

The English Review: August, 1922

The Visit of Mr. Mencken

WHETHER or no the sea-serpent approaches these shores this season, we shall at least find consolation in the arrival of an indubitable portent, Mr. H. L. Mencken. The importance to literary and dramatic England can hardly be over-estimated, for Mr. Mencken represents a phenomenon which is almost unknown in Europe, though conditions should, on the face of them, make its appearance much more likely:—The Man with the Hammer.

One of the absurd slogans that one sees hanging up in the offices of the less reputable firms in America is:—"Sell your hammer and buy a horn."

This cryptic injunction means that the whole duty of man is to "bring forth butter in a lordly dish" and see whether it will melt in the mouths of his compatriots.

Now Mr. Mencken has not discarded the horn; he has stood resolute and fought for people who had even a spark of genius. He, and he alone, has put America on the literary map. Without his intervention, we might still be standing by the conclusions of "Art in America" which appeared in THE ENGLISH REVIEW in 1912, instead of preparing a series of articles to tell Europe of how the Lord has made those dry bones live.

But Mr. Mencken has not sold his hammer. Practically single-handed, and mostly by means of an organ of a kind which, in Europe, could not possibly play a serious tune, he has made himself universally dreaded by the literary faker, who abounds in America to an extent which is quite unthinkable even in the shoddiest circles of Fleet Street to-day.

From Edgar Allen Poe, Brann of the *Iconoclast*, to William Marion Reedy, of *The Mirror*, America has

been rather fortunate in possessing isolated Isaiahs. But of these Mr. Mencken is incomparably the most important. He has made his name dreadful to all literary and dramatic humbugs. His racy, cynical, exhilarating style compels the reader, and his contempt has been only the more deadly because of the good-humoured slang in which he couches it. The extent of his triumph may be gauged by the fact that he is writing in *Harper's*, the *Century*, and other former reactionary strongholds. Without declaring that his judgment is always impeccable, we can say that his critical acumen is at least equal to anything that we can show in Europe, and he has exercised his power with a decision and authority which is almost incomprehensible to people accustomed to the compromises of Fleet Street.

It is hardly too much to hope that his visit to Europe may be the beginning of the end of the flabbiness and half-heartedness of English criticism. He is a living witness to the fact that it is not necessary to acquiesce in the shoddy output of our literary linendrapers any longer.

Mr. Mencken's motto has been: first right, then upright, and then downright.

Our national fear of saying something about an author whom we may possibly meet at dinner the following week has destroyed our national standards of literature, and, despite the Puritans and tradesmen of America, she is actually forging ahead of us because of our lack of independent criticism.

"Consider one fact: the civilisation that kissed Maeterlinck on both cheeks, and Tagore perhaps even more intimately . . ."

That is typical of his smashing blow; may he lay about him heartily during his visit to Europe!