

Books and Affairs

BY THE EDITORS



NO less an authority than Colonel Lawrence says of "Arabia Deserta" (Boni & Liveright) that "the book has no date and can never grow old." In a sense it is not so much a book as a world. Charles Montagu Doughty, though he lived only two years among the Bedouins, so caught the character of them and of their land that there is nothing for later travelers to do but to note the few unimportant changes which have taken place in northern Arabia during the generation which has passed since Mr. Doughty first visited there. In his record, experts agree, the whole of the desert stands revealed: its landscape, its antiquities, its various tribes of men, their look, their speech, their minutest customs. As nearly, perhaps, as any single man has ever done, this alien poet, with his words and maps and pictures, has compacted and distilled a country into what may hardly seem a work of art at all. And yet, in a still more striking sense, "Arabia Deserta" is essentially a triumph of art. If it took Mr. Doughty two years to make his journeys, it took him ten years to write his book. Many men might have come back safely from such adventures, perilous as they were; few men indeed could have written thus. Even a new style was invented for the narrative,

as a new font of type might have been cast. No journalism remains in the language. It is lifted above the changes of stylistic fashion and becomes so noble and universal a medium that the quotations constantly being worked into it from Arabic poets or from the Hebrew Scriptures melt into its diction and its rhythms without disturbing them. Consequently, "Arabia Deserta" seems at first a mannered book and it never becomes an easy book to read; but this difficulty, instead of irritating, only serves to fix the attention upon the matter. The movement is as masterly as the style. From the first sentence to the last the story marches, apparently unhindered by the wilderness of explanations which have to be made and which are brought in so naturally that they seem no wilderness. Hundreds of characters appear, are etched with a few words, and go, leaving unforgettable images in the memory. Hundreds of strange Arab words appear, giving a rich color to the tale, and yet so artfully introduced that a careful reader might almost learn Arabic from this one book. And besides accuracy and style and structure, there is in "Arabia Deserta" the great quality of wisdom, deep and shrewd, concerning the whole range of human life as a noble poet sees it among an ancient people. C. V. D.

§ 2

Biography, lately threatening to become the most popular of the literary types now current in the United States, tries every method. "The Days of a Man" (World Book Company), by David Starr Jordan, owes its value almost entirely to its raw materials. Mr. Jordan has been a great scientist, an eminent teacher, and a courageous upholder of the good causes of peace and international justice, and in his book he has conscientiously assembled the records, sixteen hundred pages of them, of his doings and his friendships. But either his sense of duty or his artistic limitations allowed him to be satisfied with his raw materials. They are admirable, but the book is dull. At the other extreme is "Escapade" (Seltzer), concerned with a single brief period in the life of Evelyn Scott, then an unknown young woman living with her husband and, eventually, her child in a Brazilian exile. She was, most of the time, sick and desperate. Her nerves jangled as angrily out of tune as if she had been a character in one of her own later novels. The wonder is that she survived such thrusts of pain. There is no doubt, however, that she survives in her book. It is so vivid and intense that the whole picture of her suffering comes up again, of the discomforts she endured, of the fools who bored her. As she did not then reflect, so there is little evidence of reflection in her story. It is a mere chronicle of nerves, ending in delirium, but the nerves are chronicled with the sure touch of a subtle art. "Stephen Crane" (Knopf), by Thomas Beer, is reflective and analytical, a study of the national temper in Crane's day as well as a brilliant representation

of Crane himself. Mr. Beer is sophisticated, civilized, contemptuous of the sentimental days upon which his hero fell. That hero in this handling becomes the terrible infant of the end of the century, asking dangerous questions at decorous moments, flinging tradition over his athletic shoulders, promoting a certain ruthless honesty to a high place among the literary virtues, and thereby instigating the naturalism which has increasingly dominated the schools of fiction since his time. Rarely does such a man of genius fare so happily with his first biographer. In "Midwest Portraits" (Harcourt, Brace) Harry Hansen has undertaken to do at first hand what there will be many future literary historians to thank him for: to set forth the daily walks and conversations of the men and women who at present make Chicago a literary capital. As a critic Mr. Hansen is not here at his best; he cannot resist an occasional temptation now to lift the trombone to the zenith, now to pull out the unnecessary tremolo. But in his personal sketches he is excellent. His minor figures all stand erect; his major figures, Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, Ben Hecht, dance and flare with life. The impetus which has been given to biographical writing by Lytton Strachey becomes particularly clear in "Strenuous Americans" (Boni & Liveright), by R. F. Dibble. His characters are as challengingly diverse as those of "Eminent Victorians." Jesse James, Admiral Dewey, Brigham Young, Frances E. Willard, James J. Hill, P. T. Barnum, Mark Hanna—even to list them in one table of contents is to utter an ironical commentary upon the civilization of which these strange bed-fellows are representative. The treat-

ment is in keeping with the selection. Mr. Dibble stands caustically aloof, neither enthusiastic whitener of sepulchers nor a devil's advocate. He is, however, nearer the advocate than the enthusiast. If Mr. Strachey slays folly, Mr. Dibble kills fools. His hand is relatively heavy, his blows include thumps and kicks no less than stabs. The present satirical age will find his worthies drawn very much to their taste; any age would enjoy the rough comic force with which they are portrayed.

C. V. D.

§ 3

All the characters of Willa Cather's novels are to some extent pioneers, liberated by the open world in which they live or defeated if their world closes round them. Marian Forrester in "A Lost Lady" (Knopf) is defeated by the very openness of her world, or, rather, by what for others might be openness, though it is not for her. What career has this exquisite lady in her narrow village on the Nebraska plains, bound to an aging and invalid husband, surrounded by neighbors who none of them know how to value her and her capacities? In a somewhat earlier day she might have found an outlet for her energies in the labor of her hands; in a somewhat later day she might have found it easier to go elsewhere to a more diversified community; in the Sweet Water of her day she stifles. Unable to live without love, and finding none worthy of her, she declines to lower planes, as if she were not aware, or were aware too late, that no love at all is better than unworthy loves. She does not in the end come to any melodramatic downfall, but she is lost none the less, because she has drifted away

on the tide of vulgarity against which she was designed to struggle. The theme which Miss Cather has here chosen is universal, and her art is worthy of it. The book is slight, but strong; unadorned, but full of grace; easy, but sure; clear-eyed, but pitiful. It has the defect that Ivy Peters, the ugly character of the story, is now a fiend and now a snake, not quite convincingly varying from one to the other. The other persons of the drama, however, are three-dimensional, unmistakable. "A Lost Lady" is more than a document, more than a satire, more than a moment of vision; it is a little masterpiece well begun and thoroughly achieved.

Then the season has other novels not to be overlooked. Elinor Wylie in "Jennifer Lorn" (Doran) tells a romantic story in a style which is exquisite enamel. Jennifer, married to her marvelous dilettante, visits the London of Horace Walpole, the Paris of Beaumarchais, the Calcutta of Warren Hastings, and the Shiraz of a most unchristian potentate through whom she comes to a sad end. But what does the story matter? The charm of this lovely novel comes from its dainty erudition, its polished surface, its faultless rhythm, its unfailing irony. Though it is all artifice, it is artificial with the steel and velvet graces of Congreve and Watteau. By comparison Ludwig Lewisohn's "Don Juan" (Boni & Liveright) resembles a bare sword in the hand of a fatal duelist. The book is a plea for more sane and more decent divorce laws. Lucien Curtis, the protagonist, lives in the narrative exclusively to suffer from the laws he faces and to plead for better. For this reason he has few of the more convincing colors of veri-

similitude, as have his wife, who is sheer senseless resistance to his desire, and his beloved, who is sheer passive acceptance of it. This reduction of the characters almost to points of view in the argument makes the argument as clear as if Swift were writing it. If love is the true tie of marriage, then, when love has gone, there is no marriage left, and the law which enforces it is tyranny. The question is whether Mr. Lewisohn has not made his argument too clear. With more human substance in their make-up, his characters, though their plight would possibly be less simple, would carry even more weight with the unpersuaded. But as to the abstract strength and intensity of the argument in "Don Juan" there can be no question. Something of the same abstract simplicity appears in Floyd Dell's "Janet March" (Knopf). His Janet stands in his mind, pretty clearly, as the embodiment of a type—the very modern woman. His Roger Leland is little less clearly a type also—the very modern man. Mr. Dell, more careful of the type than of the single life, traces first Janet and then Roger through preliminary adventures and then directs them to each other's arms. The structure of the book thus has a schematic quality which is matched too often in the characterization. Janet advances to her destiny through the coils of love and work with a swift reasonableness which does not always convince. Even the very modern woman receives wounds as well as gives them in the pursuit of a free life across the obstacles which convention has laid down. But though "Janet March" is so schematic, it is very fully documented. The canvas is broad, the background painstakingly filled in. Here are all the

facts, carefully arranged, about the "younger generation." The difficulty is that the novel, for all its indispensable material, half suggests that singular anomaly, a pamphlet extra-illustrated. Cyril Hume's "The Wife of the Centaur" (Doran), though it may be taken as a document on that same "younger generation," does not take itself as one. It is as purely lyrical as a gifted poet can make it. Jeffrey, the Centaur, comes down, somewhat, but not quite, symbolically, from his high mountain pasture in Connecticut, learns new paces at Yale and others in New York, loves, is broken-hearted, cries out with a disturbing eloquence, marries, rejoices in love and beauty, regrets during certain dreadful hours, and settles himself to yoke and harness and lawful furrow. Do such gilded youths, such rosy girls, as crowd these pages exist anywhere else? At least they exist in the perennial legends of nymphs and fauns, of the blithe playmates of pastoral romances, of the glittering characters of polite comedy; and they are hardly to be put to more rigorous examinations into their reality than a legend calls for. Mr. Hume has added some lovely creatures, in American costumes, to the world of romance. C. V. D.

§ 4

It is not often that the reprint of a work fifty-eight years old is a literary event. Honest reporting must so describe the recent republication of the six volumes of "Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature" (Boni & Liveright), by Georg Brandes. This library of criticism was originally published in 1872-75 in Denmark. The English translation of these books appeared in 1901-05. For several

years this significant body of literary and social criticism has been out of print in this country. These volumes deal essentially with the literature of the period between the two revolutions of 1789 and 1848. The revolt represented by the French Revolution overflowed the French frontiers and touched all of Europe, registering particular effects in England and Germany. That revolt was aimed against the classic temper and the sense of a static society which had dominated the thought and writing of the eighteenth century; it lifted the banner of a dynamic, creative, questioning, progressive age—the nineteenth century. The most vivid record of this movement of mind is not to be found in the dull monographs of those “scientific” historians who, as Lord Acton put it, “take their meals in the kitchen” of history, but in the creative literature of the period. It is this literature which Georg Brandes attempts critically to assess in these volumes. They are a magnificent adventure in comparative literature, but they are more than that; they deal with those writers and books which are the most compact and explicit expressions of the intellectual and spiritual ferment of the nineteenth century. Similar ferments are stirring in the international life of our own time, and these volumes, aside from their value to the literary specialist, throw light upon many issues of contemporary affairs. G. F.

§ 5

Clearly the white race is not suffering for want of press agents. In his “Race and National Solidarity” (Charles Scribner’s Sons), Charles Conant Josey joins the ranks of Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard in

the now popular attack upon democracy and internationalism in the interest of neo-aristocracy and a benevolent exploitation of the world by the white race. The practical implication of the philosophy of this new school of racialists was aptly hit off by “Uncle Henry” in one of his papers in a recent issue of “Collier’s,” when he said: “Y’see, Barney, the Nordic stock is distinctly a police stock. Every Anglo-Saxon comes into the world with a helmet on his head an’ a club in his hands, an’ his idea of complete happiness is to don square-toed shoes an’ walk a beat some distance away. The further the better, for authority is somethin’ that ’s got to be exercised a long ways off to get any real good out of it. . . . No matter what we ’re doin’, how pressin’ our own affairs, we ’re never too busy to drop everything when the glad news comes that another backward people has been discovered. The tests for backwardness are explicit. Do they speak another language when they might speak English? Do they know the meanin’ of chattel mortgages, mechanics’ liens, an’ unemployment crises? Are their habits different from ours? What is nervous prostration, an’ when? Do they wear derby hats? Above all, are they *happy*? That’s the thing of prime importance, for the Anglo-Saxon knows that happiness is a state of sin, or so close to it as to indicate a primitive mind.”

This satiric extravaganza does not, of course, describe the theory of the racialists, but it does indicate accurately the practical implications of their philosophy. The Grants, the Stoddards, and the Joseys are doing now for the whole white race what Houston Stewart Chamberlain and

Bernhardi did for the Germans before the war. They are doing a valuable service in so far as they are shattering the myth of the melting-pot. As a specific against the emotionalists who think democracy and internationalism must rest on an indiscriminate inter-marriage of all classes and all races, these latter-day racialists are amply worth their bed and board. But the tragic tendency of the literature they are producing is to give an apparently scientific mandate to a new social and racial bigotry. Its authors are the intellectual high-priests of Ku Kluxism and the advance agents of a new imperialism. If they were statesmen instead of pamphleteers, they would see that the indisputable facts of racial differences do not mean that the Nordics must turn themselves into a vast racial Mussolini, benevolently bossing the planet, but that the problem is to work out the ways and means of administering the world on the basis of the unique contributions that the widely differing races are fitted to make to the common life of the world.

In refreshing contrast to these adventures in short-sighted racialism, is "The New Decalogue of Science" (Bobbs-Merrill), by Albert Edward Wiggam, who is wholesomely skeptical of the fictions and wish-fancies that cluster around democracy and internationalism, who follows the findings of the new biology and the new psychology as ardently as any of the racialists, but who transmutes the imperial edicts of science into a new humanism which achieves realism without degenerating into mere swash-buckling egotism either of class or of race. This book is based upon an article which

appeared in this magazine about two years ago. It is cast in the form of an open letter from the biologist to the statesman. It gives the five warnings and the ten commandments which the author believes science has laid before politics. Many minor faults may be found in this book, but it blazes a trail away from the swaggering, anti-social, jingoistic sort of pseudo-scientific writing in which the hasty generalizers have been indulging during the last few years.

G. F.

§ 6

While we are speaking of sound and unsound attitudes on the part of writers, it is fortunate that there lies at hand a singularly clear and suggestive book on sound and unsound attitudes on the part of all of us as we play our several parts in the making of the opinion of our time. In "Conservatism, Radicalism, and Scientific Method" (Macmillan), A. B. Wolfe has written a needed essay on attitudes. Conservatism and radicalism, scientific objectivity and popular sentimentalism, democracy and class interest, individualism and socialism are the four basic conflicts that underlie contemporary affairs. These four conflicts are here clearly analyzed. Every conservative in America should read this book in order to find out why he is conservative; every radical should read it to find out why he is radical. It is a clear and understandable plea for objective thinking, which is the only thing that can save us from the wasteful pull-and-haul between conservatives and radicals, a contest that is less a warfare over real issues than a clash of temperaments.

G. F.