

Books and Things

IT was in Dresden, that pension, on a corner and up several pair of stairs, in a flat with a long L-shaped corridor, where the younger son of the house was accustomed to walk up and down, once or twice a week, playing the violin. The older brother played the flute, at the far end of the corridor, secludedly. A still older sister gave a piano lesson every day. It was the father of the family, a man aged, benevolent and choleric, who taught people singing. To this concourse of sweet sounds, which instigated many a walk abroad, I owe my surprising familiarity with Dresden. More than once I even visited the Dresden Gallery. Can you wonder that my memory of Germany, although mine is an unretentive ear, and although twenty-five years have been devoted partly to forgetting what I heard there, is still somewhat auditory?

Soon after the outbreak of the war, however, auditory memory gave way to visual. I don't mean that I had a sudden vision of Dresden und Umgebung, or that my eyes focussed upon local-colored incidents, such as the passage through the streets, at Christmas time, of cakes of great acreage on stretchers which two men carried. No, my memory, I regret to say, was vulgarly tendentious. By its light I saw a dog, small and sociable, and I saw an officer kick him off the sidewalk. By its light I saw another officer, also dressed in pale blue, crowd a woman into the street. A memory better trained would have seen both these officers as Prussians. Mine, while refusing to take them out of their Saxon uniforms, did grant me, as the war progressed, power to add to their number. And the numbers came. Lots of officers crowded lots of women off sidewalks. I seldom caught an officer in the act of doing anything else.

What kept me from telling pretty much everybody, in August and September, 1914, that I had always known the day would surely come when Germany would show herself in her true colors, presumably of the same blue with the uniforms of those unmannerly officers? Was it an arbitrary preference for the truth? Or was it rather that pretty much everybody, quicker off their marks than I, had already told me that he or she had always known and always said what there had, in fact, been none to know and very few to say? Yes, that was it, rather. Little the satisfaction and less the glory of being a prophet among prophets. If Cassandra's gift had been shared in fancy by all the numerous progeny of Priam, by those born in wedlock and those born elsewhere, and if, surviving the fall of Troy, they had met to say "I told you so," would not Cassandra, silent, have let them run on? My acquaintances had no sound reason for thinking they had been prophets. They had something better than reason. Stat pro ratione voluntas.

And yet, in those early days of the war, when Schrecklichkeit, on such a scale and so organized, was still something new under the sun, I fell to reading German again. Not Bernhardt, not Reventlow. I was stalking shyer game, looking for indirect revelations, by novelists and dramatists and poets, of such an underlying substance, such an *Echtheit*, as would account for the German behavior. Les choses valent toujours mieux à leur source, I had heard, so I strove to remount the stream of German feeling to its springs. What I found was not much to my purpose. For one passage which did seem to give Germany away, in advance, long before she ran up the flag of

a bristling pedant-pirate, I found many passages which I could not get into my willed picture.

In saying this, moreover, I am not any too sure of my ground. Perhaps I am not telling the truth. This sudden interest in German may have had a different origin. When I was ten or twelve years old a couple of barbers, dwelling on the wrong side of Beacon Hill, Boston, picked out a suitable night, walked over to the right side of Beacon Hill, and murdered one of the rich and childless bachelors who abounded in that region. For several weeks thereafter I frequented Joy Street, which lay somewhat off my beat, in order that I might stop opposite the house which the newspapers of the period, using a formula still cherished in newspaper offices, called the scene of the tragedy. At that house I would stare long and earnestly, fascinated, my hair almost horrid. Perhaps my interest in German books, during those first days of outrage, of criminal impulse directed by methodical and miscalculating leaders, was but another item in the same column with my interest in the Joy Street murder.

However that may be, this propensity to German books lessened as the war uncoiled its length. Long before November, 1918, I had somehow left off reading them. Not until lately, conscious victim of a rising illusion, feeling a little as if all the pre-war Germans were dead and gone, feeling more and more as if their land were now peopled by a race that has come into being overnight, have I tried to find my lost sense of continuity. The likeliest way I could think of was to reread things that Germans had written before the war, and that are still read in Germany. Some of these were old; others, and not by a long chalk the least beautiful, of recent date. Here, for example, is a poem by Stefan George, from *Sieg des Sommers*, in *Das Jahr der Seele*, written about 1897, I think:

Gemahnt dich noch das schöne Bildniss dessen,
Der nach den Schluchtenrosen kühn ghascht,
Der über seiner Jagd den Tag vergessen,
Der von der Dolden vollem Seim ghascht?

Der nach dem Parke sich zur Ruhe wandte,
Trieb ihn ein Flügelschillern allzuweit,
Der sinnend sass an jenes Weiher's Kante
Und lauschte in die tiefe Heimlichkeit.

Und von der Insel moosgekrönter Steine
Verliess der Schwan das Spiel des Wasserfalls
Und legte in die Kinderhand, die feine,
Die schmeichelnde, den schlanken Hals.

I like to fill my ears with the sound of this, to realize that this music is still heard in Germany by many of the old listeners, and with the old delight. I admit, of course, that few poets can get out of the German language anything remotely like Stefan George's effects. Nor is it by remembering beautiful sounds, after all, that I recover that lost sense of continuity most completely. In Dresden, at this hour, there are doubtless many flats as cacophonous as the otherwise pleasant one that I inhabited, flats where the music-lover and the music-hater are for a moment united in their discomfort. And in Dresden, about an hour from now, precisely as in the old days, another sound will be heard in every music-making room. Somebody in the room above, somebody who knows the city ordinances, will pound on the floor, and the music will come to a stop.

P. L.

Debatable Ground

Debatable Ground, a novel, by G. B. Stern. New York: A. A. Knopf.

TO H. G. Wells this novel is dedicated, and it is only fair. It is faithfully modelled on Wells's tendency novels. But the subject, or rather subjects, are honestly Miss Stern's. The first is the New Generation of English girls, their free conduct and their process of trial and error and their attitude toward so-called emancipation. The second is the English Jew. Miss Stern takes England in wartime, and shows the Jew in search of a country and in search of his soul. The two subjects are woven together.

It is an exceedingly interesting novel. Miss Stern is clever, with a sound grasp of Wells's dazzling technique. The defect of the method is that she is out to exhibit tendencies. This means that, being interested in points, she is interested in persons chiefly as a means to her ends and, roughly speaking, no person to her is an end in himself or herself. She is satisfied if she arranges her points artfully and effectively and clothes them with something that looks like flesh and blood. Being an astonishingly close and lively reporter, there is a general appearance of life. Her people talk naturally, act interestingly and fulfil the manifold purposes of their managing director. There can be no doubt that she has a good fat supply of raw material. But her people do lack a certain air of freedom. They are pitilessly determined to suit the observer's needs. Miss Stern is never at a loss about them, but neither is she ever at ease about them. Like Wells, she is more occupied in authenticating a view of persons and ideas than in exploring the emotional consequences of a view already authenticated. Hence there can be no mystery or intuition or evocation. Her people are straight from an area that has just been mentally scavenged, and she is as definite about them as a brass tack. It is, on the whole, satisfactory, or, rather, interesting, but it makes one feel that if you want bright effectiveness in the novel so badly as this, you apparently get it at the cost of emotional communication. It is like the use of painted furniture. By the lavish use of such brightness, you do not merely arrest attention. You run a ring through attention's nose. And attention thus perfectly captured has a way of reacting against its monopolist, or at any rate of hardening up just because of the intensity that is engaging it—like an egg too hotly boiled. The milder emotional reciprocations are not so remarkable. They provide a less arresting novel. But, in the end, one isn't so thumped into reciprocation and there may be a deeper aesthetic result.

Still, this is a mighty sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued novel. What Miss Stern is out to show is, first, that a young pugnacious Jew could easily be a good Englishman if they'd let him, and, second, that a Jewish girl without great fastidiousness and without great passion might just as well marry respectably and be done with it. To these two themes she gives perspicuity by showing us the variants on each theme. Thus, in the case of Richard Marcus, we have to right and left the gruff old German Jew, his honest and placid pro-English son, the ardently pro-English Jew who talks with an internment camp accent, the definitely Continental Jew who is at heart a Zionist; and the women pendant to these men. In the case of Deb Marcus, Richard's sister, we are orientated by reference to the young woman born chaste, the woman born

promiscuous, the monogamous woman who lives outside wedlock, the polygamous woman who lives inside, the conventional sensual English suburbanite and the unconventional Continental operatic and boarding-house star. Related to these there are found the suavely possessive male, the Philistine proprietary male and the Bohemian proprietary male, with the sexless man and the over-sexed man and the man who is an artist in sex. It sounds more ordered and more bristling than it is. Miss Stern covers the trail of her deliberateness quite well. But the deliberateness is there, and it serves to bring into intellectual perspective the two personalities she is most alive to, the personality of Richard and the personality of Deb.

For the sake of Richard Miss Stern might have written this book. She accepts him. Her first Part shows Richard, straight from an English public school, visiting in Germany before the war. To borrow her own quotation, there is "No German Taint Here." Having at once exemplified and propitiated English feeling, especially by attributing to the Teuton much that is clearly Jewish, Miss Stern proceeds to prove the hardship it is to Richard to be classed as an enemy alien in the England he loves when it was by mere accident he was born in Germany. The boy is evidently English in language, in shibboleth, in curtness, reticence, in free-masonry. He actually finds himself Hun-hating and Hun-hunting after the Lusitania. But the fact stares at him that he is technically a German. He cannot, although his whole nature craves it, join up to go to the Front. Miss Stern dramatizes his position with real sympathy and insight, and incidentally she depicts the other Jews of their set, the Jew as father, as child, as patriot, as love-maker. She even shows Deb reconciling herself to an overwhelmingly tribal marriage because it is a way of escape from all kinds of dubiety and because it promises Richard his one chance to be naturalized.

Deb makes no attempt to disguise her disgust at marrying the whole Phillips' family in the person of Samson Phillips, but it does not keep her from reverting at the end to the code of old Hermann Marcus, who says "weaklings! short-sighted weaklings, with their foolish chatter of 'Liberty for the young.'" That reversion is stated with the uttermost frankness. "I couldn't bear to see her [my daughter] muddling and experimenting as I've muddled and experimented; a failure as I've failed. She must learn to please the Phillips family, and conform to Phillips' standards. For her, there's only happiness in conformity . . . The Jewish girl isn't meant to be a pioneer of freedom."

Nor the Greek girl, nor the Sicilian girl, possibly! But Deb at the game of making the lumpish Samson happy, Deb trying to explain why she is a virgin when she said she wasn't, Deb surrounded by the whole Phillips' family "jabbering and shrieking and with white teeth all aflash in their olive faces" over their newest joke, invites one to interesting reflections. She gives up being what she calls "cornery and defiant." She admits herself pliable, accommodating, imitative, and sees "tolerable comfort and resignation ahead." Is it, as she says, racial? If so, it matters little that, "thank goodness, in England you could be a Jew, and hardly even know it." It restores the whole business of being a Jew to the level established in the wonderful outburst of David. "The Jews are a nation. If it were only a theological difference, why should that have affected such a very marked distinction of feature and temperament? Going to Synagogue instead of to Church doesn't alter the curve of a nose. Of course we're