

Roman Life

THE SEVEN VICES. By GUGLIELMO FERRERO. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1929. 2 vols. \$5.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

IT is permissible to guess that, like a good deal of the novel itself, the title of Guglielmo Ferrero's study of Roman life at the close of the last century is charged with a deeper meaning than is at first apparent. Nominally "the Seven Vices" is the soubriquet of a group of dissipated young men of fashion, decadents after the elaborate manner of the 1890's, the "Seven Kings of Rome" of whom the hero makes one. But only one or two of these young men enter significantly into the story, which is chiefly concerned with the connection of their reputed leader, Oliviero Alamanni, officer in a crack regiment of cavalry, and son of a wealthy *arriviste* senator, with the case of Susanna Cavalieri whose trial for the murder of her husband whom she is accused of having poisoned, has become the talk of Rome. Oliviero is convinced of Susanna's innocence, and a sense of chivalry draws him, in defiance of his conservative father's opposition and mistrust, to take an active part in her defense. It is the first notable unselfish impulse of his life. His puny and misdirected efforts to turn the force of public opinion and prevent an obvious miscarriage of justice, reveal, as the reader follows their hidden consequences, the tangled web of intrigue and secret influence in which the Eternal City is enmeshed. The story itself, somewhat overloaded with episodic plot, does provide moments of genuine suspense, but it is in the inner moral workings of modern society, rather than in the narrative which serves to disclose them, that the author's interest obviously lies. The seven vices which seem the real protagonists, against whom Aliviero's real duel is fought, are those which were already old when the imagination of the Middle Ages gave them concrete form.

The novelist in Professor Ferrero's latest book conceals but imperfectly the historian. One is tempted to believe that after having pointed the moral and adorned the tale of the grandeur and decline of ancient Rome, the veteran scholar, despairing of the enormous task of treating on the same scale the complexities of his own century, has turned to fiction for a microcosm in which to portray and to judge his contemporaries. Fiction and historiography are sometimes sister arts, and the verve and color of expression which have served Professor Ferrero so well in the one, have not deserted him in the other. The breadth of vision with which he surveys all Europe, or spreads out the panorama of Rome, its struggling cliques and castes, its decaying palaces and politics, its magnificence and pettiness, its boasts and fears and secret weaknesses, is equalled by the alertness with which he seizes, the energy, not without malice, with which he exhibits the characteristic types of the swarming anthill of intrigue.

The Machiavellian subtleties of "the Cavaliere," one of those powers behind the mask of Demos, the loathsome full length portrait of Malaguzzi, a lawyer compounded of vanity and avarice who by blackmail and wire-pulling has risen to the top of his profession, the pompous Senator Guicciarelli, head of the Institute of Toxicology, who practices organic chemistry as if it were a branch of the black art, a charlatan and climber who inveighs against clerical obscurantism while he perverts the findings of science, the cynical yellow journalist who under the guise of fearless truth-telling nonchalantly blackens the characters of the defenseless while secretly he takes his orders from men of wealth, the spiteful and frustrated Signora Cavalieri, the lying greedy cook, Gaetano: all are equally vivid, and all serve equally to illustrate the author's conception of his time. Behind the figure of Crispi, the weary old conspirator to whom Italy has turned to uphold the forces of order, one feels not only a wealth of particular study and insight, but a general European significance. The most memorable figure in the book, Senator Alamanni, lifted above mediocrity only by his great wealth and his capacity for maintaining and increasing it, and ready for any ignoble compromise that will maintain the security of himself and his order, conservative without a background of tradition, and snobbish without respect for the society to which he aspires or any sense of its function, becomes, under Professor Ferrero's hand, an epitome and an indictment of modern capitalism: the scene at his house in which the savage Russian Archduke, Crispi, and the disillusioned

cardinal exchange banalities under the respectful eyes of Alamanni's guests—the Army, the Church, and the State, decadent yet powerful under the patronage of Wealth,—rises almost to be an allegory of Europe drifting towards the catastrophe of 1914.

For, if Signor Ferrero's pictures are as brilliant as those which illustrate his study of the Roman Empire, his judgment on his own age is no less severe than that once passed upon the age of the Cæsars. Justice, he finds, is bought and sold, truth is powerless, honor a useless burden. The power of money has corrupted society; democracy, directed by backstairs politicians and yellow journalists, is a delusion; and the age ends in futility and despair. So, too, ends the story. Oliviero, his good impulses thwarted by his father's conservatism, as his evil have been given full play by his father's wealth, departs at last for Abyssinia to take part in the slaughter of Adowa, the shadow of which, thrown before the event, lies on the later pages. For Professor Ferrero is no believer in the regeneration of society by easy formulas and aggressive jingoism. His implied condemnation of tin-pot imperialism and executive tyranny can hardly be meant only for the Italy of the 1890's. There is no promise that the forces of light are likely to triumph in the near future. The indignant socialist Accolti, who is the one thoroughly admirable character in the story, seems as estranged from the world, a figure as helpless and as merely prophetic, as an early Christian in the reign of Nero. The disaster which impends looms larger than the failure of a petty colonial war, larger, perhaps, than the agony of 1914. However one may disagree with Professor Ferrero's views, his capacity to awaken the sense of history, and to make vivid his own conception of its meaning, is as undeniable now as ever.

Through the Ages

BARBARIAN STORIES. By NAOMI MITCHISON. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

THERE were a good many barbarians in Mrs. Mitchison's admirable stories about the Greeks and Romans, and readers of those tales will remember her sympathy for the under dogs of ancient civilizations—slaves and women. This present collection might be cited as proving that civilization is at least no worse than barbarism. The time of the stories runs from the early Bronze Age to A. D. 1935; some of them are hardly more than incidents, one or two attain the dimensions of novelettes. Individually most of them are good and none is particularly noteworthy. They display Mrs. Mitchison's by now familiar characteristics—her really immense if sometimes spotty erudition, her comprehension (in so far as a modern is competent to judge) of the content of primitive religion; her sense of natural beauty and her intensity of feeling—above all her capacity for suffering, vicarious though it be. They reinforce the impression made by her other works, of an unusually sensitive and intelligent personality, apparently more important than her writings, and probably capable of better work than she has ever yet done.

To a reviewer who is no expert in such matters, Mrs. Mitchison seems to realize her barbarians of all ages pretty well, though her Vikings have been bettered by Howden Smith and others; of the civilized characters she does Byzantine Greeks as admirably as she has done classic Greeks; but her Romans are still Englishmen—something which the actual Romans, despite superficial resemblances, were not. But what, after all, is the Englishman, and what is he coming to be? The last of these stories is set at Cardiff only six years in the future, and depicts the solemn and legal ritual sacrifice—supposed to occur once a year somewhere in the British Isles—of a millionaire, to appease the envy of a starving proletariat. Much of it is hopelessly obscure to an American reader and might be even to Englishmen, but the point is obvious—that we are a good deal less remote from our Neolithic ancestors than we like to believe.

Barbarians may be expected to behave barbarously, so it is natural that there is a good deal of rape as well as of killing in this volume. It may, however, surprise Mr. Douglas Fairbanks, that well-known leader of the moral set in Hollywood, to find the most rapeful story of all dedicated to him

—"by one of the many millions," the author chastely explains, "whom he has never even kissed." But even barbarians had to work for a living, or fight for it; effete moderns may be permitted a faint astonishment that they could find the leisure for such copious ravishments.

Leviathan

THE DARK JOURNEY. By JULIAN GREEN. Translated from the French by VYVYAN HOLLAND. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MARSHALL A. BEST

"LEVIATHAN" was the name that Julian Green gave to his novel when it appeared in its original French last March. The reviewers made much of that title, and the publishers conducted a contest to determine what the author meant by it. But it was not that alone which made the book a best seller in Paris and brought its young American author increasing prestige in literary circles there. It would be hard to deny that it is by far the best of his books, the most complete as a story, the richest and most varied in its characters.

Like Julian Green's other books, "The Dark Journey" (as it is called in America) is a story of overmastering passions, a study of obsession. Guéret, tutor in a French provincial family, turns from his unexciting married life to follow a young girl of the village, whom he worships with a romantic longing. When he finds that her time is at the disposal of all the patrons of Mme. Londe's restaurant, for a fee, he is consumed with jealousy and self-reproach for his unsuccess with her. He makes a midnight attack, half nightmare and half waking, upon the house in which Angèle lives; but after he has forced his way in by superhuman efforts, he finds her room empty. The next day he attacks her when she is walking by the river and horribly mutilates her face, leaving her for dead. In his haunted flight through the dusk along the alleys of the village, an old man happens to stand and stare at him, and Guéret impulsively kills him. This murder is the beginning of an elaborate plot, in which the varied emotions of the characters drawn into the orbit of Guéret's life are made no less dramatic than the action itself.

The skill of this narrative is only surpassed by the author's much more characteristic excellence, his subtle and thorough interpreting of human motives. Guéret, to be sure, is not a difficult being to understand; he is simply an unsatisfied ineffectual, botching the only great effort he ever makes for his happiness. The three women are more complex and more deeply studied. Mme. Londe presides over her restaurant with autocratic gusto, and stirs the pot of gossip until it tickles the palate of her pride. Angèle, recovering from the attack, puzzles over her unaccountable suitor and grieves for her lost beauty and the life which now can never be hers again. And the wife of Guéret's employer, Mme. Grosgeorge, with her futile existence and memories of a wasted youth, takes out her spleen on her son and tries to console herself with misapplied sympathy for the young tutor.

Though going so deep into the ways of morbidity, "The Dark Journey" is not a morbid book. It is always objective, and there is a clean-cut fatalism running through it which gives it meaning. The sense of a compelling purpose, stronger than its victims and as blind as they are, grows out of the characters themselves; it is incarnated in their obsessions. Perhaps this is "Leviathan," the fabulous monster, the biblical creature of the deep who shall not be drawn out with a hook. He lives within each of these characters and drives them on to their irrational acts:—in Guéret the passion for Angèle; in Mm. Grosgeorge the thwarted life which turns into a twisted kind of love, in Mme. Londe the consuming pride which makes her pander to her clientèle and brings ruin to her poor life when she no longer controls her one source of power, her knowledge of all the secrets of the community.

There are faults of detail in the novel. One may complain that Mme. Londe's humble person is too much dignified with such serious study, or take exception to the sudden *volte-face* of Mme. Grosgeorge at the end of the book. But more important, to those who are interested in Julian Green's progress as a novelist, is the fact that he has successfully worked his psychology into a story that is almost melodramatic in its action. More than in "Avarice House," much more than in "The Closed Garden,"

he has related these morbid lives to a life outside, given them continuity and a background in the real world. And he has done so without sacrificing the great concentration which is his special strength. The town and its other inhabitants are alive; they share in the action and enrich the central characters. Through this broadening of his interests, he may yet fulfil the literary hopes that both France and America hold out for him.

Grim Power

ULTIMA THULE. By HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT B. MACDOUGALL

THIS book possesses many of the qualities that we demand of the truly remarkable novel, the novel that will endure and be an accepted standard by which we can in the future judge a new generation of fiction. Tragic power is its chief quality; "Jude the Obscure" had much the same effect upon the reader. Such a moving novel it is difficult to imagine; one must read to believe. Probably four out of five readers will cry, "Unpleasant! Depressing!! Morbid!!! Unendurable!!!!" And these timid souls will give up without finishing. Worse fools they! The book begins to take shape in our consciousness after the half-way point has been reached; then the dreary wastes of melancholy come to seem purposeful, and the very real emotional distress that we have gone through resolves itself into an esthetic satisfaction. When we finally finish the novel we realize that we have had a most precious experience. "Ultima Thule" has a power, a force, a directed energy that make the average good novel look like a relaxed oyster. This is the fundamental reason why we can say assuredly that "Ultima Thule" will seem a great novel to all whose emotions can stand the strain. The only excellence about which there can be debate is this quality of distressful, haunting melancholy. In every other way the novel is undeniably of the first rank—in method, material, and manner. Therefore, the difference of opinion on the novel as a whole will turn into a debate between the tender-minded ones and the rugged-minded ones upon the propriety of overpowering tragedy in fiction.

Henry Handel Richardson is the pen name of a woman about whom little information is available. In 1908 her "Maurice Guest" was published in England, where it had merely a *succès d'estime*. Other novels followed with no greater popular approval, and a little over ten years ago appeared the first volume of a trilogy which was to be the life history of one Richard Mahony. This first volume was "The Fortunes of Richard Mahony"; the second, "The Way Home"; and the third is "Ultima Thule," which brings Mahony to his death. It is remarkable that a final volume carrying on a story begun in two earlier novels can be so complete in itself. We notice the lack of background in only two places: in the beginning of the narrative Mahony's situation is not well accounted for, nor is his family's; and secondly, throughout the novel there are a number of minor characters who, although never of real importance, are always a little vague in our minds. But otherwise and in all important aspects, the novel is quite self-sufficient. It will be surprising if Henry Handel Richardson does not rise from obscurity with the publication of her latest novel. Few who find themselves under the spell of "Ultima Thule" will be satisfied until they have read the author's earlier works.

Richard Mahony is an Australian physician. We see him at the beginning of "Ultima Thule" rising from financial and social calamity, setting up a practice near Melbourne, and waiting for his wife and three children to arrive from England. The family's situation in this suburban town soon becomes, for one reason and another, thoroughly unbearable, and after weeks of agonizing indecision Mahony moves the family to Barambogie, a small town many miles in the bush. In this village, too, tragedies fill the days; everything and everyone is miserable. After one more move Mahony's inevitable mental and physical collapse occurs, and thereafter tragedy is deep and continuous. The character of Mahony is exposed with a surgeon's cold skill, the author never leaving us in any doubt of his approaching paralysis and insanity. In fact, the novel might justly be called a study in the

growth of insanity accompanied by physical degeneration. We stand by, helpless; waiting as if for some certain, destructive act of God. There is no relief; the Australian scene, desolate and hostile, is as oppressively vivid as if seen under a threatening sky by the quick brutality of lightning. The wife grows desperate in her faithfulness to her mad husband. The children are terrified by their father's unaccountable weakness and hysteria. And as a kind of drone in the background is the poverty of the family, the sense we have of their complete isolation from all that makes ordinary living decent and rewarding. Beyond doubt, Mahony is one of the memorable figures in English fiction. Every turn in the novel is a step ahead in the building of his character; every aspect of his completed character is significant, fresh, right.

Prince of Charlatans

CAGLIOSTRO. By JOHANNES VON GUENTHER. Translated by HUNTLEY PATERSON. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1929. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

"I BELIEVE that Nature produces a creature like Cagliostro only once in a century," wrote Lavater. Hardly even that often, one might safely add. The more we know about him, the more perplexing Cagliostro becomes—the very prince of charlatans, certainly, in whom roguery was raised to a fine art, but also, probably, something more than a charlatan. As to how much more, there is still little agreement. Few historians today would accept Carlyle's facile accusation of complete quackery. But how much of Cagliostro's idealism was real, how much assumed, there is hardly any possible way of determining.

Such an essentially legendary character, with a career rich in events nearly all capable of various interpretations, offers the finest kind of material for historical fiction—material first used notably by Dumas in "The Memoirs of a Physician," and now again even more notably, by Johannes von Guenther in his "Cagliostro." In each instance the character is greatly simplified by the novelist. Dumas, himself much of a charlatan, illustrated the old saying of a rogue caught by a rogue; he accepted Cagliostro at the latter's own appraisal and represented him as a kingly but mysterious philanthropist. Johannes von Guenther, on the other hand, follows the Carlylean interpretation, but, one might say, reinterprets the interpretation, lifting it from the moral to the esthetic plane.

"In these pages," he writes, "Cagliostro was intended to romp through the world just as merrily, just as brutally, and just as craftily and slyly as he did a hundred years ago." Romp through the world Von Guenther's hero certainly does—through the many-hued panorama of eighteenth century Italy, England, France, and Russia, pictured by the author with glorious gusto and imaginative sweep. It matters little whether Cagliostro is really the same with Giuseppe Balsamo, as Von Guenther, following tradition, makes him, or that he is here given an amorous intrigue with Louise de la Motte Valois which in fact may never have occurred. The work is fiction, not history, unadorned with foolish bibliography or pretense to accuracy—and it is significant fiction. Occasionally, to be sure, the passion is a bit perfervid; very occasionally, the narrative halts momentarily, as it were, in order to admire itself, but on the whole, the book possesses the intensity of very brilliant art.



Return to Birds

WHEN cities prod me with demands
Of many minds and many hands,
When life becomes a cry of bargains
In unassimilated jargons
And men bewilder men with words,
Suddenly I remember birds:
Goldfinches, those untamed canaries,
Preferring thistle-seed to cherries,
Shaking their broken crystal notes
Carelessly out of china throats.

Redrobins, Spring's first feathered offering,
Whose burly strut is free of suffering
Except in drouth when they complain,
Calling irascibly for rain.
Every bird on every hill
Whose small tongues twist and turn and thrill:
The catbird, Nature's parodist,
In whose bright mill all sounds are grist—
Cluck, coloratura, mew and squawk.
The redstart's prattle, like the talk
Flung by young brooks to tolerant stones,
Contentment strengthening their bones.
The meadow-lark's slow-troubling tones.
The oven-bird, scholastic creature,
Crying for "Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!"
The oriole, wind-and-firebird,
Too seldom seen, more rarely heard.
The cuckoo's constant minor third.
Blackbird with epaulets of red.
Warbler parading on his head.
The cardinal, that crimson arrow.
The chestnut-crowned staccato sparrow
Whose voice is slivered in high chips.
The thrasher's frenzied sweeps and dips.
Dun city sparrows, numerous
As Jews and more ubiquitous,
Common to every slum and park.
Swallows, those arcs within an arc.
The hummingbird's arrested spark,
Half-flame, half-flower, blossoming where
Emerald and ruby burn in air.
The nighthawk's ghostly drum, the shrill
Insistence of the whip-poor-will.
The chebec, that small plague among
The flies with Egypt on its tongue.
Swifts and their irrepressible young
To whom all chimney homes are free.
Phoebes whose domesticity
Has no concern with privacy.
The purple martin's undramatic
Ecstasy of the acrobatic.
The blue-jay, bully of the boughs,
Usurping any half-built house,
Comedian-brawler among leaves,
Roisterer, rascal, king of thieves.
The sentimental pewee's call,
Persuasive in its dying fall,
More languid than a pampered woman's.
The partridge ruffling out her summons.
Crow in his sheath of violet-jet,
A ravaging scold in silhouette.
Conceited high-hole's much-ado.
Woodpecker's amorous tattoo.
The kingbird with imperial crest,
Quirring defiance from his nest.
Fat bobolink, impetuous singer,
Who, living, is a lavish flinger
Of notes too prodigal for man,
And, dead, the gourmet's ortolan.
The yellowthroat's beseeching phrase,
Void of self-pity or self-praise.
That country questioner, the chat;
Wrens who have all the answers pat.
The tanager's abrupt rebellion,
Taunting the greenery with vermillion.
Song-sparrow's mastery of change,
An opera in himself, whose range
The ear of flesh can never know.
The tropic-patterned vireo.
Metallic lustre, grating cackle,
That marks the iridescent grackle.
Those flakes of sky let loose, rose-breasted
Bodies lightly blueberry-dusted,
New England's liveliest muezzins,
The rusty robin's colored cousins.
Always a challenge, the unwearied
Crescendo of the confident veery,
That thrush of overtones. And lush
As a long waterfall, the thrush
Himself, brown hermit of the trail,
Our lark, our more than nightingale,
Surpassing interval and scale. . . .
These are the happy ones; their breath
Is song, their element is faith.
Untouched by all the transient oddities
They do not traffic in commodities;
They neither kill for sport nor wear
A wreath of insects in their hair;
Their flight does not pollute the air;
Their mornings have no yesterdays
Who, in themselves, have infinite ways
Of turning petulance to praise;
Who never trick themselves with words. . . .
Gratefully I return to birds.

LOUIS UNTERMEYER.