

A Vanished Arcadia

Private Correspondence of Lord Granville Leveson-Gower, in two volumes. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. \$10.

IT is not in books that the art of government is to be found. Its subtleties are too finely fashioned to be capable of direct transference to the printed word. What for the most part aids us is the knowledge of how men have reacted to its problems. For the value of history consists very largely in the persistent nature of the issues that confront each age. Only the perspective is altered; and it is difficult at any given moment to perceive the minutiae of distinction. History is not episodic and it is in the slow passage of tremendous forces that we catch a glimpse of its secrets. We catch that glimpse as we survey the thoughts of men. The biology of their thoughts, the record of their ideals—these are the keynotes of our progress. For the rest it is a continuous and constant material with which the statesman is called upon to deal.

It is from the chance documents that survive the destruction of time that we depend for our reconstruction of the past. An anecdote, an odd fragment of autobiography, the angry note in a private diary—these are the background of much modern historical work. Their value is the contemporaneous character they possess. They are the record of immediate impression taken down before the event has had time to secure the rightness of historical judgment. To such material Lady Granville has made a very notable contribution in resurrecting this fascinating correspondence. No papers since those published from the material at Bropmore by the Historical Manuscripts Commission throw so vivid a light on the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era from the standpoint of aristocratic England. The letters are valuable not because their writers—with the exception of Canning—were particularly distinguished people. A great lady of fashion, a rather grim but powerful landed proprietor of ancient lineage, a wife of deeply religious sentiment, a younger son who goes into politics as the nobility of the eighteenth century went in for gout—it is not from these that we expect enlightened analysis of the political conditions of the time. Certainly we do not receive it.

But it is something in substance more valuable that we receive. These, after all, are the people who ruled England less than a century ago. They are the people whose sober determination and grim contempt for novel doctrine were largely responsible for the overthrow of Napoleon. How did they regard the England which they raised to be the dominant Power of Europe? What were their thoughts about the problems of their time? It is to questions like these that this correspondence permits an answer.

The England of the latter part of the eighteenth century was ruled by a serio-political class intensely interested in itself and supremely unconscious of a possible scepticism as to its fitness for its task. Politics was still an hereditary occupation. Pitt and Fox were both the inheritors of a great name; Burke never entered the inner circle of admitted power. If Canning was the son of an actress the Greek verses of Eton and the epigrams of Oxford were permitted to obscure the stain. The great families were the rulers of England; and the time had not yet come when what one of them called the "damned nonsense" of popular merit was to raise its insolent head. They were the people whose wealth had been cleansed by the pride of forgetful antiquity and who ruled because men could not

doubt that government was their natural function. It was as natural for them to think in terms of statecraft as it was for them to stand firm against ideas which might, by distributing their power, undermine it. They paid no heed to novelty for it was not in the decalogue of aristocracy. They did not think of the poor save as they who are always with us and thus find a cheerful oblivion in their eternality. Trade was something in the city—and they were proud of its volume while they regretted acquaintance with its individual participants. Ireland is a place from which to stay away; it has been in insurrection and its misery—was 1798 a prophecy?—is the atonement for its wantonness. The French Revolution is not a principle to discuss, but a spectacle to visit. Napoleon is not the embodiment of an immense idea, but a dangerous adventurer by whose converse one may be thrilled. The continental war is a passionate interlude, rivaled at moments by gay meteors like Roscius the actor. Mr. Fox is a fascinating scoundrel the blandishments of whose doctrine Mr. Pitt may be trusted to withstand; and there is an inner certainty that Mr. Fox is really safe since he derives from one of the right families. The king is still the center of the political stage, and he can be trusted to support Mr. Pitt in these troubled times. It is an England which dances and drinks deep; and the vague murmurings of an awakened democracy it will set to the easy rhythm of Canning's contemptuous jingles. It is an England passionately interested in gossip and scandal. Its politics are a series of intimate personalia. Its principles are the instructive determination to keep order by maintaining possession. It holds by property and the British constitution and damns Tom Paine for his plausible falsities. Pitt and Nelson are its heroes, and Mr. Burke has written its political Bible. Yet withal it is a kindly England, anxious to effect some permanent good, tender in misfortune, cheerful in defeat, silent in victory. What it needs is the contact of men and women whose path truth has not made easy. It needs the sense of novelty. It needs to be shocked out of its belief that the ideas of 1688 were a permanent solution of all social questions. It is time that its religious scepticism—though it is vaguely aware of Wesley—be paralleled by political uncertainty. It needs to discover the moral significance of popular governments. It is too satisfied with life, too content with the meagre ways of custom and precedent. It is too apt to search for public opinion in the House of Commons and too little critical of that chamber's constituency. For it, in fact, the meaning of England is that it should continue a glorious holiday—making society in which other people do the work. In the dirt and sweat of everyday life it has no interest. It is the pleasures and principles of a closed corporation it is alone anxious to promote. It has few searchings of its political heart and its military achievements confirm its self-confidence. Yet, as with Fox, it is capable of a glorious generosity, and, as with Pitt, of a matchless determination. It has an instinctive appreciation of beauty—though it lacks the ability to share its recognition. It lives in a series of moments and asks from life only that it shall be a series of pulsating excitements. Yet it is also an England beneath the surface of whose content may be discerned the vague discomfort of approaching change.

The great history of this time has yet to be written; though a first volume suggests that M. Halévy is destined to give it to us. What it is important to emphasize is the amazing analogy between the England of 1815 and its civilization to-day. It was then assumed, as it is to-day in danger of assuming, that the epoch of warfare is the

necessary dissolvent of liberalism. Its response to democratic demand was a passionate reactionism. Oppression was its answer to the eager yearning after a richer and fuller life which found vent in the demand for constitutional reform. The result was seventeen sterile and unhappy years. The uneasiness of that time found England on the brink of a continuous precipice. It was the accidental liberalism of Grey and Russell which alone saved the country from serious disaster. That for which the world to-day will anxiously search is the men who are capable of their largeness and clarity of outlook.

H. J. L.

Military Verse

A Song of the Guns, by Gilbert Frankau. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 50 cents.

THE author of the "Song of the Guns," Gilbert Frankau, composed the main plan of the poem during a pause in the battle of Loos, and completed it in the trenches in sight of the devastation of Ypres. We are told that "the last three stanzas were written at midnight in Brigade headquarters with the German shells screaming over into the ruined town."

The arrangement of the voices of the forces of war, in the poem—the Slaves of the Gun, the Gun Teams, the Air Corps, Signals, the Voice of the Guns—recalls strongly of course, probably intentionally, the arrangement of Kipling's Song of the English—the Song of the Dead, the Coast-Wise Lights, the Deep-Sea Cables, the Song of the Songs, the Song of the Cities. The music, not as deep-toned, not as over-toned or harmonic as Kipling's, still resounds with Kipling echoes; and has not a little of the mystic dogmatism of the great singer of the Seven Seas.

Those of us who have ever heard a soldier of our own long war, the great Civil War, describe his days, will have wondered often about many of those aspects of the European war that are here graphically related to us in the Song of the Guns. It is absorbing to hear how the gunners feel in their death-dealing task; how the war looks to the air-corps; to know something of the fortunes of those thousands of horses that have been sent to the war from our middle-western pastures; and to listen to the signals in the trenches. The most overwhelming, the most terrible impression of the poem is its striking tale of the machinal character of war—

"I am only a cog of a gun machine, a link of an endless chain;

And the rounds are drawn, and the rounds are fired,
and the empties return again;

Railroads, lorry and limber; battery, column and park;

To the shelf where the set fuse waits the breach, from the quay where the shells embark."

This is the most terrible impression of the "Song of the Guns"; but it is not the most revolting. The most murderous spiritual degradation speaks in the active fighter's pity of the observers—

"Not theirs the wet, glad bayonet, the red and racing hour;

The rush that clears the bombing-post with knife and hand grenade;

Not theirs the zest, when steel to breast, the last survivors cower—"

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The zest of placing a steel at the breast of a cowering survivor; the joy of a dull, triumphing savage, battering out the sacred fire of life;—what victims will you give up to be the prey of that zest and of that hideous joy? None, of course. So long as the Germans sing songs of hate and the Allies like to see lonely survivors cowering under the assault of knives, civilization will feel the existence of something really intolerable to the human spirit in any victory.

War perhaps always arouses the lust to crush life. But most war poetry ignores or romanticizes that impulse. Our own greatest war poetry has been sung for us by a peace-lover in Whitman's Drum Taps and Ashes of Soldiers. There is no breath of the raider's rapture in all its beauty.

"How solemn the thought of my whispering soul to each in the ranks and to you.

I see behind each mask, that wonder a kindred soul;

O the bullet could never kill what you really are,
dear friend,

Nor the bayonet stab what you really are!"

None of the poetry of the European war that I have seen has spoken in this spirit—neither war poetry nor peace poetry. Not only Whitman's dignified dirges, but the gravity and modesty of General Grant, the fame of his desire that the southern officers keep their swords—and the ennobling mists of time have veiled for us the brutish love of slaughter that doubtless accompanied our long and wild struggle. It is fortunate that we possess a poem that speaks this debasing attribute as clearly as "The Song of the Guns."

EDITH WYATT.