

Irwin Shaw's Wartime Stories

ACT OF FAITH AND OTHER STORIES. By Irwin Shaw. New York: Random House. 1946. 212 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

THESE are chiefly stories of the war, and military adventures of the peace, told in Mr. Shaw's clean, economical, and skilful fashion. The author's plots are plots of mood and emotion, a hint and a gesture, rather than action, but there isn't a story in the book whose mild climax does not leave the reader satisfied.

The two best stories to my mind—but they are sufficiently exemplary—are "Faith at Sea" and the title story, "Act of Faith." The first of these appeared in some magazine, probably *The New Yorker*, several months ago but this reviewer found as much pleasure in a second reading as he did in the first.

"Faith At Sea" is the simplest stuff in the world—that is, the most difficult to write—and Mr. Shaw has done this one perfectly; it should go into the textbooks. There is a young lieutenant in charge of a gun crew on a freighter which has lost its convoy. One of the crew has a violent attack of acute appendicitis.

The freighter captain says simply, "That son-of-a-bitch'll die," but he does remember that somebody once left a medical book on the boat and produces an ancient, ragged volume, which he bets has appendicitis in it. Once the lieutenant begins to study this book, the sick man's Italian buddy is quite certain that everything will be fine, in the hands of his lieutenant.

The lieutenant operates successfully and Constantini watches over his buddy till morning shows that the patient will recover. (I am still wondering how the officer learned to take surgical stitches, but that is a small objection.)

"Act of Faith" is about a young Jew ready to start out on a leave to Paris with some of his friends. The question is money—the paymaster hasn't caught up with this particular outfit for months, and the captain himself can lend the little band of tourists only four of his eight dollars. Seeger, the Jew, has a Luger taken from a German SS major whom he had shot during the war, and he has a standing offer of sixty-five dollars for this from a staff captain.

He also has a letter from his father, at home, who tells him that his battle-shocked brother is taking cover all over the house because he expects American mobs to kill all the Jews.

Seeger figures that if this is a possibility he will have a use for the Luger—he does not intend to scream and pray like the European Jews.

At the same time, he remembers that his insolvent buddies have saved his life and he has saved theirs on various occasions, so he asks two of them, "What do you think of Jews?"

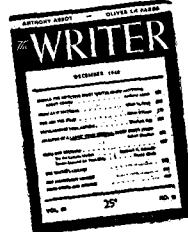
"Jews?" Olson said. "What're they? . . . I'm an uneducated fellow."

"Sorry, Bud. . . . Ask us another question. Maybe we'll do better."

So Seeger sells the gun. "What could I use it for in America?"

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Hard Times in Iowa

ACRES OF ANTAEUS. By Paul Corey. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1946. 388 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by PAUL B. SEARS

A GREAT many people who read books will not understand at once that the title "Acres of Antaeus" is based upon classical mythology rather than upon agronomy or horticulture. Those to whom this is instantly clear are likely to be fond of more subtle writing than they will find. They may make the mistake, after reading a few pages of the harsh, almost naive style, of giving up. If so, they will miss a graphic view of the Depression Era which settled like a witch's spell upon the fat lands of

Iowa, creating poverty, injustice, and frustration in the midst of plenty.

Paul Corey knows the people and the country of which he writes. He also understands the economic and technological forces which impinge upon men and landscape. The dynamics of Midwestern culture, now under such powerful strains, are also clear to him. In the album of anyone who has lived in the prairie states there will be found the counterparts of the characters used to develop the story. Even the dialogue rings true. But the effect is sketchy, and the reviewer finds himself thinking of the firm strokes with which Rebecca West has revealed the story of the Yugoslav farmers and their land.

The central figure in the book is typical—a husky, forceful, honest lad who has studied agriculture at the state college. Obligated to quit in mid-course, he emerges into a world of unemployment and frantic competition for jobs that seems incredible to us in 1946, but which actually existed in the 1930's. He gravitates into a foremanship with one of the great farming corporations which fattened on foreclosed mortgages and slave-driving until rebellion stopped them.

His wife is a country girl, sensitive enough morally to dislike the whole business in which he is involved in spite of the relative comfort and security which it promises. She wants him to get on a farm of his own where she can share the labor and the hazards. Under the circumstances this is not an easy order. For his part the young foreman, Jim Buckley, knows that a job is a job. In a muddled way he senses that a large industrial organization might supply a new kind of intelligent, scientific management for which the land is more than ready.

This contretemps between husband and wife, then, is the thread of the novel—homely enough, but impressive and interesting enough, too. If the reader will do his share as he proceeds and make some effort to read between and behind the lines, he will be rewarded. Both of the leading characters are good people, confused by the limitations of their past experience, and more so by the confusion about them.

Within the corporation is a picture of intrigue and counterplot that is realistic, if not edifying. The secondary romance of young Charley Turk, lovable, talkative, and game as a rooster, is good reading. The resolution of these problems, of the struggle of debt-ridden farmers to hold their lands, and of the personal difficulties of the chief characters comes about with a punch that will certainly commend itself to the gentlemen who engineer the production of moving pictures.

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