

The Contemporary Soul, by Irwin Edman, on page 814

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME VII

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MAY 9, 1931

NUMBER 42

The Book Depression

THE depression in the book business began about six months or more after the turn of the cycle of general business and has reached a low point this Spring. Just why book sales kept up after sales of other commodities went down, and just when in relation to less specialized articles of trade, books are likely to be freely bought again, are interesting questions.

It is not improbable that the resistance of the book market to the powerful influences of financial depression was due to a continued excitement. Books sell in times of excitement when minds are keen and awake, the interest aroused, and change in the air. The pleasurable stir of boom times sells books. The deeper excitement of crisis, such as the years 1914 to 1917 in this country, sells books; and also, though in a different way, the excitement of distress, fear, unrest, and suspense. Stirred in one way the minds of potential readers rise to new ideas, or warm in the presence of imagination. Men and women are curious then, as are all humans when they are thoroughly alive and awake, and curiosity is the beginning of much good reading. But if the excitement is of a different order, if it results from worry and strain, or from waiting upon the possibility of escape from disaster, then readers seek relief in books, they want an anodyne, or a transformer to alter the current of their thoughts.

Of course a book is a commodity sold at a price, and must be so regarded, and naturally the laws of expenditure and economy apply to its sales as they do to automobiles or soap. But not in the same measure. We are buying fewer books for the same reason that we are buying fewer suits of clothes, but that is not the only, and probably not the chief reason. In all probability such moderate price changes as the observant may already notice will help to bring about recovery. Yet last Spring's flurry over book prices was futile if not positively damaging, because it got itself misstated and was widely misunderstood. The public, naturally, wanted cheaper books, and somehow got the idea from the abundant publicity which accompanied the dollar-book movement, that all books were much too dear, and that many, if not most, could be sold for a dollar as successfully as for \$2.50. Many statisticians told them that they were wrong, but too late, the harm was done. It is not too late, however, for the trade to follow the practice of other businesses, which, with declining costs of commodities, are making new price levels, offering a real reduction which is felt as such, but still keeping prices high enough for a right return. Should not, for example, the standard price for a standard novel be again fixed at \$2.00, the figure we were all accustomed to only a short time before the peak of prosperity?

Yet price, we believe, is not the chief factor in the sale of books. An aroused interest is at least as important, and probably more so. Just as the book market held up, illogically, after the summer of '29, when other trades began slipping downward, so it may recover, and even reach normal strength, before the curve of business at large moves sharply upward. It needs action, intensity, expectancy. It pines in apathy, dulness, and in periods of marking time. For this reason it may respond to a change in conditions purely internal to itself, since a few outstanding books in a season, read with excitement and talked over avidly, will stir up a demand for all good books. It will respond to external conditions when the reaction from the nervous tension of that

Spring Thought

By DAVID MORTON

NOW . . . the slow curve of thought
Turns upward with the bough,
It straightens and is wrought
Of blossoms . . . now,

Shines . . . and is strange and still,
It strains against the sky,
Sweet and confused of will:
To stay . . . to fly . . .

Loving the earth, and fond
As root-things are,
Yet all but off, beyond
The last white star;

Not knowing what it seeks . . .
And words, when they come,
Are blossoms, and it speaks
Like apple or plum.

Lincoln Steffens

By ALBERT J. NOCK

AT the time I am writing this, there is a tremendous uproar going on over municipal corruption. Chicago has just held an election; she has Turned the Rascals Out, and gone in for Good Government and an Honest Business Administration—so I read in the papers (except that the papers do not capitalize these hoary and venerable clichés, as in any kind of fair play with their readers it seems they should). New York has not gone so far yet, but she is on her way. She has started in on the old orthodox program of reform, the churches and civic organizations are on the warpath, journalistic enterprise is making two sensations grow where one grew before, and the Republican machine is taking the high moral ground that an opposition machine always takes when there is a chance to get votes by it, and is processing the raw material of Tammany's alleged malfeasances into political capital for next year's market. Perhaps other communities are busy at the same enterprise; I do not know, for all this is such old stuff that I have not taken pains to follow it closely. But probably they are.

New York's crusaders show that they have not picked up a new idea about this sort of thing in twenty years. Doubtless Chicago's Godfreys and Peter the Hermits have likewise learned nothing. I speak of New York, however, because I have spent some time there lately and looked the situation over at close range. New York's moral leaders are out gunning for persons, for recreant jobholders, just as their predecessors were twenty years ago, in the palmy days of Dr. Parkhurst, William Travers Jerome, and the Lexow committee. Their fundamental idea is the same as then, i. e., that the way to purify society and sweeten up politics is by putting somebody in jail. If only you can get enough people in jail, everything will be all right. Change the names of the actors in the present drama or rareeshow back to Parkhurst, Becker, Waldo, Rosenthal, Mrs. Goode, Jerome, Sipp, etc., and no one could tell whether the curtain had gone up on a modern play or one that went to the warehouse after a brisk run in the consulship of William Jay Gaynor.

In other words, the righteous people of New York are exhibiting themselves in just as tight a grip of the Absolutes as they ever were; and any one who knows anything about history knows that this, and nothing but this, is the trouble with New York. What really ails New York is not that the mayor is a fool, the magistrates crooks, the police grafters—put it any way you like. Not at all. What ails New York is that so many citizens believe that some people are Bad and some people are Good, and that the way to deal with municipal corruption is to hurl the Bad people out and put them in jail where they can not do any more Bad things, and set up the Good people in control, and give them a chance to do good things. This belief in the Absolutes is the ruin of New York, as it will be the ruin of any society, small or large, that entertains it and tries to practice it.

By an odd coincidence, or perhaps by one of the turns of ironical humor that the order of nature sometimes shows, there has come out at just this moment a remarkable book* which might very well bear as a subtitle, "A Lifelong Quest of the Absolutes." Its actual title is "The Autobiography of

* THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LINCOLN STEFFENS.
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1931. Two volumes.
\$7.50.

This Week

"The Enduring Quest."

Reviewed by JOSEPH JASTROW.

"Green River."

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMEYER.

"The Pure in Heart."

Reviewed by CARL F. SCHREIBER.

"America's Way Out."

Reviewed by J. B. S. HARDMAN.

"The Tragedy of Ah Qui."

Reviewed by ALICE TISDALE HOBART.

"The Road Back."

Reviewed by CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

"A Pagan's Pilgrimage."

Reviewed by HENRY TRACY.

Round About Parnassus.

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

"France Under the Bourbon Restoration."

Reviewed by ARNOLD WHITRIDGE.

"Life Among the Lowbrows."

Reviewed by BEULAH AMIDON.

"The Little Entente."

Reviewed by L. R. E. PAULIN.

Next Week, or Later

Interregnum.

By ELMER DAVIS.

lurid year or two of unnatural prosperity is over and with fresh spirits we begin to interest ourselves again in news of the intellect and the imagination. The mental collapse of 1930-1931 is not unlike that let down which men, women, and even children felt in 1919-1920. But the Fall of 1920 and the Spring of 1921 were wonderful months for books. May history repeat itself!

Lincoln Steffens." Summarizing its contents in a word or two, it is the story of a boy who got interested in the nature of the Good and of the Bad, started out to investigate and kept up his research through long and interesting experiences with all sorts and conditions of men in all walks of life, from publicans and panders down to presidents, and from princes and professors up to policemen. He prosecuted this quest wherever chance led him. Beginning as an inquisitive boy in California, he found that everybody in the family entourage thought he, or she, knew exactly who the Bad people and the Good people were, what things and actions were Good and what were Bad, and was quite ready to inform him all about these matters, but that where he pried into their knowledge, it turned out that nobody really knew anything. So he made up his mind, when school days were over, to extend his investigations and apply them over a larger field.

College and the university were where people went to learn what they wanted to know, so Steffens took for granted that if one wanted to find out what is Good and what is Bad, one should go there to learn; so he went. No success. There again all hands seemed to know just what these were, but Steffens had been acquiring the Socratic method, and when he put them on the carpet, nobody could tell him. From an American university he went to a German university, then to other German universities, winding up at the University of Paris; he became a wandering student, like the mediæval *Vagantes*, roaming around from institution to institution to see what each one had to give him and whether it was anything he could use in his line of philosophical adventure. After some years of this, he returned to America and found himself unexpectedly stranded in New York with a young wife on his hands and one hundred dollars between himself and an entirely incurious, unphilosophical, and hard-boiled world.

He took to journalism and kept at it all his days; using it for a little while as a bread-winner; but soon being relieved from such requirements, he used it thenceforth for leverage on his peculiar ethical problems. It served him well, getting him on the inside of all the most intricate and interesting situations in our public life of the last twenty-five years, municipal, State, national, and international. It got him (or rather, his competent and dextrous use of it got him) into intimate relations with the principal figures in finance, industry, and politics in many countries. Whatever his professional errand, he never forgot his quest. He never lost sight of himself as primarily an investigator into fundamental moralities, into the workings of cause and effect in the realm of morals; and this book is the result.

Steffens not only developed the Socratic method, but added to it the Socratic temper and the Socratic humor. His book, like the "Apology," is the work of a great humorist. It will not be generally taken as such, because only people of great humor can detect humor of this type, and they are few. Most of us are more literal-minded, like the Athenian judges before whom Socrates made his plea, and with whom he played horse in sentence after sentence of most exquisite raillery. What must they have thought, for instance, when they invited Socrates to propose an appropriate penalty for himself, and he said he thought it would probably be about the fair thing all round if the Athenians would maintain him for the rest of his life in the Prytaneum at public expense; but if they wanted him to suggest a fine, he supposed he and his friends might manage to scratch up six or seven dollars among themselves—he couldn't just say, but maybe something like that. The legalist mind does not change much with the ages, and probably the Athenian dicasts looked at one another with the vacant expression of the California prosecutor who had Steffens on the witness stand in the Macnamara dynamiting case. Again, nothing in the modern world could be more purely Socratic in its humor than Steffens's proposal to President Eliot, to come to Harvard University and give lectures to seniors on the various forms under which bribery and corruption first present themselves to young men in all walks of life. Mr. Eliot was interested. He let Steffens give him some specimens of the kind of thing he thought of lecturing about, and became more interested. Then the end came:

"You would teach those things to stop the doing of them?" he asked.

"Oh, no. I don't mean to keep the boys from succeeding in their professions. All I want to do is to make it impossible for them to be crooks and not know it. Intelligence is what I am aiming at, not honesty. We have, as Americans, quite enough honesty now. What we need is integrity, intellectual honesty."

It is no trouble to imagine the effect of this on the unhumorous Mr. Eliot; yet one says to one's self, what a priceless chance for a head of a university who really knew his business! We can all see now what a priceless chance there was for Athens in Socrates's proposal that they should pay his board for life, simply for the value of having him around. Perhaps in a couple of thousand years some Harvardian, rooting into the university's antiquities, may come on this incident and arrive at a like judgment.

For there is no doubt about it, it is high time that by one means or another a penetrating thoroughgoing intellectual integrity should be developed in this land of ours. There is no quality so meanly and poorly represented in our collective intelligence, and at this particular juncture of affairs, no quality is so nearly indispensable. Those who doubt it should read Steffens's account of the Peace Conference, and his estimate of the value of the League of Nations. His appraisal of Mr. Wilson may be accepted as final, startling as it is. No one will ever add anything significant to it, or turn up anything that will modify it in any important respect. As for the worth of all our disarmament conferences, peace pacts, and the like, here, on page 783, is the final judgment which a strict intellectual integrity pronounces on them; and like a judicial death-sentence, it disposes of a great deal with very few words:

Wilson did not mean peace, not literally; nor do we Americans, nor do the British, mean peace. We do not want war; nobody in the world wants war; but some of us do want the things we can't have without war.

That is the whole story. The sum of all these proposals for permanent peace is a proposal to get something for nothing, which was never yet successfully done. We are all for peace, like Mr. Wilson, if we may have it without giving up imperialism, the economic exploitation of one country by another. We are all for good government at home, all for clean politics, clean business, if we may keep our privileges, if we may remain beneficiaries of tariffs, land-monopoly, concessions, franchises. Well, on those terms we can have neither peace abroad nor decency at home; the thing is simply impossible. Steffens patiently followed this thread all the way it led through industry, through Wall Street, through municipal, State, national, and international politics, through organized Christianity, organized education, and the findings that he has charted in this book all come to the same thing.

It is utterly useless to arraign persons or even to think about them, to imagine that it makes a pin's difference in ethical result whether the administration of business or politics is carried on by Good people (whoever they are) or by Bad people (whoever they are) as long as it must be carried on under the conditions that our economic system prescribes. Witness Steffens's account of Strong's administration in New York, of Roosevelt, of Wilson, of Mellon, and Gary in business, of any of the large and varied assortment of Good men who appear in his pages. As long as our economic system hangs up certain premiums—prizes—in the form of privileges, so long must the administration of government, international relations, finance, and industry remain just what it is, no matter who runs it.

Steffens's little parable of the origin of evil puts this truth in a striking way. At some meeting of the civic-minded in California, a bishop asked Steffens how our system came to be so bad, who started it, who was responsible. Like most of us, he was greatly interested in the Who, and hardly at all in the What. Steffens replied that this question was very troublesome to theologians. Some of them thought Adam was to blame, while some blamed Eve, and others blamed the serpent. For his part, he thought the apple was responsible, for obviously if the apple had not been there, nothing would have happened. Under like circumstances now, he said, after a lifetime of diligent search and study, he found he could not very much blame mayors, bosses, big business men, labor leaders, presidents, diplomats, and such like. "I blame the apple," he said. "Take the apple away, and you are starting at the right end of the problem. Just putting a few people in jail or throwing them out of office amounts to nothing, as long as you leave the apple hanging there. I suggest you begin by taking away the apple."

But I do not wish to leave the residual impression that Steffens's book is only for the reflective minority. It is far from that. A person who cares nothing whatever for ethics or politics, but who likes first-rate story-telling, fine, objective, humorous, personal narrative, should be the first man in the market for this

book. Also, any one who has a boy is missing the chance of a lifetime if he does not read the first fifteen or sixteen chapters aloud to the youngster—a superb piece of work. I hope some day Steffens will lift about thirty thousand words out of those chapters and republish it as a boy's book. Another thing that recommends the work highly to almost any sort of reader (I should suppose so, at least) is that there is no introspection in it. Like a good reporter, Steffens has his eye always on the object. He is thinking steadily about what he sees, not about what is going on in his own head; and his descriptive writing is plain, sincere, unaffected. As the literary art goes nowadays, I do not think the reader needs to be told how great and unusual these merits are, or how gratifying he will find them.

But above and beyond these merits, above and beyond the value of the ethical studies to which I have given so much space—perhaps too much—what emerges from these pages and stands out in clearest outline, is the figure of Steffens himself as I have known him now for many years. He is the man most like Socrates that I have found anywhere in our civilization; a man of immense humor, enormous experience and knowledge, balanced, disciplined into instant readiness of memory, thought, speech, and action; one who, as Phaedo said to Echecrates, "is the most wise, the most just, and the most excellent, of all mankind that we have ever known."

Philosophy en Passant

THE ENDURING QUEST. By H. A. OVERSTREET. New York: W. W. Norton. 1931. \$3.

Reviewed by JOSEPH JASTROW

WHEN philosophy entered in the best-seller competition, the man who reads as he runs was tempted to think as he reads. Yet the author of "King Mob" enrolls the success of the "Story of Philosophy" among the evidences of the rampant conflict between understanding and the pretence thereof—just another paste-jewel in the crown of King Mob. I cannot wholly agree, though I ventured to call the readers of Mr. Durant's book philosophers by purchase. But I can agree that a popularization of the enduring quest raises a puzzling query as to the legitimate liaison-technique between the philosopher and his clientèle. Socrates and the leisurely agora are gone; can the conversational style and easy page Socratize the modern mind?

Professor Overstreet offers his services as guide, philosopher, and friend; his guidance is welcome, his friendliness unmistakable, his philosophy questionable. The modern temper—without going so far as Mr. Krutch's despondent version—is definitely set in a minor key, with a refrain of critical despair. In its wake a reckless iconoclasm, a veritable whoopee of crashing images, undertones the blare of jazz. The present overtone brings assurance that the storm is spent, and a double rainbow spans a green and refreshed earth. The materialism of the nineteenth century has been replaced by a deeper and higher physics of emergent atoms, aspiring protons and electrons, liberating quantum; and the world of mind in what is called advolution sets the goal of living on a higher plane. Life is neither chemical nor brutal, but human; with illusions outgrown, we are masters of our fate in a modernistic sense.

That the lay mind to which dominantly this message is addressed, is at all affected by the physicists' version of their code of concepts, is more than doubtful; likewise that the level of concern on which that mind feels the pressure of its problems at all approaches the serious scrutiny of the philosopher's enduring quest. If it did, it would not be content with citations from Plato and Shelley and modern consolatory poets. The reënthronement of love as a potent philosophical balm is unconvincing. Far better to acknowledge the thrall of romance with no tincture of philosophy.

Yet this critique does not dismiss the volume with the modern equivalent of damnation by dubious praise: "an experiment noble in motive"; it suggests an uncertainty of another order. Those soothed or convinced by the appeal of this form of presentation would hardly be troubled by "a search for a philosophy of life." They are philosophers *en passant*, in a passing mood; that one professionally concerned with the nature of things is of the same mind as themselves will give them comfort. Accepting the solace, they are likely to believe that they believe for very different reasons than actually move them. The lucid and able argument may prove too persuasive. The enduring quest endures.