

Behind the Fame of Victor Hugo

THE CAREER OF VICTOR HUGO.
By Elliott M. Grant. Cambridge:
Harvard University Press. 1945. 365
pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

SWINBURNE'S inordinate admiration for Victor Hugo is as natural as Thackeray's opinion that the great Frenchman wrote nonsense, and that his novels were full of monsters—as indeed they are: sometimes farcical as well as horrible as in that absurd effort "L'Homme Qui Rit." Today who reads Hugo? And do his admirers read his poetry or his novels or both? Apart from its great merits as a scholarly, compact account of Hugo's writings, Dr. Grant's book will do a real service if it sends only a few readers to Hugo's poetry. There are no lessons to be learned from most of Hugo's fiction that cannot be learned, with less mental discomfort, from Scott, Dumas, Dostoevsky, or Dickens.

No one, of course, who is not out to condemn the whole Romantic movement, would deny that "Notre Dame de Paris" and "Les Travailleurs de la Mer" are very well worth reading, if one has the leisure; and worth more, I would say, than "Les Liaisons Dangereuses," even though I am more likely to reread Laclos than Hugo; but Hugo is great, symbolically, by his play "Hernani" and actually by many of the poems.

Dr. Grant reminds us that one of Hugo's friends confided to his diary, after hearing Hugo read "Marion de Lorne" to the Cénacle—Sainte-Beuve, Delacroix, Balzac were there, too: "No one has ever had as much form and as little thought. He never has an idea which is truly his own, not a conviction, not an observation on life, or a timeless reverie."

The sting of the criticism is in the last two words. The rest might have been written—indeed in effect often was—fifty years ago by George Bernard Shaw about Shakespeare; and is as irrelevant to Hugo's greatness as G.B.S.'s pin-pricks were to Shakespeare's.

But is it true that, in his dreams, in his poetic shaping of his world Hugo

never achieved that timelessness which the great poets, and for that matter little poets who write great poems, such as Thomas Nashe, can achieve in a verse, a line, or a phrase?

Any one familiar with "Les Châtiments," "Les Contemplations," "La Légende des Siècles" would insist that poetically Hugo has a positive and constructive quality greater than one gives to any of his contemporaries. Dr. Grant writes with rare sympathy and understanding of Hugo's achievement in poetry, and has the rare talent of swiftly appropriate quotation. Hugo's philosophy was not original; but in his restatement of old truths and old speculations—Platonic or Christian—he expressed his time with an assurance vouchsafed to few. Many critics would put him on this score higher than Tennyson, because he was acquainted with traditional Catholic philosophy, of which, in spite of his friendship with W. G. Ward, Tennyson was profoundly ignorant.

Dr. Grant sums up the case in favor of Victor Hugo with admirable advocacy in his chapter on "Les Contemplations."

In any case can there be doubt, as one closes the pages of "Les Contemplations," of the vigor of Hugo's thought, of the interest and value, if not the validity—which is always open to question in any philosophical system—of his religious and metaphysical ideas, and of the versatility and brilliance of his poetic genius? "Les Contemplations" with their reflections on human destiny, with their songs, elegies, and odes, with their extraordinary variety of poetic themes, with their dazzling metaphors and contrasts of color are a permanent, living monument to the greatness of Hugo's art and to the vivacity of his intelligence.

Then Hugo the poet can be found, tender, dreadful, threatening in one novel—"Les Misérables." It is a book of great characters as well as of great action. Hugo lacks the strange, imaginative "substitution" of Dostoevsky, by which all the characters in "The Brothers Karamazov" are the author, and all are the reader: he remains detached from us and his creatures. But he holds us in their company and under his direction: and if he is too bold when he challenges Dante—"Dante created a hell out of poetry: I have tried to create one out of reality"—he was, perhaps, right in thinking he was all the Dante the nineteenth century deserved. Anyway "Les Misérables" is a great book, to which those who are ill-acquainted with the French language and uneasy with French poetry will turn for years to come if they wish to understand the fame of Victor Hugo.

Clues from the CRIME CLUB

SOMEONE ONCE said that the true artist must learn all the rules of his craft before he can dare to ignore them. Which brings us to the thoughtful impudence of H. C. BAILEY, weaver of mystery thrillers, who plies his sinister trade with the book of rules wide open—the better to disregard them.

To the reader of adult mysteries the name BAILEY is like Sterling in silver. The prodigious work that must go into his stories doesn't "show", anymore than a fine hem shows its stitches, but the result is always a glass-smooth production, in which a meticulously woven plot makes certain interesting concessions to that unknown quantity known as a hunch.

In **THE WRONG MAN**, for instance, that sly little detective, *Joshua Clunk*, who accords the English pound as much respect as the Bible, raises the lowly hunch to the status of a science. He pays tribute to it, and to a generous "Providence" when the labyrinthine clues yield their quarry, though you suspect that Providence, being all-wise, withdrew tranquilly from the scene when she saw *Clunk* taking over the affair at Farways Inn.

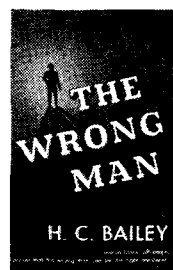
And what an affair! A missing British captain whose wife has reason to suspect that she may be his widow . . . a determined American colonel hell-bent on find-

ing him . . . the corpse of a girl buried in the woods . . . the mysterious Mr. and Mrs. Af-flock who run Farways Inn (with it's Elizabethan furniture and twentieth century plumbing) . . . and an English major, Lyd-yard, who suggests so much evil without lift-

ing voice or hand that you want him to fry—or rather to hang—even if he didn't so far forget his impeccable manners as to do someone in.

Clunk, by the way, would be horrified if anyone thought he took on his little "investigations" for anything other than money, but he piously signs his letters: "The case is much in my thoughts and prayers."

With a chess-puzzling challenger of a problem, and *Joshua Clunk* giggling his way to a stunning solution, what more could you ask for, except the book, which is the September Crime Club Selection, and is called **THE WRONG MAN**.



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The Gunman

the Phoenix Nest

TO A CHINESE DRAGON

ON pinions of what glossy plume
Fèng-huang, the fabled phoenix
flies,

A fiery pheasant through the skies
Bright rays of peace may reillumine!

From southern port and northern
range

At last the locust foes are gone.
From the Great Altai to Canton
The air is ominous with change.

Now Mao with Chiang can gild a page
To shrivel many an age of lies . . .
With Mongols freed from dynasties
Manchuria fronts a different age.

Now what the Yuans dare in Nanking
May send Asuras to their hells;
And high where the Jade Emperor
dwells

Cause all his bells of Heaven to ring;

Make white Confucius, newly sage,
Exalt vast China's larger soul;
And Lao-tzu too approve her rôle
In this apocalyptic age;

Make monstrous myth disperse like
rain,
And Wang-Mu's blossoming garden
bear—

Those peach-trees of her Western Air—
That all her world grow kind again.

Then call the Eight Immortals down
To walk her fields, her hills to bless,
Asperge her soil of all distress,
Bring plenty to the templed town;

And exorcise the ancient curse,

And lift the people from their dearth,
Till Yang and Yin inherit earth
In a new golden universe!

Buddhas, and all ye genii, hear;
And hear, O Emperor Empearled
Adream above our furious world!
The Age of All Men's Hope draws near

When the True Way shall flood with
light

The humblest hovel of the poor . . .
Jade Dawn is at the Golden Door—
Fèng-huang, the Phoenix, is in flight!

* * *

Ned Beatty Bartlow of the American Red Cross in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, sends me a newspaper story of a white-haired man of some seventy years stumbling into the Rangoon airport, surrounded by the Burmese natives who had taken care of him when he fled before the Jap invaders in 1942. Beaten by the Japanese, he sobbed as he handed the reporter yellow and faded pictures of himself, his relatives, and friends, and prayed that he would identify him. On the back of one picture was the name, Thomas Walker. Possibly he came to Burma many years ago to work in the oil fields. Another picture bore the name Bob Clark of Tulsa, Oklahoma. His wife's maiden name is Dorothy Girsham and they have a son, Jackey Clark, and a niece, Kathleen Lewis Smith. The story was taken from *The Chicago Tribune*, and Mr. Bartlow felt that it bore a similarity to Kipling's "The Man Who Was." Certainly that gaunt, staggering, parchment-skinned and weeping figure must have touched deeply the correspondent who talked to him. May he recover his memory and be returned to his own!

* * *

The following small poem comes to me without name or address, as have others in the same type of envelope:

The air still trembles
To the door that closed behind her.
But now no rocket's glide or seven-
league stride

Can ever find her,
Though every heartbeat mark
Her footsteps dwindling in the dark.
Far are the Falkland Islands, far is
Borneo,
But farther still lies half an hour ago.



Earle Walbridge, now vacationing in Vermont, takes time off to send me:

Folk of the Phoenician ilk are quite as likely to live a thousand years as threescore and beyond. Witness that favorite of my youth, "The Wonderful Adventures of Phra, the Phoenician; Retold by Edwin Lester Arnold," of which your fantasists (stfans if they prefer) might like to be reminded. Our copy here in Vermont was published in New York by the Phoenix Publishing Company, 1892, and the Vermonter who recommended and sold it to my father warned him that it was a damned lie. Arnold's father, Sir Edwin Arnold, author of the once-popular long Buddhist poem, "The Light of Asia," in his graceful Introduction put it rather less bluntly. Sir Edwin confessed that he had "taken the stupendous postulates of Phra's narrative with equanimity, if not acceptance, and derived from it a pleasure and entertainment too great to express. The author . . . has supposed a young Phoenician merchant, full of the love of adventure, and endowed with a large and observant, if very mystic, philosophy. . . . The adventurer sets out for the 'tin islands,' or Cassiterides, at a date before the Roman conquest of England. He dies and lives anew many times, but preserves his personal identity under the garb of half a dozen transmigrations."

It really is a remarkable piece of story-telling, rather formal in style but tireless in invention, and with many splendidly dramatic effects. I particularly like the embarrassing moment when Phra, after what seems to him an ordinary night's sleep, brings news of the battle of Crècy to (he supposes) Queen Philippa, and is overwhelmed by the wrath of Elizabeth Tudor!

Here is Phra's first death, as a Druid sacrifice:

"I saw the British multitude seethe in confusion and then burst and fly like the foam strands before the wind, as, out of the green thickets, at the run, their cold, brave faces all emotionless over their long brass shields, came rank upon rank of Roman legionnaires. I saw Sempronius on his white charger at their head, glittering in brass and scarlet, and finding my tongue in my extremity, 'Sempronius! I yelled, 'Sempronius to the rescue!' But too late.

"With a wavering, aimless fall the adze descended between my neck and my shoulder, the black curtain of dissolution fell over the painted picture of the world, there was a noise of a thousand rivers tumbling into a bottomless cavern, and I expired."

Once I spotted a fully illustrated edition of "Phra" on the shelves of a Fifty-ninth Street bookshop—but I never saw it from that day. Presumably it went underground for three centuries. "Dormant," like that adult novel of magic of E. Nesbit's which I have never seen at all.

* * *

Will Dorothy Lee Richardson please send me her address as I have a letter here for her from Nancy Byrd Turner?

And that is all for this week!

WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

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