

Madame de Lieven, by Lytton Strachey, on page 748

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Curiosity

CURIOSITY may have been an admirable trait in primitive man when it led him nosing about this and that until he made a tool to cut a stick to hook something or another down from just beyond his reach. Curiosity made him wiser, but curiosity seems to have just the opposite effect upon so-called civilized man. Curiosity in sex matters, for instance. When the dam of Victorian reticence burst and the waters of knowledge came forth, there was a natural interest in what those specialists in human relations, the novelists and dramatists, would say when they could tell all they knew or felt. D. H. Lawrence and others rode upon the wave, sex discussion in really fine novels quickly lost its self-consciousness, and a new area of interpretation was added to fiction in English. But the itching curiosity remained. It grew by what it fed upon and fodder began to be provided for it. Now the presses are pouring out novels whose only excuse is that they satisfy curiosity. Sordid or merely vacuous males, who remind one of Balzac's description of a complexion like a glass of dirty water, wander through sex adventures with strident uninteresting females, in a story which would be as flat as the autobiography one girl in the sandwich shop tells to another one, if it were not for the frank appeal to sex curiosity. There will be not one character that in real life the reader would waste fifteen minutes of his time with, but no doors to bedrooms either, no lights out, no dots and dashes, and only one climax.

This itching and degenerative curiosity has corrupted another kind of literature. In the popular magazine the novel of manners has become an exhibit of the habits of the very rich. It would be interesting to calculate the gross wealth of the chief characters in recent American fiction of this kind. It could be reckoned only in English billions (which we believe are much larger than American ones), and the income taxes would pay the soldiers' bonus. And the stories in which they move owe much of their success to the drench of plutocracy with which they have been soaked. How the millionaire eats, how and when he and his son and his daughter are vicious, why he grows suddenly warm-hearted when given an opportunity to encounter virtues surprisingly like those of the average reader—how plutocrats live, in short, is the theme of this flourishing fiction family which also feeds on childish curiosity. And alas for progress!—where a generation ago the servant girl was always depicted in her basement reading avidly of the habits of duchesses, now the great American and English public by millions gorge themselves with riches in the narrative and rich men's toys in the advertisements.

We are not asking for sumptuary laws in fiction, but merely suggesting that all this "realism" of experience and "novelty" of setting in current fiction which publishers, and some critics, call sophistication and naturalism and honesty and revelation, is, for the greater part, just a catering to man's still primitive itch to know what goes on behind closed doors and inside iron grilles or country-house gates. It is an itch that belongs to the childhood of the race and its persistence indicates a certain childishness in the adult minds of civilized peoples. These books that deal in sexy realism or vulgar opulence, will not they, hard-boiled as they seem to be to gentle, old-fashioned readers, seem a little juvenile once their naturalism is exposed by time as just another chapter of "Secrets of the Bedroom," or a sequel to "The Wicked Millionaire?"

The Love of Books

By JAMES R. CLEMENS

HAPPY he
Who, in his home at night,
Finds in his books delight,
And sweet society;
Whilst he who sees no profit in their use,
Will live a fool and die as great a goose.

At my call
Great Shakespeare and his fellows
Stand ready, like my bellows,
For service menial;
Thus kingly do I sit and at mine ease,
Whilst they, when summoned, do their best to please.

Who pines more
For earthly rank and pelf,
Than good books on his shelf,
Is like a sycamore;
A tree so plagued by density of shade,
That well-intending light shrinks back dismayed.

With a book,
A man is richer far
Than kings and princes are,
Though he no cities took;
For in good books a vein of thought is found,
Which, mined, exhaustless gold yields from the ground.

Now It Can Be Shrieked*

By JOHN PALMER GAVIT

EVERYBODY remembers that exploit in pure research recounted by John G. Saxe; the Hindu fable of the six men of Indostan,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

Bumping against his rough and wrinkled side, feeling of his smooth and pointed tusk, his squirmy trunk, his gnarled and sturdy leg, his flapping ear, his slender tail, they concluded variously, each from his own experience, that the Elephant was very like a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan, a rope—

Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right
And all of them were wrong.

Not so well remembered may be that similar output of the International Commission, English, French, Polish, on like quest, reporting elaborately (I cite from treacherous memory) each from his characteristic point of view, upon "The Elephant and British Commerce," "Les Amour de l'Eléphant," and, of course, "L'Eléphant et la Question Polonnaise!"

These classic investigations come irresistibly to mind in contemplating two recent works of diagnosis and prescription regarding the present condition of the more or less United States of America. One (as might be expected with Dr. Schmalhausen as, so to speak, both dominant gene and *accoucheur*) is deadly, sometimes hysterically serious; the other with its tongue visibly in its cheek; not merry but in fact rather acidly satirical, compilation of exceedingly clever articles in *Vanity Fair*, written under a pseudonym said to disguise a government officer whose identity I cannot guess. The first is bound—deliberately, one suspects—in red, the other in blue; but the red one might quite as appropriately have been blue. Anyhow, 'tis blue reading! The blue one . . . well, its jacket is striped in red and white, and its starry blue field is quartered with a dollar-sign, a wine-glass, a five-cent cigar, and a beer-mug foaming.

Between these covers ominously incarnadine (more so than some of the context) Dr. Schmalhausen has gathered a symposium of writers, mostly well-known for views to say the least leftish; about as calmly judicial-minded and restrained in expression as himself. A few seem a bit unusual, not exactly to say uncomfortable, in their juxtaposition. Beside the editor there are thirty-two of them, and to name them is almost to describe the collection:

Harry Elmer Barnes, Robert Morss Lovett, Robert Herrick, John Haynes Holmes, George S. Schuyler, T. Swann Harding, C. Hartley Grattan, Jerome Davis, John T. Flynn, Louis B. Boudin, Melvin P. Levy, A. J. Muste, Arthur W. Calhoun, McAlister Coleman, James Oneal, Henry Seidel Canby, William Seagle, Ernest Gruening, Charles W. Ferguson, Abraham Lefkowitz, Albert Mordell, James Oppenheim, Pierre Loving, Daniel Gregory Mason, Joseph Jastrow, Harry Alan Potamkin, Gorham B. Munson, Edwin Seaver, Robert Dunn, Lewis Corey, Roger N. Baldwin, V. F. Calverton.

* BEHOLD AMERICA! (A Symposium.) Edited by SAMUEL D. SCHMALHAUSEN. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1931. \$5.
WHAT THIS COUNTRY NEEDS. By JAY FRANKLIN. New York: Covici-Friede. 1931. \$3.50.

This Week

"Mère Marie of the Ursulines."

Reviewed by CHARLES F. RONAYNE.

"The Passionate Pilgrim."

Reviewed by ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES.

"Green Hell."

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL.

"American Humor."

Reviewed by ROBERT E. SPILLER.

"The Gospel According to Saint Luke's."

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT.

"Enter the Actress."

Reviewed by MONTROSE J. MOSES.

Next Week, or Later

"My Experiences in the World War."

Reviewed by ROBERT ALBION.

Many facets of present-day "America" (meaning of course as usual only our own portion of the Western hemisphere) are dealt with under five main headings: "Promise and Fulfilment," "Our Social System in Reality," "Illusion and Disillusion," "The Creative Life in These States," and "America at the Crossroads." Politics, religion, business, education, labor organization and exploitation, racial and sexual relations; eccentricities, fads and fakes in psychology and psychiatry; professional ethics and practices in law including judicial processes and abuses and violence under cloak of "law and order"; in medicine—teaching, science, historical research and utterance; literature, music, art, "culture" generally, and so on through pretty much the whole gamut of social and economic life in these parts. The consensus appears to be that we are in a pretty sad state, having fallen away from, or anyway failed to exemplify, the ideals of some high faith once delivered to the saints. Furthermore and most alarming of all, it would seem that we are right now at some sort of critical juncture in time, with a God-given opportunity, a bare "Chinaman's chance," to choose some particular road leading to the right destination. It is a bit disappointing—or would be if you really expected it—to derive no clear impression of unanimity as to that destination. From each writer one can gain perhaps a notion of *his* notion, a glimpse of his general bent and trend; but as for any clear leading . . . it is rather bewildering. What else could be expected? 'Twould have been the same with any other personnel. On the whole, it is like most conversations, in which each participant waits with such patience as he may possess, for the other insufferable old wind-bag to run out of breath so that he himself can talk. In the main, however, and with a few exceptions, the assault is upon that old devil Capitalism, as it is alleged to have worked and to be working, now and hitherto.

In other words, each sees what his bent of mind leads him to look for. And what you behold is "America" according to the radical and somewhat ultra-liberal formula; truth, half-truth, exaggerations and distortions of truth, and some sheer nonsense. Which is which is a question dependent greatly upon the standpoint, discernment, and information of the reader. I shall not attempt to criticize in any detail either the selection of the particular writers, or their findings, such as they are, severally or as a whole. Aside from the fact that it would require inordinate consumption—not by any means to say waste—of space, and an affectation of wisdom in many fields beyond even my ordinarily adequate store of gall, at the end you would have only the personal reactions and private opinions of another individual, no better qualified than these—certainly not so well qualified as some of them—either to diagnose or to prescribe.



The "Jay Franklin" observations are of another sort. The author, who plays his hand alone, isn't any better pleased with "America" as he sees it than the Schmalhausen outfit, but his therapeutics are distinctly old-school. It would be a dismal business to appraise it solemnly, or otherwise than in the spirit of it and from its own satirical point of view. It is highly diverting, cynical; to what extent the absurdities and plain twaddle in it are intentional 'twere hard to say. Some of it is refreshing against the lugubrious ensemble of diatribe in the other book; though "Franklin" does not omit the scathing quality. It should be taken as it was written, in small doses; otherwise there is an unavoidable impression of a self-consciously clever "smart-Aleck," concerned chiefly with being clever at any cost. Underneath is a grimly serious note, struck by a man disgusted with mealy-mouthed hypocrisy, with Main Street aims and slogans, with hot-air and political buncombe and ineptitude in high places and low. We are too fat and comfortable, we need hard work and suffering, including another war that shall really cost us something; we need statesmen rather than spokesmen; brains in politics, government, and administration; we need to stop preaching at each other and listening to preaching, including crooked printing; we need to restore the old-fashioned saloon and to get shamelessly drunk every little while; we need to stop worshipping the dear old Constitution and even to contrive a new one; we need to enjoy clean fun and to stop whining and glooming. We need to get us some "guts," of the kind acquired and displayed in fighting, deprivation, and facing facts, in the kind of struggle that gave "guts" to our fathers who tackled the conquest of the continent; before

the lust for luxury and idle ease got into our bones. So "Jay Franklin" affects to think.

We have plenty of good qualities, of which we know little or nothing . . . In another hundred years or so, it will make what Alexander Hamilton called "a great beast" into a great people.

The two books are mutually antidotal. Their circulation ought to be severely controlled. The Schmalhausen symposium won't do any good to the only kind of people who are likely to read it. They already have in their systems too much of the same; it will only superheat their blood. They need rather some of this "Jay Franklin" stuff, to lower their temperature, to make them laugh, especially at themselves, to give them some time-perspective. The "America" that they see, and that I see, is pretty bad, to be sure; but I don't remember, and haven't read of, any time when it was better. Much less do I know of any other country in fairer phase. I notice that none of these Schmalhausen boys shows any disposition to emigrate—anywhere! The Soviets blew out the best brains in such technological leadership as Russia had, and has had to come to capitalistic America, bad as it is to replace them. One of the American engineers, hired at fabulous salaries to show the Russians how to build vast industrial plants and railroads and to organize immense-scale agriculture, told me the other day that every third Russian asked him anxiously whether he thought they could somehow get what "America" has, of education and efficiency, and material comfort.



During forty-odd years of newspaper work I have seen the world come to an end on election night, times out of number, when somebody was or wasn't elected, and some fair political panacea went phut! It is quite exactly thirty-five years since a distinguished man in Chicago, a real thinker, not at all a professional radical, assured me that "America" was rotten to the core and that *within five years* its social-economic system would go down in crashing revolution and give way to some form of coöperative commonwealth. I don't remember whether I believed him—like others who have been young and now are—well, older, I have had my dreams; I have denounced and prophesied, and hoped. Things were pretty intense then; quite as intense as they are now. It was in the immediate aftermath of the Haymarket massacre and the shocking frame-ups and ghastly miscarriages of justice ensuing; of the Pullman strike engineered by Debs; of one of the great industrial depressions and a dreadful winter of unemployment and starvation. A full generation ago and more that was, and "America" looks to me as less likely a field for revolution than it was then. The mills of the gods grind slow. We must keep our shirts on.

Both kinds of hysteria make me laugh. Yesterday a man who hasn't been to church since Hector was a pup, who doesn't know where his Bible is if he owns one, which I doubt; who wouldn't be sure whether Dan and Beersheba or Sodom and Gomorrah were man and wife, places, or states of mind, or whether or not the Epistles were wives of the Apostles—looked at me over his unlawful cocktail glass, vehemently denouncing the activities of the Soviets against religion and the Bible, and accusing "Moscow" of responsibility for the decline in "America" of reverence for law! And here come more Books of Bellyache about the management of affairs in general, written by fellows most of whom you wouldn't commission to run a peanut stand—if you expected to make anything out of the peanuts. Or who . . . well, there was a chap who used to preach Hot Overthrow at the Tuesday Evening Meeting at Chicago Commons. Suddenly and mysteriously he disappeared into the silences; but a bit later I found him, making oodles of money on the Board of Trade—out of the food-stuffs of the masses whose cause so little a while ago he had been vociferating. So different seems the scenery, according as one looks in from out, or out from in!



The symposium should be made compulsory reading for the D. A. R. and other suchlike organizations of complacent Tories; for the racketeers of pseudo-patriotic hundred-percentism and the credulous suckers on whom they live; for the smug Pollyannas placidly assured that things are, ought to be, and somehow will continue to be "as they always have been"; for stout upholders of "the established order" regardless of who established it or how or why; for the optimists who don't care what happens so long as it doesn't happen to *them*. The Franklin book is good medicine for utopians, for radicals-in-a-

hurry, with Five Year Plans and other short-cut happy thoughts about reconstructing the world; more particularly for such of both types as imagine something can be gained by knocking the blocks off of those who do not agree with them. People who can't recognize that Communists shooting the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie breaking Communist skulls with police night-sticks are peas out of the same pod.

Meanwhile, the really Big Fellows of capitalism, the essential brains of Management (more concerned about social welfare and less about personal profit than those who do not know them would suppose), have begun to realize that things can't go on this way; even fish-committees, pre-charged with white-wash, come back from their Red-hunting investigations with warnings to capitalism to clean house and mend its ways. These people are scared about Russia, not because of scruples about religion, but because they aren't sure that something isn't going on there to beat them at their own game. Such as these will do well to study the Schmalhausen symposium, whether or not they divert themselves with the "Jay Franklin" vaudeville. With all its mis-statement and over-statement, it is on the whole a fairly just picture of the state of affairs. Viewed from the seamy side, to be sure; but it is at the seamy side that a competent tailor looks as he projects repairs, or decides to throw the thing away.

Echols to Fraser

THE DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY. Volume VI: Echols to Fraser. Edited by ALLEN JOHNSON and DUMAS MALONE. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1931.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

THIS indispensable work moves forward past Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, the Field family, and Benjamin Franklin, to a point where the great enterprise is now almost one-third completed. The list of contributors, after rising steadily in the first three volumes, is now slightly diminishing. That is, more names are being entrusted to the office staff and to men who have been found broadly competent in special fields. In thoroughness and accuracy the standard remains as high as ever, and in literary quality—for the Dictionary has it—there is certainly no diminution.

There are fewer great names in this volume than in some of its predecessors; not a single American President except Fillmore appears, and not a single great novelist, poet, or general. The Fiske, Field, and Ford families fill up many pages with second and third-rate personages. Yet the book is hardly of less interest than some of its companion volumes. For one thing, it contains in Carl Becker's twelve-page essay on Franklin one of the most masterly papers that the Dictionary has yet printed. His sketch is marvelously precise in its statement of factual detail, and represents a broad labor of research; but this is by no means its chief merit. The final pages which analyze Franklin's genius and character are an original statement of importance. Mr. Becker places his finger upon the secret of "Franklin's amazing capacity for assimilating experience without being warped or discolored by it." Mark Van Doren's less analytical paper on Emerson, and Ralph Barton Perry's sketch of Charles W. Eliot, are also of eminent quality. For another feature, there are salty personalities enshrined here, whose picturesque traits are not slighted. The grim sea-dog Farragut, the explosive Nat Forrest, the impudent Jim Fisk, the gallant reformer Joseph W. Polk, the dissipated Stephen J. Foster, are typical names in a list that might be made tiresomely long. The essays on some of these men confirm the impression that the greatest value of the whole work, when completed, will be in giving us our first really adequate and convenient information upon a long list of secondary figures who have not been of sufficient importance to achieve separate biographies.

As before, the chief questions raised by the work are those of proportion. Was Bishop John England, of Charleston, South Carolina, really worth five columns when only four are allotted to Millard Fillmore? The editors seem to think so. In a previous volume the famous Speaker, Joseph G. Cannon, was given less room than the educator Wallace Buttrick or than some very obscure writers. But we may be sure that these questions of space have caused endless anxiety to the editors. It is sad to think that this is the last volume which Dr. Allen Johnson was able to see through the press.