

The Rise of Father Divine

GOD IN A ROLLS-ROYCE. By John Hoshor. New York: Hillman-Curl, 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by A. J. LIEBLING

THE purchase, for \$150, of an ancient Rolls-Royce limousine that was being held for arrears of garage rent, has through the years brought thousands of dollars worth of publicity to that blatant but frugal Harlem deity, Father Divine. The climactic bonus on his small investment is the title of Mr. Hoshor's book. "God in a Second-hand Car" might have sounded less impressive, but it would have told more about the little colored man whose followers insist he is "God in the Fathership Degree." (Christ, they say, was only "God in the Sonship Degree.")

The book is full of accurate information about Father, and his people, but the author in his straining to make them sound "important" and "significant" sometimes ignores on one page what he has set down on another. Thus he ascribes 2,000,000 followers to Father, for no better reason than that Father himself always claims 20,000,000. "Of the total," Mr. Hoshor guesses on page 139, "probably ten per cent are white, certainly not more than fifteen per cent."

Yet a hundred pages or so further on, he notes that the movement has not touched the South. "There are in round figures 12,000,000 Negroes in the United States. Of these 9,400,000 are in the South." Nearly three out of every four Negroes north of the Mason and Dixon Line, then, or 1,800,000 out of 2,600,000, would have to be Angels to justify his earlier estimate of 2,000,000 followers, including ten per cent of whites. This is manifestly absurd. There are about 150 blocks in colored Harlem. Father's people predominate on only two: 115th St. between Fifth and Lenox, and 126th St. between Lenox and Seventh. And Harlem is God's footstool in the New Jerusalem. That the writer has a far "higher intuition"—to borrow a favorite Father Divine phrase—of the real number, he proves in his chapter on Heavenly finances.

"Take any group of five thousand individuals, for instance, and let them pool (1) all their property, real or personal, and (2) all their efforts and income, and they could also buy Rolls-Royces, airplanes, banquets, and real estate," he says. There are, in fact, just about five thousand believers in the United States. But they belong to Divine as utterly as the House of David people belonged to Ben Purnell or the Mormons to Joseph Smith. Their collective earning power composes an enormous income for one individual. He provides clothing, board,

and very crowded lodging (if the believers do not have domestic service jobs where they "live out," in which case he saves that expense). As Mr. Hoshor writes of one particular "Kingdom"—i.e., combination mission and lodging house—"the chances are the 'take' is from two to ten times the actual expenses."

All of which indicates that Father Divine, born George Baker, may not be a "Madman," "Menace," or "Messiah," the three possibilities suggested on the title page, but a shrewd and successful business man. This quality is not incompatible with the founding of a religion. Mohammed and Mary Baker Eddy died in affluence, and Dr. Buchman is apparently doing all right for himself, too. Mr. Hoshor, however, chooses to believe that Divine has a sincere Messianic intention, the universal mingling of the white and



FATHER DIVINE

colored races, and that all his strategies have been directed toward it.

"Like a skilled general," he says, Father makes no unnecessary sacrifices, but "lays the cash of his cult on the line when by so doing such action appears likely to bring him nearer his Messianic goal." "Father Divine is a general, fighting the battle of his race, but with religion, instead of bullets." And again "like a crafty general" he has Father using "the psychology of worrying the enemy by exaggerating the number of his adherents."

"What if some of his followers' homes have been broken up, what if some have given up all their savings and insurance money, all their property and wages to the cause? What if a great many of them are headed for a pauper's grave?" the author rhetorically inquires. "Greater sacrifices have been made for other, and less worthy, causes." Father's acceptance of the cash is a matter of fact, his motive one of opinion.

Even if you don't think much of the

Hoshor interpretation, and I don't, the book is worth reading for its abundance of objective detail. It gives clearly the once "mysterious" source of the cult's income—the earnings of its members—although Mr. Hoshor seems to feel that the long mystification was a justifiable stragem to obtain publicity and converts. It also includes about everything that's definitely known about Baker's beginnings.

Mr. Liebling did extensive research work for a recent study of Father Divine.

Jalna, Vol. 6

WHITEOAK HARVEST. By Mazo de la Roche. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1936. \$2.50.

THE shelf of Jalna books now counts six titles—which, after all, as novels go today, is the equivalent only of two such robust volumes as "Anthony Adverse" or "Gone With the Wind." But it is enough, and this latest story, its action set in the years 1934-35, gives some indication of being the last. It at any rate brings the long family chronicle to a rounded close. To a great extent the estate has been the protagonist of the series. Generations of the Whiteoaks come and go, but Jalna goes on forever. In the penultimate volume, Jalna for the first time in its crowded history bowed to a mortgage, and readers feared the worst. The essential theme of this latest fast-moving story is the development of the threat to the estate, and the timely rescue of house and acres by the resourceful Renny Whiteoak. There is much subsidiary action: marital discords, religious conversion, the clash of neurotic personalities, provide busy chapters and ample suspense even apart from the mortgage. All surviving members of the Whiteoak clan, even to the old uncles returned from England, appear again. An illegitimate child emerges on the scene. But the essential story remains that of the estate, and in the last pages the lifting of the mortgage gives the effect of a peaceful close to the whole series of books.

The greatest merit of Miss de la Roche's earlier volumes lay in their rich, varied, and convincing character studies. As the chronicle progressed it has been natural for her to take the old characters ready-made, and the newer ones she has invented have lacked originality if not truth. This fact alone would account for a deliquescence in literary power. It must be added that the author has of late yielded somewhat to the temptations of melodramatic or saccharine situations. The constant succession of "scenes" in this book jades the reader. But it seems ungracious to say much in criticism of the writer who gave us "Jalna" and "Whiteoaks of Jalna"; few families anywhere in recent fiction can compare with them, and there are many readers who will be thankful for the entire six volumes.

The BOWLING GREEN by Christopher Morley

"A NIGHT AT AN INN" or, The Cinque Ports

[Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett,
18th Baron Dunsany—Who's Who.]

TO bedward, says EDWARD.
I'm on, cries JOHN.
It helps to shorten the night, quoth
MORETON.

Just a glass of port, to relax, says DRAX.
And now we've drunk it, mumbles
PLUNKETT,

Come on, old zany.

And so all five, with yawns and snorts,
Having partaken their Cinque Ports,
Are merged in bed as LORD DUNSANY.

Notebook in Spiral Binding

At this beginning of the college year, I think you'll be pleased to know that the oldest university in the western world—San Marcos, in Lima, Peru—is again open and its beautiful palm-treed patios lively with students. When I saw it two years ago, San Marcos was closed under military guard. But now it is again busy at its teaching job; through the quadrangles comes the sharp trilling of time-bells and the hurry of feet on the old wooden stair under the portrait of Fray Tomás, the founder (in 1551). I had chance, a few weeks ago, for a brief ramble there, and noticed particularly—as at every school and college the world over—the multitude of notices on the bulletin boards. Among them was a synopsis of a course in Literatura Castellana and I wished I might have attended the lecture, then being given, on *la poesía juglaresca*. The *juglar* is what we would call the jongleur or troubadour. The synopsis made me think of Vachel Lindsay's very practical instructions in his *Handy Guide for Beggars*. It listed the kind of recompense received by the *juglar*: *sobre todo, dinero y paños para sus vestidos; alimentos, vino, a veces caballos*—"above all, money and cloth for his garments; food, wine, sometimes horses." There were, the notice added, *juglares de a pie y de caballo*: "jugglers both on foot and on horseback."

There is something very pleasant in South American loyalty to the great name of Castile. For though the dialect of the streets is by no means Castilian in accent, they always use the word to mean the language of Spain. If, for instance, you ask a newsdealer if he has any Northamerican magazines, he will reply, "No, only Castellano."

Among these public notices was posted

a letter that had come to the Rector of the University of San Marcos from Route 3, Red Oak, Iowa, dated May 15, 1936. *Estimado Señor* it began, respectfully enough, and went on to say that a young Iowan was trying to learn Spanish (he should have said "Castellano") and would like to improve himself by exchanging letters with one of the students of San Marcos. He concluded with a burst of intimacy which may have surprised the Rector—*Tu afectísimo amigo*. Anyhow I hope one of the young Peruvians has taken him up and that a lively correspondence is going on between Lima and Red Oak.

Speaking of struggles in Castilian, I must warn the traveler not to address a hotel chambermaid (as I did) *Oiga, camarone!* It seemed to me that she was a little startled, but she answered pleasantly enough; and fortunately she was of very small stature so the phrase was not completely inappropriate. It means *Hey, shrimp*. The word for chambermaid is *camarera*.



ECUADOR
STAMPS...

Another Northamerican touch on one of the San Marcos bulletin boards was a statement (in English) about Effective Education, quoted from Norman F. Coleman of Reed College and set as a translation exercise in one of the courses.

For me, any of those South American towns offered innumerable exercises in translation. It struck me that Spanish lends itself better than English to the lapidary art of brief inscription. Lima did a great deal in the way of cleaning and decoration for its 400th anniversary last year; I found many tablets in honor of writers and artists which had been put up since I was there before. The text of these epigraphs I thought delightful. For instance:—

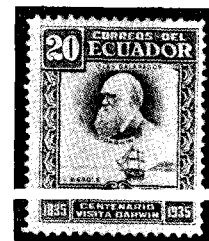
LEONIDAS YEROVI (1882-1917)

Gran Poeta Bohemio

Que Resumó Dolor i Gracia

(Great Bohemian poet who united sadness and charm) and another to Don Felipe Pardo y Aliaga (1806-1868) el Egregio Satirico. There is something keenly salutary for the wandering mind to be exposed at every turn to names, ideas, traditions, of which it knows nothing, nothing whatever. I felt a curiously congenial pleasure in saluting these memorials of writers of whom I had never heard. They had their own hopes, disappointments, amusements, angers; in fact the Bohemian, I was told, was killed at the door of the newspaper office where

he worked, in some romantic or political feud. The world of New York, which is important to us, meant nothing to them. It is pleasant sometimes to try to blot out everything known and familiar and live merely in superficial sensibility.—If you find yourself homesick for North-america you can always go to the movies, pondering meanwhile what sort of idea of the yanqui or gringo civilization young South Americans gather in their theatres. I fear they may imagine us a race alternating great physical comeliness with fantastic clowning. At any



... FOR DARWIN
CENTENNIAL

rate I got a pretty clear hunch that the young South American hidalgo takes his sartorial suggestion mostly from Hollywood.

I feel it worth interjecting that it does not matter how mistaken casual impressions may be provided they are sincere; I prefer substantive error to doctrineering fact. An honestly wrong impression is interesting because it often induces examination of the observer to find out what was his private coefficient that made him feel that way. Who for instance was the temperamental observer who in the Steamship Folder described the great cathedral in Lima as built of "gray stone"? As a matter of fact its greatest charm is that it's made of yellow adobe. In a sunset light it shines in beautiful orange and umber tints. But someone took a hasty look at it in the silvery mizzling weather of Peruvian winter and remembered how gray it looked.—They made a mistake when they scrubbed and brightened Lima's fine old tawny churches for the fourth centennial. Much of their loveliness lay in the swarthy patina of age.

Of the cathedral, I liked best to loiter at the open side door where a soft cool air blows across the dusky nave. If you stand straddling the sill, with one nostril you catch the sweet incense from inside, with the other the sharp tang of mid-day onions cooking across the street. By moving a little to one side or another you can blend and balance the two. There is obviously something in both that appeals specially to Spanish temperament. The ancient and supersweet vapors of the church, the rank and pagan whiff of the hodiernal onion, these are not impossible as symbol of their social division.

As a reporter of literary matters, I think I should note that a large book-

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