

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

TWO OUT OF A POSSIBLE THREE

By Ruth Hale

EXPERIENCE has taught us that autobiographies are usually written by people who have been considerably picked on, and who aim to place their side of the matter before the public while there is yet time. The majestic feeling of being able to say to oneself, when the slings and arrows are flying, "Of course, I could tell you a thing or two if I would", seems to find its most satisfying outlet in an autobiography.

Well, writing a book, or copying out your love letters, is certainly a hard enough job, and we ought not to begrudge the authors even their feeblest source of energy for so doing. If we have a complaint against any of the three ladies whose lives and times are here at hand: Lady Susan Townley's "Indiscretions", Margot Asquith's *Autobiography*, and Mrs. Pat Campbell's "My Life and Some Letters"—it is that their apologiæ are largely for the lives of their husbands, to whose emotions upon being so championed we can imagine nothing being added but a pained surprise.

We will say at the outset that if you should happen to want to get one or all of these chronicles, you will find in Margot a candid though somewhat chaotic tale bearing on political doings in England from about 1900 on; in Mrs. Pat an obliquely revealing story of a fine if somewhat muddled woman in London's world of letters; and in Lady Susan the reason why we, for

one, shrink at the very mention of her name.

Lady Susan describes her life as the wife of a diplomat who appears to have been hastened about from place to place by his Foreign Office, giving her constant new fields for the play of her sprightly temperament and subject matter for her memoirs. In her final chapter she tells how her husband failed of a deserved promotion because, so the Foreign Office said, of "the indiscretions of Lady Susan". Therefore the book's title. The Foreign Office then, apparently, behaved very badly indeed in refusing her a hearing. But we felt sure we knew why. If they knew the half about her that her book lets out, they simply couldn't abide the woman, and yet did not have quite the heart to say so. What she actually did, on her own accounting, wasn't a patch on what we've known the wives of other diplomats to do, from a certain part of our past spent reporting in Washington; but if she was not particularly indiscreet, she was invariably arrogant and vainglorious. She hadn't the knack of doing things, and she thought she had. The combination is fatal, and we devoutly hope we have heard the last of Lady Susan.

It is a great relief to turn to Mrs. Pat. She also does what she can for her husbands: Sergeant Patrick Campbell and George Cornwallis-West. But Mrs. Pat would have to marry Moses, or Mustapha Kemal, or heaven knows whom, to get a husband who could be half as interesting as she is herself, so by virtue of this specific gravity she remains the central figure

of her book. She tells of her life very honorably, not trying to make it more or less distinguished than it is. She tells of her rôles, which of them were successful and which were failures, and usually very acutely why. Then she undoes her old letters for us. Some of them are splendid, and some of them, particularly those from Bernard Shaw, are positively news. Who would have thought that Shaw could sign a letter, for instance, with "Good nightest". We made great haste, when we came upon it, to fight back the impulse to gag; but after all, if Shaw could bear to write it we ought to be able to read it, and we cannot suppose that Mrs. Pat simply made it up on him. Her book is the revelation of a woman whose spirit is both large and high, whose history has been amusing, stirring, tragic, and rounded. You will be sure to like her.

You may not be so sure to like Margot Asquith, but you cannot very well help being stimulated by her. We are going a long way round to try and describe one peculiar quality of her. When Dean Kirchwey waked up one morning to find himself on one of Archie Stevenson's little lists of dangerous persons during the war, Kirchwey said promptly: "I'd like to wring his neck." The irritated informality of that phrase immediately dropped Stevenson and all his works forty fathoms beneath the serious consideration of any sane person. As far as Kirchwey was concerned, Stevenson could contain no menace. Well, we can imagine that many English politicians must often have felt that same exasperation at Margot Asquith, accompanied by exactly that same absence of fear. She does appear to have mixed a good deal in things that did not need her. But those who thought her possessed of the slightest evil in-

tent, to her country, to her people, or to anything else, must have been simpletons. She is an honest woman, one of personal force so great that no limitations whatever could restrain her. She is generous, tolerant, impetuous, and full of healthy inquisitiveness. And, although she might—in fact must—have injured many a statesman's sense of official dignity, she does not anywhere appear to have injured anybody's sense of personal dignity, which shows her innately and deeply kind. The rather large gesture of her dedication: "*Les chiens aboient, la caravane passe*", which she credits to her son-in-law, Prince Antoine Bibesco, is of a piece with her. That was the attitude which nurtured her energy to breeze through politics. We think it grossly unfair to ascribe to her the mediocre showing of her husband in the last election. The left wing of English politics, in the last four years, has moved so violently leftward that the former outpost of the party is now a mere *embusqué*. Anyway, whether calamitous or not, the final two volumes of her autobiography are gay and interesting, and seeing that they are about politics, that is no mean testimony.

"Indiscretions" of Lady Susan. By Lady Susan Townley. D. Appleton and Co.
My Life and Some Letters. By Mrs. Patrick Campbell (Beatrice Stella Cornwallis-West). Dodd, Mead and Co.
Margot Asquith: An Autobiography. Volumes III and IV. George H. Doran Company.