

A Mural of Revolution

THE MOUNTAIN AND THE PLAIN.

By Herbert Gorman. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1936. \$3.

Reviewed by MEADE MINNIGERODE

MR. LENOTRE, to whose memory this book is dedicated, would have vastly enjoyed it. Mr. Lenotre spent his life digging up out of the records an infinity of forgotten facts with which to explode so many of the fallacies which, even in contemporary minds, ornamented the story of the French Revolution. Facts which academic erudition persists in ignoring or, at best, dismissing with easy ridicule; fallacies which have become embedded in the public mind, sacramental and dogmatic, endlessly repeated in books and reiterated from professorial chairs, until to venture to doubt their validity marks one as a heretic or, at least, a poor fool. Galileo had the same trouble.

It began right away, on July 15, 1789, when—as a result of shrewd opportunistic propaganda on the part of the National Assembly—the people of Paris learned with astonishment that it had risen in its spontaneous popular might against tyranny the day before, and conquered the Bastille. Actually it had done no such thing. A bewildered spectator, it had watched the capture of the fortress by a mob instigated for the purpose; a mob consisting partly of prison sweepings liberated to assist a horde of specially imported thugs and bandits from the surrounding countrysides, responding to the instructions of carefully coached paid agents, many of them representing the Duke of Orleans. The same type of “spontaneous” movement which, under the same auspices—yelling against a carefully superinduced famine—later swept its violence through the hall of the National Assembly and the chambers of the palace of Versailles. Later, again, but under different auspices, through the Tuileries.

But the propaganda was effective. By July 16, 1789, there was hardly a good burgher of Paris who was not quite sure that he had been one of the “Conquerors of the Bastille,” and now posterity is certain of it. Just as in America it is a matter of unchanging certainty that Aaron Burr committed “treason.” As for the Jacobin Revolution, the Revolution of 1792, 1793, and 1794, the fallacies have spread and grown until now it is become a thankless task—because it must challenge that thought which is the offspring of a wish that in that Jacobin Revolution might have been exemplified and enacted an ideal of freedom, of humanity, and of democracy—a thankless task to attempt to point out that the Jacobin Revolution, and some have called it Holy, was a mi-

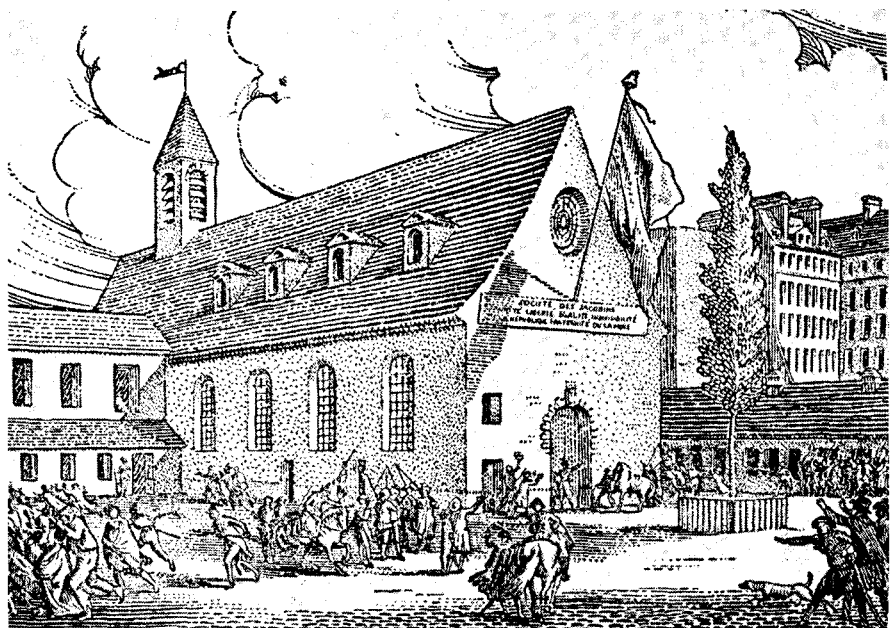
nority dictatorship of tyrannical usurpers; that its freedom was based on intolerance, that its humanity was clothed in the armor of partisan brutality, that its democracy was an autocracy of force and violence; that its Liberty was an untrammelled, and in endless cases bestial, licence; that its Equality was a frantic self preserving and enriching process of denial of any rights to all but its own votaries; that its Fraternity was seared across a shuddering land in fire and blood, sanctified with sacrilege and sweetened with wholesale massacre.

But now along comes a book—fortified by how careful and widespread a research only those who have labored in the same enormous vineyard can appreciate—a book which quietly, without passion and without sentimental hysteria, on the contrary with great restraint and equity, but inevitably, inexorably, and with the inescapable clarity of verities set free, tells the truth and beards the fallacies. Tells the truth—and this is dismaying, surely, to those who trust to history and biography as their medium—tells it and establishes it through the medium of fiction ever so much more vividly and convincingly than one could ever hope to in any other manner. There are 653 pages in this book, and in that space of non-fiction one might have crammed a far greater amount of the raw material of truth than Mr. Gorman has chosen to consider, but one would be far short of the effectiveness, the conviction, and the vitality which he achieves, by means of his imaginary characters, their emotions, their motives, and their talk, spreading like a leaven through the background which activates them while they animate it and give it

life and meaning, a form which can be apprehended, and values which can be appraised through the touchstone of human reactions and contacts.

In the story of Alain Gihon, a Common Man, seeking his destiny in the Revolution, and in the story of his personal experiences and spiritual transformations at its hands balanced against the interminable mouthings of a Thomas Paine's childlike trust in an ideal founded on dreadful fallacies you have the main stem of the book, and the guiding thread through the tapestry of the Revolution. Paine, a man of the clouds, helped to create the Mountain with a flow of incessant words, excellent in themselves, which turned out to be powerless when the Mountain, even to Paine, became a monster devouring the words and spewing forth devils in their stead. Alain, a man of the Plain—a man of the earth, eager for regeneration and filled with the gracious generousities of youth—also helped to create the Mountain, and then found that he must repudiate it, fight it, and cleanse his soul of it. Mr. Gorman tells you why, and you will do well to attend him.

Mr. Gorman also tells you how; in a fine, gripping piece of romantic fiction in which the conventional claptrap of historical melodrama plays no part. Indeed, there are times when Mr. Gorman is almost too prudent in that respect; and one wonders whether, at the height of the Great Terror in Paris, Alain, David Livingstone, Marie, and her father could have lived as unmelodramatically and as unmolested as Mr. Gorman has willed that they should. But that is being fussy. The interplay of personal and public interests and antagonisms; the quick pen pictures of personalities—Talleyrand, Robespierre, Danton, the King—revealed through their own talk; the passing of Yves Guihon and the parting of Alain



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and David—all that is fine, well, and deftly done.

But best of all is the principal character, the Revolution itself, roaring, and crashing, and sweating all through the book. The noise of it is continually in your ears, the splinters of it in your eyes, the smell of it in your nostrils. With the possible exception of the drive to Varennes—the breathless nip and tuck of the flight and the drama of its fore-ordained failure are somehow lacking—Mr. Gorman has dealt superbly with it and yet frugally, for he abstains from any direct participation in the majority of its climaxes. You are not at the Tuileries on August 10; you are not in the Convention for *Thermidor*; you see only one man killed in the September Massacre; you witness only a single guillotine execution; in the prisoners' warehouse at Nantes you are not shown the corpses of babies shoved into the garbage pails; but when you are through with those events and those scenes you have, nevertheless, seen the whole horrible, bloody business, and, with Alain, you understand that you must cleanse your soul of it. In any case, after Mr. Gorman's magnificent description of the storming of the Bastille, after that tremendous plunge into the streets, it was not necessary to duplicate the feat.

Some things have, no doubt, been omitted. There is very little impression given of the fatal role played by the inconsequent, would-be liberal nobility and by such brilliant word scatterers as Germaine de Staël. There is no mention of the false "red bonnets," the conservatives and royalists masquerading as ultras, and their vast influence on the course of events. Only a slight echo is found in Alain's activities of the complicated ramifications of the so-called Foreign Conspiracy against the Revolution, the constant peril and pressure of which contemporaries, at least, were well aware. The double dealing of Danton and so many of his colleagues, and their perpetual concern in a cessation of the Jacobin Revolution, is not made clear. And perhaps the greatest fallacy of all is not brought out—the fallacy which obsessed the French mind and caused it to believe that the political revolution of the American colonies was a social one, and that because there was a republic in America there was a new order of society in the new country from which French liberals, totally misunderstanding the Anglo-Saxon mind, derived their inspiration.

But a plague on omissions. Mr. Gorman was writing fiction, and he has put in what he chose and left out what seemed best to him. The resulting book is a great mural of the French Revolution. Take your mind and your soul, in the company of Alain Gihon, into its presence.

Among Mr. Minnigerode's numerous historical studies are "Jefferson, Friend of France," and "Some Mariners of France."

The Spain of Yesterday

THE OLIVE FIELD. By Ralph Bates.
New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1936.
\$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

THE Spain of today, torn by civil war, is in the headlines. The Spain of only yesterday, between civil wars, is in "The Olive Field." Newspaper correspondents are now writing one chapter, and Mr. Bates has written another chapter, of the same story. Mr. Bates's chapter runs from February 1932 to December 1934, and its climax is the great revolutionary rising in October of the latter year, under the leadership of the Socialist Party, which seemed for a moment capable of victory, only to end in defeat and temporary disaster.

"The Olive Field" is an intensely serious novel, ambitiously conceived and conscientiously elaborated, but there is much unevenness in its five hundred pages. There is unevenness of texture, of power, and of pace. It has magnificent moments, but these are too often separated by thickets of dulness. The power of the book resides in individual scenes rather than in the whole. At times the tale reminds one of a muscle-bound man; its strength is plain, but it does not move easily. Indeed, until we reach the final scenes, the reader is never caught up and carried along by the movement of the story, for the simple reason that the movement is intermittent and spasmodic. We make our own way, sometimes with difficulty, from one peak of narrative to another. But on those peaks Mr. Bates proves himself a master. And, even when he is least moving and least interesting, he is always master of the Spanish scene and the Spanish character. Seldom has an author written of a land and people, alien to his own, in accents that seem so truly native.

Broadly speaking, Mr. Bates is concerned with the relations and interactions of state, church, and workers within the Spanish Republic. But, until we reach the last portion of the novel, politics emerges only occasionally from the background. In the foreground are the workers in the

olive fields of Andalusia, and the tragic triangular story of Mudarra and Caro and Lucia,—Lucia Robledo, who loved one man and gave herself to another, who bore Diego Mudarra's child and married Joaquin Caro. It is a story of primitive emotions and complex psychology, written with unflinching candor and subtle understanding. And scarcely less important than the principal characters are the olive trees themselves, symbols of fertility and the continuity of life. The trees have their own story and their own drama; a drama in which the cherishing hands of men, and drought and hail, play parts. Nor is the reader ever unaware of the land, the old tired land of Spain, from which the olives spring.

Mr. Bates has drawn a full and detailed picture of the little olive-producing town of Los Olivares de Don Fadrique in southernmost Spain. At first somewhat confusedly, and then with greater certainty, we become acquainted with its inhabitants in



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all walks of life. The olive fields become familiar to our sight; we smell as well as see the inn of the muleteers and packmen; and we are admitted to the town brothel, familiarly known as the Black House. We listen to the talk of communists and anarchists, and watch Don Fadrique discharge workers with one hand while he buys a rare book of music, for twenty thousand pesetas, with the other. We witness the attack of the iconoclasts on the Holy Week procession, and the attempt of the water-starved small landowners to dynamite the dam which holds back the water they cannot afford to buy. We are present at the taurine death of Argote, and are plunged at last into the revolutionary turmoil of October, 1934.

But, through it all, it is the story of Mudarra and Caro and Lucia that counts, and the greatest scenes are theirs. The scene in which Diego takes Lucia; the fight between Diego and Joaquin, the scene in the shed, surely the highest point in a book of pinnacles,—these are the making of the book, the making of a book that lacks only organization to be a masterpiece in many of its parts.