

The Long Journey

The Long Journey, by Johannes V. Jensen. Translated by A. G. Chater. Volume I: *Fire and Ice*; Volume II: *The Cimbrians*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$5.00.

IT has become the fashion lately to write epics of mankind, showing the long continuity of human effort. Wells, in his *Outline of History*, and Van Loon, in *The Story of Mankind*, have taken hold of the German science of *Weltgeschichte*—professed in the nineteenth century by bearded scholars—and remoulded it with journalistic facility. The former is a book, picturesque, but marvellously inexact; the latter is a nursery epic, written to captivate and instruct. And yet both authors hold to the traditional stand of the historian: even where their information is thin, they never consciously fictionize. Their convictions are what Croce calls “the undemonstrable conviction of the jurymen, who has heard the witnesses, listened attentively to the facts, and prayed Heaven to inspire him.” That is to say, they attempt to show the world realistically, as it has been since the day of primeval slime. But finally, the value of their conclusions depends upon the depth of their intuitions. In so far they have the nature of the artist.

Covering so vast a field, Jensen has preferred to make his work artistic in the narrow sense, presenting it in the aspect of the possible, of the imaginable. Thus *The Long Journey* is frankly fiction—intuition illuminating a very solid background of science. It is a series of stories, delightfully written, each of them covering an epoch: the two volumes which have appeared carry the men of northern Europe all the way from the hot volcanic age of forest-life to the stirring times of the Roman Republic.

Undoubtedly the method has its advantages. It gives room for a great deal of pleasant satire, as when Jensen writes: “They two were alone upon the ice-sheet, the only human couple in the North. The sun broke through the clouds and saw that there were no others. Thus arose monogamy.” He can expand on those eras where his information is sound and use asterisks for the interim; and he never needs to say, as Wells does, “Now here again, with every desire to be plain with the reader, we have still to trouble him with qualifying statements and notes of interrogation.” There is no need to discuss issues of history or anthropology; what he does is to reach his own solutions and present them in clear, living pictures. They stand out amazingly vivid—learning fused and united by the flame of art.

Intimate human needs are what interest Jensen most—climate and love and the search for food, the recklessness of men and the frugality of women; and he shows how these are reasons for invention and migration. From being a horde of hairy animals in the forest, men become lords of farms and forests and wide fields, all because they demand a living from the world, and because some man arises with brains enough to master his surroundings. He is always an outcast, living apart from the herd, and learning through solitude. He is impetuous youth, breaking away from the circumspection of its elders; and he becomes an agent of thrilling change, with a new herd following behind him. Fyr, the forest man, is the only one to make discoveries for sheer joy, crowing on the mountain-top: because his memory was long enough to distinguish day and night, he wanted to touch the sun and count the days of the moon; and so he climbed the

volcano, lived in its upland meadows, and brought down fire on a branch.

With the coming of the Ice-age, however, all this was changed: Carl, the next Prometheus, “was one who could not yield. His heart fed on defiance, he grew in adversity. And when the primitive people were brought to the crossways between the cold and the forest, he was the one who chose the impossible. He became the first man.”

Fyr and Carl and White Bear are stalwart heroes, more interesting than the later figures. As the work grows larger, the descriptions of flowers and beasts begin to pall, and the endless repetition of living and loving and dying which is human life tends to grow monotonous. The attitude towards little children is increasingly sentimental; the strong, eager bond between a man and woman, which in early days was so fruitful of progress, has softened now that it is no longer rooted in economic need, and appears in the sentimental story of Cheiron and Vedis. The truth of Anatole France’s epigram becomes very apparent here, namely, that “the embarrassment of the historian increases with the abundance of his documents.” To cover the whole period of the European migrations, Jensen has been forced to invent a mythical figure—Norna Gest, who is minstrel and immortal, wandering from one age to the next and giving the book a crude kind of unity. The method which Jensen has chosen is one that is hard to sustain. It is an endurance test, a real tax upon the writer’s ingenuity, to keep it up for two volumes; and there is still a third to come.

ROSELEE COHEN.

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C. N.

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