

A Russian aristocrat and scholar, who now endorses the Revolution, proclaims that the ex-surrealist, Louis Aragon, has just written a literary masterpiece.

ARAGON Arrives

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SIX or seven years ago a leader of French literature told me, 'There are two geniuses in French literature today—and one of them is Aragon.' His estimate was obviously exaggerated, but it indicates the important position that Aragon, the surrealist, occupied in the 'inner circles.' His was a high place on the ladder of literary snobbery, and, though he remained unknown to the public at large, his colleagues looked upon him as a master. He therefore had something to lose when he broke off his relationship with bourgeois literature, and the fact that he was able to make that break attests to his literary manliness.

The transformation of Aragon, the surrealist, into a proletarian writer has international significance, for it was not only a thorough reconstruction of the man and the worker but of the artist. The fact that Aragon was able and willing to undergo this metamorphosis proves how honest and

powerful a revolutionist he is. Having killed one artist within himself and found another, who in no way resembles the first, he has demonstrated his great creative power.

Les Cloches de Bâle [Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1934] is an important stage in Aragon's creative biography. After he quit surrealism, he wrote only poems, most of which have been collected in the book entitled *Hourra—l'Oural*. But Aragon was never primarily a poet and should not be judged by his poetic compositions.

Les Cloches de Bâle is the first part of a chronicle dealing with French society just before, during, and immediately after the Imperialist War. As we read this novel we should remember that it is only the beginning of a larger canvas. Some situations, which may appear unjustified in the light of the first part alone, will later find their solution. The novel is constructed on several planes that hardly

ever meet. Yet this apparent discreteness is essentially different from what we find in Dos Passos, in whose work the development of the story along different lines that meet only by chance reflects the artistic attitude of the author, who sees the chaos of the bourgeois world but has not yet found an artistic expression suitable to his political understanding of the struggle for the proletarian revolution. Aragon is a Communist writer whose artistic world-view is permeated with his political understanding of history. He sees the imperialist organization of bourgeois society with all its contradictions and, at the opposite pole, the organization of the revolutionary proletariat. Above the chaos of petty affairs and personal lives he sees the struggle that determines the meaning and reality of our epoch. This meaning also determines the composition of Aragon's novel, in which the different planes and characters are not subjected to a sort of lyric orchestration, as in Dos Passos, but to the relationship which these different characters and planes occupy toward the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

II

Les Cloches de Bâle, which is the first part of an epic dealing with the pre-war period,—the story closes at the end of 1912,—has woman as its special theme: her slavery in bourgeois society and her path to freedom. Three of the four sections that compose the book bear the names of the heroines who represent three moments in the development of the theme—Diana, Catherine, and Clara.

Diana, who is the daughter of noble parents and the kept-woman of a

whole series of wealthy men, is not so much a person as an *objet de luxe*, which always goes from the less wealthy to the more wealthy owner. She is the quintessence of prostitution and parasitism. Catherine Simonidze is the daughter of a Georgian émigrée who is separated from her husband, a Baku oil king, and she lives on the stingy donations of a father whom she does not know. Catherine is the petty-bourgeois rebel, the anarchist, the man-hater who seeks liberty through freedom from male tyranny, who goes from one lover to the next in order to prove her independence of them all, who, while exhausted by this slavery, still remains a remnant of the same world of prostitution and parasitism. The third heroine is Clara, Clara Zetkin, the leader of the international proletarian movement, the prototype of the woman of the future, of the working woman, the symbol of the revolutionary path toward freedom. *Les Cloches de Bâle* ends with Clara's speech at the Basel Congress on woman's struggle against war and for the proletarian revolution.

It is a bold and unusual stroke to set in juxtaposition Clara Zetkin, an historical leader and a heroine of the proletariat, Diana, the worldly prostitute, and the futile, distraught intellectual, Catherine. But in this contrast Aragon reveals, I think, a correct understanding of what really is typical: it is not that which is most often seen but that which expresses most fully the essence of a particular historical phenomenon. Thus, the brainless prostitute is much more typical of the woman of the bourgeoisie than the petty-bourgeois, respectable mother of a family—although the mothers may be more numerous than the

prostitutes—because such a prostitute expresses the true position of woman in the capitalist class. In like manner, the revolutionary vanguard is most typical of the proletariat, and Aragon was absolutely right in choosing a great leader of the proletarian movement as a type.

Since Aragon introduces three heroines, the story takes place in three circles of society. Diana represents the world of the governing bourgeoisie, where members of the former royal house, republican generals, Ministers, aristocratic courtesans, and international capitalists foregather. The entire first part takes place in this setting, and the story attempts gradually to reveal the nature of its participants. The author strips his characters of their bourgeois respectability with such supreme mastery that each new revelation comes as a complete surprise, though many hints have preceded the actual disclosure. The final revelation comes when the reader suddenly catches a glimpse of the real character of the millionaire Brunel, the gay speculator. He turns out to be a simple usurer 'working' on the money of the automobile king who is Diana's lover and the source of the wealth and luxury that surround Diana and her husband, Brunel. This section of the novel is a satirical comedy, relentlessly cruel and at the same time never going beyond the limits of comedy, for not one of the characters ever arouses our pity.

III

The second world we enter is the circle of Catherine Simonidze, an unstable, passing world, which touches the ruling class, on the one hand, and

the world of anarchists and émigrés, on the other. The atmosphere here is changing. The cold, comic irony of 'Diana' gives way to the emotionally charged climate of worries, cares, and problems. The author obviously sympathizes with Catherine. Perhaps he sympathizes a little too much. His sympathy, however, never becomes condescending. On the contrary, Aragon is relentlessly severe toward his heroine's parasitical life and her egoistical individualism. But, at the same time, Catherine's personality, her love affairs, the impression she receives from the shooting of a group of workers, her devotion to anarchism, the suffering she endures when the doctor tells her that she will soon die, her attempt at suicide—all these things fascinate the author. Catherine's rôle in the general theme of the novel is to show the futility of all her attempts to create a free and worthy life. The liberation of woman outside the struggle for the liberation of the working class is fruitless and empty, and Catherine remains bound by the same bourgeois chains among which Diana is so comfortably enthroned.

The third circle introduces the revolutionary worker's movement. It enters the novel in two ways: first, as a stage in the story of Catherine's development and, second, as a part of the political and historical atmosphere in which the narrative evolves. Catherine's contact with socialist workers does not produce a lasting impression on her. Because she is attracted by the healthy and balanced personality of the socialist chauffeur Victor, who quite by chance saves her from suicide, she offers her services to the strike committee during the chauffeurs' strike, works with great zeal at first,

but soon wearies of her responsibilities, gradually grows away from her new friends, and returns to her intellectual, restless solitude.

The fact that Aragon does not make Catherine undergo a sudden conversion attests to his artistic integrity. He understands that the gap between petty-bourgeois rebellion and thoroughgoing revolutionary spirit cannot be bridged by means of the 'happy reunion of lovers.' But, even after she has left Victor, a slow seething process goes on in Catherine's mind, leading her to the one true path. Prison plays a decisive rôle; there she makes the acquaintance of the prisoners,—prostitutes and workers,—and there she sees 'all the sin and all the greatness of human beings.' 'She knows the fate of woman now, she knows that in the final analysis there are two sorts of women. She herself belongs to the world of parasitism and prostitution; the world of labor opens wide before her.' And here ends Catherine's story in the first part of this epic.

IV

Politics enter the book in many different ways, and the author's presentation of political situations is unusually keen. The people of the bourgeois world, Diana's world, take an active part in politics, but the rôle they play is secret. Though the author gives us many hints about the political activity of this class, the time has not yet come for a complete revelation: that is to be the subject of later novels. For the proletariat, on the other hand, for the workers, life and politics are one and the same thing. The chauffeurs' strike, one of the most powerful episodes in the book, is

closely connected with the workers' personal lives and with the class policy of their leaders—their speeches and articles. All the political problems that concern the working class occupy the same place in the novel that they would naturally hold in the lives of active workers.

Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle* enriches our understanding of the French labor movement on the eve of 1914. Lenin's correct policy is tragically absent from French socialism; from the arguments about sabotage, which do not give the workers an opportunity to discover the right path between anarchy and reformism; from the figure of Jaurès, who combined elemental socialistic honesty with the fatal burden of petty-bourgeois republicanism. Jaurès, who appears in the third section as part of the historical background, becomes an active character in the fourth part. At the Basel Congress he unwillingly becomes involved in conversations with M. Brunel. When Diana's husband's career as a usurer ends, he becomes a high-class spy, and his first step is to establish a personal friendship with the leader of French socialism. Brunel's career as a spy reveals the political activities that members of Diana's world prefer. Succeeding volumes will tell us more about these people.

Essentially, the fourth section is Clara's story, but it is not told in terms of Clara Zetkin, for it is an artistic and journalistic disclosure of the true meaning and significance of the Basel Congress, at which representatives of Social Democracy from all over the world assembled. Hence the title of the book, *Les Cloches de Bâle*, for the bells of the Basel churches

in December, 1912, greeted the opening of the Congress, which took place in the monastery that the Bishop of Basel generously put at the disposal of the Socialist International. These bells symbolize the opportunistic degeneracy of Menshevism, which was already forming an alliance with the bourgeois powers, and also sound the tocsin announcing the first round of the Imperialist War and the proletarian revolution.

The various methods used to bring politics into the novel become particularly noticeable in the fourth part. And these methods form one of the most interesting aspects of Aragon's novel. He fearlessly injects purely journalistic terms and expresses a direct opinion concerning the actions of his characters. He introduces historical events and speeches, regardless of their relation to the separate threads of the story, and subordinates them to the general plan. At the same time, Aragon places his characters in the concrete political setting of the particular month and year. The experiment performed in *Les Cloches de Bâle* should have great significance for the development of the Soviet political novel.

Aragon's style is extremely inter-

esting and is characterized by three qualities—simplicity, which makes the book accessible to the average reader, the use of everyday spoken language, which in France is so different from written language, and the almost complete absence of so-called picturesqueness. In his preference for spoken, in contrast to written, speech, Aragon resembles Louis-Ferdinand Céline. But the differences between the authors of *Les Cloches de Bâle* and *Voyage au bout de la nuit* are far deeper than their similarity. Céline, the degenerate nihilist, is socially orientated toward the parasitical outcasts of the capitalist world, and the language he uses is therefore the language of thieves, pimps, and prostitutes, which undergoes a certain formalistic transformation, thereby receding still further from normal speech. Aragon's language is the speech of a democratic intellectual or an educated worker. It is used by all and can be understood by all. It is free from pedantry, from literary pretentiousness, and from the casualness of small-talk. The closest analogy in Russian to Aragon's language—making due allowances for the social differences involved—is the language used by Pushkin in his letters.

BOOKS ABROAD

BRITISH DOCUMENTS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE WAR, 1895-1914. *Edited by G. P. Gooch, D.Lit., and Harold Temperley, Litt.D. Vol. IX. London: H. M. Stationery Office. 1935.*

(J. L. Hammond in the *Observer*, London)

NO VOLUME in the series to which this book belongs brings home more directly to the reader the sense of his debt to the editors. The task of sorting, arranging, organizing, and editing a vast mass of documents covering twenty years of great moment in the history of Europe demands the highest of the historian's qualities, and students will long have reason to be grateful for the care, and skill, and profound knowledge with which Dr. Gooch and Dr. Temperley have done their work. Their gifts have never been displayed to greater advantage than in this new volume.

A man need not be a close student of diplomacy to find this an exciting and absorbing book. The story of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, their surprises and heroisms, their treacheries and tragedies, would hold the attention if they were an isolated episode in the history of Europe. But behind the scenes stand two Great Powers, who use these little states as pawns in a great game of life and death, as Rome and Carthage once used in a similar game of life and death the Greek cities of Sicily. And, as this game brought Europe to ruin eighteen months later, there is an uncommon fascination in watching in these pages the play of the passions that were to wreck Europe, to see into

the minds of the actors who caused that wreck and went to the bottom when it came, and to note by what methods and what accidents that wreck was averted in 1913.

If a man put down this volume knowing nothing of what had happened afterward, he would close his reading with one solid ground for hope. After all, he would reflect, all this warfare, which lasted from October, 1912, to August, 1913, which involved five Balkan states and Turkey, in which ally turned against ally and perfidy sharpened that hatred between Christians, which was so much fiercer than the mutual hatred of Christian and Moslem, all this warfare had come to its bitter end without bringing Austria and Russia into open conflict. That was an immense fact, and the method by which peace had been kept added immensely to its significance. 'During the Balkan Wars,' say the editors, 'the concert of Europe became a real thing. It failed to prevent the smaller Powers from going to war; it succeeded in making peace possible between the Great Powers. Austria-Hungary and Russia were too acutely affected by the changes in the balance of power to take up a neutral attitude. Italy was affected by her recent war with Turkey. But France, Germany, and Great Britain were able to take a detached view and to exercise a strong and successful influence in favor of peace. For once Europe was a reality.' If the reader happened to be an Englishman, he would have reason not only for confidence but for pride, because the