

A Personal Record

AN AMERICAN SAGA. By CARL CHRISTIAN JENSEN. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by M. E. RAVAGE

Author of "An American in the Making"

SOMEWHERE between a dozen and a score of immigrant autobiographies have in the past quarter of a century appeared among us. Together they constitute perhaps as distinctive and characteristic a phase of a literature as any country can claim. Some of them are epics of man the alien at grips with his environment; others are mere self-conscious, sentimental tales, filled with a tawdry patriotism and naïve gratitude; others again are shrewd commentaries on our civilization viewed through detached eyes; not a few are in the deeper and narrower sense of the word literature.

Standing as he does on the shoulders of so numerous a company of predecessors, Mr. Jensen has not written an impressive book. His English is sometimes fluent, often pungent, usually vigorous and full-bodied. There are patches in the volume of vivid observation; there are bits of imaginative description; once or twice a portrait flashes out in bold outline. But his story as a whole leaves me indifferent and unsatisfied. It lacks a pattern; it is without the significance that endows a book with unity. I think of it as a handful of odd beads vaguely strung together, bearing little relation to one another or to any general plan. "An American Saga" is not, like Mr. Bok's story, a rushing, colorful narrative of a self-made man; it is not, like Mr. Lewisohn's, a critical reaction to the American scene; it is too fragmentary and disjointed for the epic note; and, except in spots, it is not literature.

His opening chapters are well-knit, intense, alive. Mr. Jensen has lived his boyhood on the Danish shore, and his memory of its squalid, undernourished but withal passionate scenes has stayed with him vividly. I feel that if he had cut his story short with his arrival in this country, or possibly at his marriage, he would have come off gloriously. He seems not to have digested his American experiences, or to stand too near them in time for perspective. The experiences are varied and interesting enough in themselves, but his portrayal of them is as colorless as a government report. I do not see him in them at all. There is nothing of the man against an alien sky, of the earlier keen observer; he is neither enamored nor critical of the New World. His struggles and hardships and triumphs might have happened to anyone, anywhere. His recital of them is factual, drab, without zest or significance.

I rather suspect that part of Mr. Jensen's difficulty springs from his nationality. There is not enough contrast between his boyhood home and America to tempt forth the imaginative, graphic quality he displays earlier. His United States is merely a larger and possibly more amorphous Denmark. What might not have an Italian or a Russian Jew done with his amazing plunge into the sectarian life of America, with his Doomsday chapter! The Dane has known such people before, and he squanders his gifts on trifles.

Perhaps, however, as his publishers say, Mr. Jensen did not primarily think of himself as an immigrant and of his narrative as an alien autobiography. His restraint of comment on American life would seem to point that way. He has lavished his skill as a writer on his youth in the homeland and on his life at sea. And as a tale of adventure, of manifold struggle and ultimate triumph, his book is perhaps as worth while as they come.

Hauteville House, Guernsey, where Victor Hugo lived during the whole period of his exile from France, has been presented with all its furniture and contents to the city of Paris by its present owners, his grand-daughter, Mme Negroponte, and his great grandchildren, Jean and François Hugo and Mlle. Marguerite Hugo, sons and daughter of the late Georges Hugo. The house is in the same condition as when Victor Hugo left it to return to France after the declaration of the Republic in 1870, and it is estimated to be worth, with its contents, about £20,000. Many of Victor Hugo's most famous works were written at Hauteville House, including "Les Misérables," "La Légende des Siècles," "L'Homme qui Rit," "Les Travailleurs de la Mer," and "Les Chansons des Rues et des Bois."

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A Shirtsleeves History

IV. Concluded

IN the first year of the Great War it was natural that the different industries in America should increasingly speculate as to what its effect would be "on business." The munitions makers began to make hay—or, rather, munitions. The propaganda makers had, for our part, not yet entered the arena. We were listening to von Bernstorff and were later decidedly to get "an earful" from Dr. Bernhard Dernburg. England and France were not without their spokesmen. George Sylvester Viereck had addressed Wilhelm II as "the Prince of Peace" and two verses of his exordium had stigmatized Germany's enemies as follows:

May thy victorious armies rout
The savage tribes against thee hurled,
The Czar, whose sceptre is the knout,
And France, the wanton of the world.

But thy great task will not be done
Until thou vanquish utterly
The Norman brother of the Hun,
England, the Serpent of the Sea.

He ended with the rhythmical remark, "For if thou fail, a world shall fall." "Who dies if England live?" sang Mr. Kipling. In *Jugend* appeared Ernst Lissauer's "Hymn of Hate,"

"French and Russian, they matter not,
A blow for a blow and a shot for a shot—" etc.

and *Punch* printed a memorable picture of an average German family working up their morning Hate.

The English poets did not, as a rule, indulge in hate hymns. Even Chesterton, who can hate quite briskly, gave us "The Wife of Flanders," a sober and quite noble effort. Masfield's "August 1914" had a sombre and elegiac quality. Young Rupert Brooke praised God for having "matched us with this hour." He was young, romantic, and disgusted with esthetes. Hardy sang with disillusion of the "men who march away." Of course the martial tom-toms were out in every country. That is inevitable, it seems, in war-time. And the realization of what such a war as the Great War would come to mean had not penetrated many minds. Shaw, with his usual integrity and intelligence, had his full say. Perhaps if there were a dozen Shaws seeded in every nation, the wild unreason of war might be blasted out of Man's emotions. He strove to give us common sense. Well, for the matter of that, so did Wilson, even hampered as he was by certain faults of character. If Shaw was standing on his head, à la Max's cartoon of him, (though that was not penned apropos of his war-attitude) in the light of all that happened afterward it turned out to be a rather more truly dignified position than the positions assumed by many who should have given us light and leading. But the war spirit, once aroused, is a deadly virus; hate springs from fear and the human race is still crawling fearfully under a vast and bloody shadow. At a touch it is absorbed in noctambulistic nightmare. So, the tom-toms were out, the war-drums were beating. Thy fruits, "diplomacy."

There was speculation as to what the war would do to literature. Ironically enough, William Aspinwall Bradley had been writing of the Belgian literary revival. Verhaeren was, naturally enough, read avidly in America in 1914-15, for the world's eyes were centred on Belgium. St. John Ervine thought that the war would bring a change for the better. He wrote in 1915, "The world in which we were born came to an end at the beginning of last August, and a new world was created." Out of this new world, presumably, he saw the emergence of a literature greater and stronger. Elsewhere, the renaissance of French literature after Sedan, the siege, the Commune, and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, was instanced. It was argued that, as the Civil War had roused the South to expression—Lanier, Cable, Eggleston, Maurice Thompson, etc.—so the Great War would eventually produce new and crowded achievement in letters even in the countries hardest hit.

Attention was also turned to prophecies of the war in fiction by, among others, Edmund Lester Pearson, the specialist in the literature of murder.

He recalled to us George Tomkyns Chesney's "The Battle of Dorking" (1871). Writing as a veteran of 1925, Chesney described fictitiously how the Germans captured London and overturned the British Empire in 1875. Then there was "The Great War of 189—", published in '93. The authors of this really quite prophetic book were Rear-Admiral Colomb, Colonel Maurice, Captain Maude, etc. They wrote of a "war spark emitted in the powder magazine of the Balkans," of the assassination of Ferdinand of Bulgaria,—but in this imaginary chronicle Russia and Germany fought each other while France battled with England by sea and with Russia by land.

Meanwhile, it may fairly be said that General von Bernhardi was the most conspicuous author by the end of 1914. Everybody was discussing von Bernhardi, Heinrich von Treitschke, and Kultur, and interpreting and misinterpreting Nietzsche until James Huneker was forced to exclaim that genius had no country, it was international not national. Mencken, of course, tried to clear up some of the misunderstandings about Nietzsche. In regard to von Treitschke, in his early twenties he had first put forth two books of poems, then he had chanted of war in "A Song of the Black Eagle" in 1870. He was the son of a Saxon general. He began as a university teacher at Leipzig in 1859. He published his "Social Science," four volumes of essays, of which the best is said to be his essay on Milton, and then became enamoured of the Prussian cause. In 1879 came the first volume of his "German History in the Nineteenth Century," frankly partisan. But what Americans were discussing was his statement that "The conduct of war is an essential function of the state," that War was God's medicine, and that, most important, the code of ordinary private morals cannot be applied to the State. Yet he said again, "No state has the right to extend its sway over people of a different race whom it cannot assimilate," this being a negative way of saying that other nationalities had a right to exist.

If the code of ordinary private morals cannot be applied to the state—well, what is the state, and why not? An abyss opens at our feet.

Let us turn from this madness to listen to the voice of an English novelist, W. L. George, who was discussing quite another matter at this time. He was talking about a writer then new to us, one D. H. Lawrence. Gilbert Cannan, J. D. Beresford, Oliver Onions at that time had come to the fore as English realists. Lawrence, Mr. George rightly felt, was destined to outstrip them all. Here was the son of a Nottinghamshire coal-miner, a Board-school boy who had got a county council scholarship and had later taught at Croydon for less than £2 a week, suddenly becoming a portent in English letters. He had begun "The White Peacock" at twenty-one. He had produced a great novel, "Sons and Lovers." Mr. George was saying of him,

I wonder whether Mr. Lawrence has not mistaken his medium and whether it is not a painter he ought to have been, so significant is for him the slaty opalescence of the heron's wing and so rutilant the death of the sun. When he paints the country-side, sometimes in his simplicity he is almost Virgilian, but more often he is a Virgil somehow strayed into Capua and intoxicated with its wines. All through everyone of his novels runs this passionate streak, this vision of nature in relation to himself.

I mention this because the writings of D. H. Lawrence were to have a noticeable effect upon our younger writers in America. At one time there was no English author more discussed among the artists. Another figure notable at that time was the Irish Navvy Novelist, Patrick MacGill, with his "Children of the Dead End" and "Songs of the Dead End." His prose was better than his poetry, which, even in the invective of "Serfs," owed to Swinburne, if not to Kipling. Another book from the people, much discussed, was "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists," by Robert Tressall, the story of a socialist house-painter. There was also John Helston, a much lesser Masfield.

We were being introduced to Anton Chekov, to Rolland's "Jean Christophe"; and Knut Hamsun's "Shallow Soil" was first being translated into English by Carl Christian Hylested. Hamsun had worked over here as a farm-hand and a street-car conductor, and had written thirty books before his

first one came to America. We were becoming acquainted with the Serbian sculptures of Ivan Mestrovic, with the psychic improvisations upon the piano of our own Francis Grierson, who had spent his boyhood on our Mississippi prairies and later had left us for so long,—with Scriabin's composite art of sound and color and his keyboard of light, following our acquaintance with Schoenberg and Stravinsky—with Percy Grainger's, the Australian's, folk-songs of the American negro. And the then pristine James Stephens, who had just presented us with Patsy McCann and his philosophic donkey, had handed our literature a regular wallop in the pages of *The Century*. He called his article "The Old Woman's Money." He said our literature had become brutally feminine and appealed to the middle-aged woman. "Instead of being sensuous it is sensual, and often indelicately so." He advised us to "cut out" the boyish boy and the girlish girl. "This youth has attained to all the vices of age, and has conserved few of the charms proper to its period." And that ancient, Mr. Edward Garnett, in *The Atlantic* had called our fiction exaggerated and stereotyped, a presentation of standardized morals. He listed seventy British writers of genuine original talent (though omitting Shaw and Barrie) and could only discover about twenty writers in the United States who were no literary commercialists. This also was endearing.

Frank Harris had been revaluing us. He praised Emerson, and then tossed the bombshell that David Graham Phillips was on a high intellectual level as a prophet and seer, the level of Schopenhauer and Emerson,—nay, not only that, but "the greatest novelist who has yet written in English." This was paralyzing.

John Cowper Powys was among us exhorting that "we must return to the great masters . . . to the things that really matter," meaning to Rabelais, Dante, Shakespeare, El Greco, Milton, Nietzsche, Hardy, Dostoevsky, and others, all of whom he orated of with engaging enthusiasm in "Visions and Revisions."

And William Marion Reedy remarked, "It is sex o'clock in American fiction."

We were hearing from Irvin Cobb, Arthur Ruhl, Alexander Powell, Jack Reed, about the War. Von Hindenburg had now become the hero of the Masurian Lakes. But on the eve of the spring campaign of 1915 Germany had lost the initiative, Great Britain held the seas, France was ready to push reserves on the Northern line, Italy was going in, Austria was nearly out, and the Turkish stroke had failed though Russia was pressing hard in the East. Brand Whitlock was in Belgium. So was Hoover, later. And while fifty million dollars a day were being spent by seven nations to destroy each other, out in San Francisco forty-two nations combined in an exhibition of the total value of three hundred and fifty millions; the court of the Universe, the city of Palaces, the tower of Jewels, the amethystine searchlights,—the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

Nearly a million and a half men had been killed in battle. "Certainly," said an editorial, "no people ever lived less desirous of war than the American people at this time and no men were ever in power more averse to an appeal to arms than our President and his Secretary of State. Yet three thousand miles away from the scenes of carnage, the suction of the maelstrom has caught us in its power and escape will apparently require the utmost skill and energy."

On March 28th the British passenger steamer *Falaba* was sunk by a German submarine, with one American citizen on board. On May first the American vessel *Gulflight* was torpedoed by a submarine and two American lives were lost. On May 7th the British passenger steamer *Lusitania* was torpedoed and one hundred American citizens lost their lives. All these ships were carrying contraband of war and were subject to seizure and search. The German embassy had advertised in our newspapers warning those Americans sailing on the *Lusitania* that they did so at their own risk. Wilson's note to Germany was a distinguished document; and Bryan resigned because he thought it too harsh. Rudolph Eucken, the German philosopher, who had now been revered by so many club-women, looked toward Heaven and intoned that what Germany really wanted to do was to spread its Kultur,

that "complete fruition of the special kind of spiritual life imparted to us by nature," etc. He referred to "creative sources of the truth" and "mighty idealism." That sort of thing began to get a bit thick.

(To be continued in a fortnight)

Merrick's Early Work

VIOLET MOSES. By LEONARD MERRICK. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

THIS is one of Mr. Merrick's earliest books, never before published in the United States, and omitted at the author's request from the "Definitive Edition" of his works. Mr. John Macrae tells us that a rereading of the novel made him feel that the omission was a mistake, and that it is "interesting in itself, apart from its clear indications of the author's budding gifts and future distinction." He might have spoken even more warmly of it. In some respects it is one of the most striking and memorable of Mr. Merrick's books.

It is arresting and memorable because it is more ambitious than most of Mr. Merrick's later work. The author was not yet content to write pleasantly ironical and amusing tales which slip over the surface of life, or slight if penetrating studies of mal-adjusted artists. In this early novel he tried to deal with large and poignant themes. There is the theme, first, of marriage between Gentile and Jew,—a very unhappy marriage, as it turns out—with all the problems it entails. There is the theme of love outside wedlock; the unhappy wife tempted by a former sweetheart to abandon her husband. Earlier in the volume we have still another "situation" of dramatic possibilities; the situation of a girl, the heroine, called upon to leave congenial surroundings to go live with her shabby, scheming, swindling father. Indeed, one evidence of Mr. Merrick's artistic immaturity lies in the fact that he has overcrowded his novel with problems and with plot. Nevertheless, his ambition is to be counted a merit and he might have become a greater novelist if he had retained more of it.

The characterization shows the expert observation and insight which mark Mr. Merrick's later work. All his personages are sharply realized and drawn. The hero, Allan Morris, a dreamy, romantic, and morally weak young man, who will not give Violet up even after her marriage; the coarse-grained, selfish, materialistic, yet entirely honest and well-meaning Jew, Leopold Moses, whom Violet marries because marriage is the only escape from an intolerable home; the amusing scoundrel and blackleg, her father, who cheats and robs and slinks his way through life—these are done almost if not quite as well as Merrick later did the characters of "Peggy Harper" or that favorite novel of Howells's, "The Actor Manager." There is a tragic funniness about the household in which Violet has to live when she joins her father; her designing and tyrannical aunts, her crackbrained old grandfather, and her cadging parent, boasting of the neat swindles he has pulled off in various parts of the world. Equally grotesque is the Anglo-Jewish world of which she becomes a part when she marries Leopold Moses, a world concerned by day with money-making and by night with food, drink, clothes, and cards. Mr. Merrick pictures these scenes with freshness and gusto, and the satire is neatly pointed without being unpleasant.

Expert craftsman that he is, no doubt Mr. Merrick would win a little today over the crudities of his grand climax. Violet, miserable in her union with Moses, who has not a single taste or aspiration in common with her, tormented by the vulgarity of the *nouveaux riches* among whom she spends her days, nevertheless rejects the advances of her former suitor, Morris, now a successful novelist. Both of them expend a good deal of rhetoric on the scene. Mr. Merrick expends a little himself. When it is over, he says, "racked and anguished, the wretched woman supported herself on the threshold, and questioned dumbly what she might still expect, what solace the years could ever bring. The kaleidoscope of her life lay shattered at her feet, a heap of splintered glass." Mr. Merrick has learned to write in a different style. Nevertheless, this scene completes a really felicitous picture of a Victorian girl of strong will and high character, who faces life bravely and amid many vicissitudes shows herself to be both very human and very good. If it were only for the study of Violet, the book would be worth republishing.

The War Seen Truly

THE SPANISH FARM. New Edition. By R. H. MOTTRAM. New York: The Dial Press. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by DOROTHY CANFIELD

TO say of any book that it shows us the Great War as it was, is almost as foolish as to say of any book that it shows us life as it is. The Great War meant (like life) different things to every human being touched by it. "The Spanish Farm" limits its portrait of the Great War to the impressions of one small family of half-Flemish, half-French peasants whose farm was near the front, and to those of a few English officers, mostly of the non-professional soldier class.

If you think that this limits the book you are mistaken. To show those impressions as Mr. Mottram shows them is to give an interpretation of the war. Within those limitations, self-imposed and admirably well chosen for his purposes, the author paints authentically, exactly, movingly, profoundly the pageant of the War (if so drab and muddy a war can be said to have a pageant). He recreates the British Expeditionary Force, makes us understand what was going on behind the khaki uniforms and cross belts better, far better because less self-consciously, than Ford Madox Ford in his war books. Above all he interprets the varying points of view and of interest of the Allies, sometimes whimsically, more often with understanding philosophy. His book sets down sensitively the distractingly various moods of the war, the incoherent ups and downs of emotion. Nothing is truer in it than the small incident of the taut tuning up of everybody's nerves for a heroic defense of the farm against the terrific offense . . . which never came off. The ensuing flatness of reaction is one of the most recognizable, absurd, and familiar items in the book. Again nothing is truer and more touching in any war-book I know than the desolation of loneliness of the British officer on leave with nowhere in particular to go. The picture of his emotional state as he starts for Paris to spend his week of leave with his French girl, is (for an age still soaked in Romantic School melodramatic traditions about the relations of men and women) astonishingly human and movingly truthful.

The book has its defects, mostly to my mind connected with the ambitious attempt fully to understand and depict in detail the inner life of a French peasant girl. Mr. Mottram is a man and an Englishman, and once in a while the reader is sharply reminded of this, is brought up short with a start of incredulity. I refer especially to the feeling of the French-Flemish farm-girl towards the son of the landed proprietor, from whom her father rents his farm. Mr. Mottram shows us her acquiescence in all the whims and selfishness and brutal carelessness of her rich young lover as being based on her sense that he is "the young master" and hence above criticism by such as she. It seems to me that Mr. Mottram has been misled (for once) by a similarity of phrase. A girl of that class might indeed speak of such a young man as "le jeune maître" but I am sure she would mean by the phrase nothing remotely resembling the feeling which we are led by English writers to believe is the feeling of an English peasant girl when she says "the young master." The Northerners in France have always been extremely, not to say exasperatingly, independent in their personal attitude towards those who from time to time throughout the centuries have tried to set themselves up as their "social superiors." From before the Spanish, and steadily down through history after them, *un homme du Nord* has silently, very competently, and not at all graciously considered himself as good as anybody. The slow bluntness of their downright manner is traditional in France, as is their utter lack of any desire to be pleasing in personal contacts with their "overlords." Furthermore in this case the family of "the young master" was according to French standards one of parvenus, new-rich, with no old standing in the region.

I don't doubt at all the relationship between the worthless and engaging young rich man and the solidly vital peasant girl, but I feel that it was based entirely on personal elements, an interplay between their two characters as man and woman; not at all as between representatives of two different social