

# A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

## INTROSPECTION AND RETROSPECTION

By Louis Bromfield

OF these five books, each in its fashion intensely interesting, only three come strictly within the category of Memoirs. The other two—"A Story Teller's Story" and "Straws and Prayer-Books"—have little to do with any record of concrete events; rather they are curious and deeply appealing documents, the former dealing largely with what we must call the soul and the latter centring about a fine artist's progress and his theory of writing. In literary importance they far outstrip the others. Indeed, it is difficult not to devote all the space to these two alone.

The book of Sherwood Anderson is a document that is at once penetrating, filled with revelation not alone of the man who wrote it but of his country and the men who are his fellow citizens, and possessed of an unearthly, almost prophetic quality that concerns itself, unlike the others, as much with the future as with the past. It is the book of a man who has written many stories, sometimes sadly uneven, sometimes inspired, and sometimes a shade ridiculous because the gods in making him forgot a sense of humor; yet the book of a man whose terrible earnestness makes one ready to forgive everything. "A Story Teller's Story" is the best of the tales that Anderson has written, and in a fashion it is the apotheosis of them all; for Sherwood Anderson of all writers is one whose work is drawn out of himself. And so this tale includes all the other

tales which have come from his pen.

In reading it there comes to mind at once the autobiography of another man, a book called "Up Stream", which has so many of the qualities of "A Story Teller's Story" yet is utterly different. Both writers are deeply concerned with America, so much so that both books give the impression that their authors are more concerned with the nation than with themselves; but in the final effect there is little or no likeness. Ludwig Lewisohn writes of America as an alien, and with each stroke of his pen it becomes more clear that he will be until he dies an alien in whom there is little of sympathy and much of querulous criticism. Anderson, on the other hand, is an American born . . . a middle westerner, which is to say, an American of Americans. His whole book, though he voices many of the same doubts and the same criticisms as Mr. Lewisohn, is shot through with the warmth which comes only to one in whom there is a native sympathy, a feeling for the very soil, and a sense of blood kinship for the men about him, however mean or cramped or stifled they may be.

As to the material of the book, it is the material of Anderson's own stories, the stuff of which his life is made, colored by that quality of mysticism which has led some to call him a "Russian" writer. It is not incident which concerns either the author or the reader; it is always the significance which lies behind the incident that troubles both. This is a beautiful book and one that is gravely and, in portions, superbly written in a style

which must impress even the bitterest critics of the author. It is a book which every American should read and one which should be in every circulating library. To a reader who comes from the middle west it should arouse a train of memories far longer than those contained in the lengthy volumes of Marcel Proust.

"Straws and Prayer-Books" is the book of an artist, of a man who believes profoundly in an interesting theory to which he has devoted all his life as a writer. Beside it "A Story Teller's Story" becomes the work of a literary evangelist. In such a statement there is no slur intended at Sherwood Anderson; it is only that the whole tone and mood of the two are so vastly different. Cabell writes serenely from the summit of a lofty peak, and there runs through the entire narrative (for it is really a narrative) an extraordinary feeling of age, as if the author were himself an old man, instead of being forty four; as if his other books had been written half a century ago.

In the course of the twelve finely chiseled chapters Cabell touches upon many things, among them the writings of George Moore and Hergesheimer, the beauty and soundness of the Romantics and the obvious failings of the Realists, Manuel and his Biography, time itself and the changes that follow in its wake. There is much subtle and delicious humor in "Straws and Prayer-Books", not the least of which is to be found in the footnotes that are appended by the author himself for the benefit of those who will read his work long after he is dead. They are satisfactorily spiteful. For example, there is a reference to "Floyd and Ethel Dell", designated in a brief footnote as "Novelists of the day; authors of 'Charles Rex', 'Janet March', 'Greatheart', etc."

The book is written as an epilogue to Cabell's great Biography. Doubtless there will be new books and books which will fill in the gaps in the Biography, because a man who believes as Cabell believes cannot stop writing. In the end he says, "With life, then, I, upon the whole, have no personal quarrel; she has mauled, scratched and banged, she has in all ways damaged me; but she has permitted me to do that which I most wanted. So that I must, I suppose, be grateful." In that brief confession lies perhaps the kernel of every fine artist's philosophy. Of the three remaining books, all are autobiographies of the sort we have come to expect. "Memories and Adventures" is the most spirited and vigorous of the three; "Recollections of a Happy Life" the most urbane and worldly; and "Memoirs of an Editor" the most factual and informative.

Conan Doyle is one of the interesting figures of our time. He has been, in turn, sailor, physician, detective, author, historian, war correspondent, spiritualist, and the Lord alone knows how many other things. His book is the record of an active body and an inquisitive mind, packed with entertaining anecdote told in a straightforward characteristic fashion. Born in Edinburgh of a Scotch and Irish family, he has, it seems, driven his way through life almost by sheer physical force, never hesitating to alter a mind always open to questions of the day, and more than once altering the whole course of his existence. The book leaves the impression of a man who has wasted none of the short span allotted him on this planet. He does not, as might have been expected, devote a great amount of space to his adventures in spiritualism, but he ends the book on a note of faith in its teachings and confidence in the belief that the day is

not far off when his doctrines will be proved sound. His is an interesting book, changing and colorful, and one that should be read by every lover of Sherlock Holmes. The author, strange to relate, is a little ashamed of the character who made him famous; he prefers to have his immortality rest upon the foundation of "The White Company", "Micah Clarke", and others of the historical school.

The quality most impressive in Mr. Egan's book is his eye for color and character, perhaps the heritage of his early career as a writer of fiction. Also he understands the joy which every reader finds in the little details, the gossip, the rumors that make life day by day interesting. One puts down his book of memories with the feeling that here was a man who knew how to enjoy life, to pack every moment of it, not with the fierce animal activity that marks the progress of Conan Doyle, but with an intellectual restlessness touching many people and many issues. He paints a fascinating picture of the Philadelphia and the Washington of a half century ago; there is much of the Philadelphia portion which brings to mind James Huneker's "Steeplejack". It was a more interesting city in those days, and its French émigrés and Irish citizens were a more colorful lot than the suburban residents of today. But that impression may be due after all only to the roseate glow which time has imposed and the skill with which Mr. Egan recreates the city of his boyhood.

"Memoirs of an Editor", which bears the subtitle "Fifty Years of American Journalism", is without much doubt the most valuable and diverting of many books covering or touching upon this same field. Mr. Mitchell, born in Bath, Maine, came to New York at the age of eight to live in

a house on Fifth Avenue opposite the Reservoir, which in those days occupied the present site of the Public Library. He grew up in New York, and went through college with the intention of becoming a physician. To raise money for such a career he went to work on the Boston "Advertiser" . . . and, once in the newspaper world, he never left it. He was one of those to whom a newspaper is an irresistible thing. A love of the profession fills the whole book with vitality. Mr. Mitchell was one of the editors of the New York "Sun" in the great days of Dana, and his picture of that period and of the men who were prominent in it provides but a small portion of a fare that is excellent from beginning to end. It is not possible to discuss Mr. Mitchell's book without some mention of the writing; it is an admirable job . . . clear, vivid, even pictorial, and never overwritten.

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A Story Teller's Story. By Sherwood Anderson. B. W. Huebsch.  
Straws and Prayer-Books. By James Branch Cabell. Robert M. McBride and Co.  
Memories and Adventures. By Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Little, Brown and Co.  
Recollections of a Happy Life. By Maurice Francis Egan. George H. Doran Company.  
Memoirs of an Editor. By E. P. Mitchell. Charles Scribner's Sons.