

## A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

### LITTLE LIVES OF GREAT MEN

By Dorothea Lawrance Mann

**L**IVES of great men have a way of reminding us how fortunate one is never to be the likely subject of a biography. To write memoirs oneself would be different, though of course the most interesting things never can be told. Even to be at the mercy of one's friends—without the opportunity to bluepencil or suggest—is a terrifying thought. To be sent out upon the stage not in the poor trappings you have been able to fashion for yourself, but as you are seen through someone else's eyes, is a consideration to bid one pause on the very threshold of a public career. A biography is a perilous undertaking—for the subject of it. No matter how conscientious the biographer, he can see his subject only through the medium of his own nature.

Is it not significant that a biography of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus should appear entitled "A Greater than Napoleon", when Napoleon was just trying his first flights some two thousand years after the battle of Zama? Yet here is the mighty Roman vouched for by the little Corsican! It is hard indeed for the present not to show its condescension toward the past!

In our day fiction and biography have drawn close to each other. I suspect that "the new biography" owes more than it will ever admit to the biographical novel. Certainly there are times when fiction and biography intersect. When it comes to

autobiography, it is fairly certain that the only really good writers of it are good story tellers! Plenty of people seem to take a morbid delight in confessing their sins in this manner, but whether they can tell the truth is another matter.

More often than not, as in the case of these memoirs of Catherine II, out of their own mouths self chroniclers assassinate their greatness. As an historical document Catherine's autobiographical fragments are interesting, and to the biographer the facts of the Empress's life they contain must be important. On the other hand, though we may have abandoned the old heroic ideal of the Semiramis of the North with her three hundred lovers, this weeping girl, preyed upon by the Empress Elizabeth and her minions, is a pathetic and disappointing figure. There is little here to suggest the woman who could murder her own husband and seize his throne. Biographies should leave us some illusions, and this Catherine is neither dangerous nor great.

Catherine lacks the elements of a showman. She could learn a lot from our other autobiographer, Mr. P. T. Barnum. It might be interesting to know what he would have done with her adventurous career! In her narrative are too many tears and scoldings, and the portrait of the inadequacies of Peter III is so convincing that one suspects her of trying to influence the jury. This Grand Duke gets his girl bride to lock the door that he may play with his toys, and he openly exults over his accession to the throne on the very day of the Empress Eliza-

beth's death. We would almost like this foolish Peter to know that the girl he ignored could stamp him out of existence and send her name hurtling to the four quarters of the earth. It might at least have earned her his respect.

Mr. Barnum in contrast knows far too well how to advertise himself before the public. He not only wrote his own story but he sold it himself. All the time he is intent on proving to you what a fine fellow he is. Even when he confesses his humbugs he is suggesting quite plainly that it is something after all to be able to fool the American people. And he never neglects an opportunity — along with his accounts of Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind and the American Museum he tells you the secret of how to make money and how he fooled the public, and with an equally naive gesture he shows you his press.

These four biographies, of Scipio Africanus, Balzac, Tchekhov, and Thomas Paine, have this in common: that they are written, not to strip away false greatness, but to settle the laurels more firmly on deserving brows. The first three men can lay claim to genius, and Paine is not without elements of greatness. The Tchekhov is a collection of reminiscences of the great man by his friends, together with some hitherto unpublished fragments. The Tchekhov and the Balzac plainly are little books about great men. They add little, even if they do not detract. The Paine biography, on the other hand, and the biography of Scipio Africanus are interpretative if not creative works. One is at least at the right end of the telescope.

Paine is one of the few of his sex who can truthfully plead to being greatly misunderstood. His head may be still unbowed but it is distinctly

bloody. How should it fail to be, when Gouverneur Morris as representative of the American people whom Paine had served in their own war for independence allowed him to languish eleven months in a French prison, where he had been cast when he failed to see that a wholesale murder of the aristocracy was legitimate warfare! As late as the days of our twenty sixth president that gentlemen, never reticent about his opinions, referred to Paine as "a filthy little Atheist". The term carried the same sort of accuracy as the nomenclature of the Holy Roman Empire, for Paine was elegant, certainly taller than Roosevelt, and not an atheist. An Englishman by birth, Thomas Paine came to this country, served in the Continental Army, and in the darkest hour of the war stiffened the spirit of the army with his pamphlet on "Common Sense". He did to be sure criticize the Bible in "The Age of Reason", but he wrote in the very shadow of the guillotine "The Rights of Man" — a classic in our own as well as in a preceding day.

The nearest to great biography of any of these books is that of Scipio Africanus — despite its patronizing title. It lifts the great Roman from the mists of antiquity, and shows him possessed not only of military genius but of a statesmanship from which the modern world could learn much. It was Scipio who volunteered to command the campaign in Spain when Hannibal was already ravaging Italy and Rome's generals were in despair. After his victorious campaign in Spain he opposed the entire Roman Senate, insisting that Rome must now wage an offensive war. When they refused him an army by public authority, he managed to raise one of volunteers, trained them in Sicily, and carried the

war into Africa. The test of his strategy lay in the fact that when great Carthage had sued for peace, he imposed such generous terms of peace that Hannibal himself demanded that his country accept them gratefully. He laid the foundation of the policy which made Rome greatest — the policy of making always a better and securer peace. It was the prosperity and prestige of Rome he sought, and vindictiveness he felt only engendered another war. The moderation of his terms to Carthage at the close of the Second Punic War, compared with the terms of the Peace of Versailles, is none too good a recommendation for the Christian Era.

There are many drawbacks to being a great man, and not the least are the biographies. It is easier to render a little man interesting than a great man great. There are not many Lytton Stracheys in a generation, and Strachey made his most flattering success with a dull German woman. Perhaps there should be a conspiracy of silence about these great men. Certainly only Scipio, the far off Roman, seems to retain the habiliments of greatness — and he was nourished on the formidable Roman virtues!

Memoirs of Empress Catherine II. Selected, edited, and translated from the German by Katharine Anthony. Alfred A. Knopf.

Struggles and Triumphs, or The Life of P. T. Barnum. Written by Himself. Edited with an introduction by George S. Bryan. Alfred A. Knopf.

Anton Tchekhov: Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences. Translated and edited by S. S. Koteliensky. George H. Doran Company.

Balzac. By René Benjamin. Translated by J. F. Scanlan. Alfred A. Knopf.

Thomas Paine, Prophet and Martyr of Democracy. By Mary Agnes Best. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

A Greater Than Napoleon: Scipio Africanus. By Captain B. H. Liddell Hart. Little, Brown and Company.

## EUGENICALLY SPEAKING

By Will Cuppy

IT has long been evident to thinking men and women that mankind must be surpassed, or at least pretty thoroughly revised and improved. We all hope that as time goes on mankind will snap out of its present ways, become less of a general pest, and develop a number of the attributes appropriate to a truly worthwhile species. That this hope is not just so much blah seems to be indicated by "The Next Age of Man", Albert Edward Wiggam's latest gift to the reading public.

Mr. Wiggam states: "There are, here and there, people who are naturally good, naturally sane, healthy, intelligent and long-lived. These people are naturally happy and naturally civilizable. I believe that through the use of the new instrumentalities of science these people are going, in the course of no great time, to constitute the main body of the population." This thesis he defends with an imposing outlay of erudition and dialectic, great moral fervor and liberal quotations from research workers in the field of the social sciences. The work might well be called the current bible of eugenics.

Since, as the author rightly asserts, "practically all questions are eugenical questions, all happenings are eugenical happenings", the scope of the work is anything but small. The world and all it contains or may contain is Mr. Wiggam's oyster, especially in re genes, hormones, prohibition, disease, war, birth control, reproduction, heredity and environment. The heredity-environment problem, over which so many readers and writers have gone stark, staring mad, is so handled as to illuminate some of the dark places for the layman and at the same time con-