

Foreign Literature

A Mexican Tale

EL AGUILA Y LA SERPIENTE. By MARTÍN LUIS GUZMÁN. Madrid: M. Aguilar. 1928.

Reviewed by ERNEST GRUENING

Author of "Mexico and Its Heritage"

VICENTE BLASCO IBÁÑEZ'S articles about Mexico, printed in the American press early in 1920 and published in their original tongue as "El Militarismo Mejicano," contained a promise to write a novel about Mexico. The title would be "El Aguila y la Serpiente"—an eagle holding a serpent in its claws being the Mexican emblem. Don Vicente indicated with gusto that to this larger purpose his devastating articles about Mexican militarism were merely an *apéritif*. He never carried out his promise—or threat.

Less than a year after his death, Martín Luis Guzmán, Mexican journalist and *folletista*, has written a story (one avoids with difficulty calling it a novel) of the Mexican Revolution with the above title. It is loosely hung on the autobiography of a civilian who went through the chaos and reached eminence in successive Revolutionary régimes. Later he intrigued with the De La Huerta rebellion, fled to New York in the customary manner as one of its agents (I interviewed him the night of his arrival in one of the hotels which Latin-American *juntas* frequent) and, finding that he had backed the wrong horse, remained in exile. The whole scenario, even to his subsequent necessity of writing for a livelihood—to which we owe this opus—is part of the Mexican Revolutionary rhythm, including the writer's new-found ability to discriminate between fair and foul, and, as retrospective commentator, to gauge moral values of which he was oblivious as an actor in the drama.

Witness his allusion to "the Mexican sport of civil war"; his analysis of intra-Revolutionist differences of principle: "At bottom it all simmered down to the struggle—eternal among Mexicans—of groups, plural, desirous of seizing the power, which is singular." And in portraying a fellow-

Revolutionist: "He was one of the few . . . who felt the Revolutionary tragedy: the impossibility of not siding morally with the Revolution, and the material and psychological impossibility of achieving through it the good and immense result that was needed." Elsewhere he describes the lavish breakfasts which he and his fellow liberators consumed at the Hotel McAlpin, their gay nights along Broadway, and with that admirably detached irony of the *político* whose right cerebral lobe is fully conscious of what his left hand abstracts: "We were sincere Revolutionists . . . no doubt of it!"

In his descriptions of Mexican events Guzmán writes with the realism of a Zola and the relentless pathos and fatality of Gorky and Andreieff: The massacre by Villa's lieutenant, Rodolfo Fierro, of three-hundred prisoners, *Orozquistas* (followers of Pascual Orozco, originally *Maderista*, who turned counter-Revolutionist). They were driven, cattle fashion, a few at a time, from one *corral* into another, human targets, until the mounting—and thus protecting—pile of human bodies called for increasing ingenuity by the butcher-in-chief. This and kindred horrors are told unsparingly but with a restraint and diction that reveal a new star in the Hispanic literary firmament.

Here is Mexico's Revolution from within—with all its gluttony and gore, its mute suffering, its heroisms. The book reads like a novel, because, indeed, the Mexican truth is stranger, to our twentieth century consciousness, than fiction. Its historical value as source material is considerable, for it discloses the motives and methods of many principals in the national drama over which still hangs the acrid smell of powder and blood. It is to the hitherto almost unchronicled turmoil of Mexican Revolution what "La Débâcle" was to the Franco-Prussian War. In a word, it is a masterpiece.

Colonel Lawrence, author of "Revolt in the Desert," who is now an aircraftsman in India, denies that he is bringing out a new book on the East under a *nom de plume*.

The last volume of a work of fiction begun as long ago as 1908 and carrying its tale of society and love through six volumes has just been issued in René Behaine's "Les Yeux de l'Esprit" (Grasset). Over a period of twenty years the "Histoire d'une Société" has been appearing, and gradually has been winning recognition as one of the most remarkable of recent French works of fiction. As it has developed it has become rather than a portrayal of society an inquiry into the nature of first love,—a portrayal of delicacy, charm, and rare understanding.

Readers who know Jakob Wassermann only as a novelist will be interested in getting a glimpse of him as an essayist. His latest volume, "Lebensdienst" (Grethlein), is a collection of essays and studies which are illuminating as the expression of a personality and a point of view.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE:—Naturally one reason why these books of Mr. Milne outsell all books of fiction as well as non-fiction—some of the best as well as the best-selling books in the history of publishing have been published in the last four years—is that grown-ups enjoy him as much as if not more than children. In four successive years with four successive books, Mr. Milne has broken all existing best-seller records. This in itself establishes a record which it would seem humanly impossible to break or even equal. The charm and spontaneity of Mr. Milne are apparently inexhaustible.

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Points of View

Literary News

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

In spite of the increased number of our literary journals, there still seems to be one task left undone both by your magazine and by its contemporaries. That task is the furnishing of a brief column of news about contemporary writers.

Contemporary valuations of books have frequently proved wrong when compared with the verdict of time. Hence many second-rate critics, careful of their prestige, have dealt almost wholly with the established past. But more courageous critics realize that time is merely an artificial term which can be analyzed into many parts, and that each part is some man who, by praise or blame or actual publication, keeps alive some book. Courageous critics, then, do not attempt to stand apart from the verdicts of time, but play their parts as minute-men of time, best qualified to see and judge the contemporary scene.

To such courageous critics to-day has been added the strength of modern business methods, and our various book clubs are the result. Formerly the critic wrote a thousand words on a book; and of the relatively few persons who read his review, still fewer had inclination and money enough to purchase the book. The unanimously critical ballyhoo in recent years for Melville and Stephen Crane did not result in popularly priced publication of more than one book by each man. Nine-tenths of their works are as scarce and as little in demand as before. But the clubs—four general ones, and the specialized ones on poetry, religion, free thought, crime, and juveniles—can secure the purchase of nearly 200,000 books every month. The contemporary critic—there must be at least forty on club committees—can deal in deeds instead of words. Many more persons will purchase the books which he recommends than would read any article he might write in criticism of those books.

This one duty of contemporary criticism is to-day fulfilled better than ever before. But the second duty, that of recording facts, is badly neglected.

Take the files of half a dozen weeklies and monthlies that deal largely or wholly with literature. Look through them for

some simple but important facts—for instance, the dates of the deaths of Thomas Hardy, Anatole France, and Hermann Sudermann. Each death produced a flood of appreciations and memoirs. But you will not find the simple facts about the time and place and cause of their deaths recorded in our magazines.

You can find those items in the newspapers. But for three reasons, newspapers are inadequate in such matters. Almost all of them are not printed on durable paper. Hence they are not bound and preserved in most libraries, and are not easily available for research. And finally, literary news (except scandals) rarely "makes" the daily papers; at best it results in whimsical accounts of tea parties.

Here are some questions which contemporary writers of literature have not answered adequately either in magazines or in newspapers: What were the exact circumstances of Bierce's going to Mexico? When did Booth Tarkington's daughter die? When did Dreiser sail for Russia and how long did he stay there? What newspapers does Sherwood Anderson edit? With what colleges has Robert Frost been connected, and when? When and in what circumstances did Charlotte Mew die? Where are Hugh Walpole, Ford Madox Ford, and Carl Sandburg at any given moment?

Do these questions seem trivial and silly? They are exactly the sort of questions that earnest researchers work years on and write articles about, in order to gain degrees, fame, and higher salaries. Here is a similar list of "scholarly" questions: What were the exact circumstances of Poe's entering West Point? When did Swift's Stella die? When did Whitman go to New Orleans and what experiences had he on the trip? How many pieces of real estate did John Milton sell? With what stock company was William Shakespeare connected, and when? When and in what circumstances did Christopher Marlowe die? Where were Homer, Chaucer, and Oscar Wilde at any given moment?

Wiser men than I say that such facts are important in literary study. If so, the magazines are neglecting a vital part of their duty. Opinions on books may be wrong and contrary to the verdict of time. But facts about writers, if wrong, can be immediately corrected. And such collections of facts in durable, bound magazines scattered through the libraries of the land, might perhaps change future literary studies from a species of detective work to the reading and furthering of good books.

I plead for columns of literary news in our magazines.

W. L. WERNER.
State College, Pa.

The Crime Story

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

Thanks for your editorial in a recent issue entitled, "Throw Out the Detective." Only why not go a little further and make it "Throw Out the Crime Story"?

Of what earthly use is the so-called mystery or crime story that makes a hero out of a criminal or interests the reader in the criminal inclinations of fictional personages? I can't see them. I find them stupid and silly, and I can't help wondering if the present vogue is not, to some extent, the result of clever propaganda. Some people like to be in the mode. Raus mit the mystery fake yarn!

ARTHUR G. PEACOCK.
Jamaica, N. Y.

Miss Sidgwick

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

To those of us who have been reading and enjoying Miss Ethel Sidgwick's books for nearly fifteen years, it was a bit painful to have your reviewer in the issue of November 17 refer to her constantly as Mrs. Sidgwick. And still more painful was his apparent implication. I admit that he did not say it directly—that she was a disciple of Margaret Kennedy. Long before Margaret Kennedy wrote "The Constant Nymph," the arrival of a new volume by Ethel Sidgwick, introducing us to more of her delightfully human people, was something that brought a fresh joy to life.

Your reviewer could not have been ignorant of this, but he fails to make it clear in his review. Nor does he refer to a fact that Miss Sidgwick's readers would have been interested to know, that this is the second appearance of most of the characters, who had already been introduced in "Laura."

PRISCILLA OSBORN.
Washington, D. C.

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