fully justify the confusion of the sight-seers. They are clearly drawn to life,

but to a life seldom seen on this planet. As the owner announced himself at the opening of the show:

"This is the circus of Dr. Lao.
We show you things that you don't know.
We tell you of places you'll never go.
We've searched the world both high and low

To capture the beasts for this marvellous show

From mountains where maddened winds did blow,

To islands where zephyrs breathed sweet and low.

Oh, we've spared no pains and we've spared no dough;

And we've dug at the secrets o' long ago;
And we've risen to Heaven and plunged

Below,
For we wanted to make it one hell of a show.

And the things you'll see in your brains will glow

Long past the time when the winter snow Has frozen the summer's furbelow.

For this is the circus of Dr. Lao.
And youth may come and age may go;

But no more circuses like this show!"

Indeed, the exhibits were unique and we learn something of what may be called the wider biology. For example, of the satyr ("the man with horns on his head"): "We caught this fellow near the town of Tu-jeng in North China close to the Great Wall. We caught him in a net by a little waterfall, a net which we had set for a chimera. Incidentally, although we did not know it at that time, it is impossible to catch a chimera in a net by reason of its fiery breath, which burns up the meshes."

Now that—if I may interpolate—is a piece of useful information, not, so far as my learned friends know, to be picked up elsewhere. But we learn more than that, for the passage continues: "Satyrs are not omnivorous like man, but rather herbivorous like the goat. We feed this fellow nuts and berries and herbs. He will also eat lettuces and some cabbage. He has always refused onions and garlic seed, however. And he drinks nothing but wine."

We learn about the hound of the hedges (the "green dog") more fully: "Evolved among the hedgerows and grass-plots of North China this animal is the living, breathing symbol of greenness, of fecund, perennial plant life, of the transitional stage between vegetable and animal. . . . When you examine him, you will notice that, although his form is that of the usual dog, his various bodily parts are those of plants. His teeth, for instance, are stiff, thick thorns; his tail is a plait of ferns; his fur is grass; his claws are burrs; his blood is chlorophyll. Surely this is the weirdest beast under the casual canopy of heaven. We feed him hedge apples and green walnuts. Sometimes, too, though not often, he will eat persimmons. We found him in North China along the canals where the ricefields flourish and where grasses and little stunted hedges grow. For a long, long time that land had been nothing but so much parched dust with no green thing growing on it anywhere. Then the canals were con-

structed and brought water to it, and over its dry skin lovely green things commenced to grow. That which had seemed dead quickened into life. That which had seemed sterile glistened with fertility. And as a symbol and embodiment of that exuberant fecundity, the grasses and the weeds and the flowers and hedges and bushes each gave a little of themselves and created this hound, truly an unparalleled achievement in the annals of horticulture.

"We saw him first at dusk playing about the hedgerows, leaping, gamboling, biting at the hedge apples, pawing little holes in the ground and nosing fugitive seeds into them. . . . I tell you, nothing in the world has ever thrilled me as much as did the first sight of the hound of the hedges, and I have adored and studied animals for more than a hundred years. I said: 'Here is the masterpiece of all life, here in this superb living body that is neither plant nor animal but a perfect balance of both. Here is a mass of living cells so complete in itself that it even demands no outlet for reproduction, content to know that, though it did reproduce its form a thousand times, it could never through that or through the evolutionary changes of a thousand generations improve upon its own victorious completeness.' . . .

"Doctor Lao reached in the cage and patted the hound's head. The beast sighed like the murmur of wind in sycamore leaves.

"'What the hell is the Chink talking about?' asked Quarantine Inspector Number One.

"'I'll be damned if I know,' said Quarantine Inspector Number Two. 'Let's go see the mermaid. That goddam dog looks like a fake to me somehow.'"

Of all the persons presented to us in this veridical chronicle of events the magician Apollonius is the most engaging. (I prefer 'magician.' Mr. Finney, in his one lapse from grace, says 'mage,' perhaps in apology for a previous 'thaumaturge.') Apollonius is fond of children and is prepared to do anything for them. He even produces a 'Poland China shoat' out of the 'candy sack' of one (that is, a baby pig out of his sweet bag), and a flower for another. It is then that the simplicity of his character becomes apparent. "Apollonius regarded the big blossom in wonderment. 'Goodness,' he said. 'I never made a flower like that one before in all my life. I wonder what kind it could be. Do you know, mister?'"

"'Naw,' said the plumber, 'I don't know a whole lot of flowers. Just the common kinds like dandelions and all.'

"'Well,' said Apollonius, 'it's a big brute, whatever it is.'

"'I think you do the cleverest tricks,' said Mrs. Rogers. 'Don't you, children?'"

"Touched to the quick, the mage said:

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"Oh, these aren't tricks, madam. Tricks are things that fool people. In the last analysis tricks are lies. But these are real flowers, . . . and that was a real pig. I don't do tricks. I do magic. I create; I transpose; I color; I transubstantiate; I break up; I recombine; but I never trick. Would you like to see a turtle? I can create a very superior turtle."

"I do," said Willie. "I want to see a turtle."

Apollonius creates a turtle, but something goes wrong and the turtle has two heads.

"Oh, goodness," said Apollonius disgustedly, "I would botch the job just when I wanted to do a really neat piece of magic for you. Imagine making such a freak of a thing! Two heads! Really, I apologize. I'm ashamed at my ineptitude."

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"Oh, that's all right," said the plumber. "I guess them things are kinda hard to make right anyway."

The two-headed turtle may be a botched job of Apollonius, but who is responsible for the Medusa? Dr. Lao's specimen was a Sonoran Medusa from Northern Mexico and Dr. Lao had learned something about them. He agrees, however, that "their origination is a puzzle to science. Their place in the evolutionary scale is a mystery. Their task in the great balance of life is a secret. For they belong to that weird nether-world of unbiological beings, salient members of which are the chimera, the unicorn, the sphinx, the werewolf, and the hound of the hedges and the sea-serpent. An unbiological order, I call it, because it obeys none of the natural laws of hereditary and environmental change, pays no attention to the survival of the fittest, positively sneers at any attempt on the part of man to work out a rational life cycle, is possibly immortal, unquestionably immortal, evidences anabolism but not katabolism, ruts, spawns, and breeds but does not reproduce, lays no eggs, builds no nests, seeks but does not find, wanders but does not rest. Nor does it toil or spin. The members of this order are the animals the Lord of the Hebrews did not create to grace His Eden; they are not among the products of the six days' labor. They are the sports, the offthrows, of the universe instead of the species; they are the weird children of the lust of the spheres."

Medusas, as is well known, turn people to stone, and Dr. Lao had prudently arranged for his specimen to be seen in a mirror,

But one of his audience was a m sceptic. "Kate bent under the guard and stuck her face around the edge of the cubicle. 'Hussy,' she started to say. And before she could utter a third syllable, she was frozen into stone."

"Later on, while everybody was stewing around wondering what to do about it, a geologist from the university examined Kate. 'Solid chalcedony,' he said. 'Never saw a prettier variegation of color in all my life. Carnelian chalcedony. Makes mighty fine building stone.'" On which one can merely observe that one has seen worse epitaphs.

And so the fascinating panorama unrolls itself, the sphinx, the chimera, Mumbo-Jumbo thumping a tom-tom, the corybants and nymphs, the sea-serpent, the mermaid, the werewolf—they are all presented to us and described in interesting and often intimate detail. The whole concludes with a performance of the Witches' Sabbath under the directing hand of Apollonius, and the rites of the great god Yottle.

Special attention should be directed to the admirable style of this varied and circumstantial narrative. Professor Butterfield has recently immortalised a conversation between Acton, Mommsen and Harnack, in which these three giants of history agreed among themselves that the greatest historian who ever lived was Macaulay; from which one may learn that the possession of a good style is not incompatible with being a historian. I do not suggest that if the volume under review had appeared a century ago our three authorities would have named Charles G.

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Finney in the place of Thomas B. Macaulay, but I do say that in addition to being a historian (and not in contradiction to his being a historian) Charles G. Finney can write. Unfortunately, one cannot offer adequate specimens in a short review, but I should refer readers to the description of the "man of many parts," Lawyer Frank Tull, the account of Apollonius' meeting with Mrs. Howard T. Cassan, the apostrophe of Dr. Lao to the two college youths from back East, or the still-life portrait of the proof-reader's confrontation with the sea-serpent. The description of the Witches' Sabbath, with its recurrent refrain: "The master cometh," and that of the coming of the master and his actions, will speak to the nightmare sense of every reader.

Apart from the "Abalone" and "August 3rd" of the opening sentence of the book, there is little indication of the time and place of the action described. From an incidental reference on p. 14 it would appear to have taken place after a certain word had appeared in a review of *Jurgen*. Since reviews are, written, as a rule, shortly before or after the book reviewed is published, it would appear that the *terminus a quo* of the action may be taken as 1919. Further, the author of *Jurgen* is referred to as "Mr. Cabell," a type of ascription applied generally to authors whose first names are unfamiliar and who may therefore be presumed to be new. This may reasonably be said to hold of the Cabell of the 1920's, not afterwards when he attained world-wide oblivion. The *terminus ad quem* is fixed by the mention of the Russian. This would, of course, have been impossible in the very recent past, and unlikely even in the late 1930's. It would seem reasonable, therefore, on all counts, to fix the time of the events described at the later 1920's.

As for the place of the action, even the most casual reader could hazard a likely guess. One has to look for a spot where such a circus would arouse no astonishment and a Russian be talked of as an interesting curiosity. One thinks naturally of those regions of the newly civilised world where everything is so surprising that nothing is a surprise, *i.e.*, Texas and California. Now we

learn from incidental references in the book itself that Abalone is in Arizona!

Further than this we know, and can guess, nothing. We can only record our gratitude to the narrator who has flitted across our path and, after having given us a convincing chronicle of strange events of which we should have liked to have heard more, disappear. One is reminded of the Japanese painter who painted a life-like landscape, so life-like that the birds came and twittered on the trees. On the landscape he painted a temple, so real that worshippers came there to worship. In front of the temple he painted some steps, and as he walked up, the temple doors opened. They closed after him and he was never seen again.

Something of the kind seems to have happened to Dr. Lao and his chronicler, although we may glean, perhaps, a faint hope from the dedication "to Francis L. English who knows where Tu-jeng is." As we have seen already, Tu-jeng, where the satyr was caught, is "in North China close to the Great Wall." The meaning can only be that Mr. Francis L. English has more precise information. It may be, for example, that he knows the nearest railway station or airport. If that is so (and it is devoutly to be hoped) we appeal to him, in the interests both of science and of literature, to communicate with us (mentioning DESIDERATA) as soon as possible.

A. B. F.

[DESIDERATA makes no apology for printing a second review of *The Circus of Dr. Lao* first noticed in our columns by J. N. B.R. two years ago. We derived much pleasure from a second reading and trust readers will find pleasure in a second article. A work of this quality should not be forgotten.]

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