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The Certain Hour

by James Branch Cabell

June, 1995 [Etext #288]

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THE  
CERTAIN HOUR

(Dizain des Poetes)

By  
JAMES BRANCH CABELL

"Criticism, whatever may be its pretensions, never does more than to define the impression which is made upon it at a certain moment by a work wherein the writer himself noted the impression of the world which he received at a certain hour."

NEW YORK  
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1916

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TO

ROBERT GAMBLE CABELL II

In Dedication of The Certain Hour

Sad hours and glad hours, and all hours, pass over;  
One thing unshaken stays:  
Life, that hath Death for spouse, hath Chance for  
lover;  
Whereby decays

Each thing save one thing:--mid this strife diurnal  
Of hourly change begot,  
Love that is God-born, bides as God eternal,  
And changes not;--

Nor means a tinsel'd dream pursuing lovers  
Find altered by-and-bye,  
When, with possession, time anon discovers  
Trapped dreams must die,--

For he that visions God, of mankind gathers  
One manlike trait alone,  
And reverently imputes to Him a father's  
Love for his son.

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A PRINCESS OF GRUB STREET  
THE LADY OF ALL OUR DREAMS  
"Ballad of Plagiary"

## BALLAD OF THE DOUBLE-SOUL

"Les Dieux, qui trop aiment ses faceties cruelles"  
PAUL VERVILLE.

In the beginning the Gods made man, and fashioned the  
sky and the sea,  
And the earth's fair face for man's dwelling-place, and  
this was the Gods' decree:--

"Lo, We have given to man five wits: he discerneth  
folly  
and sin;

He is swift to deride all the world outside, and blind  
to the world within:

"So that man may make sport and amuse Us, in battling  
for phrases or pelf,  
Now that each may know what forebodeth woe to his  
neighbor, and not to himself."

Yet some have the Gods forgotten,--or is it that  
subtler  
mirth  
The Gods extort of a certain sort of folk that cumber  
the earth?

For this is the song of the double-soul, distortedly  
two in one,--

Of the wearied eyes that still behold the fruit ere  
the seed  
be sown,  
And derive affright for the nearing night from the  
light  
of the noontide sun.

For one that with hope in the morning set forth, and  
knew never a fear,  
They have linked with another whom omens bother; and  
he whispers in one's ear.

And one is fain to be climbing where only angels have  
trod,  
But is fettered and tied to another's side who fears  
that  
it might look odd.

And one would worship a woman whom all perfections  
dower,  
But the other smiles at transparent wiles; and he  
quotes  
from Schopenhauer.

Thus two by two we wrangle and blunder about the  
earth,  
And that body we share we may not spare; but the Gods  
have need of mirth.

So this is the song of the double-soul, distortedly  
two  
in one,--



Of the wearied eyes that still behold the fruit ere  
the seed  
    be sown,  
And derive affright for the nearing night from the  
light  
    of the noontide sun.

#### AUCTORIAL INDUCTION

"These questions, so long as they remain  
with the Muses, may very well be unaccompanied  
with severity, for where there is no other end  
of contemplation and inquiry but that of  
pastime alone, the understanding is not  
oppressed; but after the Muses have given over  
their riddles to Sphinx,--that is, to practise,  
which urges and impels to action, choice and  
determination,--then it is that they become  
torturing, severe and trying."

From the dawn of the day to the dusk he toiled,  
Shaping fanciful playthings, with tireless hands,--  
Useless trumpery toys; and, with vaulting heart,  
Gave them unto all peoples, who mocked at him,  
Trampled on them, and soiled them, and went their way.

Then he toiled from the morn to the dusk again,  
Gave his gimcracks to peoples who mocked at him,  
Trampled on them, deriding, and went their way.

Thus he labors, and loudly they jeer at him;--  
That is, when they remember he still exists.

WHO, you ask, IS THIS FELLOW?--What matter names?  
He is only a scribbler who is content.

FELIX KENNASTON. The Toy-Maker .

## AUCTORIAL INDUCTION

WHICH (AFTER SOME BRIEF DISCOURSE OF FIRES AND FRYING-PANS) ELUCIDATES THE INEXPEDIENCY OF PUBLISHING THIS BOOK, AS WELL AS THE NECESSITY OF WRITING IT: AND THENCE PASSES TO A MODEST DEFENSE OF MORE VITAL THEMES.

The desire to write perfectly of beautiful happenings is, as the saying runs, old as the hills--and as immortal. Questionless, there was many a serviceable brick wasted in Nineveh because finicky persons must needs be deleting here and there a phrase in favor of its cuneatic synonym; and it is not improbable that when the outworn sun expires in clinkers its final ray will gild such zealots tinkering with their "style." Some few there must be in every age and every land of whom life claims nothing very insistently save that they write perfectly of beautiful happenings.

Yet, that the work of a man of letters is almost always a congenial product of his day and environment, is a contention as lacking in novelty as it is in the need of any upholding here. Nor is the rationality of that axiom far to seek; for a man of genuine literary genius, since he possesses a temperament whose susceptibilities are of wider area than those of any other, is inevitably of all people the one most variously affected by his surroundings. And it is he, in consequence, who of all people most faithfully and compactly exhibits the impress of his times and his times' tendencies, not merely in his writings--where it conceivably might be just predetermined affectation--but in his personality.

Such being the assumption upon which this volume is builded, it appears only equitable for the architect frankly to indicate his cornerstone. Hereinafter you have an attempt to depict a special temperament--one in essence "literary"--as very variously molded by diverse eras and as responding in proportion with its ability to the demands of a certain hour.

In proportion with its ability, be it repeated, since its ability is singularly hampered. For, apart from any ticklish temporal considerations, be it remembered, life is always claiming of this temperament's possessor that he write perfectly of beautiful happenings.

To disregard this vital longing, and flatly to stifle the innate striving toward artistic creation, is

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