

Parisian Panorama

THE HOUSE OF ALL NATIONS. By Christina Stead. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1938. \$3.

Reviewed by ELLIOT PAUL

FEW present-day writers attempt a canvas of such magnitude as Miss Stead's. International banking is a field which has been surrounded by a great deal of hokum and mystery. Miss Stead makes its personalities as vivid as James Farrell's Chicago Irish.

At the head of the Banque Mercure in Paris is Jules Bertillon, a slipshod, conceited, but presentable young man who has all the instincts of a gambler and none of a builder. William, his brother, is the balance-weight, who does most of the work and feels all the responsibility. Alphendery, an Alsatian communist, is the brains of the institution, an impractical Jew who is discontented with what he is doing, has an affection for Jules but no regard for his mind. Raccamond, who works himself into the job with all the subservience of the toady, has been a white-slaver and has been through several bankruptcies in preparation for his career as customer's man. Jules's enemy is a French politician named Jacques Carriere, who wants to break Bertillon because both of them are rated at about three hundred millions.

None of these people expects anything but trickery from the others. Alphendery, who has no fortune, is the possible exception. The others, who have money or want it in huge quantities, know that their associates will stoop to anything, that they will lick boots in a manner unworthy of an Algerian rug pedlar, that it is practically impossible for them to tell the truth, that stealing and spying and selling out to the enemy is second nature to them. Miss Stead performs the feat of describing such men and their actions objectively and without indignation. The women in the book are matter-of-fact and predatory; the whores of all prices are true to type.

The opening chapter is an epic of vulgarity—not on the part of the author, whose delicacy is Olympian. Henri Leon, grain merchant, out for an evening collects a flock of women, gives them little, gets nothing from them. Complete, meaningless waste—and still the same man, on another plane, conceives a commercial and political maneuver as delicate and powerful as a Beethoven symphony. Not only would it make him millions but it would even help people everywhere. Leon appeals to Jules to go in with him on the deal, and one of the most interesting episodes of the book results. Jules makes a hash of it. Leon cries to heaven. No millions are made and no starving nations get wheat or credit.

The book is a long one, only because

the scope is large. I was held by it to the highest pitch of excitement. There is a long list of characters published in the back pages, merchants, servants, lawyers, clients, even a poet or two. That should not cause the reader alarm. The story is so well constructed, with such originality and force, that the main characters stand out clearly. There is nothing in the book except human beings and their activities, few descriptions of scenery or interior decorations, few doses of author's philosophy. The pages are filled with conversations and concise stage directions. The essence of Miss Stead's art is dialogue. She makes her characters articulate, preserves the difference between them, makes use of their rhythms of speech, and is never in too much of a hurry. The emotional tension of the story rises and falls magnificently. This she accomplishes without padding or shorthand. There are passages which one would swear have been translated from the French, but on close examination it appears that the exact meaning could not have been conveyed another way.

"The House of All Nations," named for

a famous Paris bordel which makes a perfect symbol, is packed with memorable scenes, flashes of wit, almost everything except pathos. What is pathetic is the waste, is the inability of these surfeited men and grasping women to enjoy life or even to understand it. The victims are not widows and orphans. All the clients are rich and vicious, or rich and ill, or rich and foolish. No one starves except an eccentric millionaire, who will eat only porridge.

In this limited space it is impossible to do justice to Miss Stead's book. I only hope to convey that it is interesting and almost inexhaustible. Miss Stead possesses an immense vocabulary from which triteness only is missing, and she uses it with the utmost simplicity. Having a knowledge of her subject gained by five years of intense application of a brilliant mind, she has perfect poise but no desire to display erudition.

Miss Stead is in America, at work on a book with an American setting. Everyone interested in reading or writing should be glad to welcome her and salute her.

Elliot Paul is the author of "Concert Pitch," a novel laid in Paris, where he lived for several years, and of "The Life and Death of a Spanish Town."

Fun without Farce

SUMMER HALF. By Angela Thirkell. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

IN place of the customary disclaimer directed against the laws of libel, this book offers the modest statement: "It seems to me extremely improbable that any such school, masters, or boys could ever have existed." At first the reader may be inclined to agree with her; but that is, on reflection, only a tribute to the author's keenness of observation. For one may paraphrase Degas's immortal response to the lady who asked him why he painted such ugly women, when he replied "Mais, madame, les femmes en general sont laides!" by saying that human beings in general are improbable. It is Miss Thirkell's special gift that she can be funny without being farcical, simply by putting down the cross-purposes of everyday conversations, the passing but acute contretemps of ordinary social life, and the entertaining peculiarities of people who would seem to a less sharp-eyed observer to have no peculiarities.

Since she does not deal in the arti-

ciality of epigrams, it is hard to find a passage brief enough to show her manner. To do herself real justice she needs a broader canvas, like the chapter at the beginning in which the young hero has heroically and idiotically decided not to be a burden on his prosperous parents by studying law as he wants to do, but to begin schoolmastering so as to earn money at once; and in which, trying to announce his grave decision to his family, he finds it entirely impossible to get anybody's attention for two minutes,—and in which his martyrdom is taken for granted anyway. But Colin's misguided self-sacrifice turns out very pleasant for him and us. It introduces us to a sardonic headmaster and his pretty daughter; to various schoolboys, some good-naturedly impudent and one of

them the unworldly grind who manages simultaneously to flood the house and set it afire while studying Greek; to river picnics and pleasant scenes. And they are all portrayed in a style whose sparkle is as different from the sparkle of mere epigram as that of spring water from champagne, and as much more refreshing.



Angela Thirkell

All the Perfumes of Arabia

D'ANNUNZIO. By Tom. Antongini. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1938. \$5.

Reviewed by ERNEST BOYD

ALTHOUGH a fairly representative group of d'Annunzio's works has been translated into English, he has never been a popular figure either in England or here. For this there are two reasons. D'Annunzio was undoubtedly a consummate master of Italian prose, the greatest in modern times, and his work is well nigh untranslatable. To read d'Annunzio in French or English is to miss the music, the beauty, the exuberant verbal ingenuity, which are his sole literary *raison d'être*. Further, he has of necessity been severely bowdlerized, even in the French versions of his three most important novels, so that the very essence of his frank, esthetic, passionate sensuality is lost to all but readers of Italian. In other words, he might have been read for his style or his sexual daring, or both, but neither has been rendered by his translators.

In these circumstances the question arises as to why any human being who is not Italian would like to read a volume of nearly six hundred pages by d'Annunzio's secretary, in which it is difficult to understand whether Tom. Antongini is hero-worshipping or being a valet to his master. The phrase that no man is a hero to his valet is not correct in this instance. D'Annunzio is always a hero to Tom. Antongini; in fact he is referred to throughout as the Poet (with a capital P). We have never yet been informed as to the kind of perfume, shaving soap, or pajamas used by such nonentities as Shakespeare, Goethe, Beethoven, and Nietzsche. Fortunately this information about D'Annunzio is available.

D'Annunzio is most particular about

his personal appearance. I think that, had he nothing better to do, he would be entirely happy bathing, dressing and spraying himself with perfume from morning until night. . . . He uses on an average a pint of "Eau de Coty" daily and a perfume bottle of ordinary size may last only five or six days. In his youth his taste ran to "Crab-Apple"; at the time of the Villa Capponcina it was "Acqua Nuntia." . . . "Moussée de Diane," Atkinson's "Virelle," "Chypre," "Borgia," and "Toute la Forêt" have all, at various periods, been his favorite perfume. At the Vittoriale he favors "Peau d'Espagne," prepared specially by the Maison Coty.

It is interesting to know that "he changes his shirts so frequently that his servants are as likely as not only to refresh them with an iron and replace them with the tiers of others." It is a relief to know that d'Annunzio seldom wore jewels but he has presented precious stones and metals to the value of half a million lire to friends of both sexes. I may explain that the secretary is the person who uses the expression "friends of both sexes." Unfortunately, apparently, d'Annunzio never had a friend of any sex. He could not stand male society, and it is a fair inference that a man who cannot stand men can hardly have a friend. On the other hand, d'Annunzio had a number of women who could hardly be described as his friends nor as his victims. They could not be his victims because he held that it was inconceivable for a woman to have any feelings that mattered. In addition to his various activities as a pre-Fascist Fascist, d'Annunzio, as reported by his secretary, found himself in the curious position of incessantly spending money to get away from men who might see through him and getting away from women who were incapable of doing so.

It has generally been felt that Gabriele D'Annunzio hardly distinguished himself

in his relationship with Eleanore Duse. We readers of "Il Fuoco" have been misled, according to Mr. Antongini. Duse, it seems, was a cheap actress, never on the same level as the Poet. Consequently it would be absurd to criticize d'Annunzio for his brave and gallant relations with an inferior woman who was on the stage. To an impartial mind it might seem that the Poet should have been on the stage and La Duse somewhere else. Unfortunately the stage upon which the Poet strutted was Italy; fortunately the strutter wrote an incomparably beautiful Italian. One's appreciation of d'Annunzio's writing should not be affected by the fact that he could not write without drooling. His salivation was so copious that he generally had five handkerchiefs to dry his mouth as he drooled over his compositions. Up to date, we have no statistics to indicate the amount of saliva used by Beethoven in the composition of the Fifth Symphony. But, then, Beethoven does not seem to have had a secretary; in fact I'm not sure that he had a parlor maid. As a result we shall never know so much about him as we now can find out about Gabriele d'Annunzio.

Operatic Genius

PUCCINI AMONG FRIENDS. By Vincent Seligman. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1938. \$4.

Reviewed by ROBERT A. SIMON

THERE isn't yet any biography of Giacomo Puccini comparable to Francis Toye's magnificent chronicle of Giuseppe Verdi, but Vincent Seligman's "Puccini among Friends" offers a shrewd, intimate, and fairly comprehensive view of an operatic genius in action—and in inaction. Mr. Seligman's mother, whom her son has sketched charmingly in this book, received hundreds of letters from Puccini. They were the candid letters of a man to a woman whom he respected and trusted; and around this correspondence, Mr. Seligman has constructed a useful and engaging history of Puccini, his operas, and his opera libretti.

Readers of Specht's "Giacomo Puccini" (Mr. Seligman spans this volume occasionally, and not unjustly) and Adami's "Letters of Giacomo Puccini" may not discover many new biographical revelations in Mr. Seligman's book. The outlines of Puccini's career are simple, and the important facts evidently have always been reasonably accessible. But Mr. Seligman furnishes scores of details and anecdotes that fill out the picture of the man.

"The characteristic note," says Mr. Seligman, referring to the letters, "is what might be termed one of 'humorous despair.'" Puccini was, in his way, a perfectionist, and he rarely placed the Italian equivalent of "O. K." on anything,



"The stage upon which the Poet strutted was Italy" . . . (d'Annunzio, right, with Mussolini.)