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The Engineer's Bookshelf . . .

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

THE following article was broadcast by the janitor of this column over Station WOSU on Sunday, December 26, 1943:

This is Dumble speaking, Dumble speaking about Woolcott. You remember Woolcott; Alexander Woolcott. He was the Town Crier for NBC in the early Thirties; he was the raconteur who told his public where it could find Shangra-La, Mr. James Hilton's Shangra-La, not Mr. Roosevelt's; he was the drama critic who, with his Remington dipped in vitriol, reported the theatrical doings of Broadway for the New York Times; and in the spring of 1934, he was the author of a book called *While Rome Burns*. Of course, you recall Mr. Woolcott.

Mr. Woolcott died after a broadcast late one night last January, but from the tavern at the end of the world he is speaking to his reading public once again. Dealing with people and events of only yesterday, this time he calls his volume *Long, Long Ago*; or maybe, that is the title the Viking Press gave to the book. I do not know. In either case, *Long, Long Ago* is a good book, the kind of book you will want to keep on the night stand at the head of the bed, the kind of a book that you will take from your shelf when a visitor mentions something about Sarah Bernhart or Mrs. Pat Campbell or Lord Jeffrey Amherst or Kitty Cornell or Harpo Marx. It is likewise a kind of source book on the Halls-Mills murder case, the Elwell murder, the Lindbergh kidnapping; and it is the kind of book where if you are interested, you can discover what George Gershwin ate for luncheon one day at the Traymore Hotel in Atlantic City, or what Mr. Justice Holmes said to President Lincoln on a bleak cold winter morning back in 1864; or what Mr. H. C. Wells thinks of the vegetarianism of Mr. George Bernard Shaw. In fact, *Long, Long Ago* concerns itself with ships and shoes . . . and kings and cabbages. Although it might not be quite as entertaining as *While Rome Burns*, you will find it decidedly worth your time to read here and there, now and then, and finally, in the end, to begin at the beginning and finish it once more.

Woolcott has a way with him; at his best, he is near tops in the story-telling field. He knows where to begin; he knows where to end. He realizes that, in telling his story, certain incidents must be stressed and certain ones omitted. He realizes that, in order to gain his most glowing ef-

fect, he must arrange those incidents in a sure pattern, with a certain design, a colorful suspense. All these items about the technique of writing Mr. Woolcott knew, knew only too well . . . knew, and then with the aid of a dash of Angostura, did. The results are always astonishing, and frequently amazing. His nicely-turned sentences give the effect of being worked over to just the right degree. His paragraphs are the rare products of the easy-to-read writing, that kind of writing so difficult to achieve. And his finished product is just as stimulating as caviar and champagne.

In *Long, Long Ago*, the reader will not find anything as interesting as his dramatic review of Mr. R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* which appeared in *While Rome Burned*. Nor will he find anything as exciting and as full of suspense as his little murder story, *Moonlight Sonata*, also included in the *Rome* volume. Nor will he find anything as subtle as *Entrance Fee*, that delightful yarn of the romantic French soldier, who, with the financial aid of the men in his battalion, took French leave to make successful young love to a dashing Parisian actress. These three Woolcott bits probably will live in the pages of anthologies just as long as anthologies are collected out of the literary welter of progressing years. Nevertheless, the reader will find many interesting comments. Let us look at some of them. First, let me quote you from *Long, Long Ago*, a passage indicating what the author thought of *The Green Pastures*, by Mr. Marc Connelly, indicating what Mr. Woolcott believed "put the play over the footlights".

"Indeed, I think the fate of the play was decided once and for all ten minutes after the first curtain rose. Following the prologue in the Louisiana Sunday school, which served as a frame for the picture, we saw the festivities of the fish fry in heaven, heard the jubilation of the spirituals, caught the whole intended flavor of the Sunday-school picnic. Next we heard the voice of the coal-black Angel Gabriel dominating the gaiety with the most tremendous entrance cue ever written for an actor in the history of the stage.

"'Gangway,' he called out. 'Gangway for de Lawd God Jehovah!'

"And then we beheld him, de Lawd as ever was. Fatherly, benign, good: 'Is you been baptized?'

"All the dusky heads bent forward. 'Certainly, Lawd.'

"Again the question, this time a little sterner :
'Is you been baptized?'"

"The heads bent lower. 'Certainly, Lawd.'"

"Once more the question, this time in a voice compassionate, sheltering, full to the brim with loving solicitude: 'Is you been baptized?'"

"'Certainly, certainly, Lawd.'"

"Whereupon, with a look of ineffable benignity, Jehovah smiled upon his children, accepted an elegant cigar and said, 'Let de fish fry proceed.'"

"After that I think, there was no more doubt. But in that anxious moment, the fate of *The Green Pastures* did hang in the balance. One false note, even an insufficient note, at that point and the whole house of cards would have tumbled to the ground. But if the audience accepted this Jehovah, then the whole play, its idea, its idiom, its love, its very spirit would be accepted too."

Mr. Woolcott, when he dips into his past theatrical-going days, probably is at his best. Here, in part, is his account of a trip he made as a boy to the old Broad Street Theater in Philadelphia.

"Even as I write these lines, I am arranging (with my left hand) for seats for the first Boston performance of Helen Hayes and Maurice Evans in *Twelfth Night*. To that evening I reasonably look forward with anything like the hope and appetite that went with me to the old Broad Street Theater in Philadelphia on the night during the Spanish-American War when all the world was young and Nat Goodwin and Maxine Elliott were playing *Nathan Hale*. Why, the family seats for that performance had been reserved for weeks in advance. When the great week came I thought of nothing else, talked of nothing else. The other little boys at the Germantown Combined School who were *not* going to see *Nathan Hale* must have suppressed with real difficulty a powerful impulse to catch me at recess, take my cinnamon-bun away and beat me to a pulp. The great day itself dragged on, interminable. Then came the dressing up, the scrubbing behind the ears, the trip into town, the good long wait as the theater slowly filled and the subsiding murmur of many voices and programs as the lights in the auditorium died down. Then the sudden invocation of the glow at the footlights, and the curtain rose. For weeks thereafter I could hear her strangled sob as they took her from him on the night before the execution; for months I could see the quiet, erect figure, his hands tied behind him, standing under the dangling rope in the apple orchard at dawn. For months? For years. I can see that figure still."

On June 22, 1937, Mr. Woolcott wrote an article about Sir James M. Barrie. Since Sir James

had died the preceding Saturday in a nursing home in London, Mr. Woolcott subtitles his article "an obituary for the son of Margaret Ogilvy". You may recall that, during the three or four years prior to 1937, there had been a great thinning of the ranks among English men of letters: Sir John Galsworthy in January 1933, then Kipling, then G. K. Chesterton. Finally, in 1937, James M. Barrie.

In speaking of their entrances into another world after death, Mr. Woolcott has this to say about Chesterton and Barrie:

"The tavern at the end of the world. When it came Chesterton's own turn to die, it was my notion that if he was right there must have been great preparations afoot in that tavern. I seemed to see Mr. Dickens himself coming down to the desk and making a reservation. A good room, with a fireplace in it, please. And polish up the flagons. We're expecting a chap named Chesterton.

"The tavern at the end of the world. All last week they must have had word there that Barrie was coming. Surely there was much loitering around the door to welcome him. First and foremost of course Bobby Burns and the great Sir Walter too. And that other Scott of the Antarctic wastes. These I think and then—eager and charming and cordial—Robert Louis Stevenson. But the one the newcomer will most be wanting to see is none of these. She'll be waiting for him but holding back a little, peering from behind a pillar and much uplifted at all these great folk gathered to greet her son. Margaret Ogilvy. She's a proud woman this night."

Well, that was Alexander Woolcott saying au revoir to his good friend Sir James M. Barrie. I would not be too surprised if, on that windy and blustery morning last January, when Woolcott came waddling down the road to the tavern at the end of the world, it was Sir James himself who first greeted the new arrival. No doubt, Peter Pan was with him. Let us see; who else might have been there? Certainly Sarah Bernhart, dressed as L'Aiglou, still carrying that large bunch of fresh violets which she used in her death scene. Then, a pace or two away, stood Minnie Maddern Fiske. Nat Goodwin and Will Rogers also were nearby, I wager; and surely, surely out of those green pastures strolled one Richard Harrison; yes, de Lawd himself. All at the tavern at the end of the world.

We can be thankful that we have Mr. Woolcott's *Long, Long Ago*, even if it were an only yesterday that he wrote about.