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Guy Chapman, author of "A Passionate Prodigality"

Books Reviewed

A PASSIONATE PRODIGALITY. By Guy Chapman. (Nicholson and Watson, 7/6 net.)

DOWN AND OUT IN LONDON AND PARIS. By George Orwell. (Gollancz, 8/6 net.)

GARBAGE

By H. E. Bates

THESE two autobiographies, one a narrative of war, and the other of so-called peace, have much in common. They have both a fine air of reality and truth, their foullest horrors and most atrocious improbabilities are convincing, and though both are written out of bitterness neither is written with bitterness.

It is conceivable that their authors might once have cherished a thousand grievances against the system which made them sweat with horror and pain in the mud of French battlefields, and the garbage of Parisian hotel-kitchens, but they have outlived those grievances and can now look with detachment on the horrors they suffered in order that humanity might be butchered or fed.

Their books are therefore important not only as narratives of real life—or perhaps one should say unreal life—but as social documents.

A Passionate Prodigality, though there is not a word of argument in its 350 pages, is the most powerful kind of argument against war: the incontrovertible argument of bare, terrible, unforgettable facts; and Mr. Orwell's account of the working conditions of Paris hotel-scullions at once infuriates the mind and touches the heart, making one enraged and wretched at the miseries of one's fellow men.

A Passionate Prodigality is not merely an autobiography of an officer. It is also the biography of a battalion—"for a long time I used to think of myself as part of a battalion, and not as an individual." The battalion is the hero of the book: "This body of men had been so much part of me that its disintegration would bear away something I cared for more than I could have believed. I was it and it was I."

And it is because of that devotion to the battalion, of the individual to the mass, that the book has more than a mere personal value. It is a personal record, but it is also the history of a generation.

Mr. Chapman joined the New Army on the eve of 1915, without romantic illusions, "not eager, or even resigned to self-sacrifice," and, except for a brief period with the Staff, he remained with his original battalion until its disbandment in 1919, and he describes it from its first rawness and terror, and its first acquaintance with death, through its indifference to death and suffering, to its final passing over the frontier into Germany:—

> "Beyond, a dark grey morning, windless, with a hint of drizzle, colourless trees and hedges, and no sound but the steam from the engine. The train jerked into movement. We passed over into Germany. No trumpets sounded."

A Passionate Prodigality is at once a terrible and a noble record. It is enthralling as a pure narrative and appalling as a document. It would be unbearable if it were written with bitterness or without the spirit of understanding and compassion which marks it from first to last. Its writing is admirable, the prose sure, sensitive, penetrating, in the truest sense of the word witty, and, above all, convincing and moving. Tired though we may be of war and the thought of war we cannot ignore such a book as this.

Mr. George Orwell's book is also something more than a mere autobiography. Like *A Passionate Prodigality*, it gains in strength and significance by being the record of the lives of a body of men—in this case of dish-washers and tramps and Embankment sleepers. The author himself describes it as "a fairly trivial story," adding slyly, nevertheless: "here is the world which awaits you if you are ever penniless."

The story of his poverty in Paris is fascinating but terrible reading. After being workless for weeks he succeeded in getting a job as a *plongeur*, a scullion, in a hotel de luxe. He became at once a slave, working in hot and filthy underground kitchens for fifteen hours a day, sweating and rushing hither and thither in order to feed a rich and invisible monster on a floor above, a monster who in turn was completely ignorant of the filth through which his exquisite and expensive food was passing:

> "Fool! Why do you wash that plate? Wipe it on your trousers. Who cares about customers? *They* don't know what's going on. What is restaurant work? You are carving a chicken and it falls on the floor. You apologise, you bow, you go out; and in five minutes you come back by another door—with the same chicken. That is restaurant work."

And again:

> "The dirt in the Hotel X, as soon as one penetrated into the service quarters, was revolting. Our cafeterie had year-old filth in all the dark corners, and the bread bin was infested with cockroaches. . . . In the kitchen the dirt was worse. It is not a figure of speech, it is a mere statement of fact, to say that a French cook will spit in the soup—that is if he is not going to drink it himself. . . . Roughly speaking, the more one pays for food the more sweat and spittle one is obliged to eat with it."

His account of lodging houses in London and workhouses up and down England is just as pretty. Yet he confesses only to have touched the fringe of poverty, to have learned only a few things:

> "I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy, nor subscribe to the Salvation Army, nor pawn my clothes, nor refuse a handbill, nor enjoy a meal at a smart restaurant."

His book ought to be read by all who are concerned with the way the other half of the world lives; and not least by those who fancy they know already.

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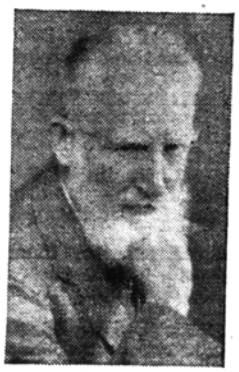

Portrait by Dorothy Wilding

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