

REVIEW AND COMMENT

It Still Goes On

DR. HARRY ELMER BARNES of the World-Telegram has been reading church history and has discovered a resemblance between the psychology of the early Christians and that of contributors to THE NEW MASSES. The comparison, which is not altogether original, is based on the violence that Dr. Barnes detects in the polemics of both the Christians and the Communists. I wonder if he has forgotten his own controversies on the subject of war guilt, especially the campaign that, with all the zeal of an Athanasius or a Tertullian, he carried on against Bernadotte Schmitt. Most people, as a matter of fact, get a little excited when what they regard as fundamental issues are at stake, and it is hard to see what is gained by dragging the Book of Jude into the discussion. Moreover, Dr. Barnes' illustrations of THE NEW MASSES' apostolic fervor are rather strangely selected. He says, for example, "One prominent writer in this journal assaulted the reviewers in the New York Times Sunday Literary section as 'White Guards,' assigned to assassinate any books favorable to Soviet Russia." I am very glad that he read my article on Section Five; I only wish he would read Section Five. In the issues that have appeared since my article was published he could have found a good deal of evidence to support my "assault."

In the issue of September 30, for example, was Alexander Nazarov's review of the Countess Tolstoy's *I Worked for the Soviets*. Mr. Nazarov felt that the book lacked "the gripping drama" of his favorite reading, the "unforgettable" *Escape from the Soviets*, but "in the deep sincerity and truthfulness, in the conviction which her story carries, and in the darkness which the picture unfolded by her presents, Alexandra Lvovna's book fully equals the work of her predecessors." Readers of Section Five learned that the Countess, with "no trace of rancor in her tone" and "without bitterness," describes the prison-like atmosphere of the Soviet Union, the wrecking of Russia's educational system, the pregnancy of fourteen-year-old schoolgirls, and the eagerness of the peasants to turn their guns on the Kremlin. The book, to put it briefly, is a powerful piece of evidence in the trial of the Soviet Union at the bar of "the conscience of the civilized world."

In the issue of October 14, Section Five's mysterious expert on Russia, A. M. Nikolaieff, appeared in a new role, as authority on China, reviewing Agnes Smedley's *China's Red Army Marches*, which he did not like. In the issue of October 21, J. Donald Adams lent his solemn approval to Chamberlain's *Russia's Iron Age*. In the issue of October 28, Mr. Nazarov—back on page 22, it is true, and with several

qualifying phrases—wrote at length and with some satisfaction on Boris Kamyshansky's *I Am a Cossack*.

It still goes on, but Dr. Barnes does not see it. His comment on my article is: "Whether the charge is correct or not, certainly it is only fair to recall that, after the famous exposure of the news published on Russia in the Times which was brought out by Walter Lippmann in the New Republic, the Times has published more valuable and authentic material on Russia than has appeared anywhere else in the English-speaking world." I do not know whether he means that my article may be as fruitful as Mr. Lippmann's or that I ought to have given the Times credit for its Russian news, but let him have the benefit of the doubt. The important thing is that scholarly phrase, "whether this charge is correct or not." Nothing, of course, about the pages of evidence the article contained. Nothing to indicate that the learned doctor has ever read Section Five. Just a good academic bit of hedging.

But note how, when he has occasion to praise the Times, this blushing modesty vanishes. The Times "has published more valuable and authentic material on Russia than has appeared anywhere else in the English-speaking world." Why he qualifies his statement with "English-speaking" I cannot understand.

In general I have the impression that my article on Section Five, "whether the charge is correct or not," does not wholly meet with Dr. Barnes' disapproval, for he continues: "But when this critic sails into the Times reviewer, John Chamberlain, and denounces him as a weak 'straddler,' this is a little too much. Mr. Chamberlain is known best for his book, *Farewell to Reform*, which is a very critical summary of American progressivism and liberalism in the last generation and a forthright relinquishment of any hope in reformist programs." But I did not criticize Chamberlain on the ground that he was a reformist. On the contrary, it is precisely because he pretends to be more than a liberal that he may legitimately be attacked for straddling. If he wrote under some such title as "The Liberal Viewpoint," as Dr. Barnes used to do, straddling would be natural and unexceptionable.

And John Chamberlain's straddling, like Section Five's White Guardism, still goes on. There was a pleasant example in his review of Max Eastman's *Art and the Life of Action* in the Times for October 29. "Granville Hicks," he wrote, "and others who drop frequently into the habit of applying mechanical moralistic criteria to literature might read the first half of Mr. Eastman's book with profit; but others should be warned that Eastman, in

his willingness to make out a case against his enemies, overlooks facts that might do his thesis damage." I shall start worrying about my "mechanical moralistic criteria" if Mr. Chamberlain will take the trouble to show me what they are and when and how I have applied them, but for the moment I am concerned with his introducing these criteria to balance the mild rebuke he administers to Max Eastman. A slap on my wrist, a slap on Mr. Eastman's, and everyone is happy.

Dr. Barnes' third example of patristic fervor in THE NEW MASSES is S. Snedden's review of *Challenge to the New Deal*, which he finds "even more reminiscent of the diatribes of the old heresies." He quotes two sentences: "It has been a matter of note that some of the cleverest and most influential enemies of the working-class have been prepared for their careers by a taste at the Marxian spring. The 'little knowledge' of these renegades has indeed turned out to be a dangerous thing—for the masses." He neglects to quote Snedden's next sentence: "It was as 'Marxists' that MacDonald, Mussolini, Briand, and Pilsudski learned to know the nature of capitalist society and were thus equipped to advance themselves in it." That, it appears to me, is a simple statement of fact.

But Dr. Barnes insists that the contributors to *Challenge to the New Deal* are "brilliant left-wing specialists on American civilization today," and that is that. The reviewer should not have pointed out that certain essays are very good, others sadly confused, and others dangerously suggestive of Fascism. Such discrimination, according to Dr. Barnes, gives aid and comfort to capitalism: "So long as the American radicals stick to backstabbing in their own ranks as the great indoor sport the American Bourbons can sit pretty with few grounds for fear."

It would be nice if we could be one big happy family, as Dr. Barnes wants us to be. Unity in the radical movement is enormously important, and I suspect that Communists realize its importance quite as well as the World-Telegram's expert on the history of world civilization. But we happen to believe that unity on the terms, let us say, of Mussolini or MacDonald or even Selden Rodman or A. J. Muste would defeat the purposes for which we and, theoretically at least, all radicals are striving. Dr. Barnes thinks we are wrong, but that can scarcely prevent us from showing, as forcefully and as clearly as possible, why we are right.

The growth of a revolutionary movement is a strange thing. Primarily created by economic forces, it receives its apparent stimuli from all sorts of sources. Even Dr. Barnes may help to make a revolutionary now and then. I know one young man who became interested in the Communist Party, which he

subsequently joined, as a result, so far as he could tell, of reading "The Liberal Viewpoint."

But he would not have become a Communist if Communists had refrained from criticizing Barnes and his ideas; he would have stayed right where Barnes is. The sharpening of the class struggle goes on day by day. It is no longer enough to be vaguely against capitalism; it is necessary to be clearly

and wholeheartedly for revolution. Those who stand resolutely and openly for the existing order cannot be influenced and need not be exposed. Exposure is for those who conceal hostility under a guise of impartiality, and criticism for those who divert the energies of the revolutionary movement into unprofitable channels. If this is the spirit of the Book of Jude, so much the better for the Book of Jude.

GRANVILLE HICKS.

From the Other Side of the Tracks

THE DARING YOUNG MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE and other stories, by William Saroyan. Random House. \$2.50.

THERE is one striking feature in this, the first book of William Saroyan; it is the work of a young man who comes from the other side of the tracks—and is proud of it. His proletarian ancestry flashes through in the perfervid quality of his writing; he is perturbed, often excited, at times violently passionate about these times. Although he has not read the Communist thesis that this era is inevitably productive of another "round of wars and revolutions" he feels it in his bones. Unlike the writers who hail from the middle-class he takes things to heart. He produces clear images of present-day America and he does it in bright, biting words. His writing is free of that fog of unreality one finds in middle-class writers to whom this age seems idiotically melodramatic, with its processions of Swastikas and its Hammers and Sickles, its alarms and reverberations of riots and wars. Reality is ever melodramatic to those out of a cloistered upbringing. Saroyan has evidently lived close to hunger—the basic reality of our times. He is, however, too much given to studying Life and Death and the other words in capital letters. He remains unclear concerning the plebeian words: wage-cuts and wage-scales, strikes, machines, and their relationship to the fancy words—how they determine the Eternal Verities he so diligently pursues.

Saroyan, we learn in the title story, hears the "tap dancing of doom." His dreams are troubled with whirls of "Karl Franz, black Titanic, Mr. Chaplin's weeping, Stalin, Hitler, a multitude of Jews" and the fact that "tomorrow is Monday, no dancing in the streets." His stories reveal he has not the least notion how "the hungry people marching in a parade" can be set to dancing in the streets. And I finished the book with what might be called qualified enthusiasm. "Enthusiasm," for having encountered a brave young workingman who derives from our people, the poor and the hungering and who writes exceedingly well; "qualified," because he does not himself understand the mainsprings of the environment which bore him.

Although advertised as a short-story writer, Saroyan does not write "the short story." It seems to me a sort of personal essay; it has a quality akin to that of popular columnists today. He buttonholes the reader, and talks to

him. Some may find that quality objectionable; I, for one, do not. It is that personal quality one enjoys so much in reading a columnist like Mike Gold, in the Daily Worker. When you finish this book you not only see a few things that are going on hereabouts these days, but you also know what William Saroyan feels about it. I have no objection to this except when Saroyan becomes too personal—when he becomes flippant. In *70,000 Assyrians* he warns you, "I am writing a very serious story, perhaps one of the most serious I shall ever write. That is why I am being flippant. Readers of Sherwood Anderson will begin to understand what I am saying after a while; they will know that my laughter is rather sad." Despite this, he launches into a first rate "short story" where you feel his burning concern for his fellows of 1934. He stands slyly watching "Iowa" a young American Bezprizorni, jobless, drifting wherever there is talk of work. Later Saroyan thinks: "People with money laughing at the death that is crawling slyly into boys like young Iowa, pretending it isn't there, laughing in warm theaters. I have prayed for Iowa, and I consider myself a coward. By this time he must be dead and I am sitting in a small room, talking about him, only talking." He is coming to realize that talk, literature, even masterful literature, is not enough. The letter he sent to THE NEW MASSES indicates that. "If I have any desire at all," he says in *70,000 Assyrians*, "it is to show the brotherhood of man." But though his terms reveal his lack of clarity, they also reveal his abundance of sympathy, of warm youthful love for the masses. For he means the brotherhood of worth-while men, the producers of life; not the brotherhood of the producer and the exploiter; the wolf and the lamb.

When he has a mind to write the "straight" short story such as the one titled *Love* he does as craftsmanlike a job as any admirer of Hemingway or the earlier Anderson could demand. Similarly when he sets to etching a character: in *Harry* he gets off an American go-getter type as vivid as the fez of a 32nd degree Mason. He strikes some shrewd blows in this story; the scene of financially-independent Harry on his death bed with T.B. trying to sell life insurance to those few friends who visit him, is not to be forgotten in a hurry.

He is ever pre-occupied with the under-dog; in *Among the Lost* his characters ask, "Do you think we'll ever get jobs?" And he moves

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