

Books

First Glance

"MARK TWAIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY" (two volumes, Harper: \$10) will be disappointing to anyone who expected a consecutive or otherwise ordered account of Mark Twain's life. How much order anyone had a right to expect from the mind of this man is a question; but the fact remains that the book as it now appears is a jumble of things some of which are consequential and some of which are not. Mark Twain was obsessed for years with the idea that autobiography is an impossible art, and he only gradually evolved what he called a method, which was to "start at no particular time of your life; wander at your free will all over your life; talk only about the things which interest you for the moment; drop it the moment its interest threatens to pale, and turn your talk upon the new and more interesting thing that has intruded itself into your mind meantime." Even then the mass of the writer will remain hidden—"it and its volcanic fires that toss and boil, and never rest, night nor day. These are his life, and they are not written, and cannot be written." Add to this confession the circumstance that the book was written or dictated over a period of almost forty years in places as different from one another as Vienna, Florence, Fifth Avenue, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, and not very much will be looked for in the way of consistency either of tone or of material. Unpublished articles and other scraps on hand were shoveled in to make the manuscript "complete." The sections were arranged in the order of their composition, not in the order of the events related. Fifty of the seven hundred pages deal with the marketing of General Grant's "Memoirs"; thirty are given to a description of the Florentine villa in which Mark Twain was living in 1904; the rest are covered with whatever reflections or reminiscences occurred to the author on the day he composed. Strictly speaking, "Huckleberry Finn" is better as autobiography than this, for at least it is complete within its limits, and limits were good for Mark Twain. The present volumes do not even reproduce all of the available manuscript; Albert Bigelow Paine's introduction hints of a third volume yet to come.

Neither are the disclosures of Mark Twain's private opinions as stirring as the public was induced to hope. The book was to be a voice "from the grave," yet no one will shudder upon reading it. Certain very pessimistic passages about human nature have been anticipated in earlier posthumous works if not in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg"; and the few outbreaks here against obscure individuals of Mark Twain's acquaintance attain no new height of rage. The bitter criticisms of Theodore Roosevelt, General Wood, and General Funston are, to be sure, very welcome, being just; but any reader will say that they would have been ten times more important, because ten times more useful, if they had been published when they were timely. No explanation of their author's curious ideas as to the impossibility of being frank in this world will explain their failure now to be impressive.

But the "Autobiography," shapeless and disappointing as it is, must still be called a great book. Perhaps by very reason of its imperfections it reveals, in the plainest and most naked way, the quality of Mark Twain's literary sinew. Unclothed, his genius seeks the company of Fielding, Shakespeare, and Rabelais, and is accepted there. He shares with those men their vast riches in the mine that is so indispensable to a writer of the first rank, the mine of eloquence. This is shown here not only in numerous paragraphs and pages which mount to the top pitch of expression, not only in eulogies and diatribes which sweep the reader from his bearings, but more convincingly yet in the evidence everywhere that Mark Twain's interest in the arts of language was unbounded. He is always coming back to language—now analyzing the oratory of his various

friends, now professing an enormous relish for profanity in all its forms, now making game of the German tongue, now slipping into a disquisition upon grammar and the literary rules, now seeking to establish that newspaper English is the best English in the long run, now letting himself go on the subject of narrative style. A quotation bearing upon the last point will both reveal his theory and prove his gift:

With the pen in one's hand, narrative is a difficult art; narrative should flow as flows the brook . . . a brook that never goes straight for a minute, but *goes*, and goes briskly, sometimes ungrammatically, and sometimes fetching a horseshoe three-quarters of a mile around, and at the end of the circuit flowing within a yard of the path it traversed an hour before; but always *going*, and always following at least one law, always loyal to that law, the law of *narrative*, which *has no law*. Nothing to do but make the trip; the how of it is not important, so that the trip is made.

This is first-rate writing, or perhaps it should be said first-rate talk. For it has been pointed out that Mark Twain's language at its most powerful moments is the language of passionate and impetuous speech; significantly enough the section of the "Autobiography" which was written at Vienna is indistinguishable in manner from the section dictated at Florence. More than he ever was aware, no doubt, Mark Twain was concerned with the art of writing without art, and it is conceivable that critics of his books a century hence will be more concerned as to how he made his long, triumphal trip than as to the obvious fact that he made it.

MARK VAN DOREN

A New Genre

Mark Only. By T. F. Powys. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

THE Cranford myth consists in the belief that the English countryside is politically a charming hangover from the manorial system, aesthetically a well-arranged geometrical pattern of clipped hedge-rows, and socially a region largely inhabited by two classes: well-mannered Oxfordian curates with a lovable mania for tea, and quaint rustics who dance on the village green, raise caps to the squire, and drink their four-ale, all in the most approved genre manner. On the surface Mr. Powys may appear merely as the leveller of a lance against this Cranford myth, one of the prosaic band of "uncompromising realists" who are at present engaged in inaugurating a new controversy. His three books of fiction, "The Left Leg," "Black Bryony," and now "Mark Only," present pictures of life as it is lived in the south and west of modern England. Mr. Powys, ruthless, Dante-visions, bitter with the agony of long and continuous contact with the environment he describes, strips this life of every possible idyllic association. We arise from these novels of the most exquisite realism with a vision of the mutilated corpse of the gentle Mrs. Gaskell, who saw life steadily but saw it over the rim of a teacup.

Those, however, who have read Mr. Powys's early book of confession, "The Soliloquies of a Hermit," and who have patiently endeavored to define for themselves the rare, if bitter, savor of his novels, are convinced that he is more than a crusader against sentimentality. It is true that in "Mark Only" the hero Mark Andrews is technically a moron, the villain Tulk a despicable satyr of the most fiendish type, and the other characters either wandering in their wits or muddled with brutality. It is true that the story itself is a compound of every horror-inspiring melodramatic device known to the hack of fifty years ago. It is true that a bestial passion creeps through the pages of the story like a dirty white fog, compelling our nostrils to an involuntary quiver. Granted—Mr. Powys is not for the weak-stomached. He may very well be presenting a faithful, if revolting, portrait of country life; or he may not be. He overdraws at times, being given more particularly in "Mark Only" to piling horror upon horror with the persistence of a Sophocles.

But all this does not so much matter—the importance of Mr. Powys is that his concern is with deeper things than mere truth to externals. What, for example, is the aesthetic problem that he has so successfully solved?

The people in Mr. Powys's world move so slowly that they seem to compose an almost static society. Their lives are so intensely primitive and simple that the intrusion of drama into them seems an impossibility. They are all governed by one or two elementary desires, or rather obsessions—the poor halfwit Mark by a half-realized desire to keep his life running or creeping in the old channels familiar to him, the lame Tulk by an uncomplicated lust for power over his immediate fellow-creatures, Emmie the little servant by a tragic and childlike sexual curiosity that masters her like a Greek Fate, Mr. Beggwell, prosperous farmer, by an overweening pride in the enormity of his prize mangelswurzel, and so on. The minds of these people stir like the thick mud at the bottom of a stagnant pond; it is as if they were being put through their paces by the operation of a slow-motion camera. Nothing surprises them. The flame of life has burned so low that they are the most passive of receptacles for the most limited of experiences. They do not seem organic; they are the agents through which operates a continual and relentless process of petrification. They live in a worn world; their environment is sessile. So quiescent are they, so slow in reaction, that it seems impossible to find any conflict among them—and narrative is born of conflict.

Mr. Powys in describing this negatively accelerated universe with sympathy and power has performed an amazing technical feat. He has synchronized the volatile motions of his brain with the unbelievably impeded tempo of the village of Dodderdown. His style is carefully graduated so as to approach monotony but never quite reach it. It is one of stark simplicity where the lacunae of human speech count for more than the words themselves, where omission lights up emotion. He wastes little time in reflection, none in characterization. He stamps his characters with the decision and accuracy of a minting machine: "Mr. Thomas had a wife who was in ill-health and made the most of it." Never is there the slightest concession to fine writing, although the flame of a twisted and tender beauty flickers through these pages. Mr. Powys, in short, has presented an organic picture of an almost static society. He is a splendid example of the adaptation of the artist to his material. And it must not be thought that his people are dull. They are fascinating. We enter into their squalid but intensely poignant lives as if we were making an excursion into the mind of primitive man. Kinship we cannot feel, but the Balboan thrill of discovery is ours. Mr. Powys has described, it may be invented, a new world where Mr. Peach and Mr. Tolly discourse of the soul "which do be a hedgehog," where old Mrs. Andrews, patting her thin and greasy hair, gibbers the story of a tragic girlhood, where Mr. Hayball the parson escapes unwitting from the life around him by indulging a queer antiquarian taste for rainfall statistics. Mr. Powys has invented a new genre—the tragic-comedy of rustic life seen by one as over-sensitive to ugliness as the flayed Marsyas was to pain.

CLIFTON P. FADIMAN

Tartar History

A Thousand Years of the Tartars. By E. H. Parker. Alfred A. Knopf. \$5.

THERE are many uncharted regions in the national history of the Tartars. For a time one of the most powerful peoples of Asia, they crowned the long row of their successes, which they had achieved in their native territory, by subjugating a considerable part of Europe. This climax of their military achievements was at the same time the beginning of the decay of their power. They were too sparsely settled on that immense territory which spread from Kamchatka almost to the Atlantic coast of the Eurasiatic continent to enable their leaders, however powerful they might have been, to preserve their

authority over the unruly tribes whom they had conquered.

Mr. Parker was among the first who went back to Chinese sources in an effort to explore the early history of the Tartars and to gather information on their racial origin. In the present volume he describes the events of importance in the life of the tribes which are commonly designated as Tartars from the second century before the Christian era until the death of Tashih in 1136. Strictly speaking, therefore, the book gives more than it promises in its title. Apparently the author was of the opinion that the period described by him was a complete chapter which, considered as a whole, would permit students of Tartar history better to understand its further developments and the subsequent spectacular role which the Tartars played in Europe under Bathu Khan. Moreover, the nature of the material which was placed at his disposal by a chief judge of Shanghai—and which was limited to Chinese sources—made him select as the topic of his book that part of the history of the Tartars in which their orientation was toward China.

One of Mr. Parker's discoveries is that the Hiung-nu, Scythians, Huns, and Turks trace their ancestry to the same root. In the "empires" which the Tartars set up these branches of the same race alternated with one another, permitting a further intermixture of the different racial elements. It was the Tartars, according to Mr. Parker, who imported early Buddhism into China. Contrary to the formerly current opinion that the moral code of early Buddhism found its way to China through Tibet, the author insists that it was mainly through the Punjab and the Pamir that the new religion took its way. Mr. Parker reminds the reader that modern Chinese is derived to a considerable extent from the Tartar language. If one bears in mind that in that period of Chinese-Tartar history which the author describes Tartars and Chinese fought for the hegemony around and inside the Chinese walls, and that their struggle resulted in a more or less periodical alternation of rulers in Northern China and Tartary between members of both peoples, the great importance of Tartaric in the evolution of the Chinese language can be better appreciated.

Mr. Parker has given a powerful impetus to a further study of Tartar history and ethnology by making accessible contemporary Chinese sources. As might have been expected, his side of the narrative presents chiefly the Chinese attitude toward the Tartars. Today there are living about three million Tartars scattered over European and Asiatic Russia. The story of their origin is one of the most interesting chapters in human history. It is to be hoped, now that one aspect of their ancestry has been taken care of by Mr. Parker, that their relation to the Turks, Scythians, Huns—with whom, it is argued, they are in many respects identical—will be as elaborately and as interestingly treated.

EMIL LENGYEL

An Englishman to Excess

Contemporary Criticisms of Dr. Samuel Johnson, His Works, and His Biographers. Collected and Edited by John Ker Spittal. E. P. Dutton & Company. \$6.

TO discover and publish what the reviewers of one of the major magazines of his time had to say about Samuel Johnson and his writings, and to collect, also, their comments upon the books that were published about him, has been Mr. Spittal's purpose. The result is a valuable addition to existing Johnsoniana. It is fortunate that Mr. Spittal was able to know Johnson's own opinion of the source chosen, for Johnson remarked to George III that the *Monthly Review* was the most carefully written of the magazines then appearing, although its principles on religion were not above question. What the reservation signifies is very apparent to Johnsonians.

Not the least striking fact brought to light is that the vast superiority of Boswell's "Life" was immediately recognized and hailed, and that there was no question in the mind of a contemporary reviewer that Johnson deserved so meticulous a rec-