

Saeva Indignatio

HUNGER AND LOVE. By LIONEL BRITTON. New York: Harper & Bros. 1931. \$4.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

THIS is a truly extraordinary book. Its most striking characteristic is a sustained rage, against civilized society, against you, because you have ten cents and nothing more necessary to do with it than buy a copy of the *Saturday Review*. This fury sometimes rises to a white heat of illumination, sometimes it sinks to a sullen red glow, but all through the six hundred and twenty-three large pages it is there. Nominally, the book is a novel, the story of Arthur Phelps; actually it is a treatise on man in the universe, with particular reference to the injustice of capitalism. Arthur Phelps, when we first meet him, is a pitiful, pinched errand boy living alone in a wretched lodging house, cramming into his mind all the knowledge he can lay hold of, during every minute that he can snatch. He goes from job to job, sometimes coming to the very edge of starvation, always living in hideous and inescapable dirt, always earning a little more, but always finding the time he can use for study grow less and less. However, he is inextricably caught by the system through falling in love; the hope of some day possessing a certain girl keeps him at his work of persuading people to buy things they do not want at more than his employer paid for them. In the end the war breaks out, and he is sucked into it, vainly resisting; and the author does not know what becomes of him.

By that time Arthur Phelps has already ceased to matter. Whether he was introduced to gain our sympathy or to relieve some oppression in the author's mind, Arthur has throughout the book been made to stand aside for a chapter at a time while Mr. Britton pours out his passionate convictions about education or economics; and even where Arthur appears, his every action is made a text for a commentary on society. This is often delivered in a characteristic telegraph or headline style, which has a bludgeoning effectiveness; thus when Arthur steals a book, Mr. Britton comments:

Everybody knows rich people do not work, police soldiers with murder weapons quite openly flaunted in streets. The process is frank and open enough in form, open confession merely beasts on grab, willing risk blood of other men but not their own. Something clean about frankness. But if shove book down trousers, not frank.

And all through the book, the author insistently presents the scientific background—the chemical changes in the body during an action, the movements of the earth in space, the physical changes in the brain of a man listening or looking, the progress of a life through space-time. This device seems badly overdone; one grows tired of galaxies and trillions; but Mr. Britton has a purpose in it which becomes apparent as the book goes on.



The reader will have seen by this time that Mr. Britton has a remarkable mind—one may say a great mind, for only great stresses acting on a great mind could have produced the friction necessary to generate so much heat and light. It is a mind equally remarkable in its qualities and its defects. It derives much of its battering force from the fact Mr. Britton has not the most rudimentary conception of what people unlike himself are driving at. For instance, he devotes considerable space to a discussion of poetic diction, and concludes that if almost all poets, from the days of the Iliad and Beowulf down, have used a special language, this has been to recommend their lies, which would be detected if straightforwardly set forth, and to prevent the proletariat from writing at all. This much one has seen before; but Mr. Britton goes on to analyze a specific example; he cites "I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!" and says of it:

The lilt and romance of it get hold of us. Imagine it; the human!—and it can pretend it wants to sink down to the level of a bird! . . . The human, with its transcendent consciousness, its wide horizons; the white birds—a whiteness that is verminous, an easy life that is a perpetual struggle with starvation.

A man who can write like that of those anapests or of the same thought in the prose of the Psalter simply has no idea what poets do; he is reading a cryptogram whose surface meaning is nonsensical, and he does not even suspect that there is a key.

These blind spots in Mr. Britton's mind are of great importance, because they conspire with his perfectly justifiable bitterness to produce a distorted out-

look. Any society in which a boy can live as Arthur Phelps lived is a rotten society; it ought to be denounced, as vividly as possible; for that alone, even if it were not for the extraordinary ideas he expounds, we should owe at least as much gratitude to Mr. Britton as to Herr Remarque. But Mr. Britton, from the very brilliance of his mind, attacks society in the wrong place. He is extremely intelligent; and he cannot believe that people in general are stupid. He has thoroughly grasped the scientific conception of the universe; and he cannot believe that a statesman with an ordinary good education is as much at a loss at the head of modern society as Prince Henry the Navigator in command of the Bremen—or the *Graf Zeppelin*. Above all, he has a particular view of life; and he cannot believe that any one can sincerely hold the view of life professed by John Keats, or by, say, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Therefore, he deduces, the world is made up of thieves, and the poet and the parson are paid to tell their lies to make thieving easier.

Mr. Britton's conception of society, then, is like Mr. Upton Sinclair's, but if possible more extreme. Who is not with him is against him; the entire bourgeoisie is engaged in a gigantic conspiracy to keep down the proletariat, by all possible means, by teaching them the romantic view, for instance, but above all by keeping from them food and love, and so centering all their thoughts on love and hunger. The bishops make us wear clothes, he says, because a woman is more appetizing clothed than naked, and so men who see her will have their minds more strongly distracted from social reform.

Where Mr. Britton's bias does not lead him astray, his ideas are arresting and often profound, and they appear in the book with the prodigality of a wealthy mind. He says of education, for one instance, that children ought to be given the general idea first, instead of spending years over the details that it governs; this is perfectly true, though he is wrong in attributing the present method to malicious obscurantism. Or again, no one can fail to be impressed, not only by his grasp of scientific theory, but by his power of correlating and illuminating it, as when he mentions the fact that the water in a wave does not advance, and then says that just so we eat every day but do not increase in size; "We subsist in the stream of food."

This ever-present consciousness of man in the scientist's universe leads him to his most important theory, the necessity of an oversoul. The human soul "is fundamentally an energy surplus which arises out of energy association," the associations, that is, of the cells in our bodies. Similarly, he holds, the association of humans in society, if only they would co-operate instead of competing, would give rise to a soul which should be to man as man to the cell. And only by this absolutely selfless co-operation can man progress. "The individualist," he says, "is a cancer cell." This theory is set forth with great eloquence, and backed with a very wide scientific knowledge, but it will hardly stand analysis. It is I think based on a false analogy to begin with; human personality we know as a fact; a Lamarckian will in the cell, or an oversoul in society, we know only as an hypothesis. But more important, it seems to me that this analogy would, like the Calvinist analogy of God and the potter, certainly lead to cruelty in practice, for it would serve far better than romanticism or religion to drug the proletariat. The Arthur Phelps of that régime would simply be told that they were inferior cells, whose business was to do as the brain-cells told them, or be amputated as cancerous for the good of the whole. Indeed, this would re-establish the Divine Right of Kings in a much stronger form. At present, even rich people do feel some sense of responsibility to the poor; already the public libraries and public baths are open longer than when Arthur Phelps was a boy. But let the governors believe that they were the brain-cells, and, just as the brain says "*L'homme, c'est moi*," they would say "*L'état, c'est moi*" with a clear conscience.

This is, with all its errors, an amazing piece of work, as I hope I have made clear, and one well worth reading. Its mistakes and prejudices are those of a man who has tried all his life to serve society, and whom society would allow only to do useless jobs at starvation wages, if he asked for those jobs as a beggar. One can see the bias that has resulted, but one cannot see how he managed to learn so much, to keep his mind so vigorous, to preserve his belief that mankind was worth saving. That society wantonly warped such a mind is the one overwhelming count in his indictment.

Of the Race of Story-Tellers

MORNING TIDE. By NEIL M. GUNN. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LEONARD EHRLICH

IN this day of so much darkly brutal writing by our younger craftsmen—envenomed and cast over with hopelessness—it is a heartwarming thing to come upon a "Morning Tide." Here is a novel that dares to utter affirmations; of valor and tenderness and the dignity of life; all as if these still existed in the world. And it is no mere milk-and-water kind of book. I venture to say that not since the creation of young Paul Morel in "Sons and Lovers" has there been a more truly passionate treatment of the boy years, or one so glowing and vibrant with sensuous life.

It is the simple story of a lad in a Scotch fishing-village; Hugh, son of MacBeth. (What rich salty names these are, they give the very savor of the work: Rid Jock, Dugald, mad Margat, Hector the piper, Jumak, Donald Campbell from Seabrae, Peter Crock, Navook the pig-killer). Now at dusk the boy goes slithering in the cold sea-tangle off the shore, gathering mussels for his father's bait, "with the tide at low ebb . . . and quiet except for a restless seeking among the dark boulders"; now he fights a roving band of boys, is stoned, learns the cruelty of the pack, and stumbles homeward with bleeding nose and a cold, secret pride; or this time he explores the clammy passages of a ruined stone house and understands further the terror of aloneness; or again on a moon-filled night he is on a poaching expedition, fading along, aquiver with joy, through the still gleaming forest. Readers, watching Hugh go his way through these experiences, watching the tangle of motives and prides and bewilderments, will get a sense of recognition; he is your own young brother, or some lad you know, or perhaps yourself a time ago; so real and divining is the perception.

But Mr. Gunn does not rest with a mere prototype. Hugh is a full characterization, an uncommon boy, quick and impressionable, with hot loyalties, and a beautiful bitter depth to him. His growth, his dawning soul, are suggested always in terms of his relationships; again and again he catches a sight of "the pale glimmer that is the ghostly face of grown life"; when MacBeth is imperilled out in the sea-storm, or Kirsty the sister is beheld in a glade with golden Charlie Chisholm, all wild and lost in passion, or the mother is wasting toward death. These intimations rise and sink incalculably in his consciousness, and often the effect is as if the boy were moving in a dream of unquiet and dark richness.

The storm scenes are tremendous, with the men in small boats fighting the howling, lashing seas, and the old women keening on the dark shore. The whole of it has an eerie, Celtic quality. But it is an indication of Mr. Gunn's range that one can still say, after such magnificent writing, that his greatest strength lies in the quiet moments. These give the heart warmth of which I have spoken, the sense of life's dignity:

Hugh's mother . . . sat with her hands on her lap, her full body upright, her head bowed. . . . She could get up and lift a boiling kettle from the fire while her husband was saying grace without destroying the moment's harmony, as if wisdom dwelt also in her movements. . . .

The mother passed the cups of tea. She had the natural air of dispensing life's mercies. Her movements were soothing and sufficient. She was the starting point of a circle that finished in her. Within that circle were their faces and their thoughts and their hands. The paraffin lamp . . . shone down on them its soft light.

No evaluation of Mr. Gunn's work can be adequate without a word upon his prose. It is a perfect instrument for the expression of his homely yet poetical substance. Now it is gnarled, salty, true to the fibre of these doughty Scots; sometimes it goes lean and swift as a young sailor; often, because Mr. Gunn's people believe in a living God, bulwark against the demonic forces loose in the world, his utterance flows like a Biblical lyric, pleading to be read aloud.

Somewhere the author says of Kirsty: "And there was something, finally, in Kirsty that was like story-telling in a saga. At great moments it came into her voice. Her love had to be for someone or something outside herself. Her love . . . had the simple, awful note of the great hero-stories." Well, there is something, finally, in Mr. Gunn's manner of telling that is saga-like. For he is of the beautiful ancient race of story-tellers, the race of Walter Scott and Stevenson.

The BOWLING GREEN

The Red and White Girdle

I. HUISSIER AND HUSSY

A VERY select Crime Club is that which once a year or so revisits the pages of Bataille: *Causes Criminelles et Mondaines*. Most of M. Bataille's "causes" are too strong or too frolicsome for our anæmic Anglo-Saxon tastes; a little vanishing cream has to be applied in transcribing them for English print. But what a reporter he was! A friend whose tastes are both mature and macabre tells me he is going to begin to study French. What a textbook I could compile for him out of judiciously selected Bataille! What a Beginners' French Class that might be: to meet once a week for an evening's reading, criminal and mundane.

There are reasons of my own, which will transpire presently, for an interest in a story which Bataille narrated in his volume for 1890. He calls it *L'Af-faire Gouffé*. Gouffé was one of those mysterious French functionaries called a *huissier*; I have a notion, very likely wrong, that they are the people you see in the neighborhood of the Paris Bourse wearing cocked hats. I suppose bailiff is a fair translation, or sheriff's officer, or collector. My own private title for the story is *The Huissier and the Hussy*; but that gives it too light-hearted a flavor. The crime was brutal and shabby. M. Bataille, connoisseur of all shades and nuances of evil-doing, is rather condescending toward it. He says it lacks ardent passion and mystery; it was "only a brutal assassination." True it gives us little to sentimentalize; but it has valuable elements of horror and disgust. I soften the tale here and there; but, as I have warned you before, in studying Bataille you are not catering to tender tastes.

M. Toussaint-Augustin Gouffé, the respectable bailiff of the rue Montmartre, closed his office on a summer afternoon (it was half past six on the 26th of July, 1889) and set off for dinner in excellent humor. In a cardboard folder behind the ledgers in his safe he had carefully put away 14,000 francs in bills; that is to say, in the exchanges of that era, about \$2800. Usually, when there were large funds on hand, he took them home with him for safety; he had the typical middle-class Frenchman's preference for keeping money close to his person. But this happened to be a Friday, and Friday was Gouffé's Night Out. He had a private appointment for eight o'clock, one at which he thought it would be inadvisable to carry too much cash. Poor Gouffé, prudent in little and imprudent in much, his name chimes appropriately with a modern slang. As he goes round the corner to his favorite house of call, the Café Gutenberg on the Boulevard Poissonnière, let us consider him a moment.

It is only a few steps from the Gutenberg to his home in the rue Rougemont; it would be wiser if he were there. Long a widower, his two grown-up daughters keep house for him and are careful to remove the soup-stains from his reputable frock coat. Apparently he leads the orderly life expected of a responsible official who handles large sums of other people's money. He returns home regularly for lunch and dinner. But beneath these methodical appearances, Bataille remarks, he dissimulates an existence of agitation. Particularly he has two habits without which this story would not have been written. Too often, after a petit verre at the Gutenberg, he frankly exhibits the large bundles of money he is carrying. And those Friday nights, his evenings of escapade, are not always innocent. Pathetic Gouffé: in the dull and busy life of a minor functionary he is aware of the twinge of irredeemable Time. He is prosperous in his small way; he has a gold watch, and a ring with two good diamonds in it. But he feels vaguely how much he has missed. There are other things in life besides a cocked hat and a portfolio full of Due and Payable. There are a lot of letters in his desk, afterward carefully destroyed by his brother-in-law, which show how he had tried to step-up the low voltage of romance in bailiffing. And when, on the leather settee at the Gutenberg, he replies to a petit commerçant's inquiry "How are collections?" to wave a bundle of banknotes gives him the flush of self-importance that all men need now and then. Especially on those

bachelor Fridays he enjoys meeting chance convives. He has rather an eye for young women. There is one, a lively little blonde with an impudent tilt to her small nose, who has accepted a drink from him several times. She was introduced as Gabrielle Bompard, or possibly as Mlle Labordère, but he calls her La Petite. He usually sees her with a certain burly talkative Eyraud, a dark and rather forceful fellow, who seems to have travelled much and has ideas about all sorts of businesses. Eyraud is twice La Petite's age, and they both look a bit shabby; Gouffé has not yet seen Eyraud pay for a drink; but he can't help admiring the Parisian chic with which La Petite makes the most of her meagre wardrobe. In spite of her schoolgirl mien (she isn't much over 20) she has a free and startling tongue. Gouffé has even been rather pleasantly scandalized by some of her anecdotes of a Belgian convent-school from which she was expelled. Her father was an iron-merchant in Lille, but after her mother's death he had been infatuated by a governess. Gabrielle ran away to Paris to look for a job. She saw an advertisement of a business called Fribourg which needed a cashier. In that office she met Eyraud; she accepted him instead of the job. They had lately been on a business trip to London together, and kept Gouffé laughing at their account of the oddities of the English. Evidently La Petite hasn't inherited any cold iron in her own disposition, old Gouffé thinks. He was never more mistaken.

Such was the background of the bailiff's thought this evening as he strolled in the sunset of the boulevards. That very day at noon, as he was on his way home for lunch, he had met Gabrielle on the street. She seemed in some distress; told him she had left Eyraud, who was getting to be a bore. She had taken a little apartment of her own in the rue Tronson-Ducoudray, a tiny byway between the Madeleine and the Gare St. Lazare. This was Friday, Gouffé remembered, as he was admiring a mischief in her eye. Why shouldn't she take dinner with him? No, she couldn't do that, but she *would* like a chance to consult him about her problems; she would be at home at eight o'clock. I'll be there, he said. So now we see him, after an early dinner, strolling pleasantly and in sentimental anticipation, limping very slightly on his left heel as was his habit. The cocked hat of office (if huissiers wear cocked hats, I don't guarantee this) is laid aside for a new Panama, bought from a hatter who keeps careful measurements of all his steady customers. He has thriftily reckoned how much Gabrielle's problems are likely to cost him. In his pocket is a gold hundred-franc piece and a fifty-franc note. I can't help thinking that in his romantic mood he had mentally designated the gold piece for La Petite. He is wearing his tortoise shell pince-nez, he pauses in the quiet Place de la Madeleine, looks at his watch and strokes his glossy beard. It is a comfortable thought for a bailiff of fifty that a young *poule* (so he thinks of her) should find him so cheery. A few minutes after eight (let us not seem too eager) he is in the rue Tronson-Ducoudray. In the soft air of July the little street is lively, children playing, people chatting in doorways. Windows are open, everyone enjoying the summer dusk. Gouffé taps at a ground floor apartment at the rear of the house. La Petite opens.

"Tiens!" he says. "Tu as là un joli petit nid."

It is small indeed. Apparently there is only one room, and a curtained alcove for sleeping. But he is touched by her simple preparations for hospitality. On a table are champagne, cognac, and biscuits, also pen and ink. On the mantel, undoubtedly, some of the cheap novels of which she was always a constant reader. A comfortable chaise-longue is drawn up close to the curtain which modestly conceals her bed-chamber. There is no other chair, but he rather likes her intuition that among friends one will serve. She's wearing a kimono with a pretty rope-girdle of twisted red and white silk.

"Will you have some wine?" she says.

"No, thanks, I've just had dinner. Come, sit down and tell me all about it."

He takes the chaise-longue, and with the prettiest confidence she occupies his lap. How small and slender she is. And what an attractive kimono. He admires the heavy silk girdle.

"C'est gentil," he says.

"N'est-ce pas?" She slips it off and laughingly puts it round his neck. "Comme ça te ferait une belle cravate."

The following afternoon the servants of the Hotel de Toulouse at Lyon were distressed by a trunk that

had to be carried upstairs, so heavy that it took three to handle it. But the couple to whom it belonged insisted on having it in their bedroom. When the porter grumbled at the weight, Monsieur explained that it contained samples of cloth. It was a new trunk but had evidently been reinforced for greater strength. The visitors slept soundly that night with their baggage close to the bed. But the next morning, Sunday, the young woman was grieved to see small moistures oozing from the trunk. As a reader of melodramatic fiction it is odd to think that on a recent visit to London she may well have seen on the bookstalls a copy of the then popular *New Arabian Nights* in which the young American, left alone with a similar piece of luggage, "nosed all the cracks with the most passionate attention." She wiped the box carefully with her handkerchief, and remarked to her companion that something must be done; particularly in this hot weather.

It was Sunday, the day for excursions. What more natural than to hire a carriage and go for a drive in the country? True, it seemed a little eccentric to take the samples of cloth with them, but Monsieur explained that they were looking for villégiature and would not return to the hotel. He obtained a rig from a livery stable, the trunk was hoisted in, not without further comment from the porter. Monsieur was a hardy fellow, but he was perspiring with nervousness when they finally drove off. When he wiped his forehead he discovered he was wearing a hat which did not belong to him. "Bêtise!" he exclaimed, "I must have left mine at the rue Tronson-Ducoudray." Mistakes like that are bad for the neck.

I do not know the neighborhood of Lyon, but there must be some beautiful drives along the Rhone, and in July 1889 they were not crowded with motor cars. On a wooded hillside near the village of Millery the excursionists halted and took a good look round. They opened the trunk, and with some difficulty dumped out a sinister-looking sack. They dropped the key of the trunk in the road, but they had matters more urgent to think of. They rolled the stiffened bundle down the steep embankment, and were even somewhat gruesomely amused to see how it somersaulted over a bump. Probably they hoped it would fall into the river, but it caught in some bushes far down the slope. But they were so relieved to get rid of it on any terms that they drove on encouraged. Behind some brambles a few miles farther on the trunk was thrown into a ditch. In the village of Saint-Genis-Laval a "débitante" (which our Beginners' French Class must not confuse with a *débutante*) served them some refreshments. Long afterward she still remembered the cheerful spirits of the pair. However, they seem to have still felt the need of some purgation. The record is not explicit, but Bataille tells us that they now made an excursion "to a place of pilgrimage." On the first of August they were in Marseilles, where they dropped some clothes and shoes into the water.

Marseilles was evidently a strategic place to be. Monsieur had there both a brother and a brother-in-law. There is no record as to these kinsmen's comments when the visitor and his young woman arrived. The trip may have been explained as a vacation jaunt, but the care with which Monsieur read the newspapers may have caused comment. At any rate, the travellers managed to borrow some money. Monsieur got 500 francs from his brother, and it is surely a tribute to the girl's personality that she cajoled 2000 francs from the brother-in-law. These increments were celebrated by taking to a jeweler a ring with two diamonds; she had the stones mounted in a pair of handsome ear-pendants.

It seems that they had long had a hankering for what the French love to call the New World. Monsieur had told his amie lively stories of adventures in Mexico and the Argentine. Now events happened that stimulated that desire. On August 13th a laborer working on the embankment near Millery was attracted—or rather repelled—by an unpleasant whiff in the warm noonday air. Exploring, he discovered a grisly sack. The contents were past recognition, and further deteriorated by the careless use of a pitchfork with which he removed the covering. He was too agitated to remember, afterward, whether the remains had lain in the sack head-down or head-up; a point very important to the lawyers later on, though irrelevant to the unfortunate contents. And on August 15th the trunk was found.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

(To be continued)