

Laura Riding and the Heroic Spirit

A *TROJAN ENDING*. By Laura Riding. New York: Random House. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

IN her preface, Miss Riding tells us that she came to write a novel of the Trojan War, because "it happened to me to begin thinking of Cressida—as I might have begun thinking of my girlhood." Her interest in Cressida (which it is not too much to say, after the hint she has given us, amounts to self-identification) led her to espouse, with feminine intensity, the cause of the Trojans, to learn every legend about them and the Greeks their opponents, and to write this novel. The novel begins in Troy at the time of the beginning of the Iliad, that is, in the tenth year of the war; it parallels the events of the Iliad as far as they could be observed from within the walls, and gives her own account of the patriotic reason, heretofore unknown, for Cressida's desertion to the Greek Diomedes. Her passion for her cause has also led her to flashes of great insight, such as her description of Paris of whom she says that everything he did was of less importance than his beauty and masculinity, which, like the femininity of a beautiful woman, was his real reason for existence. But unfortunately it has also led her to incorporate in her story every legend from every source, good, bad, and indifferent, which she has found in her exhaustive study, with a preference for the legends which are less known and (so long as they are not supernatural) less likely.

The interest of Miss Riding's book lies in her devotion to her Trojans, and is concentrated in her preface. The devotion indeed runs all through the novel.

Consider: we are Troy, Trojans. Other people make a mystery of us. . . . They envy us our sanity, our imperturbability, our high standards—which we seem to live up to without violence or oratory.

And throughout the book she contrasts her Trojans, integral of life, with her Greeks, of whom she says simply that they were insane. But the high point of the book is the preface, where, in writing of great brilliance, but a distorted brilliance like Tom o' Bedlam's Song, she gives her view of the Trojans as something unique in history. Theirs was the first articulate world-conflict and, for her, the last. All the ages between, the rise and fall of empires, are to her a stony waste of statues; but the Trojans, she says, were like ourselves. "They were the preëminently stout-hearted, as we are the preëminently stout-minded."

Maintaining the unique historic importance of the Trojans involves, of course, maintaining their historic existence; but Miss Riding finds no difficulty in upholding the existence of the one Trojan who was (one would say) unknown to Troy, her heroine Cressida. Of her she says with no apparent wavering of her faith, "Even Homer, to whose imagination she must have been at least legendary-real, does not mention her." Miss Riding's exhaustive study of her subject has, of course, included the development of the legend of Cressida, from her very name, the misunderstood accusative "Chryseida" from Chryseis, (who exists independently in "A Trojan Ending"), a shadowy figure in the Iliad for whom we know only that name, meaning "Chryses' daughter"; through Boccaccio, who first gave her anything that can be called a story, to Chaucer, who first gave her anything that can be called a character.

The fact that Cressida has no character in any ancient source makes it possible to regard her as the personification of courage without contradicting them. And to her great credit, it is courage that Miss Riding admires. What she admires is the heroic spirit, which appears naturally in a society like that of Homer, and more rarely elsewhere. Miss Riding finds, and admires, the quality of the heroic in Hector's acceptance of death. She may find it equally throughout the Iliad, in the speech of Sarpedon the Greek, "Since no mortal can escape all the deaths that hover about us, let us go forward"; she may find it anywhere in the Iliad, among the Trojans, and the Greeks, through whom alone the mind of the Trojans



Seizin Press

LAURA RIDING

is known to us. She would find it also in other peoples who lived like the Homeric warriors, for example, in the Icelandic sagas. And she could find it, if she would look, in the tragedies of the Golden Age of Greece, in the "Clytemnestra" of Æschylus, the "Antigone" of Sophocles, the "Cassandra" of Euripides.

For the Greeks of the Golden Age were almost alone in combining the highest civilization with a joy in the Homeric heroism. Miss Riding thinks she has found that combination among us, but her discovery of "preëminent stout-mindedness" in our distracted world comes from the same pious wish as her discovery of courage for the frail Cressida. One need call no other witness than this book, which is inspired by the deepest and most genuine devotion to Homeric ideals and which yet, in its redundancy of detail, its preference for the marvelous over the true, its whole fantastic rococo exaggeration, seems to come only from the Alexandrian authors of the Hellenistic decadence.

A Keen Observer of Civil War America

FORTY YEARS OF AMERICAN LIFE. By Thomas Nichols. New York: Stackpole Sons. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

JUST after the Civil War two important books were written by Americans to interpret their country to the British Public. One, full, precise, analytical, was G. M. Towle's "American Society," the work of a member of our consular service; the other, with more narration and description, was Dr. Nichols's volume, here happily reprinted. As issued in 1874, it was a revision and expansion of a smaller volume published ten years earlier. Dr. Nichols had many qualifications for writing on American life. He had traveled widely North and South, was a close observer, knew many important Americans, had read and thought much, and above all held an independent and critical point of view. Disgusted by the hysteria of the Civil War and its restrictions on personal liberty, irritated also by American materialism and Calvinism, he fled to England in 1861 and there spoke his mind on American institutions. His book, shrewd, for the most part fair, and eminently well written, is well worth reading today.

The first half contains entertaining pictures of farm life in upper New England in the early part of the century; of steamboat and stagecoach travel in the Central West in the days before railroads; and of residence in Louisiana and Alabama, whither this New Hampshire youth wandered. It also gives lively descriptions of New York in the forties and fifties, with anecdotes of Poe, Fitz-Greene Halleck, Greeley, Cooper, and other notables whom Nichols knew. He read Herman Melville's "Typee" in manuscript, for he was a friend of Melville's brother; he frequently saw Charlotte Cushman as a stock actress at \$15 a week, before her English tour made her famous; he witnessed the triumphal reception of Winfield Scott after his Mexican campaigns. The second half of the volume is more topical in character. Nichols is severe upon American corruption, which he found pervasive long before the Civil War; upon the demagoguery of our politics and the mediocrity of many Presidents, including Grant; upon the low standards of the legal and medical professions; upon our love of sensation; and upon the sentimental folly of the Abolitionist approach to the Negro problem. He patriotically extolled our social democracy, however; our high standard of living; our keen interest in education; our industry; and apart from the corruption, our general purity of morals. It is a well-balanced study, and surprisingly anticipates a good many verdicts of later students upon the years 1830-70.

Allan Nevins is professor of history at Columbia University.

The BOWLING GREEN by Christopher Morley

The Trojan Horse

VII. Dichotomy

I'VE eaten, thanks, says Uncle Pan (complete with monocle) as he takes a chair in the apartment on Epsilon Street; where Cressida and Antigone are just finishing lunch.—I had a sandwich at the office. Well, my dear, I think I may say we had a good press. The interview with Miss Lyde has had a very satisfactory effect.

Definitely, Cressida says; perhaps with a little whiff of irony. Pandarus cocks his eye at her watchfully. He does not always know quite how to take her.

Your dignified behavior, he continues, was all the more favorably noticed by contrast with Princess Cassandra's deplorable outburst.

Since you've come just at lunch time, I suppose you're looking for a snort.

Just a trivial one, he agrees. He doesn't really want it, but he sees she is in a captious mood, and thinks it may help.

We're glad of an excuse, says Antigone as she makes the necessary preparations. What a morning!

How do you mean?

All the sacred cows have been calling, Antigone explains. Queen Hecuba, Lady Helen, Andromache, Creusa. They came to congratulate us on our patriotism.

PANDARUS—Excellent. That shows the power of the press.

CRESSIDA—They all brought their knitting and settled down for a good palaver.

ANTIGONE—If the Greeks can be beaten by gossip, they're certainly licked.

CRESSIDA—It was rather embarrassing, we didn't have any knitting that looked at all patriotic.

ANTIGONE—I was working on a girdle, I had to try to turn it into a muffler.

CRESSIDA—Women ought not to do so much knitting; it gives them double chins.

PANDARUS—It's looking down all the time. They should look up.

CRESSIDA—At a man, I suppose.

ANTIGONE—They get double chins on their minds too.

PANDARUS—Yes, it's terrible what life does to women.

CRESSIDA—You've been noticing it for years, haven't you.

Pandarus realizes that he's not going to get anywhere on the line of banter, so he wisely takes a drink instead. Cressida and Antigone suspect that this is his way of conceding the first round, so they feel better too. The three lift a silent toast to each other, the underlying sentiment of which, whether expressed or divined, is "To hell with Sparta."

I admit the patriotic ladies must have

been rather trying, says Uncle Pan. But they're useful as a social backstop.

They're so gruesomely earnest, poor dears, murmurs Cressida. They've got prickly heat about the affront to the goddess of Wisdom. They say she's gone over to the Greeks, the way Daddy did.

It's not impossible, Pandarus admits. But remember we still have Aphrodite on our side. Generally speaking, I think she's more useful than Pallas.

You're just arguing from your own experience, says Antigone.

I'm sorry you're both so flippant. (Pandarus is just a trifle peevish.) What I'm trying to tell you, Cressida, I think you should get out more. You need social diversion. You don't want to be an introvert.

How do you know we don't? What is it?

People who stay at home and think about themselves until they get morbid. It always makes one feel better to get out and compare yourself with other people.

That's all right for domineering creatures like you, Uncle Pan. I just don't feel gregarious.

Well, it's too bad. I suppose I made a mistake. But I can still cancel the order. What do you mean?

Get Madame Iris on the phone, I'll countermand it before it's too late.

Madame Iris, they exclaim! The dress-maker?

I'm afraid it was a liberty, he says. I told her to come up and take your order for some new clothes; as a present from me.

Pan, you darling! You old rogue, what are you up to now? You know you ought not to do that sort of thing.

We'll take it out of the War Chest. It's strictly a military measure. It's not good for morale to have the two prettiest girls in Troy shut themselves up like nuns.

Darling (Antigone to Cressida) did you notice, they're wearing a new kind of tunic, with a smooth shoulder: I saw one at the Palladium.

And the highlow waist, finished off with a peplum!

In Persian rose, and a yoke at the hip! It seems a pity to cancel it, he says, pretending to reach for the telephone. Quietly but firmly they push him back to his seat.

When's she coming up?

Some time this afternoon. I told her not until after the parade. The street will be so crowded.

Parade, here?

Yes, didn't you know? The Boulevard's torn up, so the troops will go by here on their way to the field. There's a big push scheduled this afternoon.

Poor fellows, I wish we could do something for them.

Give them a wave from the window. That's better than knitting those horrible socks.

Uncle Pan refreshes his drink. At last he feels he has the conversation under control.

You know, he says, we not only got a good press on our Palladium appearance, but we made a conquest. Quite a remarkable one; a young man of considerable importance. He saw you at the service and was completely smitten.

I'm not interested.—How do you know?

He told me so.

Wasn't that rather indiscreet?

I'm afraid I wormed it out of him. He didn't mean to tell, but he was in such a state he didn't realize what he was saying. It was quite pathetic because he's never had anything to do with women before.

That's what we need, more men like that.

Of course I shall respect his confidence. Quite right.—Who is he?

He's written some poetry about it, really quite unusual. He gave me some of his manuscripts to look over.

Uncle Pan slyly takes the papers from his pocket and glances at them. I'm glad the arts keep alive in war-time, he says. Yes, some of this is excellent. It's a pity it's too personal to be published.

Did you want us to criticize them for you?

Why my dear child, he protests, I wouldn't dream of violating a pledge. You see, they have his name on them. But I'll read you one, if you like. This one is less emotional, more in the humorous vein.

And, assuring himself of their close attention, he reads:—

I saw no merit in the scheme

Of Nature's primitive division:

Though sex, they told me, was supreme,
I held it always in suspicion:

It seemed too gross, too much imbued
With propagative purpose crude!

But now, O palinode, confess:

Dichotomy proves more appealing,
For since I saw you, loveliness,

I have a wholly different feeling:

To my astonishment intense,
Biology makes better sense.

Magnificent is Nature's plan,

Provocative, ingenious very,
To make a woman and a man

So mutually necessary:

Let Beauty flourish her allures—

I am, appetitively yours. . . .

CRESSIDA—There are a lot of words
(Continued on page 14)