

## Romain Rolland's Prophetic Novel

A WORLD IN BIRTH. Being Volume Five of "The Soul Enchanted." By Romain Rolland. Translated from the French by Amalia de Alberti. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1934. \$2.75.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

AND so it ends, the long novel which Romain Rolland wrote between 1921 and 1933; the long novel that began as an intimate story of the two daughters of Raoul Rivière, Parisian architect, and that has overflowed its banks to sweep forward as the history of a world enduring the agonies of apparent death and possible resurrection. We have been almost a decade reading it, for the first volume, "Annette and Sylvie," appeared here in translation early in 1925, while the fifth and final volume has only just come from the press. And, having read it, what do we make of it all? Yes, of it all; for there is no judging the last instalment alone, despite the publisher's assurance that it constitutes an independent novel. We are confronted by a single narrative of more than two thousand pages, of which the action covers thirty-odd years,—pre-war, war, and post-war. A big work, certainly. But what quality is there in the bulk? Is there greatness here as well as size. The questions pose themselves.

They pose themselves, for here is a work that is conceived on the grand scale, with vast ambition, and executed with an independent disregard of conventional patterns, but one that evokes many controversial issues; that begins as a simple story, moving at a leisurely pace through the quiet days of an orderly world, and reaches its climax and its end in political pamphleteering that is at once eloquent and furious.

The wise reader would, perhaps, have foreseen this end. But I failed to do so. I had no suspicion of the volcano of passionate prophecy and propaganda that was to erupt from the last six hundred pages of M. Rolland's novel. I did not anticipate the sudden outburst of proselytizing energy born of a lethal hatred for one class in the class struggle, and of an almost mystical love for the opposing class.

Fiction that turns into pamphleteering? Then this long narrative is not homogeneous; it begins as one thing and ends as another. So it would seem at first glance. But M. Rolland can advance cogent reasons in opposition to this judgment. He can argue that Annette and Marc, having begun their careers as individualists, were necessarily caught up in the great battle of their generation, and submerged in it, while contributing to it; and that, this being so, their historian was compelled to become a kind of pamphleteer, being unable, in any other role, to enunciate the true significance of their lives. He can even argue that in such a day as ours fiction which is not pamphleteering is devoid of force and meaning. Message is everything; let art take care of itself.

Individualism, the free spirit, since the other war, has had its army of Metz and its Sedan. It has surrendered. What is left of it? A few shreds of flags, hidden in pockets, which are exhibited at private gatherings; or in safe palavers.

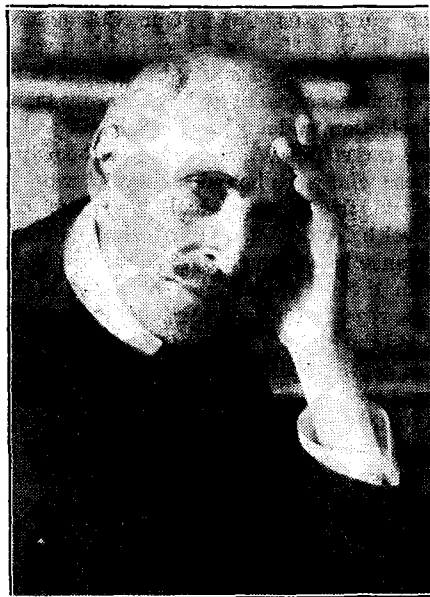
There is only one sacred cause today. The cause of Labor, alone. All the rest, faith and culture, pure reason, social state—all must be rebuilt, from the beginning, upon the unshakable foundations of organized Labor. [Oh ye, of mighty faith, who can believe in unshakable foundations!]

Ponder these quotations well, and I think you will understand that M. Rolland will not be much disturbed by a charge of artistic failure, so long as his powers as a prophet and a pamphleteer are recognized. Romain Rolland sees himself at once in a castigating and a messianic role. With furious blows he belabors the exploiters of the old order: and simultaneously he exalts labor in all lands, and the glorious future which labor will create with its hands and brain, its humanitarian vision, and its uncompromising faith.

He comes before us, carrying a whip in one hand and a book of revelations in the other. But he also comes before us as a novelist, and so long as literature has a

life of its own, so long as it has not been made entirely subservient to some form of social service, it is fair to judge him as a novelist. Here he must be judged, specifically, as the author of "The Soul Enchanted." And so judged, his stature shrinks. The writer of fiction is less than the preacher, less than the propagandist. He has power, but it is an intermittent power which is scornful of artistic bonds and bounds. Few writers are possessed of greater eloquence, but he often displays a lack of simple skill. The threads of his long narrative frequently fall slack, and he is sometimes clumsy in patching (as when he introduces a railway accident, and an important character, into his fifth volume, of which and of whom we should have heard in his fourth volume). His principal characters, with all their slowly awakening passion for humanity, seem strangely removed from the common clay we know. Their emotions are a little larger than life, verging too often on hysteria; their spiritual experiences too often escape from the realm of the explicable; their most casual conversations are frequently too cryptic or too highfalutin; and in too many of their aspects and actions they appear to have been imagined rather than observed. Another curious fact is that they are not solidly planted in any recognizable group of friends and acquaintances; they are singularly detached, they float. The great background of Western civilization is painted in bold strokes behind them, but their immediate background lacks definition. Because of all these facts they fail perfectly to incarnate the message their creator would deliver; now that the whole work is before us we can see that the integration of the novelist's fiction and the preacher's truth is faulty and incomplete. And there is one odd mistake which M. Rolland makes in "A World in Birth" that cannot be allowed to pass without comment. Suddenly he introduces himself, in his own person, into the narrative, thereby stepping down from his post of auctorial omniscience, and rending the veil of illusion asunder. The moment that he refers to Annette and Marc as real persons, capable of meeting the indubitably real Romain Rolland in the flesh, the gossamer web of fiction is rudely violated. This is the kind of blunder that could be made only by an author who had grown supremely, and fatally, careless through confidence in his own genius.

One can understand how he might be so confident, for that he has genius of a kind, as differentiated from talent, there is no doubt. But in his latest work it has been made to serve two masters, and it has served the one better than the other. Rol-



ROMAIN ROLLAND

land, the fiery prolocutor of Revolution and the Rights of Man, has been well served. Rolland, the novelist, has to a certain extent been betrayed. Saying this, I know that I am judging a man who believes in a new world, and in new literary values, by the standards of an old world whose values have been long established. The time may come when "The Soul Enchanted" will hold an honored place as one of the great pioneer works of Revolutionary fiction. But it is not for us to anticipate the brave new judgments of a brave new people.

## The Odyssey of the Bounty Mutineers

PITCAIRN'S ISLAND. By Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ARCHIE BINNS

"PITCAIRN'S Island" is the third of the *Bounty* trilogy. Putting aside "Men Against the Sea," "Pitcairn's Island" is the mutineers' Odyssey and "Mutiny on the Bounty" their Iliad. It is true the physical wanderings of Christian and his followers end early in the book, when they land on Pitcairn's Island and burn the fateful *Bounty*. But there follow years of spiritual wanderings before they attain the peaceful island home of their search. As in the Odyssey, only one of the seafarers who set out lives to reach that haven. The others, together with the native men who accompanied them, die in adventures as mad and strange as any that befell the crew of Odysseus. Some of their adventures are indeed the same. Compare the drunken Elpenor, falling to his death from the roof of Circe's house, and the drunken McCoy plunging to his death from the bluffs of Pitcairn. For the mutineers, too, visited the house of Circe and were changed into swine. Only two managed to regain their human form.

As in the Odyssey, the misfortunes which overtook Christian's crew on Pitcairn were chiefly of their own making—bearing out the ancient observation that sailors cannot behave themselves on shore. And Pitcairn's Island was too small for its inhabitants to escape from themselves or the consequences of their acts.

There are other classical parallels. The heroic Greek mothers, Athenian or Spartan, never surpassed the women of Pitcairn's Island in some of their exploits. As when, for example, the men had made the island a living hell, with horror piled on horror, the women, with their little children, launched an open cutter through heavy breakers and attempted the impossible voyage to Tahiti, 1,200 miles away.

Whether one prefers the Iliad or the Odyssey is chiefly a matter of temperament. Personally I prefer the Odyssey, and I prefer "Pitcairn's Island" to "Mutiny on the Bounty" or "Men Against the Sea." Not everyone will agree with me. In many ways Messrs. Nordhoff and Hall had the most difficult task in writing the present book. Instead of working from accurate and detailed contemporary documents they were obliged to sift and reconcile contradictory word-of-mouth accounts, given long afterward. They also had to explain a great deal of almost incredible human behavior and present acts which would have turned to the wildest melodrama in less able hands. It can be said at once that the authors were equal to their task. Where they had to guess and reconstruct they guessed and reconstructed well. While all of their story cannot be the precise truth about what happened it is probably as near the truth as we will ever know. Out of the available sources—sometimes sketchy and sometimes luxuriant with divergent accounts—they have built a plausible, three-dimensional human story of great depth and terror and beauty.

"Pitcairn's Island" is a book which will richly reward any reader. The extent of the reward, and its nature, will depend largely on what the reader brings to the book. To some it will be a superb story of adventure and conflict, to others a fascinating human document, and to still others a profoundly significant study of civilization, with Pitcairn's Island as a microcosm, shut off from all contact with the outer world for nearly twenty years by the lonely sea, while the mutineers and their women and children worked out their destinies and achieved a civilization which was later described by visitors as a veritable Golden Age.

To women readers, this book should be a source of pride. With the possible exception of Christian, there were no heroes among the men on Pitcairn's Island. With few exceptions, the women were truly heroic. Without their Amazonian exploits the island would soon have become an

island of the dead or of utter bestiality. This is one of the book's many problems for the student of civilization. The allegedly savage women brought from Tahiti moved patiently and heroically toward civilization in its finest sense, while the allegedly civilized white men disintegrated and perished through their own savagery and folly.

It may be argued that the men were driven to something like madness by the narrow confines of their island. If so, what will happen when communications have shrunk the world to the size of Pitcairn's Island in 1790? Will Amazons again come to the rescue of civilization?



HELEN HULL. Photo by Pinchot.

## As We Were

MORNING SHOWS THE DAY. By Helen Hull. New York: Coward-McCann. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH

WITH those intelligent and practised novelists who are to-day undertaking the task of depicting the American Scene, Helen Hull must be definitely reckoned. From her first book her work has shown her to be a true craftsman whose respect for her tools never tolerates shiftless or slovenly lapses. Her stories rise from their solid foundations like sturdy colonial houses designed by honest architects. Her rooms are well-proportioned, her ceilings the right height, her fire-places draw perfectly, and there is plenty of closet space. Moreover, her landscaping and interior decorating are always harmonious and sometimes subtle. Of course you may not care for colonial houses or the people who live in them. Then it is not for you that Miss Hull is writing.

In this her newest novel Miss Hull has chosen for her theme the fact that if we look carefully enough into the morning we will find that little breezes presage the afternoon's whirlwind. In the first half of the book therefore we are taken back to the sunny guileless mornings of a Mid-Western town, into the family circles of a group of high-school boys and girls whose circumscribed lives are yet untouched by Mr. Ford, radios, or Hollywood. These seven adolescents are bound together only through the accident of having been born, with a few thousand others, into this Michigan town, and through having been chosen to the editorial board of the high-school year-book. From school we follow them in their relations to each other and to their families, until when fully grown they are swept, as we all have been, into the confusion of an exploded ideology.

Everything Miss Hull tells us about these young people is almost disturbingly real. And when you have the author's picture of the unescapable shell which their homes impose, you know fairly well what will be the life pattern of each. It is all as logical as a geometrical problem. But so, if we were all-knowing, life itself might seem. Let us be grateful to Miss Hull that she can make the commonplace not only interesting, but exciting. Read, for example, her description of the distracted and newly awakened Shirley at the hospital awaiting the verdict upon Allen's medical examination. An exciting



bit of tense realistic writing, that, and there are others which, if not quite so dramatic, still repeatedly affirm her penetrating and sensitive perceptions.

Why, then, is it that when Miss Hull knows so much about us, when she has learned to tell a story with dignity and restraint, her people only momentarily become breathing human beings? They are such excellent portraits, so readily recognizable at a glance, but they remain in the memory as pictures, not people. Is it perhaps because they are a little too typical? With admirable clarity we are shown youth,—ambitious, covetous, vain, straining at the leash of parental control,—and we agree boys and girls are like that. But what of the generosity of spirit, the passion for fulfilment, the aching, inarticulate searchings of adolescence? These are as truly youth, and of these we are given no hint, although we are given to believe that our seven are the pick of their class. As for mothers, although we have been told in a hundred novels and plays how horrid they are, we still don't believe that if you took seven at random they would all turn out to be so futile or hateful as are Miss Hull's. Is it possible that Miss Hull knows us better than she likes us? Or hates us? For to paint a living man, whether in words or in colors, you must either love or hate him. A too great detachment and you become a scientist or a photographer.

## Drama in Seahampton

ELIZABETH. By Frank Swinnerton. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CURRIE CABOT

THE dejected streets of Seahampton, a small gray town on a gray sea, look unpromising enough at first glance, the gloomy houses are not, you might imagine, likely to lodge particularly interesting people. But Mr. Swinnerton's shrewdness can dispense with surfaces. Given human material he can discover drama lurking tense, dark, and hidden beneath a drab exterior. In Seahampton he finds much to reveal. Lifting a curtain here, opening a door there, he discloses his characters against their warm or bleak or sordid backgrounds, living a bit of their lives; the curtain falls, the door shuts, but one has had time to judge and know these people, and later when one encounters them in the course of the story, one is interested in them and their interlocking histories. Certain among them, lifted by wealth and character above the intensely living, scheming, furtively passionate generality are, it must be confessed, less absorbing to the reader. The Swifts who live so charmingly and with such leisure in the "Admiral's House" outside Seahampton, seem almost insipid in their pastel colors beside the sharp black and white of the townfolk, and their lovely daughter Elizabeth, compact of sweetness and light, pales beside that other Elizabeth, Eliza Cordell, whose life drags itself out bitterly in a dreary house on a dreary street. Eliza, who has a long pale face and eyes like "very dark carnations," who is all sharpness and spite and cleverness, with a flair second only to Mr. Swinnerton's for detecting people's weaknesses and concealments, is the most interesting character in the book, and one is fascinated by her struggles and her frustrations and her disagreeableness.

"Elizabeth" is a clever and absorbing novel, and Mr. Swinnerton's penetrations are always entertaining and profitable. He has a way of summing up certain traits of a character that makes one intensely curious about the whole man. But there is an artificiality in the handling of the plot, and a reliance on coincidence, that diminish the book's importance. Also the drama is spread a little thin over a large cast and certain personages even appear superfluous. One reads with greatest interest those parts of the book that are restricted to the intensified consciousness of one person undergoing some brutal stress or other. When Mr. Swinnerton writes of quiet country life, of people who have "arrived,"—or who have always been there—he is incomparably less interesting than when he is the dramatist of life that is narrow and striving and obscure.

# The BOWLING GREEN

## IX. Buenaventura

THE steamship company's folder tries earnestly (in a brief prose passage which is a miracle of suppression) to give the idea that Buenaventura is just another picturesque town. And so, some day, I dare say it will be. But at present it is far more interesting (if you don't have to stay there long) than the most romantic arrangement of plazas and basilicas—and night clubs. (Night in Buenaventura would be something really worth seeing.) Your first feeling is one of dismay: is it possible, you naively wonder, that all South America is going to be like this? Our excellent skipper must have been amused when an eager passenger asked him "Where's the best place in this town to have lunch?" His answer was brief, immediate, and surprisingly true. "Right here." And the motley throng on the pier (every shade of black, brown, and lemon) know that well. All the time the ship is alongside the galley ports are besieged by uplifted palms eager for our overplus. An apple, I noticed, is a delicacy they specially prize.

I don't think it's possible to give you any fair notion of Buenaventura: you wouldn't believe me if I did. And I think frankly that perhaps I like it better because it plainly has so much future and so little past—at any rate architecturally. If there ever were any comely old Spanish buildings they were wiped out in the fire a few years ago. Between the modern piers and the rabble of scantling huts that make up the native town is a wide open space, where future streets and plazas are hopefully indicated and where grasshoppers or crickets of some sort are stridulating in the coarse grass. The new railroad station and town hall are under construction. Then there is the little square with the statue of Bolivar: but you will realize how humble Buenaventura is when you see that the Liberator had to do without his usual horse.

Only the very daring tourist makes entry very far into the native town. Life there, under a sullen climate of heat and wet (I was told, very likely inaccurately, that the rainfall averages near an inch a day) reduces to prime elements. The narrow alleys climb steep grades of slimy clay; rickety cabins perch on piles over quagmires of litter and sewage. Perpetual sluice of rain, and a high tide from the bay which sweeps up a gully in the heart of the whole midden, presumably help to keep off plague. The naked babies everywhere are so black that there seems almost a blue tone in the pigment. I wonder if it is a diet of bananas and fish that so bulges out their little paunches? The women and girls all carry on their heads long shallow wooden bowls with a few handfuls of beans or green sass in them. One of those bowls, if you could ever get it properly clean, would make a beautiful sideboard ornament. A delicacy which a small boy tried hard to sell us was ears of corn sprinkled with sugar (and flies). I think he lingers in Titania's mind as in some odd way symbolic of the place. "He was so black," she says, "and the corn was so yellow."

The assembly of fortuitous dogs is extraordinary; you would not believe that even the haphazards of canine congress could produce such amazements of surprise breeding. Almost equally haphazard seemed the strings and tangles of electric wiring crisscrossing everywhere among the flimsy streets; it is not surprising that the more pretentious part of the town burned down a few years ago. Besides electric light, the Singer sewing machine (one of the world's triumphs of distribution) has made lively penetration. And the favorite footgear of man, when any is worn, are sandals cut out of old automobile tires—the black treaded rubber of the outer tire for sole, strips of red inner tube for the straps.

I have no economic thesis to offer, and no pleasure (ever, anywhere) but to set down what I see. As a gateway to South America Buenaventura is certainly superb for it is unlikely you will ever have seen or imagined anything like it, unless perhaps in Cutcliffe Hyne's stories of Captain Kettle in the villages of West Africa. But what makes it melodramatic is the contrast between the big modern piers, with their shiny new automobiles being unloaded, the neat bags of coffee coming aboard; and the squalor of the native town behind. In spite of which, observe the cleanness of many of those on the pier. The cotton trousers and singlets are fresh washed; the dresses are crisp and of gay colors. And wander as you will you will see faces certainly happier looking than in the mean streets of New York. He must be very wise or very certain who will be too positive about the laws of human satisfaction.

I think as a matter of fact we caught Buenaventura just at some turn of economic tide. Even in the three weeks interval until we were there again things had happened. On our second visit they had actually started to put in some kind of drainage; men were digging deep cuttings in the pale wet clay; and the most unhappy looking person I saw there was an American engineer sitting on a box supervising a group of workmen toiling in a sewage trench. Some of his gang were splitting wood with a machete to light a fire and melt some lead. I offered them a cardboard folder of matches to start the blaze. They were puzzled to know how to light matches of that sort; evidently had never seen them before.

The morning train for Cali (the Ferrocarril del Pacifico) was just leaving as we docked; so our Colombian passengers—including the very kind General who gave one of the children some beautiful stamps—must stay over at the hotel on the beach until the next day. That hotel (run by the railroad company, I think) is an epitome of the hotels in distant ports described by Conrad or Somerset Maugham. Here we drank some good beer and bought postal cards. The queue of small black supplicants—whom we had rashly encouraged by giving away some small coins—could not pursue us there. Our Colombian friends were falling to upon their almuerzo with good spirit, but we felt our Spanish incompetence to the dangerous task of selection; and anyhow the Captain's advice was sound. We had lunch on the ship. Those who were bound for the interior—Bogotá, for instance—had three days of travel before them, although the bee-line distance is not much over 200 miles. The train that leaves Buenaventura at 11.30 a. m. reaches Cali at 6 p. m. and there you spend the night. You leave Cali early next day, get to Armenia for lunch, and then go five hours by motor bus over the mountains to Ibagué. Another night at Ibagué; leave there 10:15 a. m., you reach Bogotá at 6:15 p. m. the third day. Always a lover of time tables I ferreted out this information (but I don't guarantee these connections) just to tantalize myself. It was one of the many things we had to miss; but at least it's exciting to know how it can be done. And now you can realize also why travel by air is increasing so inevitably in South America. The hangars of the Panagra Airways are plainly visible just across the river from the pier.

After lunch I fought off lethargy and wandered the docks and railway sidings. I said to myself, with a surmise almost as wild as the Spaniards' in the sonnet, here I am in South America. For just those two words, I don't know why, had always been to me a label for the superlative in the distant and unlikely. Perhaps it is their musical cadence, the one slow syllable and four quick, which makes them sound to me more remote, more

beautiful, than the name of any other geometry—except perhaps California and Czecho-Slovakia. The strangeness and poverty of the place was emphasized by the handsome profile of *Santa Maria* with her smart green funnels rising high above the sheds. In places so foreign the mind seeks instinctively to make them feel homelike to the mind; even if it is only the tough grass and rubble heaps of a dock-side freight-spur one reflects that they are closely familiar to *someone*. The sleepy hum of insects, under a furious prostration of sun, made the scene coth and agreeable to me. There were mechanical reminders too of familiar things. The travelling crane on the pier came from Ipswich in East Anglia, a town dear to me; the locomotive loitering thirstily under a water tank was built by Baldwin of Philadelphia. These two were prophetic of much seen later: British and American capital side by side working at these far resources. Romulus and Remus at the udders of the big bad wolf of South America. Indeed, if you are going to go fantastic, you can well think of that chain of Andes peaks as the inverted dugs of some vast animal mother—offering such nourishment of natural wealth as even the conquistadores scarcely dreamed.

I was amused at a characteristic remark uttered by a very intelligent Englishman on the ship, a veteran of the West Coast returning after many years' absence. "What a pity," he said, "that the English or the Americans didn't get hold of these republics and make real countries out of them." (He put it a little more strongly than that.) This comment, superbly appropriate to our grasping race, leads into an infinity of meditation. For my own part perhaps I am grateful to see the spread of English and American efficiency occasionally checkmated. It has already gone farther and deeper in South America than you would ever suppose. But under the hull of an old blistered launch, pulled up in the shade of a tottering tin roof, lay two Colombian citizens blissfully asleep. No matter how much cargo *Santa Maria* had to shift before the evening tide they were going to enjoy their siesta. I was pleased too by a humane touch in a poster at the railroad station on the jetty. It said that the Ferrocarril del Pacifico in hiring employees gives preference to fathers of families.

Buenaventura may seem remote to you, but it is closely tied in with the ever-tightening web of human affairs. At the alcade's office is a notice that the next lot of hombres due for military service will be called up on such and such a date. (If the recent trouble between Colombia and Peru had come to formal warfare Buenaventura would have been the first to suffer.) Those innocent looking green knolls across the river are said to have concealed guns; and on the pier are huge cases containing airplanes from Hagerstown, Md., addressed to the Minister of War. Up at the far end of the pier was an elderly steam cutter which seemed to constitute the Pacific squadron of the Colombian navy. She was built in Normandy and had once been very smart but her crew were gutting fish all over her deck and her brasswork was foul. Her name was *Carabobo*, which sounds Venezuelan to me; she had a most taking air of one who could tell good stories.

There's enormous wealth of goods in those big piers, but perhaps not much of it sticks to the fingers of Buenaventura. The parson of the tin-roofed church just behind the piers has his troubles. As it is time for another lesson in Spanish I cannot resist the thesis in manuscript fastened to the church door. It said:—

*En lugar de venir a pedirme dinero prestado, tenga usted la gentileza de ayudarme a pagar 1500 dólares que debo a la Casa de José Campaña de Barcelona por le imagen del Resucitado y la de San José. Precisamente por haberles prestado a hombres sin conciencia me aprietan las deudas.*

EL CURA.

This I construe as follows: "Instead of coming to beg me to lend money, have the kindness to help me pay \$1500 which I owe to the Joseph Campaña Company of