

## Books and Things

SAY whatever you please, after reading *Prejudices, First Series* (Knopf), about its author, Mr. H. L. Mencken, and almost immediately you wish to retract and explain. From I, Mary MacLane, Mr. Mencken learns "that a Scotch Presbyterian with a soaring soul is as cruelly beset as a wolf with fleas, a zebra with the botts." Unbelievable, isn't it, that a clever man should exhibit himself in the act of trying so hard to be smart? If one knew nothing of Mr. Mencken but this fragment one would set him down as a particularly unhappy victim of the will-to-power-and-punch, and think no more about him. And one would be quite wrong. Mr. Mencken can also be witty without seeming to try. He can say, when writing about books on sex hygiene: "The mystery of sex presents itself to the young, not as a scientific problem to be solved, but as a romantic emotion to be accounted for. The only result of the current endeavor to explain its phenomena by seeking parallels in botany is to make botany obscene."

Put cotton in your ears and listen to the noise of Mr. Mencken's vocabulary: Slobber, hocus-pocus, softies, popinjays, flappedoodle, flubdub, poppycock, balderdash, pish-posh, clapper-clawing, rumble-bumble, sissified. I cannot think of his vocabulary without wondering whether he is a shrew. "A Birmingham anthropologist, Dr. Jordan," says William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "has divided the human race into two types, whom he calls 'shrews' and 'non-shrews' respectively. The shrew-type is defined as possessing an 'active unimpassioned temperament.' In other words, shrews are the 'motors' rather than the 'sensories,' and their expressions are as a rule more energetic than the feelings which appear to prompt them." Yet Mr. Mencken is not one of Dr. Jordan's shrews. He only looks like one. In spite of his vocabulary, so appropriate to nobody but a man trying to hide his lack of energy behind it, his feelings really are energetic. No one can doubt his energy who reads his *Prejudices* through, though many single sentences sound as if he were faking it.

Equally irrelevant to Mr. Mencken's real gifts is his desire to épater le bourgeois. I use the shop-worn phrase because the desire is just as shop-worn. Long ago there was a split in the bourgeois party. Every writer of Mr. Mencken's rank except Mr. Mencken knows that some of them, at that remote date, enrolled themselves in les bourgeois inépatables, and that the left-behind others are not worth shocking, being such easy marks. But Mr. Mencken cannot let the poor bourgeois alone. He has a point, and a good point, to make against Mr. Veblen's belief that we hire men to cut our lawns, instead of putting cows there to crop them, because "to the average popular apprehension," Mr. Veblen says, "a herd of cattle so pointedly suggests thrift and usefulness that their presence . . . would be intolerably cheap." And here is part of Mr. Mencken's comment: "Has the genial professor, pondering his great problems, ever taken a walk in the country? And has he, in the course of that walk, ever crossed a pasture inhabited by a cow (*Bos taurus*)? And has he, making that crossing, ever passed astern of the cow herself? And has he, thus passing astern, ever stepped carelessly, and—But this is not a medical work, so I had better haul up." Such a putting of his finger to his nose, such a winking and grimacing, read suspiciously like flourishes to something Mr. Mencken regards as brightly daring. Now I deny that it is daring to object to cow-

dung on lawns. Was Mr. Mencken afraid nobody would be offended if he made his objection simply?

When I began this article my plan was to write each paragraph so that the end would contradict the beginning, but I can think of no passage in *Prejudices* which effaces the impression left by what I have just quoted. Let me add, however, that the quotation is in a class by itself, that to be "daring" is not one of Mr. Mencken's besetting faults, that for every once he tries to shock les bourgeois he scolds them and flouts them twenty times. His dislike of the crowd has the same origin as his dislike of the men he calls the professors, namely, in a generous anger. He is angry or contemptuous or exasperated whenever he sees good books ignored and feeble books exalted. In other words, he is often angry. When "the professors" unite in praising an author he esteems, for example Poe, Mr. Mencken is uneasy, and his uneasiness takes him back to the time when "the professors" gave Poe the cold shoulder. "If it ever occurred," he says, "to any American critic of position, during Poe's lifetime, that he was a greater man than either Cooper or Irving, then I have been unable to find any trace of the fact in the critical literature of the time." Let us be glad, on Mr. Mencken's account, that his search was unsuccessful, for success would have made him rather unhappy. And here, I think, we have one of the contradictions he interests us by revealing. In the spring which feeds Mr. Mencken's critical activities, most of the boiling and bubbling is done by a love for the books he thinks good, a hatred of the books he thinks bad. His business as a critic is to communicate this hatred and this love, and if he were successful on a large scale, if he found either the professors or the highbrows or the crowd in agreement with him often, then he wouldn't much like his company. The strongest critic, he appears to believe, is the critic who stands most alone.

For practical purposes the best critic is he who does most to increase a reader's enjoyment, either by giving him new books to enjoy or by intensifying and differentiating his enjoyment of old ones. This a critic cannot do for you unless he has the art of inclining you to agree with him. For me, Mr. Mencken is not that kind of critic. He seldom persuades me to feel I shall like a book by saying that he likes it. Of *The Purpose*, a Sudermann story in the volume called in English, the *Indian Lily*, Mr. Mencken says: "Here, in less than fifteen thousand words, Sudermann rehearses the tragedy of a whole life, and so great is the art of the thing that one gets a sense of perfect completeness, almost of exhaustiveness." To my taste *The Purpose* is a workmanlike story, without any of Sudermann's worst faults. Another story in the same book, *Autumn*, is "almost a fit complement to Joseph Conrad's great paean to youth triumphant." Never, I say upon reading that incredible comparison, never will I take Mr. Mencken's word for anything remotely related to life or letters. Then I turn the page, and I'm not so sure, for I come upon Mr. Mencken's admirable characterization of George Ade, which is both generous and wise, and at once I want to read George Ade over again.

But the book I most wanted to read, just after finishing *Prejudices, First Series*, was *Prejudices, Second Series*, by the same author. The second series will be as readable and sincere as the first. It will have the same defects. Mr. Mencken will put into it extraordinarily able things, like his articles on Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Nathan, and he will put in howlers. He doesn't know the difference. He will never know.

P. L.

## Ludendorff Self-Exposed

*My Thoughts and Actions, by General Erich Ludendorff. New York: Harper & Bros.*

ON demand from Prince Max's cabinet the Emperor dismissed Ludendorff on October 26th. "On October 27th I stood in Spa, in the prime of my life, at the end of a military career which had brought me infinite work to do, and at the same time a responsibility such as falls to the lot of few men. In the evening I left Spa. In Aachen I sought out my first war billet. I thought of Liege. There I had found my manhood, and had not altered since. My muscles stiffened. I went back home." And from home he went to Sweden and wrote the account of himself which he would like posterity to accept.

He sees himself as a sort of Gulliver bound down by the politicians at home, and finally ruined by them. He was never wrong. His judgment was always correct. He alone really understood the war, and while the victories are to his credit, the defeats are due to others. It is an unmanly performance, and though it contains incidental information that is of some value, it is a dull and uncandid book.

Perhaps it is better thus. The Ludendorff legend will not be nourished by these memoirs. They are not the record of a tragic ruin; they excite no pity and no awe, and they leave behind them the tedium of voluble self-justification, and an immeasurable complacency, and a lingering sense of stupidity. The soldierly competence of Ludendorff was high. Yet as the brain of the General Staff of a country in which the General Staff occupies the position it did in Germany, his failure is written all over these pages. Orderly and logical in his thought, capable of controlling mentally a vast number of factors at once, his judgment failed at the decisive moments, and he led his people to a disaster so complete as to stifle his mind. At the end the great technician is reduced to an uncomprehending and exclaiming moralist.

These memoirs show that his critical failure occurred in the winter months just before America entered the war. They were the months of transition in which the whole character of the war was altered. Up to the conquest of Rumania the war on both sides was running on its original momentum. The German army was still a great organization with a morale for the offensive, but it had reached the limits of profitable aggression both east and west and in the Balkans. It had done everything it could do, but it had not won the war. With the Allies the orthodox European phase had also reached its climax. Italy and Rumania had been secured, Russia was still a belligerent, but there was no decision. The war would not be decided by pitched battle as things then stood; neither G.H.Q. controlled the war. In a profound sense the European war had come to an indecisive end. It was merging into the infinitely complex struggle marked by the participation of America and the disintegration of all ancient authority in eastern Europe.

Ludendorff foresaw none of this, nor does he to this day understand how radically the character of the war was transformed in the winter of 1916-17. Though from page 361 on his bewilderment is ever greater, though his grip is obviously relaxing, the reason for it he does not grasp. He simply scolds the shirkers at home more savagely, and asserts his own patriotism more loudly. He knew at the end of 1916 that it was necessary to take

stock, and of course he was keenly aware of the superiority of the Entente in reserves and material. He drew up the so-called Hindenburg program and proposed a draconian work or fight law. Except in the gamble of March, 1918, his military judgment as to material equipment needed seems to have been extraordinary. But when the period of deadlock and ferment set in at the end of 1916 his admirable technical judgments rested on perfectly unreal notions of what human beings were capable of doing. He expected a military discipline and a sacrificial ardor among civilians that only the most highly trained troops possessed.

Though no man could be more emphatic about the superiority of the drilled German over the undrilled Russian, he somehow cannot contrive to remember that the undrilled civilian is simply incapable of doing as a civilian what he can do as a soldier. Many militarists make this curious error. They will tell you, as Ludendorff does, that only military discipline can create the proper spirit; then they go into tantrums of rage, as Ludendorff does, because people not under military discipline do not possess the martial virtues. For all his parade of toughmindedness, Ludendorff lived for over two years on the delusion that by sheer act of will the whole German people would transform itself into battalions with the morale of shock troops.

This deep miscalculation prevented him from adjusting his mind to the facts. He knew that victory was impossible even at that date, yet he insisted on a political policy based on a victory. The terms of peace which he laid down about Christmas, 1916, were a program of victory. They were the terms of the Pan-Germans, not the extremest fantastic terms of a dictated German peace, but a peace of annexations nevertheless. His mind was torn by an unanalyzed dilemma. He saw that he could not win, but he insisted on acting as if he were going to win, and he justified himself by the conviction that the Allies would not make a moderate peace. In all of this he did not realize, though he was the conqueror of Russia, that a Russian Revolution was preparing. He did not know that Germany's prospects were really more favorable at the moment than they seemed.

It was at this juncture that he rather ignorantly and at haphazard accepted the Admiralty opinion on the submarine war. It was not a matter within the field of his own competence. But it appealed to him. It was one of those downright and terrific acts which are an enormous relief to a man of his temperament. It was concrete and mechanical and violent whereas Bethmann was all fuss and nerves over imponderables that somehow symbolized to him the lowered morale at home. The emotion of doing something desperate and big counted more than any sober calculation of results. He had not considered, for example, such possibilities of successful defense against the submarine as increased ship-building. It is fairly evident that as much as any man in Germany he was the victim of Admiralty propaganda. He was predisposed to accept the conclusion.

This new war which opened in 1917 turned chiefly on American participation, the Russian revolution, the break up of Austria-Hungary, and the disintegration of German morale. Ludendorff could not comprehend this war which he was supposed to be directing. About America he deliberately says little, for his misjudgment there he knows to be a reflection on his military prescience. It is an unpleasant subject and he avoids it. The Russian revolution