

April 22, 1922

Flashlight and Flame

THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED. By F.
Scott Fitzgerald. New York: Charles
Scribner's Sons.

TOWARDS the end of "The Beautiful and Damned," a certain best-selling Dick Caramel says: "You know these new novels make me tired. My God! Everywhere I go some silly girl asks me if I've read 'This Side of Paradise.' Are our girls really like that? If it's true to life, which I don't believe, the next generation is going to the dogs. I'm sick of all this shoddy realism. I think there's a place for the romanticist in fiction." With this neat blend of Shavian self-advertisement and post-Wellsian sarcasm, the current novel is hit off. If only Mr. Fitzgerald and his brilliant contemporaries could *feel* the difference between telling a story and hitting things off! If they would only leave the latter art, or sport, to such artists, or sportsmen, as the Menckens and the Nathans and the host of clever juniors who have no stories in them! "The Beautiful and Damned" is a real story, but a story greatly damaged by wit. The narrative is infested with brilliant passages, "striking" descriptions, and scraps of ebullient commentary. The persons are not permitted to emerge from the type; whenever they seem about to emerge, their author shoves them back to anonymity by making them his own obvious mouthpieces. It is true that Anthony is intended to be a feeble ass in conduct, and a glib and even skilful talker nevertheless. But who believes that, in his last interview with Caramel, it is really the sodden and aimless Anthony who declares: "The arts are very old. . . . Poetry is dying first. It'll be absorbed into prose sooner or later. For instance, the beautiful word, the colored and glittering word, and the beautiful simile belong to prose now.

To get attention poetry has got to strain for the unusual word, the harsh, earthy word that's never been beautiful before. Beauty, as the sum of several beautiful parts, reached its apotheosis in Swinburne. It can't go any further—except in the novel, perhaps." Very interesting and clever, but pure youth—and—Fitzgerald. And we get the same sort of thing, repeatedly, from the, we should otherwise suppose, empty-headed Gloria.

No, one cannot make much of this as pure novel, certainly not as either pure realism or romanticism. A novelist cannot be made out of an air of amused omniscience, or even by the most animated pursuit of irrelevancies: these things are the bane, not the making, of a true story-teller. I think Mr. Fitzgerald has the gift, if he has the patience to sort it out from minor gifts and to give it a chance. Meanwhile, maneuvering to find the angle from which his work looks best, we find ourselves, somewhat unexpectedly perhaps, gazing upon a modern morality. We may best take him as a maker of parable. Cutting out the manifold little clevernesses of this book, and even such individual pieces of excellence as the amusing episode of "salesmanship" recorded in the single long chapter called "A Matter of Aesthetics," we discover embedded in it a notable fable of current life. For such a fable Gloria the beautiful and heartless, Anthony the drunken and paltry, are sufficiently characterized. They are true enough to prevalent types. And the parable ends with a glorious ironical punch. Gloria is punished by the mere loss of youth and beauty; Anthony by the utter fatuity of wealth.