

The Stream of Life

ENDLESS RIVER. By FELIX RIESENBERG. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1931.

Reviewed by ROBERT K. LEAVITT

IT is like Felix Riesenbergs to have written a book as unusual in form and content as "Endless River." Master mariner, explorer, engineer, and inventor as well as author, Mr. Riesenbergs obviously writes for the love of it. Having demonstrated that he can handle, reef, and steer the essay, the narrative, and the ordinary novel, Mr. Riesenbergs embarks this time in a new craft, strange of line and rig. He calls it a novel, and quotes Mr. Harry Hansen to the effect that a novel is the way the man who writes it looks at life. Accept Mr. Hansen, and "Endless River" is a novel. Reject him, and it is a formless *pot pourri*. No matter; it is good reading.

"Endless River" is a torrent that pours through a book—the torrent of Mr. Riesenbergs's thought and comment on life. It is a turbulent stream, acid and slightly bitter to the taste, but by no means unpleasant. It swirls and eddies, formlessly; it gnaws at its restraining banks; it throws up a spray that gleams, now and then, with an unholy phosphorescence. And it tumbles along a burden of flotsam that is the most curiously assorted ever a river bore. It is full of story, incident, and anecdote. Like some great stream that has burst its bounds and gathered to itself a whole countryside—people, houses, goods and chattels, livestock, and machinery—"Endless River" rushes toward the sea with a cargo of wreckage and of gold.

There are briefly sketched bits as telling as the anecdote of the shriek of terror that night on the old S.S. *St. Louis*. There are short stories fully worked out from start to finish, like that of Joseph Rudge, who married Madge De Montbatan and returned home unexpectedly. There are pieces strongly satirical in intent, like the story of Caves Garland. There are dramatic bits, such as the tale of little Mrs. Darbyshire. There are gorgeous bits of risibility like the narrative of Mr. Goggenhaus. There are improbable—deliberately, but, to at least one reader, exasperatingly improbable stories like that of Mortimer Teal who, notwithstanding that he had "mastered Quintard's irregular equation, by which that infamous scoundrel, the Duc de Nuerro, predicted the arrival of triplets in the family of Don Gilberto" rode to wordly success with the aid of such clumsy tools for determining probabilities as a pair of dice. There are bits of pure fantasy—forecasts of a future indefinitely removed and of tiresome, uncomfortable Utopias. There are tales as swiftly outlined as a tableau seen in a flash of lightning—such as the story of Murderers' Mews.

Wading into so varied an assortment of flotsam, the reader will doubtless find some pieces more to his taste than others. There are those readers who are made uncomfortable by malicious improbabilities that obscure good satire. There are others who lack imagination to piece out stories as nebulously sketched as most of Mr. Riesenbergs's. But I defy anyone to miss the enjoyment of Mr. Riesenbergs's deliciously sardonic comment—the torrent itself that hurries these bobbling stories along.

For example, Mr. Riesenbergs tells the story of a gentleman who found himself sharing a table for two with an unintroduced lady at the reopening of a speakeasy of the French *table d'hôte* type. They warmed to each other over the wine; he paid her check, and they drove off in a cab:

"Need we," asks Mr. Riesenbergs then,

lie to each other, after all these hours and pages together? Here we are, the team, an old author with holes in his trousers, where threads of tobacco have dropped unnoticed, and the enduring reader, dredging into the case of Civilized Man versus God . . . our characters are not only people, but are the things that make the people what they are. . . . No rule that I know of . . . can transform an Eskimo into a gorilla, although they may look much alike. The old beau we have just left riding with the sentimental female into the night, with one eye on the meter and a warm hand stealing upward from her waist, is probably a scoundrel and a fraud. Then again, he may be one of Nature's masterpieces; the chances of this being so are small.

Mr. Riesenbergs has written a book as different from the current crop as "Tristram Shandy" was different in its day. If it is exasperating in its off-handedness it is deliberately so. If it is charged with a lusty "take-it-or-leave-it" challenge, so was "Leaves of Grass." It makes no compromise. It attempts to be nothing but what Mr. Riesenbergs likes to write. And for that independence it is the better.

Tantalizing as its formlessness sometimes is, annoying as its improbabilities are (and they are meant to be)—for one reader, at least, "Endless River" ended all too soon.

A New Voice from Ireland

GUESTS OF THE NATION. By FRANK O'CONNOR. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1931. \$2.

THIS new artist out of Ireland has the health and simplicity and sanity of an older time. His materials are precisely those of which contemporary Irish novelists have wrought their fabric of negation, disgust, and despair. He deals with them honestly, without suppression or sentimentality. But there is love in his heart for the absurd or hapless children of men of whom his tale is, and the smile on his lips never goes slack with pathos or stiffens to a sneer. The fifteen stories and sketches in this volume are concerned mainly with Ireland of the Revolution, an Ireland piteously and often comically at odds with itself, inconsistent, fratricidal, preyed upon by enemies within and without: never quite ignoble or lost.

The title story is grim enough—of two English soldiers held as hostages in a remote Irish village and quite content there, till the hour comes for them to be shot in cold blood by the pair of guards with whom they have been so friendly. It is all so brutal, and useless—and inevitable by the rules of the game. The chief object of our pity is not the big, dull, kindly



From a painting by Winslow Homer, reproduced in "The Brown Decades"

Englishman Belcher, dying like a sportsman, but his executioner, who can never forget: "I was somehow very small and lonely. And anything that ever happened to me after I never felt the same about again." This is as near a moral as you come anywhere in the book. The story-teller has the art of presenting his facts simply and rather drily. The elements of tragedy and comedy in them must be sorted and moralized by the spectator: the showman makes no comment. Is "Jumbo's Wife" matter for laughter? Jumbo is a gross drunkard and bully. His wife hates him, and discovering that he is an informer, betrays him to authority—only to find herself desperately defending him from arrest. What does she feel most when an avenging bullet "squares her account with Jumbo at last?" Another informer meets his fate in "Jo," but here private malice is so mixed with justice that the gorge rises against its human agent. "Laughter" and "Machine-Gun Corps in Action" and "Soirée chez une Belle Jeune Fille" are comedies of sex and war, laid in the no-man's land of the Irish countryside. There tiny "columns" of rebels lie in ambush, are hunted, and often sleep in beds still warm from their official enemies. This mingling of the every-day realism of peasant life with moments of romantic terror and violence well suits the temper of these people, with their love of a grievance and a shindy, their humorous tolerance of life and of death.

One little idyll called "Nightpiece, with Figures" is singularly moving: a group of young revolutionaries gathered for the night in an empty barn, and visited by two nuns, an old wise one and a younger Sister who is not less a woman and a charming one for her exile from common ties. She appears to the fugitives suddenly out of the darkness:

Her face is unusually broad at the jaw, but this instead of making her features appear harsh makes them appear curiously tender. Her face is almost colorless, her nose short; her eyes are jet black under long black lashes that give them a dreamy look; but over all her features is a strange expression which is not at all dreamy or tender, but anxious, abrupt, and painfully, sensitively, wide awake. Yet she is very girlish, slim and sprightly; and her appear-

ance as she stands in the doorway suggests to the three hunted men a visionary, enchanted youth, that wakes a sort of pang within them, a pang of desire and loss.

Nothing comes of the meeting but a few words of simple talk, but you feel the maternal spirit of the young nun reaching out to comfort these lads who can never mean more to her than they do now, but who mean so much. As for the lads,

they are all happy as though some wonderful thing had happened to them, but what the wonderful thing is they could not say, and with their happiness is mixed a melancholy strange and perturbing, as though life itself and all the modes of life were inadequate. It is not a bitter melancholy, like the melancholy of defeat, and in the morning, when they take to the country roads again, it will have passed. . . . But the memory of the young nun will not pass so lightly from their minds.

A book of poignant beauty. "A.E.," it seems, "discovered" this writer, and we cannot wonder that he says "I haven't discovered any writer so good as O'Connor since I found James Stephens."

Farm Life in England

SILVER LEY. By ADRIAN BELL. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE MOREBY ACKLUM

SOMETIMES there comes a book which uncovers the deep pathos and reveals the far-rooted human values of a lost cause. Such a book is this, by Adrian Bell.

Every economist knows that, barring a complete breakdown of modern capitalistic civilization, the day of the small farm—fifty, a hundred, five hundred acres—is over. Yet the small farm still exists, and the small farmer is still struggling against the inevitable. "Silver Ley" is a quiet and beautiful study of small-farm life in England of today, which not only enables us to realize that life and its conditions, but explains—without offering any explanation—why the struggle is still being kept up in the face of falling markets and of governmental neglect.

Mr. Bell himself, son of a London literary man, wanted to escape from the threat of an office life, and chose instead to become the working pupil of a fairly successful Suffolk farmer-squire, a couple of years after the war, while English farming was still feeling the effects of the artificial stimulus of the Corn Producing Act and trusting in the Government's promises made during the war.

After learning the practical side of the business for a year, he then took a small farm—fifty acres or so—of his own; and his book gives us his experiences through his year of apprenticeship and through some six more years of ownership.

Coming to the work with the enthusiasm of youth and with the sensitive eye and mind of an artist, Mr. Bell has painted us a picture which will stand up with the very best that has ever been written on the English countryside—White's "Selborne" not excepted. The chief note of "Silver Ley" is its deep simplicity. There is no effort to dramatize, to sentimentalize, or to decorate. With the author, we enter into another world—the world of those who live on and by and for the soil, whose forebears have lived for centuries on and by and for the soil, who know it, depend on it, respect it and cherish it. These are they to whom the land is not just an area from which so much profit or so much loss may be had, but is something intimate, which they understand, to which they belong, and from which they can only be separated by disaster or by actual starvation—a primitive people, who still cling stubbornly to the old life and the old ways so inevitably doomed by the march of a mechanized civilization.

The incidents, the scenes, which go to make up Mr. Bell's record are all, in themselves, small and apparently commonplace—ploughing, fox-hunting, milking, shooting on a winter's afternoon, ferreting for rabbits, the building of the straw ricks, the village flower-show, the local election day, and so forth; yet out of such simple threads Mr. Bell weaves a tapestry that is rich in color and harmonious in pattern and which is deeply satisfying to the mind attuned to the influence of the slow, orderly processes of the earth in its seasons.

Moreover, besides beauty, there is here a vast deal of real, practical information. Mr. Bell's experiences were no romantic search for the picturesque; they were of the earth, earthy, and much of the detail is just as grim and uncompromising as life and death. From this comes an impression of vitality and a feel of authenticity which seems to lift the book out of the category of fiction—if indeed it was ever intended to be there.

"Silver Ley" is, perhaps, Mr. Bell's confession of

faith. It is noticeable that the slender and lightly-indicated thread of love interest which runs through it closes on a note of renunciation. He must choose between marriage and his farming—and the land is more important than happiness.

An Amusing Skit

ADVENTURES IN LIVING. By LOUIS GOLDING. London: Morley and Mitchell Kennerly, Jr. 1931.

FROM England comes an amusing skit by another young writer. It is based on a plaintive contention that real life does not encourage us to live up to the Nietzschean formula. Moreover, it fails to come up to the certifications of romance or even the implications of the daily press. Golding says that he has given much time and effort to "living dangerously," but that danger has ungenerously refused to meet him half-way. Daring the psychic did no good, —walking under ladders, invoking spirits, and the like. No dive or haunt of criminals produced a thrill. A Greek murderer of whom he hoped much proved harmless and even charming. Thugs and gunmen passed him by. All those exciting moments which pursue a Cecil Roberts where'er he walks, eluded the eager Golding. He tried Tuscany, and Syria, and Chicago. He tried to be kidnapped by "the hooded ones, the Kleagles in their Rolls Royces and the Kleaglets in their Fords." All in vain; till finally, in a Berlin Keller, out of a clear sky and for no intelligible cause, he was satisfactorily set upon, punched, trodden, and thrown out by a band of silent Germans. *Warum?*

Perhaps, most of all, I should like to think of them as artists, pure and simple, doing a thing for its own sake in strict accordance with its own laws; that as some men paint pictures or compose sonatas, so these men kicked in faces. I should be proud to feel that they knew they could rely on us; knowing that to us as to them art would come before all things; that indeed, though they could not bring themselves to tell us so, the whole thing hurt them more than it hurt us. . . . I do not know. I do not know. I should like to discuss the matter with them over a quart or two of that swart sweet ale, with the piano strumming the melody of the "True Hussar." We should lift a flagon to Nietzsche also.



Defense of Poesie*

By THEODORE MORRISON

LIKE him that fell asleep and dreamed a dream,
(Bunyan, of course, the consecrated tinker),
Of visions late I had the very cream,
Though sane, and on the whole a prudent drinker.
As I was sitting poised like Rodin's "Thinker,"
Out of the scene before me I was rapt
Into the presence of a figure capped

By lightning stern that played about his brow,
In academic or judicial robes
Clad, or perhaps a toga. I'll allow
His costume was a little vague. The lobes
Of either ear were hung with little globes
Cunningly wrought of gold, on which the sea
Washed the earth's lands in lively mimicry.

On either palm he held symbolic keys
Which, by the fluid changes of a vision,
Transformed themselves with mystifying ease
Into the powers they symbolized. Derision,
Withhold your laughter, and begone, misprison,
While I relate this marvel. The rebuff
That Hamlet gave Horatio is enough

To establish wonders in a glorious plenty
More wonderful than this that I beheld.
The keys of which I spoke turned into twenty
Amazing kinds of things—torches that weld
Hot joints of steel, and symphonies expelled
From radio tubes; heaven-searching telescopes,
Vaster than guns, by which man's eyeball gropes

Into the depth where light from light escapes;
Volumes on banking, treatises on rents,
Health charts of guinea pigs, and lives of apes,

* The original version of this poem was read at the forty-sixth Annual Dinner of the Signet Society, Cambridge, March 21, 1931.

And last those keen, heart-searing instruments
By which the surgeon slits the integuments
Of mortal life, and pries into the organs
Of Al Capones, Clara Bows, and Morgans.

(All these by turns appeared upon the palms
Of that strange, lightning-chapleted, dream figure.
Words of abasement from King David's psalms
Whirled in my head. I wished that I were bigger,
And felt as though my life hung on a trigger.
But then I rallied, looked him in the eye,
And firmly but politely asked him why.)

He spoke with hum and throb of engines turning
Propellers in the blue Atlantic's froth,
With distant surf of city traffic churning,
And molten iron bubbling in hot broth,
With whirl of shuttles weaving miles of cloth,
A voice in which the toiling world seemed
rolled,
Knowledge and science and labor manifold.

"I am," quoth he, "the spirit personified
Of modern man and of his modern earth."
"I knew it when I saw you," I replied.
"I recognized you by the something dearth
Of beauty in your shape, some marks of birth,
A smudge or scar or two, a starveling eye
Thirsting to live as man before as scientist you die."

He frowned, and said with patience chilled by scorn,
"You are a poet." And I answered, "Yes,
Or want to be, or might have been, if born
In the right hour, with the right patroness.
I mean some tutelary muse to bless
The travail of my origin with song."
He frowned still more. "We're off upon the wrong

"Foot altogether," I admitted then.
"I see that you would have me plead my cause
Before the bar of modern supermen,
Defend my verse by scientific laws,
Write the equation of each change and pause
In the melodious line, and try to give
Reasons why poets have a right to live."

Growling from all his ventral dynamos,
He asked, "Does poetry turn wheels, fill voids
In jobless bellies? Or what poet knows
The analysis of light from asteroids,
How streptococci lurk in adenoids?
What poet can expose the economic
Springs of our ills? The very thought is comic."

"I must concede," said I, "that your control
Embraces the world's action, makes its mark
By burrowing into nature, like a mole
Whose light of instinct is to others dark.
The electric current flooding through an arc,
The laboring ship, the produce-laden pier,
The airplane struggling o'er the gray Pamir,

"All these are yours; the world is in your hold
By processes, discoveries, manufactures,
All save those areas yet uncontrolled
Where still old chaos rules a few broad fractures,
Stubborn against inventions and conjectures.
This I admit, without a touch of animus,
And only ask if I am not magnanimous?

"Yet though you are master of knowledge operative,
The habits and the processes of things,
I'll try conclusions with you, seek to give
Defense of the poor tribe that loves and sings
The ceaseless change and tide of the returning
springs.
I'll beard the scientist in camp or college,
And try conclusions on the score of knowledge!

"First let me ask of what stuff are composed
Your engines, and what underlies each spasm
Of conscious man, whose soul you have disclosed
To be an attribute of protoplasm?
For is there not a sly and perilous chasm
'Twixt what appears and what we may con-
clude
Is somewhat nearer the true certitude?

"The atoms are the secret of all structure,
You tell me, and I ask, what is an atom?
I know you wring from them strange usufructure,
But still it's rather difficult to get at 'em!
Some physicists themselves of late high hat 'em,

Daring to doubt these mystical scintillae
Which we are asked to credit willy nilly.

"Some think them waves, to others they're the solar
System writ in ambiguous minuscule.
To explore them is to search in regions polar
Where the mind must carry artificial fuel.
And if the atoms have escaped from school
To romp in lawless pastures, what of other
Physical properties of which we hear such
pothor?

"Where art thou, gravitation, heavenly maid,
Who mad'st the apples fall by mutual force
Of due proportion? Where, oh renegade?
To what strange language hast thou had recourse?
Must curves and coefficients be the source
By which the precious glass, dropped on the
floor;
Shatters, and spills its liquor evermore?

"Where art thou, light? Art thou corpuscular,
Or art thou, as we thought thee, undulatory?
'Tis odd, is't not, the little twinkling star
Can tell so contradictory a story,
While physicists, with locks grown thin and hoary,
Slide down the ineluctable declivity
Of a universe bewitched by relativity,

("Where time, space, cause, law, mathematics,
matter,
Those concepts that our forefathers thought all
Solid as government bonds are now mere spatter
Upon the executioner's grim wall,
Shot through by paradox, allowed to fall,
Revived, and taxidermied with new stuffing,
And shot again quite past the hope of bluffing.")

I paused for breath. My supernatural critic
Frowned through the chaplet of the lightning's
play,
As one compelled to breathe an air mephitic.
Then in disgruntled tones I heard him say,
"A captious dog you are! Well, have your day.
The seeds of truth don't always fall on arable
Land, as 'twas taught us in the ancient parable.

"Be it agreed they teach heretically
Who see all light refracted through one prism.
Physics, till late sealed up hermetically,
Has been bust wide by indeterminism.
But though there is room for ultimate scepticism,
Let me pursue my studies of the tick.
The nature of things is not my bailiwick.
'Tis mine to penetrate, to solve, to bridle
Forces that else were but chaotic chance.

(Continued on next page)

A Balanced Ration for a Week's Reading

THE CHALLENGE OF THE EAST. By SHERWOOD EDDY. Farrar & Rinehart.

An illuminating study of the Near East and Far East.

MEMOIRS OF A POLYGLOT. By WILLIAM GERHARDI. Knopf.

A frank autobiography which spares neither the author nor others.

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR. By W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM. Doubleday, Doran.

Deft stories by a master craftsman.

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