Medical Raconteur

IN SEARCH OF COMPLICATIONS. By Eugene de Savitsch. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1940. 396 *pp.* $3.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH, M.D.

LET it be said at once that Dr. de Savitsch's story, as he himself tells it, ranks primarily as entertainment. His comments on medicine and surgery, shrewd and stimulating as many are, seem but added color to an adventurous tale. And that I think will be good news to those who are beginning to yawn at the prospect of still another doctor autobiography.

Eugene de Savitsch was born in Russia thirty-seven years ago into a well-to-do family of White Russians. When the Revolution could no longer be dismissed with haughty words and disdain, his mother journeyed to Japan with him and his sisters that they might continue their education while they awaited the passing of the storm. At seventeen he joined up with the White army in the Far East. Back in Japan, thoroughly disillusioned, his father lost in the turmoil, his mother's funds practically exhausted, he supported himself in a series of fantastic jobs and saved enough ($240) to come to San Francisco on a forged passport. Here he sold gingham in a department store, was discharged, worked in a sugar factory, and worn out by hunger and fatigue, contracted tuberculosis. There followed two years in a sanitorium from which he emerged cured and determined to become a doctor. With the help of friends, temporary jobs, and fellowships he studied at the Universities of Colorado and Chicago, assisted and watched in hospitals in Paris, Antwerp, Vienna, and others, and went off to the Congo to collect sleeping-sickness brains, a wide operating experience, and the technique of elephant hunting. Back in America again he hung out his shingle in Washington, D. C., where we leave him, convinced for our part that his adventures will continue to pile up until they surpass even those of the naive Mr. Smith of movie fame.

All of this merely suggests the geography of the story. But perhaps it is enough to show that Dr. de Savitsch is far from a Dostoievsky hero. No dreamer he, but a realist with a keen eye cocked for every opportunity for advance in the profession he has unsentimentally chosen. But his eye is a roving one as well, and it is his quick delight in contrasts, in the comedy inherent in situations and persons, the wit and understanding with which he evaluates his experiences, that give the book its uncommon interest. Doctors may not assent wholeheartedly to his comments on American medical training and hospital regimentation, but they cannot fail to be actively interested in his lively critique of French methods and in his comparisons of the various European schools and their contributions. Laboratories and hospitals figure largely in the story, but after its reading the pictures that linger are of a little Russian schoolboy arguing politics with his chum and

Eugene de Savitsch

joshing with Red soldiers, of a densely crowded train creeping across Siberia while a brave and gracious lady serves tea from a huge aluminum kettle, of a boy counting fish in the basement of a Tokyo hotel, of the same lad trembling before the cowering prisoners he has been ordered to shoot, of a youth's first walk in the Land of Opportunity and of hunger and loneliness.

Perhaps nothing in this life story is more surprising than that in its telling there is no evidence in style or vocabulary that English is not its author's native tongue. English, we are told, is the Doctor's third language.

Human Actor and Writer

MOON TIDE. By Willard Robertson. New York: Carrick & Evans. 1940. 309 *pp.* $2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

THE author's photograph, on the back of the dust cover, will perhaps be strangely familiar. Mr. Robertson is, among other things, a movie actor of considerable versatility, and you may have seen him as a lawyer, or a sheriff, or a farmer, or a harassed family man, all played with characteristic shrewdness and warmth. This is quite relevant to the matter at hand, for Mr. Robertson's very human style of acting is apparently deep-rooted in the man. He has put these same qualities into his first novel and made a very sound job of it. "Moon Tide" revolves about a situation simple to the point of tenuousness. You have a derelict Swede sailor who takes a job as helper on a bait barge, on the San Pedro coast. He prevents a girl's suicide—a little waitress he had seen one day—and takes her on his barge to keep an eye on her. There is a brief, happy interlude, and then she dies anyway, by the merest mischance. Thus the tale ends just as it seems about to begin.

Willard Robertson

There is no substance here for either depth or heroics, but rather an opportunity to speak simply of a few fundamentals. This opportunity Mr. Robertson realized thoroughly, and used it so. With unfailing taste he avoided the sentimentality that might easily have choked the tale; it is all the more genuinely effective because Swede and the girl, and the roustabouts, Japs, bartenders, fishermen, who fill in the scene, all speak a direct and earthy tongue that has the sound of truth in it. The characters are the book in this case. Quite apart from the brief episode, they move about on the waterfront and in the cafes with a vigor of their own. They bring us a strong and visualized picture of the California fishing coast. In all Mr. Robertson has managed to put a good deal into his disarmingly simple tale.

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(*Continued from page* 4)

ginning was more ruthless in England, that was simply because British men, women, and children were more helpless. There was less room and less food. The most influential humanitarian book in English, one of the most effectively moving books of all time, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," was directed not so much at slavery as such, as against the ruthless exploitation of the Negro for quick profits in the boom cotton lands of the frontier. We have never been slow with knife, pistol, or whip.

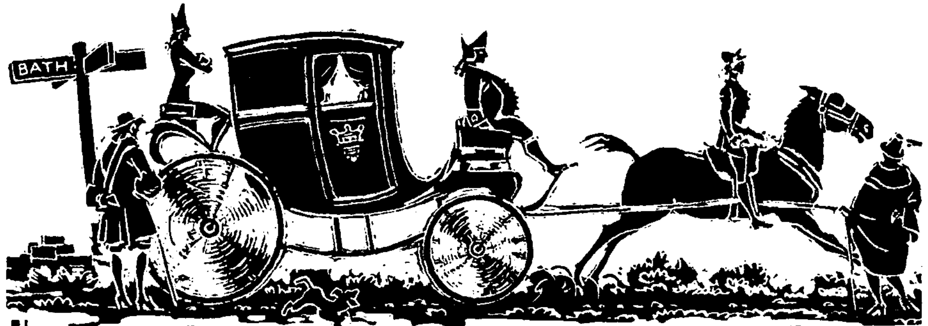
And yet never was a nation so readily touched emotionally to humanitarian ends as the American since the nineteenth century made the idea of humanitarianism familiar. The North took back the South after the Civil War without a proscription, an unheard of thing then, before, or after, in a Civil War. If there was oppression and exploitation later, that came from the other strain in our make-up. Our foreign-mission effort, of which at least two-thirds was humanitarian in its appeal, has been vast in proportion to means and population. No cause that awaked pity or sympathy has ever failed of support in this country, and as we grow rich, our contributions to world suffering have expanded out of proportion. The type political machine of the United States, Tammany, to whose methods the Nazis owe much, was built upon a basis of genuine humanitarianism combined with exploitation without scruple.

The cause, of course, of this deep-set trait is no superior quality of mercy in the stocks that settled America. However, the fact of settlement itself made them will to re-form themselves and their circumstances. Newcomers, torn from a settled environment, facing new conditions of living, separated from the tradition of stable communities upon which law and custom is based, they *had* to re-form themselves, and sooner or later re-form their neighbors. The frontiers of the United States have usually been advanced by pioneers who, having re-formed themselves once to the freedoms and necessities of the wilderness, did not choose to re-form themselves again to suit an approaching civilization. Reform in its broadest implication is in our blood because we have been conditioned by it for generations. It has become traditional, and this tradition the experiences of the latest immigrants into our industrialized society has not invalidated. They also have had both the opportunity and the necessity of re-forming themselves.

But this reforming habit of mind did not have to become humanitarian. It did not have to become moral. It was the influence, undoubtedly, of the strong Protestant tradition of a reforming ethics which made our tradition of reform so moral in its implications. An interesting comparison can be made here between the re-forming of Latin civilization in both North and South America, and our own. With the Latins, the ethical element in reform was weak, even though the religious element was durable. They sought a rich life rather than a good one.

And it was the influence of abundant opportunity in a continent working upon this ethical prepossession that seems to have made the peculiarly American blend of humanitarianism. It is more sentimental than the English because, except perhaps in the question of slavery, it has never been harshly tested. It is notably more widespread, being not confined to a class, as in the humanitarianism of the Victorian middle class, but even more characteristic of the worker than of the *rentier* or successful exploiter. It is more generous among men and women of small means because our opportunities have been more generous. We have never had to be stingy or mean, at least as a nation. Economically it may ruin us yet, for it is behind the easy good nature that, quite as much as predatory politics, is responsible for such disastrous handouts as our pension system and the uncritical character of much of our relief.

To stretch out the long list of notable American books which carry on the tradition of this humanitarianism is quite unnecessary. There are, as a matter of fact, few really hard-boiled books in the American tradition. Those which appear to be so, usually under scrutiny show, like Poe's stories of terror, a shrinking sensitiveness to pain, or like Hemingway's tough episodes,



and so to Bath

By CECIL ROBERTS

Cecil Roberts, who took us on an unforgettable European journey in "Victoria Four-Thirty," now escorts us on a leisurely trip along that famous highway from London to Bath.

What a pageant! Here are dashing blades, dandies, highwaymen, great ladies and as great courtesans. Here is the very essence of England, its villages, streams, countryside and storied figures, described with charm and appreciation by one who intimately knows every scene.

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