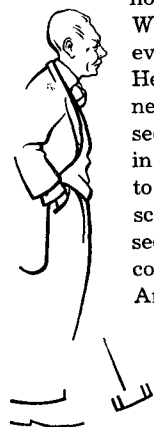


Symbols of War

THE CROQUET PLAYER. By H. G. Wells. New York: The Viking Press. 1937. \$1.25.

Reviewed by GEORGE STEVENS

A FANTASY may or may not have a definite meaning. In general, those which are the most deeply imaginative are also the most indefinite; every reader of "The Turn of the Screw," for instance, or of Mr. Wells's own "Time Machine," can give it a different interpretation, or can take it for its own sake with no interpretation at all. Mr. Wells's new fantasy, however, is explicitly allegorical. He sees the powers of darkness walking the earth; he sees primitive man rising up in the modern unconscious to threaten the civilized, conscious area of the mind; he sees the inevitable next war coming closer and closer. And he has symbolized his fears in this short novel.



Drawings from "The Croquet Player."

"The Croquet Player" is a story within a story. At a resort on the Norman coast, an ordinary, ineffectual young man named George Frobisher, whose only distinction is in being a good croquet player, becomes an unwilling listener to a fantastic tale of horror related by Dr. Finchatton, who is undergoing a psychiatric cure for his shattered nerves. This Dr. Finchatton has had to leave his practice in Cainsmarsh, where the inscrutable force of evil seems to rise like an emanation from the fens to possess the inhabitants with sadistic madness. He has fought against this force, tried first to ignore it as a figment of his imagination, later to find a scientific explanation for it, and ended by capitulating to it. He tells Frobisher this story of mounting terrors, beginning with a dog found mangled by the roadside, continuing through hints and signs of unnamed depravities, concluding with an attempted murder by the fanatical rector of the parish. He has fled first to a local archeologist, and at last to the psychiatrist in the French resort. In the final chapter the psychiatrist forces on the still unwilling croquet player the explanation of what was already implicit in Finchatton's story.

Mr. Wells's technique is the accepted one of horror stories—to enhance the horror by telling it through the medium of a perfectly normal narrator. But while it is interesting and skillfully told, it fails to make your flesh creep. Nor has it the compelling ingenuity of such earlier fantasies as "The Time Machine." The au-

thor knows too definitely what he means; he could as easily have said it another way—in fact, he often has; and the result is a fantasy not written for itself, but superimposed upon an idea. Unnamed evil is always more terrifying than specific evil, even more terrifying than so catastrophic a specific evil as the next war, and our universal plunge, when that war comes, into unconscious barbarism.

A Miniature Epic

EL INDIO. By Gregorio López y Fuentes. Illustrations by Diego Rivera. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ISAAC GOLDBERG

THE quality of this literary importation—the first to receive the National Prize of Literature in Mexico—is perhaps best suggested by the striking quality of the illustrations by Rivera. With a clear, firm line the artist achieves, within the dimensions of a page, and without the suggestion of crowding or confusion, the content of a mural. This, precisely, is what the author of this highly original document has accomplished in his sure, plastic prose.

Whether "El Indio" may properly be called a novel is beside the question; as a matter of definition it is rather a miniature epic. A proud Indian youth is crippled by the cupidity of the white man, equally lustful for gold and for women. The compatriot who discovers him mutilated at the bottom of a gully wins away his sweetheart. A war of sorcerers is waged when the father of the cripple seeks vengeance upon the successful rival. The actors in this drama meet their various deaths by animal ferocity, pestilence, or the rigors of the elements; only the cripple survives. This plot, however, is but the nucleus for the evocation of a conquered race, and the nostalgia that it portrays gives way at last to the promises of education and economic justice.

By this same token a certain unobtrusive allegory inheres in the tale. No person is named; it is as if the identity of the characters, important as they are to themselves and to one another, is merged into the history and the fate of the collectivity. This adds to the fresco effect.

The author is a newspaper man in Mexico City and has written other novels. "El Indio" is superior to Azuela's "Underdogs" and to Guzman's "The Eagle and the Serpent"—the two Mexican novels of recent date best known to English readers—because López y Fuentes has, intuitively, and in generous proportions, both sight and vision. His description of the Indian rite of the "volador," and his account of the huntsman's death at the tusks of the wild peccaries are remarkable for their simple power. From a Hispanic-American culture not at its best in the longer forms of fiction comes now this excellent work that may well be studied by our own writers.

Southwest Pageant

THE SEA OF GRASS. By Conrad Richter. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1937. \$1.25.

MR. RICHTER here falls short of that crystallization of the Southwest which some of us expect from him, but nevertheless writes a fascinating novelette and makes us more than ever confident of something memorable to come. The press is currently misunderstanding the book by comparing it to "A Lost Lady," which it resembles only in length—unless Miss Cather is to be credited with inventing the heroine who strays. Other books of Miss Cather's, however, may be invoked to show precisely wherein Mr. Richter succeeds and fails. He magnificently renders the Southwestern landscape, as she did in "The Professor's House," but fails to transcend it as she did in "Death Comes for the Archbishop."

As in his short stories, Mr. Richter is here swamped in pageantry. It is a pageantry, furthermore, that is almost tapestry: his delight in the enormous backdrop reduces his human figures to formal elements in a design. His rendition of the desert is always faithful, always sensitive and tender, frequently ecstatic. But the Brobdingnagian landscape is likely to make its inhabitants look Lilliputian, and that optical effect is proper only to romantic fiction. Essentially Mr. Richter has so far merely followed his predecessors in that form. He has immensely subtilized and sophisticated the types and themes of the better Western novel, but he has not yet departed from them. The arrogant cattle baron brought down by the pygmy nesters, the Populist lawyer who is a little craven at heart, the lovely and shadowy girl from a gentler country, the hot-tempered youth who gallantly goes deathward with an epigram on his lips—fiction has been doing these types even since it discovered the cattle kingdom. Mr. Richter gives them subtlety, charm, and above all setting; he does not give them much individuality or much relationship to the country.

The realities they conventionally symbolize are still waiting for the perceptions of fiction. The social system which the cattle baron created is the submerged four-fifths which fiction has neglected for the icy grandeurs of the individualist's code; the nesters have been only ominous and picturesque in fiction but may yet be studied in a process of warm and vigorous life. Above all, the frontier wife and mother needs a celebrant. It is to be hoped that Mr. Richter will soon surfeit himself with atmosphere and decoration. If he would bring his sensitiveness, his ardor, his genuine passion to the task of understanding the country for which he has been merely painting panoramas, a frontier long closed to the American novel might be crossed at last.

Compton MacKenzie Begins a Tetralogy

THE EAST WIND. By Compton MacKenzie. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1937. \$2.75.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

THIS is the first novel of an ambitious tetralogy which, under the general title of "The Four Winds of Love," is to cover the last thirty-five years in English history. The general title is scarcely encouraging at first sight. Clearly, the whole "edifice" (so Mr. MacKenzie describes it in his introduction) is to be a romantic, not to say rococo, structure; and if anybody but Mr. MacKenzie were its architect, one might feel justified in regarding its prospects with a certain amount of misgiving. But Mr. MacKenzie is not as other romantics. He has a place in English literature which is almost unique. To understand the last flowering of romance in pre-war England you have only to read his novel "Sinister Street"; the first two volumes of "Georgian Poetry"; and the correspondence of Rupert Brooke. This is not, perhaps, a very important collection of English literature, but it reveals, as nothing else will, one corner of the mind of that generation which died in the war—a corner which, with its intermingling of the exotic and the innocent, might be compared to an expensive hot-house filled with the simplest wild flowers.

"Sinister Street" was not in the first flight of novels. Its style was cloying and over-elaborate, and its best scenes seemed always to need the assistance of moonlight or of dew or of glimmering ecclesiastical candles. But it explored, with amazing skill, the emotions of upper middle class youth in those last years of peace; and though there may be better things to explore, one has to admit that such a feat is a significant one. Mr. MacKenzie is an artist. And nothing, to my mind, proves his artistry more than does this latest novel, "The East Wind," which tells the story of a boy of seventeen in the first year of the twentieth century.

"The East Wind"—so far as its mood goes, and mood is everything with Mr. MacKenzie—is the first part of "Sinister Street" reviewed with the detachment of a twenty years' distance; and since there was nothing detached about "Sinister Street," one might expect "The East Wind" to be little better than a frigid and mannered copy. Who can revive a mood that is twenty years old? Who but Mr. MacKenzie? His novel retains and improves upon all that was best in its original. John Ogilvie differs from his prototype, Michael Fane, not because his young passions are any less immediate, but because he has moved into history, which is a forward move. I do not mean that he is a modern character, in the sense that a novelist of this generation

would have conceived him as Mr. MacKenzie; he is simply more rounded, more visible, more securely in his period.

He is definitely a period character, but in his case the years have not condemned. He is a boy of the early twentieth century, passing out of adolescence in an early twentieth century manner—that is, through the imagination of an early twentieth century artist. Everything else is period, too—everything that matters.

Of course, there are some concessions. John Ogilvie questions English imperialism in terms which would have been impossible for a boy in 1901. Some characters have been introduced in order to explain 1901 to 1936. The whole English scene is tidier, to please history. But what really concerns us in the story of John Ogilvie is his emotional life. I do not think it would be fair to Mr. MacKenzie to repeat this story. His is a romantic who has not chosen, or has been unable, to modernize his romanticism. His faults and preoccupations are what they used to be; and his plot—with its mingling elements of the innocent, the humorous, and the bizarre—might sound a little tedious in a bare repetition. Perhaps it is, at times; the boys talk too cleverly and too long; but this does not impair its extraordinary inner freshness, its refusal either to change or to grow old. As to the character and fate of the next three novels, you feel more than a little dubious. But that is in the future. Meanwhile, those who miss reading "The East Wind" will be missing an exceedingly good thing.

Soviet Surfaces

I VISIT THE SOVIETS. By E. M. Delafield. New York: Harper & Bros. 1937. \$2.50

Reviewed by WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

HERE is a charming travel book—just that. It is an account of a journey, somewhat such a journey as Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Miss Ophelia" took through Uncle Tom's country a hundred years ago. Miss Delafield has sublimated Miss Ophelia and taken her to visit the Soviets. Nothing Miss Delafield could write would be dull. This book is bright and easy reading for any person over sixteen who knows a little French and has a good sense of humor and a good sense of Dickens. It is exactly the sort of book that would come from a writer not deeply interested in the significance and implications either good or bad of the Soviet system but who is a good candid camera reporter with a delightful, whimsical blemish in one corner of the lens.

The story is dramatized by sketches of various tourist types in Russia and their reactions to the Soviet civilization which are about the same reactions these types of people would reveal to any civilization



"THE TRAM IS INVARIABLY BUNGED TO THE ROOF"—Drawing by Leo Manso, from "I Visit the Soviets."

which differed from their own. Mark Twain, in Europe, two generations ago, brought home the same story of the Continent to Americans in his "Tramp Abroad" and "Innocents Abroad." But of course Mark Twain was a humorist and a prince of story tellers. There was no depth to his travel books in those days. He reflected the surface of things. As the British lady who "visits the Soviets" reflects the surface of Russia.

But at the surface the story ends. It never gets to the root of things. Miss Delafield is not interested in the proletarian philosophy. Apparently she was not irked by the tyranny of the proletarian dictatorship, chiefly because it does not touch the tourist as he flits from flower to flower through Russia. Dictators are tolerant of tourists. Some of their best friends are tourists. So, generally speaking, the tyrants let the tourists go hang. Whatever of fear, whatever of anxiety, whatever of trouble lies deeply in the Russian heart and is submerged in curious manifestations of released repression did not interest Miss Delafield. Or if they interested her she preferred not to interest her readers greatly in such matters. Her book, therefore, except as a beautiful example of how to be polite while visiting queer neighbors, is of no great importance. That she has set down the facts accurately, often delightfully, certainly plausibly, no one can deny. But that she has told anything like the truth, the fundamental truth about Russia and what it all means, why it is and what it may come to, no one, probably the least of all Miss Delafield, would maintain. "I Visit the Soviets" is just another of those happy, interesting, snappy stories that Miss Delafield tells so beautifully.

William Allen White, editor of The Emporia Gazette, made a trip through Russia a few years ago.