

Some Recent Fiction

Counter-Revolution

THE WHITE COAT. By GENERAL P. N. KRASSNOFF. New York: Duffield & Co. 1929. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL

GENERAL KRASSNOFF'S first novel, "From Double Eagle to Red Flag," was an astonishing story, written in exile by an ex-officer out of the still warm, vivid, and overflowing memories of an active Russian soldier's life. The sheer vitality of a talent, hitherto undeveloped, overrode technical difficulties, and spread out a Russian panorama which dwarfed the work of many more experienced but less temperamentally gifted craftsmen, and deserved to be mentioned in the same breath, at least, with Tolstoy's "War and Peace." It wasn't Tolstoy, by a long shot. All sorts of easy criticisms could be made of it; toward the end, when the émigré's imagination began to turn itself loose on the detested Bolsheviks, it grew rather maudlin. But it was magnificent, nevertheless.

His second effort, along the same line, in which he left the life he had actually lived through, and treated post-Revolutionary Russia, was much less successful. In "The White Coat," the redoubtable general leaves, for the most part, first-hand experience altogether, and embarks on an imagined counter-revolution which overthrows the Communists and restores a "Holy Russia." It is a strange product—interesting, for Krassnoff almost always contrives to be that, but ingenuous and rather wild, and as significant for its revelation of émigré psychology as for anything else.

The "Parents" are treated in the first part, in a picture of the melancholy end of an old officer who "accepted" Bolshevism; the "Children" in a second section, in particular through the lurid tale of a young girl, who, despairing of God because of what has happened to Russia, joined a nightmare cult and gave herself, body and soul, to Satan. And the latter half of the book is devoted to a sort of super-Ku Klux Klan, headed by a radiant knight in a white coat, which filters secretly into every cell of Communist life and finally overthrows the Bolsheviks.

The pathos of the émigré's morbid homesickness—often unconscious of itself—for vanished Russia, is felt throughout the book and especially in this latter part. When the supreme moment arrives, and the hero, so different from the Soviet leaders, so like a sort of glorified old-school cavalry-officer, with his white coat trimmed with sable, dusted with snow, so that "a rainbow-tinted halo seemed to surround him"—when the White Coat finally arrives, he comes as a "chief should appear. Not with the roar and hooting of a both capitalistic and democratic motor-car—the last production of the workers' industry—but with the merry tinkle of the troika, the image of peasant, agricultural Russia!" . . .

How many thousands of Russian émigrés, keeping alive, somehow, in obscure rooms and dismal barracks in the capitals of western Europe, try to forget reality in dreams of old Russia similar to this! Cling to the delusion that there is a road back to that old Russia; that if the Bolsheviks were somehow to be swept off the stage tomorrow, Russia would be, socially, economically, politically, what it was a generation ago—just as if there were a road back to our old South, or back to the France of Louis XIV, or back to one's youth! . . .

Many curious bits of political and social opinion are dropped through the story. Thus a Communist explains that

when the American Jew Charlie Chaplin grimaces before the public, when the beautiful, Ukrainian-born, Pola Negri makes sweet eyes at them, it is our propaganda that appears, unseen to them, behind their back. . . We have allowed them to stare at kings and emperors on the screen; we have made use of God Himself to whet their curiosity in "Ben Hur" and "The King of Kings." We have democratized and vulgarized everything in order to prove that there is nothing high or sacred in this world. . .

It is Communism, again, General Krassnoff apparently would have us think, and not the Paris "Kemgor," aided by the League of Nations, which is helping some of the Russian émigrés, to settle on the land in new countries. "All that is strong and healthy and truly Russian," he makes another Communist explain,

we'll manage to direct to Canada, Brazil, the

Argentine, the further the better. We'll know how to do it without being suspected of being in the play. They will be tied to the land with contracts, bound by work. No, there will be for them no going back to Russia. . . .

"The White Coat" is not to be taken very seriously, either as a novel or as politics, but the reader will be entertained most of time, and sometimes in ways not intended.

Old British Columbia

RED WILLOWS. By CONSTANCE LINDSAY SKINNER. New York: Coward-McCann. 1929. \$2.

Reviewed by T. MORRIS LONGSTRETH

MISS SKINNER'S first novel, "The Search Relentless," disclosed to readers of Curwood and Connor that an adventure story of the Canadian west could be told with truth of observation and beauty of style. "Red Willows" does even more. Holding fast to the excellences of the first book, it interprets some neglected frontier history in terms of unbridled but absorbing fiction. One learns, emotionally, what it was like to be alive in the days subsequent to the Cariboo strike in a small, gossip trading post. British Columbia is lucky to have had Miss Skinner for a pioneer child, for these days have cried out for an able story-teller. They have now found expression in a novel of uncommon quality.

Unlike western fiction, the interest of these pages depends little on plot. A sick young clergyman travels from England to Woman's Crossing, interior British Columbia, to die. He finds himself in a village of Scotch and Norwegians, English and Indians, Spaniards, and Chinese, gathered around the store stove of Finnan MacDuff. The climate is of some primitive heaven, but the daily life of Woman's Crossing is rather earthy and Hal Cressy is too engaged to die. It is the interplay of race and personality that engages him, as it does the reader, and when a murder occurs late in the book one feels that this violence is required less for the onlooker's excitement than to help Miss Skinner with her thesis.

This thesis is of course unstated, and it may be unfair to insist too much on it, but it does seem as if Miss Skinner had been brooding on the injustice of previous fiction in picturing a frontier managed and moulded exclusively by he-men. Where, she asks, are their partners in hardship? What about the brave and resourceful women? And she sets about revealing them in Woman's Crossing, grouped around and subtly led by Lucy Paley.

Mrs. Paley is a remarkable transference of breathing woman to the printed page and hers is undoubtedly one of the most finished portraits in Canadian fiction. She has charm and light-heartedness and nerve and nerves. She quivers with individuality, and, ironically, her best qualities nearly wreck the community. She has to put her ringed finger in every rough pie. Her maker has not spared her, baring her nature with a kind of loving venom until she attains a quite thrilling reality. She almost does not manage her high-spirited Spanish husband, but an opportune infant brings him to heel.

There are other women: the tired and unobtrusive sister of Great Finnan who could defy his egotism when necessary; Concha Santiago, wedded not too thoroughly to the unvoiced Eric Nord; Effie, the really touching prostitute; her sister Cherry, who aspires to Lady Cressy's son and of course gets him. All these characters have substance, and they are all better than their men, possibly because Miss Skinner can portray her sex better or possibly because she wants to.

The men are far from lifeless. Great Finnan, father of nine strapping half-breeds and dictator in Woman's Crossing to four races, is imperial—until his sister emits a tired word. Erik is symbolic of the hardy Norsemen's placid plough-riden life; he gets cuckolded. Bert marries the prostitute's sister as she designed. Mallow alone defies woman, and he, alas, is murdered. Indeed, the women decide that it would be better for justice never to know who killed him. So they don't tell.

Whether this matriarchal supremacy is quite accurate, historically, is open to some doubt, but it is a good corrective to the previous frontier romances of this region. And the scene is depicted in a style so vivid, by an ability to project character so powerful, as to place "Red Willows" without question among the very few Canadian novels of real worth.

Aldous Huxley, whose novel, "Point Counter Point," has been turned into a play, "This Way to Paradise," is publishing a new book in the spring, containing one long and several short stories.

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