

Fifteen Plans for Keeping the Peace

CHALLENGE TO DEATH. By Fifteen British Authors. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by R. GATEWOOD

"GENTLEMEN may cry peace, peace; but there is no peace"; nor is there any possibility of peace, unless the factors of war are thoroughly examined. It is to that inquiry that the authors of this symposium have addressed themselves. With care and with passionate imagination, they have dissected out the economic viscera, the nervous reflexes, the flabby thinking of their body politic, the heart of the world's greatest empire. They have summarized the existing facts, probed the temper of their compatriots, forecast probable developments; and their unanimous plea is for renewed British leadership in achieving European security.

Unlike Sir Norman Angell's most recent work, this book is not primarily concerned with ideas about war. The descriptive passages are vivid and well-ordered, notably Mr. Heard's chapter on "And Suppose We Fail?" The suggestions for treatment are wide, ranging from Julian Huxley's plans for research by scientists to J. B. Priestley's sane proposal to satirize war, rather than dramatize it. On political prerequisites almost all seem to agree: there must be collective control of armaments, not merely governmental control; and collective sanctions must be established. Furthermore, Mr. P. N. Baker follows up a devastating indictment of dilatory British policies with an impressive amount of evidence to prove that there is really no adequate defense against bombing raids; and, from League confer-

ence reports, he has drawn a detailed outline for an International Air Police Force which, far from being a Utopian project, was agreed to in 1932 by all important nations in Europe but the British.

The dangers of air attack reveal how nationalist interests are invoked to further a desire for peace: all the writers have in mind the vulnerable position of London in the face of raids from the Continent; this fear lends a cogency to their appeals which American authors would find hard to duplicate. Likewise, the benefits of international economic solidarity are more obviously apparent to an island, restricted in food supply, than to a group of commonwealths united in a single market; thus, few people on this side of the Atlantic would at present be found to accept the view that nationalism should no longer rule economic relations. Geography and tradition would also prevent the average reader in this country from acknowledging the validity of League decisions, such as must be made before any collective measures can be taken.

On larger issues, there are only incidental comments. Storm Jameson, the editor, can be assumed to have summarized the prevalent opinion when she states that "poverty and war grow in the same soil and have the same smell." The implication of modern social structure, notably the different valuations evolved by production for use and production for vendibility, with the ensuing impetus toward imperialism, have been left comparatively unexamined. It is noteworthy, however, that fascism is generally considered the handmaiden of war, and the citizen is frequently warned not to be flattered by its delusive doctrines. Throughout the book there is some unavoidable repetition, but the diverse styles of the authors have clothed their singleness of purpose with a variety of expression which should draw a response from all types of readers.

A Valiant Effort

THE ART OF HAPPINESS. By John Couper Powys. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

MR. JOHN COWPER POWYS is a phenomenon which must be nearly unique: he is mystical without being religious. He feels the supernatural aspects of the universe keenly, but he does not accept any teaching, and seems to have no defined beliefs, about the nature of those supernatural aspects. Perhaps on this account he seems to be peculiarly the prey of unhappiness; he has faced the problem, and written this book on the art of escaping from moods of irrational depression, for he says it is only with this irrational unhappiness that he is concerned. It is a valiant effort; he says bravely something that needs to be said when he declares that it is "on the side of evil" to yield to low spirits; but it is unsuccessful by reason of its author's uniqueness. For everything he says is essentially mystical, even his practical suggestions have mystical reasons; and nothing is so nearly impossible to communicate. Within a definite religious tradition, Catholic or Buddhist, it is possible to build up a kind of vocabulary of supernatural experience; but Mr. Powys is in no tradition. The result is likely to be that those who are not naturally religious will have no idea what he means, and the religious will have the dizzying experience of hearing words used as Humpty Dumpty did, to mean whatever he chose.

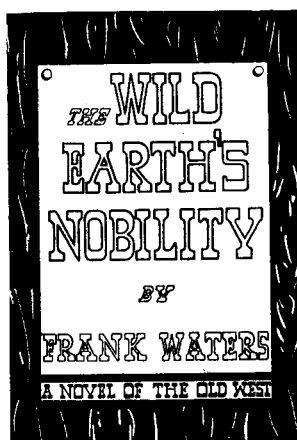
This difficulty runs throughout the book, from its most fundamental ideas to its details. The primary weapons of the spirit on which Mr. Powys relies are what he calls "the Ichthian leap," "the act of De-carnation," and "the Panergic act"; the first of these is by an effort of will leaping like a fish out of the sea of troubles, if only for a moment; the second letting oneself drift but looking at oneself with an entirely detached eye; the third is the concentration on sensation which the author has recommended in his "Defence of Sensuality." At least two of these are states of mind which it is very difficult to convey; and one cannot help feeling that Mr. Powys has increased his difficulty when he calls this leap "Ichthian" and explains this as a reference to the Sacred Fish of early Christian art. The non-Christian will feel that this has no reason, the Christian that it has the wrong meaning. At the other end of the scale, in the detailed recommendations, is the advice to have "secular rituals" of one's own, a "secular Introibo ad altare," such as lighting a fire or lying down at night. But here again, one is reminded that the phrase runs "Introibo ad altare Dei," and with no wish to dogmatize, one must say again that those who have a sacramental cast of mind are likely to have accepted already a sacramental (and consistent) explanation of the universe; and others will find this meaningless.

Between these pieces of advice lie a multitude of others, some of them the commonplaces of newspaper philosophers, but all alike presented from so singular a viewpoint that there is not much help in them for normal mortals.

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The Promethean Symbol

DANCE OF FIRE. By Lola Ridge. New York: Harrison Smith & Robert Haas. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by HORACE GREGORY

TO speak of Lola Ridge is to recall a revolutionary tradition in American poetry. No history of its mutations in the last two decades would be complete without her name; and in this context her place is singular, for there can be no thought of substituting her work for that of any other poet. Though her performance has been notoriously uneven, sometimes ornate with moments of ill-chosen grandeur, sometimes austere and clean, there can be no doubt, I think, of her serious and unified intention. Human martyrdom has been her theme, particularly the martyrdom of the poor and disenfranchised, and it is significant, I think, that her poetry of recent years should find its best expression in the fire symbol.

If we remember Shelley's adaptation of the Prometheus legend and then impose upon it a memory of Emerson's "Brahma," we will gain some understanding of the synthesis revealed in Lola Ridge's poetry; the seeming paradox dissolves and there can be no quarrel between those elements which advocate the red flag of the U. S. S. R. and those which recognize the "fire-head" of Christ upon the Cross. To read such poetry, we must extend its meaning beyond the specific areas of political or economic interpretation, and we must grant Lola Ridge the right to evolve her own definition of a chosen symbol. To deny this right is to deny the very premise on which her present book, "Dance of Fire," is grounded, for here the sonnet sequence, "Via Ignis," discloses a consummation of her purpose. Almost without exception the other poems in the book yield to its central theme, and the last poem converts the martyrdom of Van Der Lubbe into a fiery symbol to be remembered by the German working class.

An early statement of "Via Ignis" may be found in Lola Ridge's "Red Flag":

Red light burning down the centuries . . .
Red fire dwindling to a spark but never out . . .
Gleaming a moment on Bunker Hill . . .
sinking,
a blown-out flame,
leaving a deeper greyness . . .
Red Flag over the domes of Moscow. . .

It was as though the wind in the alleys of "The Ghetto," "carrying flame," had discovered tinder and then transformed itself to larger meaning. In "Firehead" the symbol reached its first culmination in the Crucifixion scene. Here the image of the young Christ on the Cross resembled the pagan sacrifice of youth in spring, and was the very life of heresy, opposing the Roman State as well as that authority derived from Moses in the person of the Pharisee. A Promethean resurrection was foreshadowed in the transference of godhead to the slaves and the awakening of revolt against the masters.

If we accept the foregoing premise, Lola Ridge's "Via Ignis," a cycle of twenty-eight sonnets, is of greater importance to contemporary literature than Edna Millay's recent "Epitaph for the Race of Man." Individually and at first reading the Millay sonnets reveal far more felicity of phrasing than is disclosed in "Via Ignis." (I make this comparison because both sequences are ambitious in their exterior design.) Yet upon rereading, the "Via Ignis" cycle seems to resolve a number of its more difficult pretensions. If we consider the entire sequence as a single poem divided into three sections, it is clear that Lola Ridge has enforced a discipline beyond a mere proficiency in the sonnet form and that the work is more

than a discernible thesis on a so-called universal condition of humanity. It is a discipline that demands a courage which transcends the usual conversion of experience into esthetic form; it is that kind of courage which sustained D. H. Lawrence in "living through" the paradox of the serpent-phoenix symbol of Aztec Mexico. In this process, the danger lies in making the concept of an idea all-inclusive, and the symbol of its conception is likely to outgrow its limitations and then disintegrate. Its minor flaws, however, do not impede the action of "Via Ignis."

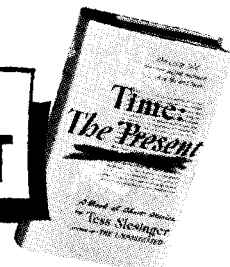
Lola Ridge's position in contemporary American poetry is unique and her vitality has been sustained throughout a difficult period. I believe this last book to be her best and that it will be remembered as the mature production of a poet who has recreated the Promethean destiny in her own signature.



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