

## A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

### DEUCES WILD IN THE SPRING FICTION

By Isabel Paterson

THE advance guard of novels of 1925 seem inclined to march in pairs, as if wanting the reassurance of company before facing the redoubtable indifference of the public. Not that they would exhibit any grave concern as to what one may think of them; they strive for insouciance, but the tentative note can be discerned. They neither admonish nor uplift, commenting aloofly upon the oddities of animate nature, especially that curious creature who calls himself Man. Life, they would say, is a queer business, but you must take it or leave it, for you can't stop it or change its course. The best thing, then, is to stand aside and smile.

In this chance haul of the dragnet, there are two satires, two family chronicles, a very remotely related brace of national or racial exhibits, and an odd one, an international exhibit.

We may as well swallow the bitter pill first, reserving the jam for consolation. But since Miss Macaulay's tonic is sugared with tolerant amusement, it goes down most easily. It is an antidote to Victorianism, containing a salutary reminder that we may have achieved a distinction without a difference in our Georgian emancipation. If the Victorians were self righteous, aren't we a little smug in our superiority to those benighted creatures?

The plot belongs to the great universal stock; Miss Macaulay helps herself to it gracefully. She premises that in 1855 there sailed from England a ship-

load of some forty orphan children of tender years, London waifs philanthropically destined for San Francisco under the ægis of a virtuous maiden lady of the Anglican persuasion, a clergyman's daughter. Miss Charlotte Smith had all the prejudices proper to her social status. A decent Scots-woman had been brought as a nurse. The ship's doctor was Irish, bibulous, Rabelaisian, and a Roman Catholic. The ship was wrecked in the lee of a fertile and uninhabited South Sea Island.

Seventy years later a rescue party arrived. They found that the orphans had thrived and multiplied, preserving in their island home an undiluted mid-Victorian atmosphere. Miss Smith, aged ninety eight, was a reduced but still majestic replica of the late dear Queen. The social, political, and economic problems of the tight little island had reproduced themselves with the same grotesque fidelity. If the microcosm is funny, the author implies, what of the original? And if they were funny, what of ourselves? How shall we look to our grandchildren? It is all done in good humor, with a touch of broad comedy for a high light in the distressing circumstances of Miss Smith's marriage. She had been deceived by the doctor; he had a wife in Ireland. Miss Smith never knew it until she had borne ten children in this bigamous union; and she kept the secret thereafter, reacting to her hidden shame by a more rigid respectability in law making. Illegitimacy she would not tolerate. On principle she was also a teetotaler, though she fuddled herself on palm wine with great dignity, calling

it fruit juice prescribed for her health. It is excellent satire, and if to youthful readers it seems inapposite, that is because they can't visualize the object. Their elders will enjoy it.

Aldous Huxley aims at the ultra-moderns, and feels no call to be amiable or even squeamish. He calls a spade a Freudian symbol of the otherwise unmentionable. His title, "Those Barren Leaves", is aptly descriptive. The members of the house party gathered by Mrs. Aldwinkle in her Italian villa are decadent, inutile creatures, bored and a trifle vicious. There are two exceptions, by way of contrast. Mrs. Aldwinkle, aged fifty, thinks of herself as a *grande amoureuse* and the presiding genius of a salon. Her parasites and victims make love, each after his or her nature, and talk endlessly. They comprise Miss Thriplow, a smart young lady novelist; Mr. Calamy, a wealthy dilettante; Mr. Cardan, an old flame of the hostess's in pursuit of a feeble-minded heiress; and the intellectual Mr. Chelifer, vainly pursued by Mrs. Aldwinkle. Mrs. Aldwinkle's pretty niece Irene finds her fit mate in Lord Hovenden. These two simple, almost simpleminded, youngsters are a considerable relief from the others. But it would be irrelevant to complain that the whole book doesn't get anywhere. It isn't meant to. It is a gesture of disgust and contempt, toward a lunatic world which the author does not deem worth setting right. Mr. Huxley's aunt, the late Mrs. Humphry Ward, would disapprove thoroughly of her nephew's work. Action and reaction are equal; perhaps he is an inevitable concomitant of Mrs. Ward. But his book is not for dainty feeders; only those who relish their novels and their game "high" will like it.

In "The Matriarch" Miss Stern accepts the universe. She presents a

panorama stretching over almost a century, but focused on the figure of a gorgeous, eccentric, autocratic old lady. To get so much into one volume requires a perilous process of foreshortening. All the same, it is a fine rich jumbled hamper Miss Stern has packed. One is willingly subjugated by old Madame Anastasia Rakonitz, chief-tainness of a far spreading Jewish clan noted for its masterful womenkind and its straight Greek noses. Disraeli sprang from just such a brilliant, mercurial strain as this. I believe he had a grandmother very like Anastasia. They are the kind of Jews who form a yeasty element in the countries of their adoption, who make an adventure of business, a business of art, and an art of living. Their essential stability consists in their strong family feeling; they rise and fall and rise again together, so tightly interlocked that an outsider pitchforked among them comes near to suffocation. One could pick flaws, but the main point is that "The Matriarch" is a decidedly likable book.

What is called English family feeling, and exemplified in Mr. Powys's "Duc-dame", is quite another matter. It doesn't really pertain to the family at all, but to the property. Thus the Ashovers must continue, that Ashover House may be populated. They personify the feudal principle of mortmain — the dead hand has directed their lives. Though Rook Ashover loved Netta Page, he dared not marry her, for she could not bear him children. He might even take her home as his mistress — never as his wife. Manifest destiny was embodied in his cousin Lady Ann, whose breeding gave her no shame nor scruple in compelling him to his duty. When he had provided a son and heir, his taking off was of slight consequence. A fatalistic atmosphere envelops the story from

beginning to end. Of itself, it is strong; but if the least ray of humor or modernity be allowed to touch its gloomily intense fabric, it becomes anachronistic, almost absurd. Nevertheless one must admire it as a sustained, consistent effort.

Ladislas Reymont's four volume epic of Polish rural life, "The Peasants", is a study of earthbound souls. It won for its author the 1924 Nobel Prize. It is integrated about a very ancient plot, that of "Phædra". Boryna, a small landowner, took for his second wife the prettiest of the village girls, Yagna. She was already attracted by Boryna's son, Antek, though he too was married. Antek's reciprocal passion led to a violent quarrel with his father. Thus far the tale was unfolded in the first volume, "Autumn". "Winter", just issued, brings the unnatural struggle to another climax of despair.

Antek and Yagna could not be kept apart. Antek's wife and old Boryna made common cause against the lawless lovers. The father came near to murdering his son and his young wife, by setting fire to the barn in which they met secretly. Antek was driven into sullen outlawry. Natural ties reasserted themselves when the father was injured in a contest with the local nobility over communal forest rights. Antek rushed to his father's aid, but the old man was severely injured, perhaps fatally so. At the close of the second volume, Yagna seems likely to receive the full punishment for her own sin and that of her paramour. The narrative can hardly work out to any happy ending.

A novel of great elemental force, it is occasionally overstrained. The author piles on the agony, rubs in the impression of the dirt and dumb ignorance of the peasants, makes nature not only

inimical but malicious and filthy. Even the clouds become "a black seething flood of squalor and grime". Still, it is an achievement in the grand style, a true epic.

Irving Bacheller is better at writing mildly fictionized history than Jeremiads against the younger generation. There are some quite charming pages, transcripts of wilderness scenes and pioneer domestic interiors, in "Father Abraham". And luckily, there isn't much moral indignation. Mr. Bacheller can make allowances for the sins of the fathers; it is the unripe grapes in the vineyard of the children which set his teeth on edge. A reminiscent mellowness pervades the pages of this Civil War romance, in which Abraham Lincoln figures as protagonist of the rising greatness of America.

The plot is certainly historical, not to say antique. Young Randall Hope, a New Englander by birth and middle westerner by preference, loved Nancy Thorn, daughter of a proud southern family of slave holders. The Civil War reared a red barrier between them. In the course of four weary years, Nancy was persuaded that her lover had been killed. She married a southern suitor. There wouldn't have been any happy ending if Mr. Bacheller had not commissioned a sharpshooter to pick off Nancy's husband on his wedding day. So the widowed bride came to Randall's arms honorably. It is a very arbitrary proceeding, but old fashioned moralists are apt to be high-handed. This, of course, is a very brief summary; there are many excursions and alarums, glimpses of historic incidents, and sketches of notable figures woven into the narrative with passable skill.

Sir Philip Gibbs has lately expressed a defiant pride in being classed as a journalist. "The Reckless Lady"

shows no evidence of a change of front. In it Sir Philip again surveys mankind from Monte Carlo to Grand Rapids, Michigan, with the facility and verve of a trained reporter. It is a travelogue of Europe, England, and America, the latter viewed approvingly through a Pullman window. All the catchwords of 1924 are caught in it. An international marriage furnishes the climax of the wandering story. Sylvia Fleming, daughter of a declassified English lady living on the Riviera, after various vicissitudes found a safe haven with Edward P. Hillier, heir of a Grand Rapids furniture factory. Afterward, she came near repeating her mother's mistake by running away from her too correct young husband; but thought better of it, and finally adapted herself to her new allegiance. It is amusing to observe how, in the lighter sort of English fiction, the rich American has taken the place of the long lost uncle, for the purpose of paying off mortgages and generally pensioning the poor aristocrats. Some sort of fairy godmother they must have, apparently. Sir Philip draws a harsh indictment against his countrymen, showing so many of them as incompetents, parasites, or arrogant snobs. One would be sorry for Edward P. Hillier, if he were a little more real. This is a well intentioned tale, making up in cordiality what it lacks in distinction.

Orphan Island. By Rose Macaulay. Boni and Liveright.

Those Barren Leaves. By Aldous Huxley. George H. Doran Company.

The Matriarch. By G. B. Stern. Alfred A. Knopf.

Ducdame. By John Cowper Powys. Doubleday, Page and Company.

The Peasants: Winter. By Ladislav St. Reymont. Alfred A. Knopf.

Father Abraham. By Irving Bacheller. Bobbs-Merrill Company.

The Reckless Lady. By Sir Philip Gibbs. George H. Doran Company.

## IBANEZ WRITES A BOOK

By Alan Rinehart

IT was in September that word came to Madrid from Paris, in the foreign editions of several American newspapers, that Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, Spain's most noted literary light of the present day, was about to dethrone the king, reorganize the country nearer Trotsky's heart's desire, and all by a subtle propaganda. The propaganda had to be subtle, for Ibáñez announced it was to be dropped from airplanes, and he did not want anyone, outside the king, to be hurt.

As a journalist I was delighted, and asked Ambassador Moore to send the clippings to the king; he presented them on his next visit to the palace and came back laughing. Although he would never tell me what happened, I learned from a Spanish friend later that His Majesty had read them through hastily, smiled, and remarked:

"Ah! Ibáñez must be writing another book!"

Evidently he was, for here it is, bearing the title "Alfonso XIII Unmasked". One can only say for it that it is well done, which means as a piece of writing, not as propaganda. It was only natural that the king should have resented Ibáñez's proposal to exploit him. Others, like Maurice Hewlett and George Barr McCutcheon, have done well by their kings, using them for their qualities of courage and romance, and but seldom for their villainy. But there are royalties and royalties. Ibáñez himself makes the choice when he heads his last chapter: "The King Must Go!"

Through the official channels I forwarded to the king a message that any reply he cared to make would be cabled at once, but he sent word that he wished to make none. Then un-