

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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Glory of the Desert

THERE is a careless fertility in good books not to be mistaken. Dickens could have written endlessly of Pickwick or Shakespeare of Hamlet or Cervantes of Don Quixote. A thousand scenes, one guesses, just failed to get in.

The great narratives in literature seem almost casual; so much happens without and within, above and below, their lines that each incident or detail has the virtue of the one thing the memory chooses among many less pithy, but unforgotten. The story of the Hebrew kings, the Iliad, Troilus and Cressida, Robinson Crusoe, Cellini's Memoirs, Borrow's Lavengro, are such books. The right reservoir from which to write is a life full to capacity of noted experience, although imagination will make much of less. Out of such a mind the right words come, for none can be empty with such fullness behind.

"Revolt in the Desert," Colonel Lawrence's Chanson de Geste, is a book of this calibre. Much of it, he would probably say, is casual, lifted probably from notes thrust down in burning noons or frozen nights in the desert. Its finest actions have the stark brevity of the medieval romance of war; characters stalk in, ride out, with the suddenness of life; there is no labored preparation for excitement or wonder. And yet the words are charged with the tension of his crusade; they echo in your mind as you read on through camel raid, ambush, or wild attack, and if the story pauses long enough for emotion, they group into passages of prose so admirable that the critical faculty hesitates to appraise them. The Morte D'Arthur, which Lawrence carried in his saddle bags, is spiritually akin to the romance which this realist of battles, whose job was to organize Arabia and beat the Turks, kept at arms length but was ever aware of as an aura upon the fight and sweat and intrigue of his desert war.

Good style may charm with the first carefully modulated paragraph and lead on the reader by pure delight in the excellence of writing. But the great style is not like that. You read for the mounting theme: it is only in full course that you realize with sudden thrill that what you are reading is not only interesting but beautiful, that it is style as well as story. Beside Lawrence's tightly girthed book, with its air of matter of fact detailing incredible adventures, the mannered narrative of merely literary stories seems brittle and glassy.

* * *

Lawrence and his companions, setting out to destroy the great bridge at Tell el Shehab, meet their hoped-for allies, the Serhan tribe, chanting a war song as they wave cloaks and sleeves in the air in a rush across the desert. But the bridge is guarded, the Serhan are afraid. At night, around a campfire, Lawrence and Mifteh began to combat "this crude prudence of the Serhan, which seemed all the more shameless to us after our long sojourn in the wilderness."

"We put it to them, not abstractedly, but concretely, for their case, how life in mass was sensual only, to be lived and loved in its extremity. There could be no rest-houses for revolt, no dividend of joy paid out. Its spirit was accretive, to endure as far as the senses would endure, and to use each advance as base for further adventure, deeper privation, sharper pain.

"To be of the desert was, as they knew, a doom to wage unending battle with an enemy who was not of the world, nor life, nor anything, but hope itself; and failure seemed God's freedom to mankind.

Little Lives, Little Deaths

By ELSA GIDLOW

SHE thought to play with life, to taste and sip. Never for her the fierce, white, terrible face Of life unveiled, life with the snarling lip; Never for her the flood, the flame, swift pace Of passionate quest. Playfully she would dip Half-frightened feet in the great sea, and race With the waves. But not so fast as to trip. She read, but always in a quiet book, Never of souls mis-shapen or agonized.

She loved (with reservations) and forsook The lover when love became too deeply prized. She thought to play with life. . . . Life smiled. Life struck.

Life broke her with the toys she half despised.

This Week



James Ford Rhodes: Historian. By Oswald Garrison Villard.

"By Cheyenne Campfires." Reviewed by Mary Austin.

"River Thames." Reviewed by Clare Howard.

"Our Far Eastern Assignment." Reviewed by Grover Clark.

"Max Havelaar or the Coffee Sales of the Netherlands Trading Company." Reviewed by A. J. Barnouw.

"Ironical Tales." Reviewed by Arnold Whitridge.

"As It Was." Reviewed by Bray Hammond.

"Andy Brandt's Ark." Reviewed by Grace Frank.

The Typhoon Junk. By William Rose Benét.

The Century. By Christopher Morley.

Next Week, or Later

James Fenimore Cooper. By Henry Seidel Canby.

"The Old Countess." Reviewed by Katharine Fullerton Gerould.

"Love Is Enough." Reviewed by Edward Davison.

"There could be no honor in a sure success, but much might be wrested from a sure defeat. Omnipotence and the Infinite were our two worthiest foemen, indeed the only ones for a full man to meet, they being monsters of his own spirit's making; and the stoutest enemies were always of the household. In fighting Omnipotence, honor was proudly to throw away the poor resources that he had, and dare Him empty-handed; to be beaten, not merely by more mind, but by its advantage of better tools.

"This was a halting, half-coherent speech, struck
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The Comstock Load*

By ELMER DAVIS

THIS has been another Year of the Big Wind. Recurring as irregularly but as inevitably as Florida hurricanes, the censorship agitation has descended on us again; and it is still a little too soon to step out of doors and count up the damage. The visible results to date, in the sector of greatest activity, amount to this: The bestowal of long life and prosperity on a worthless play which was about to close when the police raided it, and the suppression of an excellent play, without due process of law, by a campaign of intimidation which reflects about equal discredit on the aggressors in the District Attorney's office and the victims, if one may flatter them by that title—the motion picture magnates who own the trade mark of the late Charles Frohman. *Quod erat expectandum.*

At this writing it still seems possible that a new censorship law will be written on the statute books; but on the other hand it can be argued that this windy agitation has not been so ill that it has not blown somebody good. To that I shall return presently. Meanwhile one can only congratulate Miss Leech and Mr. Broun on the unforeseen timeliness of their biography of the man in whom the whole spirit of censorship is incarnate.** The late Anthony Comstock is already immortalized in legend, and legend is enough for most people. Yet a good many are apt to want the facts. And they will find the facts, together with much amusing and amazing history of New York in the period which was too hastily called the Age of Innocence, in this painstaking and perhaps too impartial biography.

* * *

In another sense the book is timely; for as every schoolboy presumably knows (schoolboys must know something, and most of them know little enough of what used to be regarded as the subject matter of education) this is the first publication of the Literary Guild. As such it has set and upset precedents, compelled a re-examination of trade ethics and a re-rationalization of trade custom. Actually to read the *corpus delicti* in such a notable test case seems as irrelevant as poking into the private life of Dred Scott.

Read it, none the less, and you will be surprised to discover that the authors, contrary to the reader's expectation and perhaps to their own, have actually conceived an admiration for this Protestant St. Anthony. Finish it and you may have another surprise; at least I did. I discovered that this book had converted me to the principle, so beloved of the patriotic societies, that the business of biography is moral edification. A book that makes out Anthony Comstock as a human being, in whose defense extenuating circumstances may be urged, ought to be suppressed by the Vice Society as pernicious to the morals of American youth.

For all of us may appeal to extenuating circumstances; the argument that in the course of justice none of us should see salvation has been perverted into the genial contention that in the course of charitable good-fellowship all of us might as well see salvation. But such salvation as there is or ever will be (unless one accepts supernatural theories) must be achieved by hard work, and the criterion of a man's goodness or badness is whether he has helped or hindered. (If you don't believe this, read no

*With apologetic genuflections to Mr. Morley, who may forgive this infringement of his exclusive punning concession in *The Saturday Review*.

**—Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord. By HEYWOOD BROUN and MARGARET LEECH. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. 1927. \$3.

farther; you won't believe the rest of it either). Comstock was unquestionably sincere, as the saying goes; so are the authors of some of our most earnest and least readable sex fiction; so, I suppose, was Gerald Chapman. Sincerity by itself is a poor excuse; and while that is not the only thing that can be said for Comstock, it is the thing that Mr. Broun and Miss Leech appear to feel is worth saying most strongly.

They, it would seem, regard life from the standpoint of motive and intention, which is natural enough, for they are novelists. But it seems to some of us (and with the concurrence of so good a novelist as Samuel Butler) that life may more properly and usefully be regarded from the standpoint of results. Not what a man meant, but what he did—and if you say that what he did was not his own fault, but that of his environment or his ancestors, you are saying what may be true, but is irrelevant to the more urgent question of what all of us, together, are going to be able to do. Once begin making exculpatory allowances and you had better scamper back to the shelter of an atonement theory as quickly as you can, for that is the only place where you will find safety.

This book, of course, must have been finished before the recent outburst of censorious zeal; and Miss Leech and Mr. Broun may owe some of their excess of Christian charity to a conviction that the devil was already bound in the bottomless pit and that there was no use kicking a fiend who was down. If St. Michael, victorious, had sat down to write an obituary of the dragon, he might have felt a sportsmanlike impulse to deal generously with the record of that old serpent; which he would no doubt have regretted if the dragon had come out of his coma and started the fight all over again after the paper had gone to press. A year ago it might have seemed safe to dance Comstock's scalp; but he is not dead so long as our statute books are weighted down with the oppressive and unreasonable laws which he devised and lobbied through. These are the burden of Anthony, the Comstock load.



Probably there will never be another Comstock; he was a unique and peculiar embodiment of an undying spirit, which existed before him and would still persist if he had never lived at all. The current reformatory enthusiasm is in the main a rather different thing, but true Comstockery still survives. See, for instance, the long letter attacking the Broun-Leech biography which lately appeared on the editorial page of a New York paper. Much of this tirade is demonstrably untrue, and extremely unfair to the exhaustive research which has gone into the book; most of the rest—a fault perhaps more serious and certainly more Comstockian—is wholly irrelevant.

The irrelevance is the familiar argument of Comstock's defenders—his service to the community in the suppression of the smut pamphlets which seem to have been openly on sale everywhere, sixty years ago. How much harm this printed filth did is open to question, but it is hard to see that it ever did any good. Mr. Broun, in an appended essay on censorship, argues that such works as "Only a Boy" vaccinate impressionable youth against the undesirable glamor of sex. Perhaps; but they are quite as likely to vaccinate against the desirable glamor, if one holds that there is such a thing. No tears need be shed over this first stage of Comstock's activity; but it is going pretty far to treat it as full justification for the later Comstock who attacked wax figures in show windows, and "Mrs. Warren's Profession"—or to treat it, as Brander Matthews did a few years ago, as justification for the Sumner who prosecuted "Jurgen."

Indeed, one finishes the book with the impression that there was a deeper irrelevance in Comstock's crusades against pornography and what he thought was pornography. His abnormal fear and hatred of sex or anything that suggested it to his superheated mind was, after all, not his dominant characteristic. Essentially he was a bully; if the human race were asexual, reproducing by fission, Comstock would still have been a nuisance. Courage he certainly had and plenty of it—but he was a large and powerful man who could reasonably count on getting the best of any physical encounter; and behind him, after the first few years, he had the Law, which in that less sophisticated day was still some protection against the knife and the gun.

Possibly the most significant sentence in the book is a quotation from Comstock's diary, occasioned by

no more flagitious an occurrence than a game of croquet with his wife and a few friends: "I insisted on fair play and some thought different." There, in a line, is the biography of Anthony Comstock. What he insisted on was fair play, and God help those who "thought different."

His first feat was the famous killing of the saloon keeper's mad dog, in his home town in Connecticut; his next the destruction of the saloon keeper's stock. During his Civil War service he seems to have spent most of his time in trying to keep the army from swearing and smoking. Not till he returned from the war, in that state of mind of the returned soldier which has been blamed for so much of late years, did he turn his chief attention to the preservation of what he regarded as purity. In a decade or so his victory over his first enemy was complete; the obscene pamphlets which had provoked him into an activity that had made him famous had been driven into a furtive obscurity from which they have never since emerged. And here was Comstock, famous, powerful, with the laws of his own writing behind him, his own hand-made fighting machine, the Vice Society, at his command—and his occupation gone. Not unnaturally he made himself more occupations, and some of them were grotesque enough.



Some of them were worse than that. He appointed himself the champion of orthodoxy and found the free-love doctrines of earnest atheists an excuse for persecuting them less as free lovers than as atheists. He drove to suicide an unbalanced woman guilty of writing a book which endeavored, however clumsily, to make marriage more decent and beautiful—but this was only one of fifteen suicides which he was proud of having inspired, and the last one. As time passed people stopped committing suicide to gratify him; sex appeared less of a peril, contributions to the Vice Society decreased, the world seemed moving away from Comstock. Desperately he tried to catch up with it, tried this and that. He spent much time attacking lotteries, and local gambling houses which were by-products of political corruption. But a short-sightedness that sprang inevitably from his temperament and upbringing confined him to accidentals; he was unable to diagnose the disease of which protected gambling and protected prostitution were symptoms, and so he missed the chance of his lifetime. The more intelligent Parkhurst grasped political corruption as a whole; on that issue he got the spotlight, and thrust Comstock into a shadow from which he never really emerged.

He descended to raiding art stores, trying to suppress the catalogue of the Art Students' League, turning "September Morn" from an unimportant painting into a valuable commercial property; he essayed to abolish Bernarr MacFadden and Bernard Shaw; but he seldom got anywhere. As Mr. Broun observes, he had finished the giants and there was no one left to fight but wind mills. He became a joke. His last effort of consequence, in 1914, was a protest against a French comedy of delicate and wistful beauty (naturally it looked revolting and obscene to Comstock) which the District Attorney simply laughed off. Whatever may be said on the other side, let that fact be remembered to the credit of Charles Seymour Whitman.

Yet still the soldier of the Lord kept on fighting, and not the Lord's battles only. More quarrelsome and ill-tempered as the years went by, he kept getting into fights, not with agents of Satan selling implements of sin, but with lawyers who dared to cross-examine him, with pedestrians who resented being knocked down because they brushed against him on crowded sidewalks. He had pampered his overbearing and bellicose disposition because he had been big enough and strong enough to get away with it; when he grew too old to win his fights, he still could not help provoking them. Here, plainly, was the ruling passion of his life; his pathological sex phobia merely happened to give it a picturesque direction.



Well, what did he accomplish? Comstock is gone but Shaw and MacFadden are still with us; and between Comstock and MacFadden it would be uncharitable to express a preference. Sex is still with us, for all Comstock's efforts; rather noticeably with us, one might say. But certainly the deliberate obscenity of our time—and without going into the question of what is and is not obscene, one may remark that obviously there is a good deal on the stage and the news stands today which at least tries to be obscene—is more suave, less repulsive than the ob-

scenity which Comstock drove underground. Unless you hold with Comstock that sex is sin, that improvement in taste—much room as is left for further improvement—is something gained.

But not all of that credit can be given to Comstock; it is a change in the popular temper, the popular taste; it might have happened without him. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of his law-making and his stimulation of suicide, it is rather hard to see just what he did accomplish. Which, apparently is the conclusion of our authors. Comstock had his virtues; he lived plainly and died poor though he could often have enriched himself by giving up his crusades. Nor was he a hypocrite; despite what seems to have been an extraordinarily tepid marriage this "strong, virulent man" (to borrow the unforgettable phrase of a lady peace delegate on the Ford party) was never charged with sexual laxity. To the psychiatrist, that would perhaps give no great surprise; his was the lust of the eye, which could be fed by the immense stock of obscene books and pictures which he had to retain as evidence.

His faults, to some extent, were those of his time; the decisions of various judges quoted in the book were even more savage than Comstock's own outbursts; some of them virtually decided that accusation was conviction, that no defense could be offered, that the book on which the complaint was based was too obscene to be offered to the jury. And in general, in the 'seventies and 'eighties, he had the support of public opinion; his principles were those professed by most respectable people, his only difference was that he was willing to act on those principles even at the cost of making himself ridiculous. The authors appear to feel that it is creditable not to be afraid of looking ridiculous; and no doubt it is. But from the pragmatic point of view the fear of looking ridiculous has prevented an immense amount of harm to the innocent bystanders.

Times have changed; current opinion permits a freedom of expression on sexual matters that would have been unthinkable ten years ago; but for a few enthusiasts—most of whom know as little about art as the average reformer does about purity—that is not enough. It is not the Comstockians who give body to the current censorship agitation; it is a bloc of middle-of-the-road opinion which has been willing to move with the times, but will move so far and no farther. Thanks to a lunatic fringe of theatrical producers, who are not content with all the traffic will bear but want a little more, the stage, and somewhat less immediately the book market, are in peril of preventive censorship.

Argue all you like about the rights and wrongs of censorship in the abstract; this is a concrete question, and practically regarded, the behavior of the producers who have set off this latest explosion is no better than suicidal lunacy. Meanwhile, the demand for censorship has had at least this much effect—two or three plays which could have done no possible good, whether or not they would have done any harm, have been scared off without ever reaching the metropolitan stage. On this point, as on a good many others, the most sensible comment has been offered by Mr. Simeon Strunsky, who observes that what the stage needs is not censorship laws but censorship bills—a censorship always *in posse*, always threatening, to keep the lunatic fringe of the show business scared into a show of decency. That is what the stage needs; but what it may get, if it is not careful, is a preventive censorship which would open the way to unlimited jackasseries.



Foremost among those who are telling the legislature that there ought to be a law is Mr. Comstock's successor; which might be taken as a tragic epitaph on Comstock who wrote the laws we have now. But the shoe, I am afraid, is on the other foot. Comstock's laws are still in force—the laws that make dissemination of contraceptive information obscenity by definition, the laws whose vague wording can be stretched as far as the inclination of the judge may go.

Of late years judges have shown a tendency toward common sense; hence the Clean Books League with its demand that all judges must be brought back to the ancient attitude that accusation is equivalent as conviction. They have not succeeded—yet; but meanwhile the laws are still there to be interpreted liberally or strictly as the individual judge may prefer. And what that means was shown in the decision on the application for injunction in the case of "The Captive"—a judge