

Edna Ferber

BY LOUIS BROMFIELD

SHE is one of the personalities of our time and in order to know her you must be a friend, because toward strangers she has a manner which is at once a mixture of shyness and hostility and because she shuns publicity as much as most novelists court it. She is difficult to write about, not only because I am very fond of her but also because she is a curious and complicated mixture of tastes, of impulses and emotions. The truth is, I think, that when America gained a fine chronicle novelist, an excellent playwright, and a writer of short stories of the first order, it lost a great actress.

If, as one sometimes does in playing parlor games, one was to give Edna Ferber mythical parents, I should at once choose Sarah Bernhardt as her mother and the Prophet Jeremiah as her father. This strange parentage is one of the elements which makes her character difficult and sometimes a little confusing. And I think that possibly among her parents and grandparents one would find that she is somehow related to Werther. She is an incorrigible romantic in the good nineteenth century sense. I myself understand perfectly the essence of the romantic's soul. It is born of the profound belief, never abandoned in the face of the most disillusioning experiences, that people, especially one's friends, should always be nobler, finer, more virtuous, more glamorous, and more beautiful than it is possible for any poor mortal ever to be.

If the stars had been in a different position on the night she was born she would have been a great actress, something which at the moment the world has need of. For myself I am satisfied with the novelist and playwright, more satisfied than Miss Ferber herself, for she is always in a state of distress over her shortcomings, sometimes real and more often imaginary, as a novelist. I know that at times she has a great yearning to emerge from the wings and play a great role, and frequently, at the rehearsals of one of her own plays, she is seized with a violent longing to climb over the orchestra pit and play a role as it should be played. Blocked at its source, all her instinct for acting has been sublimated into a talent for writing for the theatre, for the perfect sense of drama which is in her novels and made "Showboat" on the stage one of the great events of our troubled times; and sometimes it has been sublimated into a talent for poking life itself into something as fine and as exciting as the things which happen behind the footlights.

Life is rarely as exciting as that, so Miss Ferber is likely at moments of baffled irritation to take it by the scruff of the neck and slap it into shape. Now and again, without any warning, you find yourself caught up in a terrific situation and there

you are suddenly, trembling and frightened, playing opposite a great actress in a role and a scene which you never quite understand. At first all this is baffling but with a little experience you begin to understand that you are simply an instrument in the hands of Miss Ferber, being used to poke and prod life into being more exciting. After three or four weeks of hard work in some hideaway, she has begun to find life very dull and so, after going over one of the largest lists of sincere and devoted friends possessed by any individual alive today, she selects you at random and sallies forth to invent a little drama.

After a really satisfactory performance, Miss Ferber's instinct for drama will be appeased for days and even weeks and she will get a lot of good work done. She has had an extremely distinguished list of leading men which includes Noel Coward, Jed Harris, Marc Connelly, George Kaufman, Harold Ross, Alexander Woollcott, and many others. As heavy woman she has employed Margaret Pulitzer, Dorothy Parker, Beatrice Kaufman, and others equally well known. All of them love her.

All of which, with a good deal more which I mean to say, helps to explain why Miss Ferber is one of the most vivid personalities I know.

A good deal of it is a simple matter of vitality. It is impossible to write of Edna Ferber without writing as well of her mother. Known simply as Julia to her friends of all ages, she is ageless, indefatigable, handsome, entertaining, and the best company in the world. And she has character. She is always as young as the youngest person in the room. She loves good food, and the best food in New York (and I say this as one whose only vanities in life are gardening and food) is to be had at her flat and that of her daughter Edna. In Miss Ferber's flat the food is concocted by a fabulous and handsome colored woman called Rebecca Henry who herself deserves a whole article. It is concocted with strong hints from both Miss Ferber and her mother because they

"know." The walnut cake and the lobster and fish salad to be had at their small dinners are only two items on a long list in a household so hospitable that I am tempted to list it among the five best restaurants in the world.

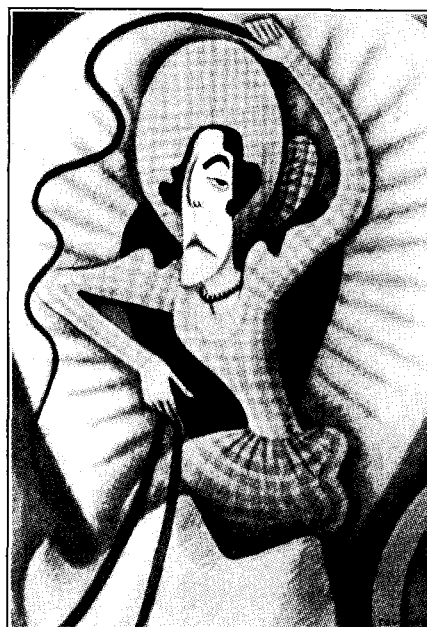
Her dinners and her parties are always small and are, I may add, handpicked. There is no shoving, pushing crowd, guzzling cocktails; there is never any screaming or yelling to make one's self heard. Miss Ferber understands the very great art of entertaining, and when one sits down to dinner, the guests are as good as the food. Thus her flat is virtually an oasis in New York. Somehow or other she has managed to isolate her own modest apartment against the New York disease.

Sometimes her mother is present at the parties, and on such occasions she is, when she will permit it, my chosen companion. There is about her a Greco-French sense of reality and truth, and if ever the conversation becomes a little high-falutin and arty, it is likely to be deflated at once by a tart, well-aimed remark from Julia Ferber. She has had

a magnificent life, and I might add is still having one, for she is one of the fortunate who never lose their zest, and out of her life she has learned (if she did not always have them) wisdom, truth, and taste. Much that appears in her daughter's books and plays and stories has been learned from her; much of it is reality. Both mother and daughter have the blessed gifts of vitality and friendliness.

One of Miss Ferber's great qualities is her sincerity. I have known many writers who were sincere either as writers

or as people, but not many who were sincere in both roles. As a rule the literary temperament is unstable, changeable, and even cynical. She is none of these things; you know exactly where to find her both as a writer and woman. She attempts neither to deceive others nor, what is far worse, to deceive herself. She is one of the most successful writers of our times, and she deserves her success because she has worked for it with all her spirit and body. She has never pretended that writing is all inspiration, that novel writing is done by some spirit control which pours out words for you. She has always done her best and whether it has been excel-



EDNA FERBER

Caricature by Covarrubias from "In the Worst Possible Taste" (Scribners).

lent or indifferent, each thing she has written, each word she has put on paper, is put there through *belief*.

I have seen her work and I know that sometimes it is for her as it is for any good writer, pure, unadulterated agony. I have seen her resisting the most terrific temptations, to remain at her desk and do the thing she has to do. For two or three summers we lived in houses, side by side, writing, each doing a novel. Of the two she was by far the more conscientious, for to her what she was doing was the most important thing in the world. By that test I failed because I could not resist the sunlight of the Basque coast and the sight of the blue-green sea rolling up on a white beach, or the prospects of fishing in the surf which was churning like champagne over the rocks at the end of my garden. I gave in, but Miss Ferber stuck to her guns.

Like any good artist she respects her craft, knowing that no writer can say all of what he means to say until he has learned the craft, forgotten it, and thrown it away. You never hear from her arty, adolescent talk on the subject of writing, but no one I know is more appreciative of the work of others when it is good; and there are few people I know whose judgment I would trust as profoundly. She knows a good book when she sees one, and she is not to be hypnotized by tricks or by the fashions of the moment. That is, I think, because she knows her craft.

She is, too, an extraordinarily modest woman, far more modest about her own work than is just to it, but there is no hypocrisy in her attitude nor any false modesty. She is proud of her work and at the same time she is never quite satisfied with it. She is aware always that there is something just beyond which somehow has escaped her. I have heard her say again and again, "This is the last novel I will ever write!" but there is always another and there always will be, because she does not think that she has attained perfection. Knowing her very well, I know that she never will, for she is much too intelligent. It is impossible to imagine a smug, a complacent, Edna Ferber.

Like her mother, she is the best company in the world, not only because she is witty and intelligent but because nothing ever escapes her and if, even for a moment she is deceived, the deception does not endure and when it is gone she is the first to admit it and to laugh at herself. I have been with her in Sweden, in



A RECENT PHOTOGRAPH OF EDNA FERBER

London, in the Basque country, in New York, and never once under any circumstances has she failed. She has, as every writer should have, a fine sense of the spectacle and her presence at table in a restaurant or at a party raises the whole level of gaiety and amusement. And she is just as good company on a beach or the edge of a cliff above the sea. I think the reason is . . . indeed the reason for everything about her, the very reason for Edna Ferber—is that she loves life and people, and that is a supreme gift from the gods.

We have one bond at least in common and that is our strange and unbalanced passion for and detestation for travel. She hates traveling and is uncomfortable and grumbling most of the time she is on her way. None the less she is one of the most restless souls I know. I have seen her planning trips which she does not in the least want to take. I have seen her departures and her arrivals and can testify that she is likely to be ill-humored both before and after the event. And I think I know the reasons for this strange dementia. If she has escaped the New York disease, she had no such luck with what I call the Middle Western fever.

Middle Westerners are incorrigible travelers, and I have a suspicion that it has something to do with a hunger for a sight of the sea, for variety, for the excitement which somehow or other none of us was able to find there as children. Born in the very center of a vast rich country, one grows up infected with the idea that excitement, color, and fascinat-

ing people all live just beyond that infinitely remote horizon. You have to travel no matter how much you hate it. Some of Miss Ferber's journeys are made conscientiously, in search for authenticity of background, but most of them are, I think, the result simply of a kind of cantankerous restlessness and of that old romantic trouble of trying to discover a world as fascinating as it should be.

She has been almost everywhere. Only last winter she made a flying trip to Egypt. It was not, I imagine, the ideal country to interest her. In any case, I got the impression that Miss Ferber did not care much for it and that she had not particularly enjoyed all the trouble of journeying there. She has seen a large part of the world and before she has finished, I imagine, she will have seen very nearly everything there is to see, grumbling all the while. What she likes best is America, and by that I do not mean the America of the crowded cities or even the small stuffy towns but the America of the Rocky Mountains and the desert of Arizona and New Mexico.

The superficial biographical details of her life are, I should think, well known to practically everyone in the United States who is literate. She has had what seems to me the best possible education for life in this modern America. Having been born in the Middle West, she came before she was twenty-one to know in detail the life of two or three small towns, each one a laboratory in which to study American life, and she made the most of her opportunities. She has worked for her living and knows how to make one dollar go as far as five, if that were still necessary. She has known a large share of the distinguished and clever people of the world and as many of the worldly ones as she chose, but she has no great liking for the worldly and the fashionable, either in life or in letters. She prefers to write about those solid, sometimes humble people who are the very essence of American life and she knows profoundly the difference between what is American and what is imitation European. She will never be one of those American writers who espouse the cause of the Left Wing or one of those who are influenced by the decadence of Europe. About everything she writes there is an atmosphere, a treatment, a penetration which is profoundly authentic and American.

I may have given the impression that Miss Ferber is a simple and direct person and if I have done so, I have failed

completely. She is as feminine, as intricate, as contradictory as it is well possible for a woman to be. She is a good many people rolled into one. It is not only Sarah Bernhardt and Jeremiah and Werther whom I have discovered but several other people less well defined. But then Goethe himself once said something very profound about genius being born of what we should call in these times a divided personality. If you are only one person, it is quite likely that you will be dull and not accomplish much of interest to the rest of the world.

There is much more to be said on the subject of Miss Ferber. One could indeed write an entire book with no trouble at all. But I must add that she is the soul of generosity and that she is a demon shopper. I have seen her in many parts of the world engaged in what is one of her favorite pastimes—buying lace, glass, porcelain, and Heaven knows what. It is virtually impossible for her to pass the window of an attractive shop without going in, and once inside she rarely escapes without buying. A good many of the things go to her friends but no one in the world could have enough friends to care for the shopping urge of our leading American chronicler. I am convinced that somewhere, hidden away, there is a vast room filled with packing cases and packages which bear the labels of Stockholm, Prague, London, Cairo, Biarritz, and Timbuctu, which have not yet been opened because she has been unable to think up a place for the contents. Some day I hope to see a large Edna Ferber Auction which will empty that mysterious storeroom so that she may begin all over again. Or perhaps she will only take another room.

If you have never met Miss Ferber you have lost much for she is one of the persons to know in our time. If you have her for a friend, you are more than lucky, for not only is she a stalwart friend but she has the gift of making life exciting.

History by Formula

THE UNITED STATES, 1830-1850. *The Nation and Its Sections.* By Frederick Jackson Turner. With an Introduction by Avery Craven. New York: Henry Holt & Company. 1935. \$4.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MACDONALD

THIS long-awaited book will prove a disappointment to those who had hoped that it would rival in importance "The Frontier in American History," the work upon which Turner's fame as a historian mainly rests. The disappointment will be due only in part to the fact that the book, in spite of fifteen years of labor and more of thought, was still unfinished when Turner died. That situation has been met, as far as it was possible to meet it, by Professor Craven, Dr. Max Farrand, and Turner's secretary, Merrill H. Crissey, who with affectionate care and competent scholarship have edited the manuscript and completed the bibliographical footnotes. The disappointment concerns the plan of the book, the marked contrast between its earlier and later parts, and the doubts which it suggests regarding Turner's grasp of the period as a whole.

In a brief introduction, Professor Craven undertakes to dispel the idea that Turner had "a fixed formula or thesis for American history." Turner did not, he declares, "believe that the American experience was entirely unique; he did not think that the frontier was the sole factor in producing democracy or that only good came from frontier experiences." "His approaches were never narrow," and "no one could have abhorred oversimplification more." His chief weaknesses, in Professor Craven's view, "lay in an uneven knowledge of the varied units which

made up and contributed to American life," his tendency to draw the materials for his generalizations from the Middle West, and a sympathy with the "boundless optimism of the prairies" which caused him, "regardless of the logic of facts," to end invariably "on a rising note of faith in the future, not always justified."

The defense is loyal, but the criticism is destructive. Turner may have thought himself untrammelled by a formula, but a formula nevertheless pervades his writing. He doubtless recognized that the frontier was not the whole story, but it is the frontier that bulks largest in his interpretation. Steeped as he was in the spirit of the Middle West frontier, his attitude was at bottom regional or sectional, and in the field of large national issues he was not at home. When, accordingly, he approached the comprehensive task of which this posthumous volume is the fruit, it was with prepossessions and limitations which were bound to prove hindrances.

The book falls into two parts. The first, comprising nearly two-thirds of the whole, is a detailed study of sections—New England, Middle and South Atlantic, South and North Central, and Texas and the Far West—between 1830 and 1850. With prodigal industry Turner examines the physical characteristics of the several regions, the movements of population and settlement, the racial elements of the population and the avenues of migration, the progress of agriculture, manufactures, trade and transportation, and the varied interests of labor, banking, land, education, religion, State politics, and social life. The effect as a whole is imposing.

What follows, however, is both conventional and unenlightening. The national events of the administrations of Jackson, Van Buren, Tyler, Polk, and Taylor are narrated very much as they have been narrated many times before. There is nothing essentially novel in what is said about the bank, tariff, and nullification controversies, the panic of 1837, the ups and downs of party politics, the growth of expansion sentiment and the Mexican War, or the interactions of slavery and sectionalism, nor does one gather clearly that what was happening was making inevitable a struggle over national union. With all allowance for the lack of revision which Turner would certainly have given had he lived, the absence of a chapter, never in fact written, on the Taylor administration and the Compromise of 1850, and the fact that what is now the final chapter was first designed as part of an introduction, one is forced to conclude that Turner was still thinking in terms of a thesis which only in minor parts was applicable to the period, and that the economic developments and political struggles were largely outside the range of his special interest.



GRAND RAPIDS IN 1831

From James Truslow Adams's "History of the United States" (Scribners).