

Napoleon III

The Second Empire, by Philip Guedalla. G. P. Putnam's Sons. Cloth \$5.00; leather \$13.00.

MR. GUEDALLA'S book will often be pronounced "brilliant;" and perhaps this word alone sums up both its merits and its defects. The brilliance is chiefly that of a witty and allusive style, qualities of which the author is in a position to make effective use, and under the temptation to overdo, because he has conveniently at hand much information of an illustrative and decorative importance. He is seemingly never at a loss for any desired odd bit of detail relating to manners, costume, cosmetics, furniture, medallions or boots; never lacks the apt anecdote, rumor, witticism or indiscretion. Upon these facts he draws freely, by casual reference or allusion inviting them to take their appropriate place in the narrative. Sometimes perhaps the wit and the recondite allusion seem to serve no other purpose than to reveal the author's competence in such matters; but more commonly the purpose is the legitimate one of making vivid the personalities of past times, of creating an "atmosphere," through which the events of those days may take on for the reader something of that bright or fateful illusion which they had for contemporaries. As an example, take the following passage.

The Second Empire was essentially Parisian; and as the war with Russia trailed away into incoherence, Paris once more became the centre of the world. The crowds went by in the Champs Elysées to see the Exhibition, and the billowy proliferation of the crinoline was beginning to undulate the imagination of M. Constantin Guys, whilst the harassed bourgeois of the comic papers stepped warily around its outer edges. The sightseers stood staring at the marvels of science in the Palais de L'Industrie; but it was all a shade more modish, a thought less improving, than the gleaming monument of good intentions with which Prince Albert had obliterated Hyde Park four years before. It was a rustling age of millinery and dance-music. At Fontainebleau someone turned the handle of a mechanical organ as the couples swung round the ball room, because, as the Emperor said, an orchestra was so awkward: "Ils racontent ce qu'ils ont vu ou ce qu'ils n'ont pas vu." They danced at Court or posed in fancy dress for M. Gavarni to draw them. They danced at the Bal Mabille and Valentino, and the town was beginning to sway to the measure which swung and quickened and rose until the Second Empire danced to an air of Offenbach out of the gas light into the cruel sunshine of 1870. (p. 255)

Mr. Guedalla's Napoleon is a man of uncertain ability, educated to silence and shrewdness and a mastery of enigmatic phrases during his years of exile and imprisonment. Until 1852 he had a definite purpose, which was to re-establish the Empire; that purpose once achieved, he no longer knew what he had to do: "At forty-five, a pallid man with dull eyes, he was Emperor of the French. . . . But the star flickered and failed, since in attaining his purpose he had lost it; it was the tragedy of an arriviste who had arrived." (p. 242). Yet as his early purpose had always been fortified by a belief in his "destiny," afterwards, although he ceased to have a purpose, he continued to believe in his destiny. Therefore he drifted pleasantly, never in a hurry (*Il ne faut rien brusquer*), trusting to his star to light the way. I think that Napoleon's purpose was often (in the case of Italy, for example) clearer in his own mind than Mr. Guedalla will allow us to think—a purpose

which might have succeeded had the Emperor not had to deal with two men infinitely cleverer than himself in the machiavellian art. But thus it is that Mr. Guedalla pictures Napoleon for us: taking events as they came, making fateful decisions with a negligent and casual air, very much as he might choose his cigarettes, contemplating the future, not with the worried look of a man who could not foresee anything, but with the indifference of a man who was assured that he did not need to.

The style employed by Mr. Guedalla is admirably suited, and perhaps deliberately chosen, to enforce this theory (unless the theory was unconsciously found convincing because suited to the style). It runs along pleasantly, as the Emperor lived, with no harsh notes or loud noises, carrying the reader through the soft Indian summer undisturbed and unperturbed save for an occasional far away rumble of disastrous omens. The method is effective for its purpose; but one feels either that there is too much of it, or that Mr. Guedalla has confined himself too much to the task of revealing Napoleon's state of mind. It is well to convey the casual air with which Napoleon made fatal decisions; but if the dramatic quality of these decisions is to be effectively exhibited the reader should not be left with a blurred impression of the events (in Italy and Germany, for example) which made the decisions vital ones. Napoleon may have been casual and nonchalant; Cavour and Bismarck were not. The defect is that Mr. Guedalla narrates the great events of history in the same way that he describes a half-conscious and transitory state of mind—by allusion, casual reference, veiled innuendo.

Mr. Guedalla's book has been compared with Strachey's Queen Victoria. The purpose is much the same—to recreate the personality of actual characters by means of skilful historical narrative. Yet the difference in style and in the handling of material is great. Apropos of the Queen's distress over the conduct of the Prince of Wales, Mr. Strachey writes:

It was clear that the heir to the throne was mixing with people of whom she did not at all approve. What was to be done? She saw that it was not only her son that was to blame—that it was the whole system of society; and so she dispatched a letter to Mr. Delane, the editor of the Times, asking him if he would "frequently write articles pointing out the immense danger and evil of the wretched frivolity and levity of the views and lives of the Higher Classes." And five years later Mr. Delane did write an article upon that very subject. Yet it seemed to have very little effect.

This is another manner altogether.

CARL BECKER.

Command

Command, by William McFee. New York: Doubleday Page & Company. \$1.90.

MR. MCFEE dedicates *Command* to "those commanders under whom the author has had the honor to serve, who have achieved firmness without asperity, tact and sympathy without interference, and appreciation without fuss." His story is by no means an exemplification of these virtues. The central figure, Mr. Spokesly, is only a mate, and his approach to command is through the London School of Mnemonics, in which he has progressed to the sixth chapter on How to Dominate Your Friends. His relations with his commanders, of whom he is profoundly

distrustful, form but a minor thread in the story, of which his subjection to woman is the chief. And this introduces to us the dominant figure of Evanthia Solaris, whose purposes he serves for a season. Spokesly is l'homme moyen sensuel whose aspirations to command are pathetic and laughable. Evanthia Solaris is a born queen—a Eustacia Vye of the Levant, and like her prototype of Egdon Heath, her kingdom is the hearts of men.

She was aware that this man, come up out of the sea like some fabled monster of old, to do her bidding, was the victim of her extraordinary personality; yet she never forgot that his admiration, his love, his devotion, his skill, his endurance, were no more than her rightful claim. Incomparably equipped for a war with fate, she regarded men always as the legionaries of her enemy.

She rules by the passion which she feels and inspires and despises. Her war cry is *Je deteste les hommes*.

She stood there, a man's arm flung tensely about her, another man cautiously working the boat in beneath where she stood, the blood and tissues of her body nourished by the exertions of other men, meditating intently upon the swinish proclivities of men. She even trembled slightly at the thought of those proclivities, and the man beside her held her more closely and soothed her with a gentle caress because he imagined she was the victim of a woman's timidity.

Evanthia commands Spokesly because she is nearer to the elemental forces than the pupil of the London School of Mnemonics; but stronger even than Evanthia is the irresistible push of things. The war is the background of the story, the war in its most desultory phase in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean. Against that background of crass casualty there is little difference between the futility of Spokesly and the official competence of his commanders. There were in fact no commanders. Of the English command at Saloniki, Mr. McFee records the failure to secure a complete view of the world on the war. "If they could collar stores from some other front or from their allies, it was all one to them." "They never spoke of private affairs except to some man of their own class who had been to one of the great public schools. For them the war was a war to perpetuate this social hierarchy, to place it once more upon an impregnable base." And their failure and the end of the war and the end of the world through the lapse of command is predicted by the German, Liethenthal:

"Europe is dying. The war, the war is only a superficial disturbance. The trouble is deeper than the mud of Flanders, my friend. Europe is dying because her inspiration, her ideals, are gone. . . . The old fidelities are departing. And when they are all dead, and Europe is a vast cesspool of republicans engaged in mutual extermination, what will happen then do you think?"

It would be a sad error to imply that *Command* is a thesis novel. On the contrary the story unrolls itself as a simple narrative of events with an artless dependence on each other, interrupted by disaster, which is thoroughly disarming. The author's detachment is complete. He does not construct his story; it merely happens. He does not create his characters; they are there awaiting his comment. In this Mr. McFee follows Conrad, but without the latter's elaborate and self-conscious alibi. Mr. McFee has achieved an indifference, a nonchalance, an aplomb which are quite the perfect manner of the novelist. But it would

be naïve not to suspect behind this ingenuousness a theme of which the story of ships and commanders is a simple statement; and to which the background of a world heaving and yawing like a gigantic derelict, is a choric response.

ROBERT MORSS LOVETT.

Speaking of By-Products

Rootabaga Stories, by Carl Sandburg. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. \$2.00.

THIS book for kids looks like it was a by-product of what the highbrows call Sandburg's Muse. Like most by-products it is put up flossy and advertised special. The publisher's ad man has a line about "folk stories" and "the soil of American life" and "the beginning of an imaginative American literature"—whatever that means—but the author omits the college stuff and just runs on about the Ax family (Gimme the Ax, Please Gimme, Ax Me No Questions and Gimme the Ax Again), about such nuts as Any Ice Today and Jason Squiff, the cistern cleaner, and about Poker Face the baboon and Hot Dog the tiger—and he's no blind tiger neither.

There's a lot more characters—some funny, some fancy and some mixed—and all their names are printed separate in front of their stories, like in a movie. At first they don't do nothing much but go to old-fashioned places like the Village of Cream Puffs and stick round Main Street in a tank town called Liver-and-Onions. They travel in trains, all right, with long tickets and everything, but their stuff is old—pigs with bibs on, and such—so it's quite a while before you know where you're at. Then just about when any regular kid would decide he wasn't no place at all and begin thinking about his radio on the sly, he hears a chummy "attaboy, li'l bunny" and learns that mascots never stay long and meets a circus man with lots of spot cash money. After that—well, you can take it from me nothing but dope could put him by-by till he found out what happened when two sky-scrappers got the bug of having a baby and how the Committee of Sixty-Six got the animals' tails back onto them by junketing from the union depot in Philadelphia to the weather headquarters in Medicine Hat.

I guess this guy Sandburg must of got up against it one night for bedtime stories and started in making them up on lines the mothers favored when he was a kid—ladies that knew their place, and it was in the home. I guess he figured he could put across any cute little idea that popped into his head by just slicking it up with some of the stuff going to waste in his poetry factory, and then repeating it over and over so's the kiddies could get it. Right there's where he missed his step. Of course, he may of got interested in his by-product and improved it on his own hook. More'n likely, though, the audience didn't—maybe they went to sleep on him! Anyways, he commenced getting busy with the world the young ones really live in, and that's not many million light-years off from the one us old ones live in.

Take the case of Bimbo the Snip. He forgot and thumbed his nose at the iceman just as the wind changed. So his thumb stuck there. And his father, Bevo the Hike, just naturally had to chase all over town after the ward alderman, the barn boss of the street cleaning department, the head vaccinator of the health department and the big main