

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

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A Private Library

IT is curious that with all the ballyhoo of the personal and the individual in modern advertising so little has been said of a personal taste in books. You are urged (and what bunk it is!) by thousands of signboards and hundreds of thousands of magazine pages to establish your personality by smoking the same cigarette as several million others, or to show your individualism by a choice in refrigerators, but the advertisers of books have at least not asked the reader to prove his uniqueness by purchasing a best-seller. There is an implied compliment here: it is assumed that the lover of good books has a personality already, and will use it. And yet the proper appeal has not been made to him in recent years, or he himself has changed his habits for the worse. Certainly the collecting of private libraries (best evidence of individual taste in books) has declined in this country, and seems to be at its lowest ebb just now when certain opportunities for acquiring books were never greater.

Of the three types of private libraries, reference is here made only to the third. The collecting of rare editions, which is one way of making a library, is more widespread than ever before, and even the deflation of stocks has not seriously depressed the price of what might be called investment items. But this is a game either for the rich or for the specialist. It is the making of a collection rather than the forming of a library. Nor can the general reader aspire as a rule to the second and finest type of private library, a balanced representation of the important fields of knowledge and the imagination, built out book by book until those departments in which the owner is most interested are reasonably complete and every province has at least its key volumes. This is a true library, but there is no use urging the apartment dweller on a moderate income to such perfection. Nor is leisure so abundant now as to permit of the use of the ten thousand odd volumes which should be the minimum of such a library.

But there is a third type of library in the reach of everyone, and so desirable for civilized beings that its lack is certainly a sign of something wrong with the family life. Neither rare editions, nor the ramifications of possible knowledge, trouble the maker of such a library. He will depend upon public institutions for his investigations and distribute his money over standard editions rather than sink it all in a few rare books. He has two aims in making his library, which are, first, to keep or recover every book the reading of which has been an experience, or which contains needed information better kept between covers than in the head. His library in this aspect will be both a summary and an extension of his education and his culture. Looking at his shelves, he can see at a glance the names of what, bookwise, he knows and is. They have become an auxiliary memory in which his intellectual life can at any moment be lived again, with this superiority, that good books grow with the reader, and are new books in a true sense at every rereading.

Yet to these memorials of past experience the collector of a private library, third class, will add other books, the number of which will be determined only by his interests and his pocket book. These will be the books he wants and hopes to read, books heard of, books seen, books read about. The element of surprise, indispensable in a good library, will be found in such books. They are his speculative investments, the yields of which are potential. They represent possibilities of increment. Some will be discarded when read, some will die on the shelves unread, their interest shrivelled before they are even opened. But from these experimental volumes a stream of

The Twelve

By ALLEN TATE

THERE by some wrinkled stones round a leafless tree,
With beards askew, their eyes dull and wild,
Twelve ragged men, the council of charity
Wandering the face of the earth a fatherless child,
Kneel, at their infidelity aghast,
For where was it, some time in Syria
(Or maybe Palestine when the streams went red)
The victor of Rome, his arms outspread
His eyes cold with that inhuman ecstasy
Cried the last word, the accursed last
Of the forsaken, that seared the western heart
With the fire of the wind, the thick and the fast
Whirl of the damned in the heavenly storm:
Now the wind's empty and the twelve living dead
Look round them for that promontory form
Whose mercy flashed from the sheet-lightning's head:
But the twelve lie in the sand by the dried tree
Seeing nothing—the sand, the tree, rocks
Without number—and turn away the face
To the mind's briefer and more desert place.

The Early Chinese Novel

By PEARL BUCK

Author of "The Good Earth"

THE Chinese novel has been, like the prophet of old, without much honor in its own country. Puritanism has not been the monopoly of western peoples. In China for centuries it has been considered beneath scholars to write or to read novels, and not until comparatively late was the whole field of fiction included in any official catalogues of the nation's literature, and not indeed until modern times have scholars openly spent time in the perusal and study of fiction. The change in these times has been greatly due to the influence of the western countries, whither young Chinese have gone for education and from whence they have brought back the western point of view toward fiction as a part of literature.

Even now few old scholars will acknowledge that they read novels or stories, much less write them, except as a recreation. This makes it very difficult to approach the subject of story and story sources, because the old scholars alone have the necessary learning and knowledge of early times for such a study. The young scholar in China seldom understands the literature of his country with any degree of thoroughness, and frankly prefers to read western novels or novels patterned after those of the west. One typical young man said the other day in answer to a question: "We find no interest in these old novels."

Among those who have been abroad for education, it is more likely that one will find a knowledge of Dickens and Thackeray, and Elizabethan literature than of Shih Nai-an and Lo Kuan-chung and the glories of the Han dynasty. This fact has had the good effect, however, of awakening these students to the idea that other countries hold high in estimation the novel and story forms, and another generation of Chinese scholars should give much to the world of the excellences of the Chinese novel. Indeed, modern scholars are already re-discovering some of the best of these, and are trying to write modern commentaries on them. Chinese publishing houses are putting out new editions of old and famous novels, with modern prefaces and interpretations. Among the best of these, of course, are those edited by Dr. Hu Shih.

Western scholars as yet know almost nothing of the Chinese novel. Histories of literature are full of the poetry and scholarly writing of China, but even the great sinologues do little more than give a few brief pages to the subject of her novels and stories. They have accepted the old Chinese point of view, that these were unworthy of serious attention, fit only for idle recreation or for women to read.

Yet to the western student of literature the Chinese novel, once the difficulties of language have been overcome, offers a field of new and absorbing interest. The attitude of scholars has not been able to suppress the growth of story among the people, and indeed it may have been a good thing in the end that this form of literature has flourished without academic sanction and interest, for the result has been an astonishing vitality and likeness to life. In the books of moral philosophies one finds the Chinese as they would like to be; in other words, they are books of ideals. In the stories and novels one finds them as they really are, and no one who wishes to discover the real Chinese can afford to pass over lightly this immense mass of romantic and realistic portrayal of the people—portrayal for the most part of themselves by themselves.

For Chinese novels are astoundingly frank, and are faithful to life in a degree rarely attained by the

This Week



"Dawn."

Reviewed by ROBERT HERRICK.

"Lenin."

Reviewed by VERA MICHELES DEAN.

"Bulwer: A Panorama."

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT.

"The Tragedies of Progress."

Reviewed by STUART CHASE.

"Father."

Reviewed by GLADYS GRAHAM.

"Ambrose Holt and Family."

Reviewed by THEODORE PURDY, JR.

"Starry Adventure."

Reviewed by OLIVER LA FARGE.

"Father Malachy's Miracle."

Reviewed by LEE WILSON DODD.

The Folder.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Next Week, or Later

A Worm's Eye View of the Elective System.

By JOHN CORBIN.

recruits will go to the shelves of the known and the permanent.

The present has chances for the formation of such a library. Shops are full of standard editions at low prices, and they are crowded with the overproduction of new books through the last few years, in which the innocent have suffered reduction with the guilty. There are the books one read about and missed, and the books one borrowed and liked but did not buy. If a hundred thousand Americans could be made to realize the difference between hand-to-mouth reading or the time-clock method where you pay by the reading hour—and a capital of good books, not frozen but flexible, some always going in, a few occasionally going out;—if they could be persuaded to begin the making of a private library, we should certainly provide the soundest and most reciprocally profitable of markets for books meant to become friends of the household.

western novel with its ideas of artistic technique. There are several reasons for this. One is that the custom of writing novels anonymously gave opportunity for much self-revelation and revelation of situations which otherwise could not have been written about. Scholars suffering from some private grief of which they could not speak to any soul, could and did find relief for their surcharged hearts by telling it in story form under an assumed name. To be sure, this anonymity has created other difficulties. Famous writers might in a summer of idleness write a story as pleasure and then be ashamed to sign their names to it. Other writers less famous have felt that their names as authors would carry no weight, and so have quite without compunction signed the name of some writer of a previous dynasty and then palmed the work off as an earlier production. But what has been lost in this way, has perhaps been more than gained in freedom of expression, and in the deep revealing of life and passion.

Another factor which has contributed to this freedom is that for the most part, certainly since the Sung dynasty, novels and stories have been almost entirely written in the vernacular or language of the people. This was done, not only because the scholars did not deign to write stories in their book language, but also because the sanction of the emperor in succeeding dynasties allowed the use of the vernacular. Early stories were at first spoken, and the emperors had always attached to their courts professional story tellers who amused them and reported to them of various matters. An emperor of Sung, Sung Ren-chung, was especially fond of stories, and had his statesmen tell them and then put them down as told to him. In the Yuen dynasty the emperors were Mongols who understood little Chinese and it became the fashion at court then to use the spoken or simple form of Chinese, and court fashion sanctioned that fashion among the people.

There could scarcely be greater contrast in the world than in the formal literature of China and this wild, unrecognized, but infinitely rich tree of life springing up beside it out of the heart of the people. The formal literature is pure, cool, classic, chaste to

courtesans, the simple women behind courtyard walls, who yet because they live so narrowly, live deeply in elemental instincts. These speak and move and love and die with artless naturalness. According to their several natures they murder as easily as they draw breath, or as easily take their own lives for love or disappointment. To read these books is for a westerner like lifting the veil which hangs between the continents and seeing at last clearly that when all the trappings of civilization are taken away, men and women are the same in the great elements of their being.

In spite of the disapproval of the literati and the moral teachers a tremendous amount of fiction has been written and read in China. One sees the shopkeeper at his counter, the wheelbarrow man sitting in the sun snatching a moment's rest, the soothsayer at his divining table, the youth on his way to work or school—any of the common people who can read—poring over small, paper-bound books printed with vilely small characters, chanting half aloud the adventures of some one like themselves. For the multitudes who cannot read there are the village story-tellers who gather about them for hours the men and women of the countryside and the street and hold them enthralled with their skill in words and the portrayal of emotion. I have seen a crowd of blue garbed working people, weeping unrestrainedly, their eyes fixed upon the twisted, tense figure of a story-teller, acting out in his own person, with his broken voice and streaming eyes, the sorrows of an imaginary, or perhaps historical, man or woman. When the moment becomes too poignant, he straightens himself, his eyes crackle, his voice bursts out into comic relief, and in a second the crowd is roaring with laughter, their eyes still wet.

In spite of all this mass of fiction and the almost universal interest in fiction among the common people of China, the novel proper was comparatively late in developing. Not indeed until the Yuen dynasty (A.D. 1200-1368) do we find novels of sufficient length and form to be really worthy the name. In that dynasty were written the great triad of novels which to this day stand for the perfection of the Chinese novel.

From the earliest times there has been stormy ma-

terial in Chinese writings. Besides the story-tellers and the wandering troupes there have been written stories for many, many centuries. The first record of such stories goes back, according to Chinese historians, to the legendary age of Huang-ti (2704-2595 B.C.). He was the third of the series of five great emperors whom the Chinese group together under the name of the Five Rulers, or Wu-ti. Although his character is legendary, this remarkable emperor seems to have made the first official step toward the story by establishing a Board of Historians, divided into a right and left wing. The right wing had charge of writing the history of the nation, and whatever they wrote they were supposed to investigate and see that it was true. The result was called "Chen Shi," or true literature. This developed into history. The left wing had charge of writing down all the rumors and strange happenings of the empire, which might or might not be wholly true, incidents of supernatural or unusual nature, and descriptions of odd persons. Such writing was called "Yea Shi," or wild literature, and from this come the first stories. This early distinction between what was literally true or false is an interesting one, since it had something, perhaps, to do with the later discrimination against the story as literally untrue writing.



Another early source of the story was in the "balkwan," or court official, whose duty was to hang about the streets continually and report to the emperor all conversations he had overheard and sights which he had seen. He was called "the emperor's ear," and while the original purpose of his position was to discover plots against the throne and discontent among the people, there is abundant evidence to show that emperors enjoyed hearing the news, and to win royal favor, these officials made their reports into something like story telling for royal amusement.

A similar group of men were the professional talkers or *soh k'eh*. These men were literally men who made their living and obtained influence by being expert conversationalists and raconteurs. They talked about men of high place, particularly emperors, and by their astute knowledge of the court and their minute study of personal affairs of men in authority they often controlled the destinies of the nation. In their talk they constantly used allegories and parable, and these stories filtered down through the people, and were repeated and written down and often embodied in longer tales.

Up to the Yuen dynasty stories dealt for the most part with the upper and noble classes in whom the common people were always interested. Then they began to be concerned almost exclusively with the common people, and from that time to the present have continued thus. The three novels of the period which stand out above all others are "The Record of Travels in the West," "The Three Kingdoms," and "Shui Hu Chuan" or "The Story of Shui Lake." Since they mark the height of the Chinese novel, it is interesting to note certain points concerning them.

"The Hsi Yu Chi," or Record of Travels in the West is a novel typical of the more romantic sort. With Chinese who delight in fabulous stories it is a great favorite, but it is one of the least interesting to the average western reader. It deals with the journey which Hsuan Tsang made to India to find relics and images and books of Buddhism. Rather, this is the occasion of the story, for beyond this there is no close relation between the plot and the journey. The hero is a monkey who learns magic and becomes master in the Taoist pantheon and even wishes to depose God himself. Buddha is asked to correct his misbehavior and proves to him his inability to rule the universe and at last the monkey is converted to Buddhism and helps Hsuan Tsang in his travels. The remainder of the story reminds one of certain passages of "Pilgrim's Progress," except that it has not the loftiness of style of that work.

More famous than this novel even is "The Three Kingdoms," or "San Kuo Chih Yen I," attributed to Lo Kuan Chung. It is an historical novel based upon the wars of the three part kingdoms which fought for supremacy about the beginning of the third century. It is a very long novel of many volumes, and deals with countless battles and feints and strategies. The characterization is excellent.

I have purposely left until the last the discussion of "Shui Hu Chuan," because of the three novels it is now enjoying the most marked recrudescence of interest. It is presumably by a writer who signs

himself Shi Nai-an, although no one knows anything else about him. Briefly, it is a story of a band of robbers who inhabit a den in the mountains of Honan. The band is made up of a hundred and eight men, a mystic number inscribed first in stars upon the sky. All the book is made up of the histories of most of these characters and of those various injustices and inequalities in society through which they became fugitives and were compelled, some against their will, to join the banditry. The book abounds in humorous pictures; there is, for instance, a great coarse country fellow, accustomed to drinking and eating huge slabs of meat, who accidentally kills a man and is compelled to flee to a monastery and take sanctuary by becoming a priest. Humor is provided in the extreme difficulty he has in keeping the vows of abstinence and the puzzling of his simple mind when he is not allowed to eat and drink as he wills, and in his adventures when he wanders forth and waylays a wine seller and drinks until he is drunken, and then goes back to face the austere old abbot and the other priests who shudder and are helpless before his bulk and his naiveté. There is pathos and despair in such tales as the one of a man whose wife another man, young and spoiled and related to an official, loved and whom he seduced by the simple expedient of arresting the husband and sending him into exile.

This book has taken on new significance in these days of revolution when communism has laid such a hold upon the younger minds of the Chinese.

To the western critic the faults of these three novels as well as their excellences are easily noted. The great weakness is in plot. The plots are extremely complex and tend to many sub-plots badly subordinated. Characters are introduced in the greatest profusion, carried on a while, and then dropped for many chapters until they are loosely caught up at the end, or they may even fail to appear again and the thread is left hanging. This results in a novel of unwieldy length and of uncoordinated and disunified impression. Yet after the first distaste to something unaccustomed is past, one pauses to question whether or not after all, this fragmentariness is not in itself a simulation of life.

In these early novels there is no particularly skilful use made of description, especially of nature. In the later novels, such as in "The Dream of the Red Chamber," description becomes a more integral part of the book, but in these novels of the Yuen dynasty conversation and action are preëminent.

On the other hand, the characterization is excellent. A word, a touch, a gesture, and the figure flies into clarity before us. This is especially true of the "Shui Hu Chuan," where a person skilled in the language can perceive what character speaks merely by the idiom and mannerisms used. One of the most charming qualities in all these novels is their spontaneity. There seems to have been in the minds of the writers an abundance of material, from which come with equal felicity humor or pathos.



But the faults and excellences of the Chinese novel to the western critic sink into insignificance beside the importance and interest of the picture of Chinese life and thought which these novels give us. It is a composite picture and full of fascinating change and contrast. One laughs with delight over a bit of humor irresistibly naive and realistic, and the books are full of such humor, as are the Chinese themselves. The next instant one is shocked by an apparent callousness to moral issues which to the Westerner seem elemental in the carrying on of society. Reading such books as "The Three Kingdoms" and the "Shui Hu Chuan" dispel forever the notion that the Chinese are a peace-loving people. They are a people singularly indifferent to the shedding of blood. As an old scholar once put it: "Strictly speaking, these two books are only killing back and killing forth," and another said, "We Chinese admire above all else prowess in war."

In "The Three Kingdoms," especially, there is a condoning of trickery and a somewhat degrading subterfuge which amounts to actual commendation of such things. It is significant that to this day the Chinese letter denoting honest or good carries with it a subtle hint of stupidity.

But all this is nothing either to praise or forgive. It is enough for our purpose if from the searching out of these old stories, which have their beginnings in the earliest times and which rise to a climax of style and form as early as the thirteenth century, we find a picture, surpassing in truth and faithfulness, of the great original, the Chinese people.