

With that we must lay down this volume, with a reluctance partially consoled by an avid anticipation of its forthcoming companion, which will complete the majestic narrative down to our own not altogether degenerate or unworthy time.

WILLIS FLETCHER JOHNSON.

### SOME RECENT FRENCH NOVELS

MICHELINE ET L'AMOUR. Par Paul Bourget, Gérard d'Houville, Henry Duvernois et Pierre Benoit. Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie.

SOUS LE SOLEIL DE SATAN. Par Georges Bernanos. Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie.

LE DÉSERT DE L'AMOUR. Par François Mauriac. Paris: Bernard Grasset.

It is a very curious and somewhat distressing book, this second part of a love story, which is told today by four of the best French novelists of the time, Mr. Paul Bourget, Mme. Gérard d'Houville, Mr. Henry Duvernois and the author of *L'Atlantide*, Mr. Pierre Benoit. As in the first part, published two years ago under the title *Le Roman des Quatre*, the authors prepared the plot in co-operation, each one taking up a character and developing it according to his or her inspiration and talent.

It will be recalled the first part is the story of Micheline, daughter of Antoine Barge, a well-known sculptor, who long ago in a fit of jealousy shot his wife and the man whom she loved. In order that the double crime of her parents should remain always hidden from the child, Micheline was brought up by an aunt in a small country place, far from Paris and from those who knew the drama. However, the terrible secret is revealed to the girl. In the shock which ensues she feels that she needs "the hand of a friend". She is courted at the time by two men. One, a cousin of hers, is the timid, serious and clumsy Lucien Hevelot; the other is a brilliant and frivolous playwright, Bernard Souchet. She marries the second.

In this second book we find Micheline married and very unhappy. Her frivolous husband, who still pretends to love her and, after all, may, has been unfaithful to her on many occasions and—what is more bitter to her—with her friend, Aimée Parbly, who has been seeking the advice and assistance of the notorious

playwright as she wanted to go on the stage. Micheline has been informed by friends, and "by the sure instinct that never deceives", of the misconduct of the man whom she still loves. It takes her long, though, to realize the treason of Aimée. She tries first to pretend to herself that she does not care about it. Her pride forbids her to admit that she is jealous. She represses her own acute pain. But she feels that she cannot bear the suffering alone, and she writes to her cousin, Lucien Hevelot, who has become an able engineer, now making a fortune in Egypt, to come to her. On receiving her note, Lucien leaves everything and sails for France.

However Micheline does not wait for him in Paris, and, as she learns that her husband, under pretense of rehearsals of a new play, is living in Brussels, at the same hotel with Aimée, she wants to see for herself what is going on between them and she goes to Belgium.

The same passion which once armed the hand of her father revives in her when she witnesses her husband gayly making ready for a drive and kissing Aimée as she enters the car. At that moment, Micheline draws the pistol hidden in her hand-bag. But, before she has pulled the trigger, the thought of the terrible, always living remorse of her father after his crime, stops her hand. She lets the couple go unharmed. She immediately flies to Bruges where she refuses to meet her cousin, the good Hevelot who has followed her there, never doubting that he would persuade her to marry him at the end. She retires to the country place where she grew up, and after some months in the healthy atmosphere of her youth, she decides that she will forgive but not forget. Meanwhile her frivolous husband continues his gay life in Paris; the silly Lucien is to marry the adventuress Aimée, who has succeeded in persuading him that she is a pure, innocent girl who has been shamefully treated by Micheline and slandered by Bernard, and Micheline consoles herself and with the approaching birth of her baby finds a new reason for living.

Of course this too brief analysis can give no idea of the charm which runs through these pages. The plot, thus reduced, will seem to be but a new version of an age-old story wonderfully told, of an attractive, complex, variegated, feminine character,

surrounded by the three varieties of male brutality which are called selfishness, frivolity and honest stupidity.

What holds the interest of the reader is precisely what cannot be analyzed: the seduction of the thought and of its expression, of a philosophy, that flashes continuously through the book making the reading an uninterrupted delight of the mind.

The strange book entitled *Sous le Soleil de Satan*, which is the first work of its young author, Georges Bernanos, belongs to the modern school, and accordingly shows a complete disdain for the three factors which were once considered indispensable to the art of a novelist; composition, unity of the plot, and clearness of expression. In spite of this fault *Sous le Soleil de Satan* was the success of the season and some critics went so far as to compare Mr. G. Bernanos's talent to the genius of Balzac.

In fact the influences mostly felt at reading these pages is not so much that of Balzac as those of Dostoievski and Paul Claudel. As in the work of this last writer, religious fear is the real subject. From the Russian genius, the author may have borrowed the methods for revealing the relentless and obscure work of the conscience in the most terrible as well as under the very ordinary circumstances of life.

There are two quite different books, with apparently no connection between them, in *Sous le Soleil de Satan*. Satan, if it can be said so, is the only point of contact between the two and the center of the book.

In the first part, or prologue, is told the story of the attractive but ill-natured daughter of a wealthy brewer, Germaine Malorthy, who, being only sixteen, has misconducted herself first with a middle-aged and poor nobleman whom she shoots after he has refused to marry her; second with a radical and somewhat repugnant doctor, politician and Member of Parliament, upon whom she tries to impose the paternity of her unborn child so that he, fearing the consequences, would deliver her before the child be born. As he refuses, she becomes insane.

The second part shows the sufferings and tribulations of a very humble and simple-minded priest, Father Donissan, despised and ridiculed by his colleagues, submitting himself to all kinds of penances and macerations, suspicious even to his

parishioners, and who proves to be a Saint. Walking one night on a road, Father Donissan loses his way and meets "a black, jovial little walker", who is none other than Satan. After many successive—extremely pathetic—attacks by tricks, threats, sarcasms, temptations, the Sinister Angel finally leaves the priest inanimate on the road.

This scene—certainly one of the most daring and, for the author, most difficult to deal with—is the center of interest of the book. Satan here has nothing of the romantic and conventional Mephisto of Dr. Faust. He is near to humanity and, like the Devil in the old Mysteries of the Middle Age, really a part of the human soul. He is both real and supernatural and his conflict with the poor Father Donissan makes us witness the tragic fight between the two eternally opposed principles, the grandeur and the vileness, of humanity.

A quarryman finds the priest, revives him, and, while they are both walking, a few moments later, on the road, a new phenomenon takes place. Father Donissan sees, with his eyes of flesh, what is hidden to the most subtle intuition, the soul and conscience of the man who accompanies him. And this soul fills his own soul with respect and love. It is a "simple, attentive, every day, taleless soul, busy with poor cares. But a sovereign humility, like a heavenly light, soaking it in its reflection. . . ."

Because he has seen this grandeur in the humblest human being, and because he has now the power to see "through the flesh and bodies", Father Donissan will now reveal to all men and women the divine principle which resides in them—and which they themselves ignore. Meeting Germaine Malorthy the murderess, now restored to health, at the outskirts of his village, he immediately attempts to discover to her the antecedents, unknown to her, which are really responsible for her crimes: then he tries to make her see the hidden beauty of her soul. After a fight between her pride and her conscience, now true and unveiled, the girl is driven by "the Enemy" to commit suicide. But before she dies, she calls for Father Donissan, who against the will of the parents and the abuse of all the village, carries the dying girl to the church and makes her a convert.

Father Donissan continues pursuing the Enemy, in his fellow men and in himself, while his reputation is growing, until one day, after he has yielded to the supplications of a mother and has vainly tried to revive her dead child, he believes that he has succumbed to the temptation of Satan. He retires to his church and dies from a cardiac attack in his confessional.

Many passages of this book remain obscure. Some are too long. But the impression which lingers after reading it is one of a poignancy which marks only a masterpiece.

The French Academy has just awarded its yearly and much envied Great Prize of Literature to Mr. François Mauriac for his novel *Le Désert de l'Amour*, or rather for all his literary work, which is already voluminous. This novel places the author among the most prominent writers of the modern school and, like *Sous le Soleil de Satan*, proceeds from the religious idea. Like Mr. Bernanos, too, Mr. Mauriac is both a mystic and a realist.

The *Désert de l'Amour* shows that love may mark the whole life of a young man if he refuses to see its real meaning and turn it for good. Raymond Courrèges, when only seventeen, falls in love with a "butterfly" of society, whom his own father passionately loves. But the girl rejects both. Raymond breaks off with his parents and goes astray. After twenty years he meets simultaneously his father and the woman whom he has never forgotten. She is married and his father has returned to his family life. Raymond alone, because of his obstinacy in his miserable passion, continues leading a disorderly, aimless and more and more degrading life.

Mr. Mauriac has written somewhere:

The inner drama of a man who can tame his heart—a drama which is shown neither in words nor in acts—who can describe it? What artist would dare to imagine the progresses and ruses of God's mercy, mysterious protagonist! It is our servitude and our misery that we can depict without a lie only the passions!

However we have the impression, when reading the books of Mr. Mauriac, that the author achieved more than once that most difficult work.

Paris, 1926.

GEORGES LECHARTIER.