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A Letter from France

By Louise Morgan Sill

J. KESSEL, whose aviation novel, "L'Equipage" was very successful, has published a new story, "Les Rois Aveugles" (Editions de France), in collaboration with Helène Iswolsky, daughter of a former Russian Ambassador to France, who has supplied many authentic documents relating to the Russian Revolution which inspires the book. It is described by one critic as a new variation of the "historical" novel: the truth is not altered, as the historical novelist has a right to alter it, while the story itself is an admirable work of imagination. The terrible, fantastic history of Rasputin is the basic theme of the book, and after reading it, it is easier to understand the Czar, the Czarina, all of gigantic Russia, physical and mental. A documented novel, thoroughly interesting.

When Chateaubriand wrote in 1859 his "Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe," he described his meeting with a young girl who had been writing him for some time, but whom he had never seen. According to his version, she insisted upon accompanying him with such perserverance that he was obliged to carry her in his arms to her home, where he deposited her in safety. (He was then past middle age). This young girl was his famous "Occitanienne"—that is to say, an inhabitant of Occitanie, country of the *langue d'oc*, of which Toulouse is the capital. As the author's description had been fancifully made, as he had transmuted the real circumstances for some unknown reason, it was impossible to discover the identity of the fair unknown, who has been the subject of conjecture in books and articles for sixty-five years. Not long ago the secret was disclosed in an article, and this led to the publication of a volume, "Le Roman de l'Occitanienne et de Chateaubriand" (Plon), by Comtesse de Saint-Roman, granddaughter of the heroine, who defends, by the documents in the case, her ancestress's reputation from Chateaubriand's careless and imaginary allusion. This old noblewoman, Comtesse de Castelbajac, died in 1897 leaving a casket of private papers with the request that, if necessary, they should be published. They were found to consist of her own account of her friendship with Chateaubriand and seventy unpublished letters from him, along with other documents showing that she was the long famous and mysterious Occitanienne, but that her relations with Chateaubriand were far from being in accordance with the paragraph in the Memoirs. She had so admired the great man, then the idol of the public and especially adored by women, that she wrote him, he replied, and a correspondence of two years followed, punctuated by meetings in the salons of her own and other families. Leontine de Villeneuve married at the age of twenty-six the Comte de Castelbajac, to whom she was a devoted wife. Her portrait, which forms the frontispiece of the book, shows her as a girl of sixteen, with a clever and piquant face, dressed in the fashion of the Empire. There is a Preface by Robert de Flers, of the French Academy, who calls the affair *un scandale de pureté*. Efforts were made on the death of Chateaubriand to discover Madame de Castelbajac's letters to him, but as they have never been found it is presumed that he destroyed them.

Emile Baumann has written a new life of Saint Paul (Grasset), "one of the greatest voices ever heard on earth." In nearly 350 pages he describes Saint Paul's "terrible and sublime adventure," illuminating his subject by personal knowledge of the places where the great Apostle lived and suffered, and by the widest reading, and by language of an impassioned sincerity. An important book. M. Baumann has written a number of novels and other volumes—"La Fosse aux Lions," "Trois Villes Saintes," "Job le Prédestiné," etc. He received the Grand Prix Balzac in 1922.

Lovers of gardens will be interested in a book, "Jardins d'Artistes," the fifth edition of which has just appeared (Poitiers: Viaud-Bruant). The text, æsthetic and philosophical, is illustrated by modern artists who have made pictures of their own gardens. Among them are Maurice Denis, Pisarro, Mme. Lucien Simon, Lhote, Sidaner, P-Albert Laurens, Viaminck, Guérin, Roussel, and a host of others. Among the old French maxims included in the text is one which ought to be written up in every countryside: "Replant or be accursed."

The tragedy which age implies to the kind of pretty woman for whom the adoration or notice of men has been the most effective source of happiness, is well indicated in Charlotte Cabrier's new novel "Une Jolie Femme Meurt Deux Fois" (Michel). The mother of an only son, who has married and left her, is kind to one of her son's friends who continues to come to see her and frankly enjoys her society. He is a young aviator who escaped without injury from the War, whose parents live in Spain, and who is alone in Paris. The mother, who tells the story, is a woman in the forties, still attractive, and the boy has a charming way of making her feel that she is young and pretty, so that little by little she makes her anachronistic mistake. The disillusionment comes when she is brought into contact with girl friends of the boy. Two former books by this author, "L'Epousée" and "Toute Seule," have been crowned by the French Academy. The publisher's printed slip encircling the volume says: "A book which will make the woman of twenty smile, the woman of thirty think, but will deeply trouble the woman of forty. Men alone, perhaps, will perceive all its tragic import."

M. Emile Magne, author of many books on history, biography, art, two of them crowned by the Academy, publishes a new edition "entirely rehandled and augmented by unpublished portraits and documents," of his work on the famous *courtisane*, Ninon de Lanclos. M. Magne has found many papers relating to his heroine in the archives of the old French noblesse, who have generously opened their libraries to him. It is remarkable to what extent the life of this fascinating woman came into contact with people known to history. Her father, Henry de Lanclos, belonged to the authentic *petite noblesse* either of Touraine or Champagne. He led a life of doubtful virtue for some years, and was first fond of, and then ashamed of, playing a lute. The book is full of such details as well as of gossip,—of philosophy too, as Ninon plunged into epicureanism or stoicism at pleasure. In the appendix are unpublished documents of various legal proceedings in which the famous beauty was involved, with lists of her household furniture including even the kitchen inventory. Her mother was serious and religious, and having named her daughter Anne was not pleased when the charm and grace of the child induced frivolous diminutives such as Annine, Nanine, and finally Ninon. The author says that Ninon tells the secret of her fascination in a few lines of one of her letters: "Philosophy accords very well with mental charm. It is not enough to be wise, one must also please."

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Foreign Literature

History in Mosaic

DAS GELDWESEN IM KRIEGE. By ALEXANDER POPOVICS. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1925.

OSTERREICHISCHE REGIERUNG UND VERWALTUNG IM WELTKRIEGE. By JOSEPH REDLICH. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1925.

Reviewed by WILLIAM J. SHULTZ

THE mills of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace grind slow, but they grind exceeding fine. For the past several years the Endowment has been publishing volume by volume its great series on the economic and social history of the World War. Each volume with its specialized field is a mosaic chip filling in the broad picture of the problems of the World War. These two studies present a fractional view of the Hapsburg Empire during the years preceding its dissolution; undocumented as is customary with the Endowment series, they are written with care and scholarship, and an absence of partisan spirit.

Dr. Popovics's book on the Austro-Hungarian finances during the War is the narrower of the two in its scope, but for students of finance it presents two interesting subjects for study. From the time of the *Ausgleich* orwards, the Dual Monarchy was faced by the supremely difficult problem of maintaining nationally independent but parallel currency and banking systems in Austria and Hungary; it was really exceptional financial ingenuity that enabled this shaky arrangement to last until the dissolution of the Monarchy. Because of this weakness, and because of general financial unpreparedness for war, the difficulties of Austrian wartime finance were greater than those of the other combatants; Dr. Popovics's analysis of these war-time problems is shrewd.

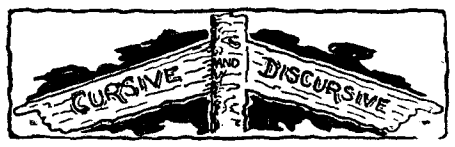
Professor Redlich's book is doubly valuable because it does not confine its study of the conflicting nationalist movements within the Empire to the years of the war, but traces them far back into the nineteenth century. On the one hand stood the Austrian political ideal—Austria to be coequal with Hungary but otherwise dominant over the minor nationalities, and within Austria the aristocracy and upper middle classes to be supreme; a centralized bureaucracy was to be the form of governmental organization. Protesting, striving against this system, were the national aspirations of the Poles, Czechs, and Slavic peoples, championing national tongues, national literatures, national home-rule; to add to the complication there appeared a growing class conflict, and an active Social Democratic movement. Parliamentary government by the Reichsrat became impossible in the face of bitterly hostile minority *blocs*.

The early years of the war, with their subordination of civil government by military, with their domination of economic life by semi-military commissions, with their temporary war-time patriotism, dampened the internal struggle. The death of Franz Joseph, the Russian Revolution, foreign propaganda among the nationalist minorities, military reverses, brought the nationalist and social issues once more to the fore. And then 1918, and dissolution.

Foreign Notes

IN "Joie dans le Ciel" (Paris: Grasset), C. F. Ramuz has written a charming and poetic tale, one which while not new in *motif* is so gracefully and deftly handled as to lend it genuine distinction. The story begins with the resurrection of the dead whom it portrays beginning their new lives in a continuation of their old homes now become heaven by reason of the fact that they are always happy there. For a time all runs smoothly and then there is a sudden eruption of the spirits of the damned. The tale thereafter becomes somewhat mystical but it remains none the less interesting and pleasing.

A new edition which has aroused general interest here is that of Father Huc's "Dans la Tartarie" (Plon), with memories of his voyage there and in Thibet and China. It was in 1843 that this Lazarist Father crossed China from end to end, from north of Peking to Lassa in Thibet, describing the country, the manners and customs of the people and their magic practices, and introducing his readers to many "lovable Chinamen." There are wonderful descriptions of the monasteries in Lassa. Critics agree that the book has lost none of its freshness and charm in the passage of years. M. H. d'Ardenne de Tizac, director of the Cernuschi Museum in Paris, has written a learned Preface. Father Huc was a serious precursor of Ossendowski—whose new book "L'Homme et le Mystère en Asie" (in collaboration with L. Stanton Palen), has recently appeared.



TO continue from last week our spirited and intensely valuable analysis of America's greatest two he-male writers, James Oliver Curwood and Harold Bell Wright.

When our space ran out we were saying of Mr. Curwood that his latest novel, "The Ancient Highway," turns into a vivid movie. It does. The climax of the book, after another stupendous fight between two *habitant* giants, is the dynamiting of a dam by the St. Ives outfit, to start their logs down river, and the counter-dynamiting by the demon Hurd of a mountain into the river, to hold said logs back. This causes all kinds of a jam. Clifton, the hero, and another, go out on the log-jam to dynamite again, in order to free the logs. They succeed. But Bolduc is killed and Clifton by every law of probability would have been obliterated. Antoinette whose coldness to him has by this time made him old before his time, and awful grim, dances out on the jam, (she must have been trained on the tightrope!) and they clasp each other fervently at last, with certain death howling all around them. The author's ingenuity is certainly taxed to the uttermost to get them out. But he does it. He does that thing. It is unbelievable. It was a million to one shot. But Mr. Curwood gets them out, and gets them married, and gets Hurd killed, and all ends in great peace and God's great content.

There is no doubt that Mr. Curwood can write excitingly. In spite of its preposterousness the sheer energy with which the climax is written stirs the pulse. As for the combat between the *habitants* that precedes it that simply reveals Mr. Curwood's intense liking for giant scraps and primitive violence. So, to sum up, we have lush local color, rapid exciting incident, primitive violence, conversation from *The Family Herald*, gentility and chivalrous nobility from the same, preposterous feats of strength, and characters essentially "dumb" clothed in a great glamour of adjectives and ranting speeches. It is great movie stuff as the movies are at present constituted. The book is of no possible value as literature, but a boy of twelve (and most of us have got a good deal of the boy of twelve still in us) would get a real "kick" out of the feats of strength. The love-interest he would dismiss as twaddle, as it should be dismissed. But that has the appeal of Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth and Laura Jean Libbey.

And so to Mr. Wright. Mr. Wright, in general doesn't write as well as Mr. Curwood. Mr. Curwood has more originality in description and a mind more full of color, at least. Mr. Wright writes more woodenly. On the other hand he sometimes gets closer to the old dime novel than does Mr. Curwood. A westbound Overland train, a crying child, a "swagger man and a tawdry woman" who protest the "squalling brat,"—a young woman "who had been the object of their careless comments and thoughtless jests,"—and,—

> "For shame!" she cried in a clear voice which was heard easily by those who had endorsed the sentiments of the couple. "Have you no pity in you at all? Or is it that your hearts are as cold as your eyes are blind?"

This is the very voice of the old melodrama, the kind of thing that brought stamping and piercing whistles from the gallery and a surf of hisses for the villain. And the poor little one's mother was veritably "in the baggage coach ahead." Mr. Wright is a true descendant of our sentimental balladists. If his talent had been for song not story he might have given us "The Face on the Barroom Floor" and kindred lyrics. Therefore I have more sympathy with Mr. Wright, as a matter of fact, than I have with Mr. Curwood. His is a simpler, more lyric gift, you might say! But just where, as Blanche Colton Williams has it, "so eloquent is his sense of the pathetic as to draw comparison with Dickens," and just where he is "as stark as Thackeray," I am at a loss to imagine. Dickens, just possibly, at Dickens' very worst, for a flash or two, but Thackeray—!

But no, on second thoughts we don't see even the *slightest* similarity to Dickens. And another exception we take to Miss Williams' estimate of Mr. Wright. She says, incidentally, "he is an admirable writer of dialect. We dont see it.

Mr. Wright loves dialect, though. And once he gets a Chinaman, or a Mexican talking, it is almost impossible for him to stop their loquacity short of pages.

Mr. Curwood celebrates, apparently, a grand old patrician girl of Canada; Mr. Wright a simple Irish Pollyanna. Both are equally lay figures. Yet there are occasional rather sly touches of humor and pathos in Mr. Wright's story that surprise one with a certain deftness. Mr. Curwood is always slathering on the purple patch; Mr. Wright occasionally writes almost naturally.

Mr. Wright also has his villain who is a monster of iniquity, yet he succeeds in making him (in a way) a recognizable human being. Mr. Curwood's villain never had a chance. Mr. Wright's hero is, furthermore, not *quite* so oratorical a *dummkopf* as Mr. Curwood's. In casting around for a parallel to Mr. Wright, the late General Charles A. King comes to our mind. Take an old favorite like "Laramie," by the late General. The late General treated the Army frontier post of past days with about the same melodrama, heroism, villainousness, and sentimentality that Mr. Wright uses in interpreting "the desert and mountain world of Arizona and the Mexican border" of today. And General King's handling of dialect was about as excellent. He also preserved the high moral tone of his books while at the same time injecting lots of exciting incident. The arrest of Holdbrook, for smuggling arms and ammunition into Mexico, at the end of Mr. Wright's story, is quite in the good old General King tradition. General King would have used Nora and Larry O'Shea, if he had hit upon them, in just about the same fashion. The squaw-man Injun Pete is an accomplice in villainy who would have been dear to the General's heart, and Holdbrook, the suave villain, himself, is the type of villain the old soldier used again and again.

General Charles A. King was a very popular writer in his day. Mr. Wright, in taking up Arizona in a serious way, follows in his footsteps. He uses much the same recipe. But despite Miss Williams' dictum, his preaching has *not* perfected him in story-telling. We emerge greatly wearied by the stock characters and obvious claptrap of his tale. He is most certainly *not* an inspired novelist. He uses stereotype without the slightest freshness of style or language. His present story is, on the whole, less preposterous than Mr. Curwood's, but Curwood can at least achieve a more stirring climax, preposterous as it is.

What childishness is in the concocting of both these books, what eternal childishness! For that reason they appeal so strongly to the eternal childishness of three fourths of our population. Yet better books have also appealed. As we recall it, Owen Wister's "The Virginian" was once a best-seller. Wister could take Western material, concoct an obviously heroic love-story in an obviously dramatized setting, and yet shape his material so dexterously, with so pungent a gift of observation, so innate a sense of style, that his humors of characterization and his narration of exciting incident enthralled. It is all in the quality of an author's imagination. Mr. Wright writes better than the dime novelist, but the quality of his imagination is the same. His stories are not so good as our friend Colonel Ingraham's stories because they are not wrought so wildly well. Colonel Ingraham builded better than he knew. He achieved fantasy. Mr. Wright only achieves rather wooden melodrama. To "The Virginian" Wister brought a high quality of imagination and a genuine gift for writing. And those are quite different things.

W. R. B.

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