

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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The Engineer's Bookshelf

By Wilson R. Dumble

WALK LIKE A MORTAL

IN a warm and as charming a story of a boy's growing up that I have read recently, Dan Wickenden has written a splendid novel, probably one of the best new ones to appear in the early spring list. "Walk Like a Mortal," Mr. Wickenden's new novel, tells of the seventeenth year in the life of a lad, exposes his thoughts and lays bare his unhappy family life. It is a far more serious novel than Booth Tarkington's "Seventeen" which has recently been revived from the dusty shelves of time and put brilliantly on the screen with Jackie Cooper and a newcomer, Miss Betty Fields.

Mr. Wickenden is not new to the reading public, although this is only his second book. His publishers briefly inform me that he was born in Tyrone, Pennsylvania, and has spent most of his life on Long Island, living first in Flushing and then in Manhasset. They recall that he cheerfully started to collect rejection slips at the early age of fifteen, aiming high and sending his material to such magazines as "Harpers" and "Atlantic Monthly". At Amherst he specialized in English, and won highest honors for a thesis relating Laurence Sterne to Virginia Woolf. Although he published first in "Story" and had some articles appearing in "Stage" and "Vanity Fair", his first novel, "The Running of the Deer," did not appear until 1937. It was a well-told and a completely winning story, and surely heralded better and more to come.

Then, last month, Mr. Wickenden's "Walk Like a Mortal" appeared on the book shelves thus fulfilling the early promise of his first novel. Definitely now, Mr. Wickenden must be considered a mature and not merely a promising novelist. With a gift for realism and a sense of splendid novel construction, he has "arrived".

"Walk Like a Mortal" is the story of Gabe MacKenzie, age seventeen, the son of James and Margaret MacKenzie. For one whole year the reader watches along with Gabe the gradual crumbling of his family with a final crash in the divorce courts. It is a tragic story, yet not devoid of humor. James is a drab individual, a good husband, who is in the shirt business. Margaret has her own ideas about husbands. We see her at the restless age when any man other than her husband might interest her. In this particular case it happens to be one Charles Cobden, a delectante of only moderate income, yet enough that if he lives carefully he is not obliged to work. He dabbles in painting, drives an old but once elegant automobile, wears rather youthful but not extreme clothes, and knows what to say and when to say it.

During the summer months—the time is the 1920s and Gabe had been seventeen the previous February—we meet Gabe and his mother summering at an unpretentious cottage settlement in upstate New York. Staying at the nearby hotel is Charlie, and Margaret has not seen him for some twenty years when they were

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high school mates together. Friendship is renewed, Charlie comes to luncheon at the MacKenzie cottage, and he and Margaret take long rides in the country seeking places to put on canvas. Gabe is left alone at the cottage but he does not mind. He swims, plays tennis, cooks his own meals, and does the things that a normal boy of that age would do.

When September arrives Gabe and his mother pack up to return to the city, to their apartment, and to school. It is his senior year. He is looking forward to it, for his grades have been among the best in his class, and he has enjoyed his work on the school paper, on the scrub football team, and on the student senate. But Gabe sits by watching the divorce clouds gather.

The blow comes on Thanksgiving evening when Margaret announces to James that she is leaving him and going into the city to take a secretarial position. This she not only does, but also she rents an apartment in Greenwich Village and openly lives with Charlie Cobden, meeting and drinking and cavorting with his tinsled literary and artistic group of friends.

Gabe and his father go to live with Uncle Henry and Aunt May and their children after closing their apartment, and await results. The Christmas holidays come and go; Gabe fits beautifully into the new family life, wins additional honors at school, and makes new friends. But all of these accomplishments are not without a great struggle, a youthful struggle that is so finely handled and so carefully balanced by the author that the result is saddened perfection. Weary and sick of her chosen lot, Margaret returns to James to say that she is willing to return to him and to her son. Rightly enough James refuses the offer and Margaret leaves to seek a divorce and, at long last, marry Charlie.

It is a moving story, a story of a boy growing up under the most distasteful circumstances, a story of a boy turning despite circumstances into the best of young manhood, a lad learning to "walk like a mortal."

One of the most distressing chapters in the book comes when Gabe finally realizes that his mother is living with Charlie. It occurs on his eighteenth birthday when he meets her by appointment at Pennsylvania station, sees a matinee, has dinner at a good but

modest restaurant, and then goes to her apartment with her to meet some of her effete friends. There, in the bathroom, hanging on the back of the door, he spies a pair of pajamas with the initials C. C.

Yet, Gabe wins in the end, graduates in June from his high school with splendid grades and high admiration of his classmates, and plans to enter college the following September. "Walk Like a Mortal" is a glowing tale, rich in human emotions and genuine charm. William Morrow & Company, New York, \$2.50.

STEINBECK

Two cinema productions have recently appeared on Columbus movie house screens that deserve praise, both for intelligent transcription from the novels and for direction in Hollywood. I am referring to "The Grapes of Wrath" and to "Of Mice and Men", both made over from the extremely popular novels by John Steinbeck. With hesitation and even fear I saw "The Grapes", wondering just what Hollywood might do to that greatest novel of social consciousness to appear in recent years. But the plight of the Joads on their disastrous trek from Oklahoma to the fertile fields of California was beautifully handled. I was not disturbed by the fact that the novel ended on a more hopeful note than did the book. Some have objected to that feature; but personally I was rather delighted to see the remaining family members start north to get twenty days work in the green Salinas river valley. Much better, that is, probably, than to take them into the box car, as does the book, and there try to botch up some of those more or less revolting scenes in the last few pages of the novel.

Actually, "Of Mice and Men" was a winner with Lon Chaney, Jr., as the hulking half-witted Lennie and Burgess Meredith as the considerate George. Almost to the very letter Hollywood followed this novel with the intelligent direction the like of which reminds me of "The Informer" and the more recent "Goodbye, Mr. Chips".

Two plays that have appeared at the Hartman theatre during the season which is rapidly coming to a close have eventually reached Broadway, and it is interesting to note what the New York critics say about them.

In speaking of John Barrymore in "My Dear Children" which visited Columbus in November last and sailed onto Broadway on January 31, Mr. Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times relates in his review:

His voice has wonderful resonance and color when he especially wants to use it. He has an excellent figure. He uses his hands like a master of the craft. His eyes are burning. Best of all, he has the personal magnetism that electrifies a play and an audience at the same time and takes instant command of a whole theatre. In contrast with the Barrymore who dominated the theatre by memorable works twenty years ago, he is a ravaged figure now. But the fact remains that he can still act like a man whom the gods have gen-

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erously endowed and like a man who knows the art and the business of stage expression.

Mr. Woollcott Gibbs in *The New Yorker* gives the following information about "The Burning Deck" which opened at the Hartman several weeks ago for four performances before visiting New York:

"The Burning Deck," by Andrew Rosenthal, has been widely described as the sort of play that indicates its author will someday write a good one. Not only is this a patronizing form of criticism that I personally would find more irritating than a frank and open dead cat, but also, I am sorry to say, nothing that I saw during my brief visit to the Maxine Elliott could be taken to indicate anything of the kind. Mr. Rosenthal, of course, may well write a good play some day, but if there was any prophecy of it in "The Burning Deck," it was no more than a whisper, inaudible in seat G 1.
