

## Give Me the Sun

*The Man of Promise, by Willard Huntington Wright.*  
New York: John Lane Co. \$1.35.

IN defining "what is noble" Nietzsche spoke of a good and healthy aristocracy as the significance and highest justification of society. "Society is not allowed to exist for its own sake, but only as a foundation and scaffolding, by means of which a select class of beings may be able to elevate themselves to their higher duties, and in general to a higher existence: like those sun-seeking climbing plants in Java—they are called *Sipo Matador*,—which encircle an oak so long and so often with their arms, until at last, high above it, but supported by it, they can unfold their tops in the open light, and exhibit their happiness."

This sun-seeking plant is the theme of Mr. Willard Huntington Wright. Its ascent is for him also the justification of society. But in this particular instance society does not justify itself. Mr. Wright discloses a calamity. His oak is a more than usually stubborn specimen. It does not support the plant that is using it to climb to the sun. The plant, on the contrary, is strangled. "But, to speak the truth, is not man a most miserable creature the while?"

That society can fail to live up to a man of genius is for some people a grotesque conception. For them the established order, aristocratic or democratic, is the heavenly order. The rebellious angel is the fallen angel. They would see any genius as Lucifer pitted against unalterable law. With due contempt for such persons, the fact remains that it is a difficult task to depict a man of genius, or "a man of promise," failed by society. It requires that the man of genius should be made sufficiently real. Besides the true Lucifer there are in the world many semi-Lucifers and pseudo-Lucifers. If such gentlemen were themselves allowed to judge, they have a perfect case against society. Any opposition to them is a sign of the deepest conventionality. They are victims of a conspiracy against the superman. But one does not have to be prejudiced in favor of society to decline to upbraid it for not supporting egoistic parasites. There is a difference between *Sipo Matador* and the clinging vine.

In taking up the case of genius against society, and especially against woman as the conservator of society, Mr. Wright has attempted nothing new. Schopenhauer, Strindberg, Weininger, Nietzsche, have said something on this score. But a novelist does not need to coin new ideas. It is enough if he give any ideas a human habitat. This Mr. Wright has earnestly attempted, an American writer as his hero. It is because of his inexpertness and his limitations, rather than because of his ideas, that he has failed.

In a grave and rather stilted prose Mr. Wright narrates the struggles of one Stanford West to live up to his genius. His first enemies are his academic father and his pious mother. His next enemy is the incognizant girl to whom he becomes engaged. Cambridge University proves no better for him than the small town where he grew up in the Susquehanna valley. Not only is he hampered by the intellectual cowardice of the undergraduates and the faculty. He is seduced by a predatory female named Irene. In "The Truth About Woman" there is quoted a passage from Dr. L. O. Howard describing the behavior of a female spider. A little male of the same species falls in with this lady and has a dreadful time. First she bites off his left front tarsus and consumes his tibia and femur. Next she gnaws out his left eye. She goes on to eat up his right front leg and then devours his head and gnaws into

his thorax. All this time the male is seeking to embrace her. Having finished her meal on his thorax, the lady spider succumbs to his advances. "She remained quiet for four hours, and the remnant of the male gave occasional signs of life." This, approximately, is Stanford West's experience with Irene. First he parts with his money. Next he gives up his recitations. Then he discards his great classic drama and his *fiancée*. Finally he abandons his whole college career. It is his first great experience of the conflict between genius and the Irenes. In his anger with her, he beats her. This merely increases her devotion. He takes a last stand, however, against her exactions. She marries another man in desperation and thus saves him from the whole fate of the spider.

If woman interfered with Stanford West in Harvard, she proved no better in New York. Though his father and mother and *fiancée* quailed before the sunburst of his first unconventional drama, they extracted him tenderly from the wreckage caused by Irene, and he went to New York to make a career as dramatic critic. There, however, another woman lay in wait for him. She was an actress. She allowed him to use his influence as a critic. Not content with this, she made herself his mistress. She distressed him by her slovenliness and incensed him by her bad cooking. And then, to complete her disregard for his convenience and his genius, she became pregnant. She put him to the immense trouble of procuring an abortion. This broke him down, and if his *fiancée* had not consoled him by hastening to marry him the case against her sex would be overwhelming.

This simple girl who marries Stanford is named Alice, after her counterpart, Alice Benbolt. Luckily, she has a little money. With this for backing, she and Stanford go off to London, where his greatness is at last to be consummated away from noxious democracy and compromise. But Alice exacts worldly conformity from him. He achieves conventional greatness as a novelist in a few years, ashes in his mouth. It is not till he meets Evelyn Naesmith that he realizes he is being stifled. "It's weakness, and not conviction that binds you to mediocrity. . . . Tell me; if you changed your course, would these others that you speak of suffer more than you are suffering? And is not the present loss to the world greater than it would be if you stood forth, defiant and brutal, and gave birth to the best in you?" Stanford combats this idea. Then the frustration of his greater capacities becomes unbearably clear. He leaves Alice and the baby and with Evelyn hies to Paris and the sun.

Like other women, however, Evelyn presses her claims. He enjoyed her. "She dispelled his loneliness during his hours of rest, and, even when he was busily engaged, the consciousness of her presence afforded him a certain contentment and comfort. He found in her the necessary relief from labor. She constituted a desirable orderliness in his routine. She relieved his mind of innumerable minor annoyances which, had he been alone, would have fallen on his shoulders. She compensated him for the absence of his wife and, in a measure, furnished him with a justification for having deserted his legal obligations. His nature was such that he required a sexual and social complement; and no other woman had ever gratified his material and chemical needs with such intelligent understanding. Throughout the whole of his maturity he had demanded the presence of a woman in the house, in order that the many functionings of his masculinity might be expressed." But Evelyn is disgustingly jealous. She artfully estranges him from the best friend of his genius. He breaks with her

after three years. "He arrived at the conclusion that it had been his idealistic regard for women which had always held him a slave. . . . The women who had hindered him had merely been repressive obstacles which, had he possessed the power, he might have conquered. His appetites, his emotions, his sentiments, perhaps even the biologic imperative of his nature—these had constituted the factors of his weakness. But he was done with women now. Henceforth he would avoid them as the unconscious enemies of all that was noblest in him. . . . Women were merely a recreation, a plaything to be taken up when the mood dictated, and put aside with the same impersonal abandonment that one would put aside a toy. His own rôle was that of the fighter; and just as the warrior must go into battle alone, so must he conquer, single-handed, the years ahead."

But his mother, his wife and his daughter remained to be disentangled. In the end, to the death of his genius, they subject him to their mere human claims.

There is a kind of genius whose relations with women are substantially those narrated by Mr. Wright. A certain feebleness and instability is characteristic of them and they live in sexual turmoil all their lives. But to make a novel of their interesting pathology requires two things; detached understanding of their singularity and a sense of their genius strong enough to give them high value in the reader's mind. Neither of these things does Mr. Wright accomplish. He does not know how to bioscope his material, in the first place. Just as the Duchess fails to communicate aristocratic personality, though violently asserting it, so Mr. Wright fails to communicate genius. This is largely a matter of technique. But worse than his failure in technique is his failure in penetration. The data of a pathology he takes to be the data of sex psychology. Quite right in respecting genius, he tries to generalize as to its obstacles with a special susceptibility in mind. The result is not reasonable. One may be sorry for the seasick without bemoaning that we cannot drain away the sea.

F. H.

## Agrarian Democracy

*The Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy, by Charles A. Beard. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$2.50 net.*

THE economic interpretation of history has been reviled more often than it has been understood. Traced to the influence of Karl Marx, it has shared the discredit into which the rigid Marxian doctrine has for the most part fallen. Yet, as a fact, Marx is in nowise the originator of the theory distinguished by his name. So long ago as the seventeenth century, James Harrington had urged that property takes political power as its handmaid; and if we scorn the emphatic reiteration of Marx, let it be noted that so keen an observer as Lord Acton placed the discovery among the most striking of modern times. When, indeed, the theory is closely scanned, one is struck rather by its obviousness than by its perversity. The place of desire in the formation of opinion is now among the accepted truisms of psychology. Men's wishes are, after all, their reflection, for the most part, of what they deem their self-interest. So that it is no large assumption to suggest that an examination of the interests of men will provide an important clue to their beliefs.

Professor Beard has used the economic interpretation

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of history with very striking effect in this important work. American history has—thanks to the constructive inspiration of Professor Turner—passed beyond that theological stage when its incidents are related as the triumphs of a beneficent deity. Nor do we any longer paint them as an instance of the inexplicable genius for self-government miraculously vouchsafed to the Anglo-Saxon race. It has been seen that the essential need is the piecemeal, often tedious, reconstruction of economic and social environment, the attempt, as Maitland put it, to think the common thought of our ancestors about common things. And when we set out to study in this light the history of the American Constitution, we see that while the Fathers were doubtless inspired by certain vague hopes of political freedom, it was yet for other purposes that they mainly assembled in convention at Philadelphia. The burden of Great Britain's control had been thrown off; but grave problems, fiscal and social no less than political and administrative, still remained to be solved. Is it conceivable—so Professor Beard has asked in an earlier book—that their answer to these problems should not have been framed in the light of their experience? The movement for confederation had been the work, for the most part, of capitalist interests. The convention itself was sanctioned by no popular vote; nor did the proletariat find representation therein. The very men who drafted the Constitution were themselves the most certain to benefit from its enactment. They were holders of property and they took especial care for its effective protection. It was to be no mere subject of the whim of popular majorities; and accordingly it was enshrined with peculiar affection in those *arcana imperii* where no man's feet may tread. "The Constitution,"