

The Interesting Dullness of Dreiser's Life

By Burton Rascoe

A BOOK ABOUT MEN. By Theodore Dreiser. Published by Dorn & Librecht, New York, 1922.

THE most interesting thing about this interesting autobiography is the singular uneventfulness of Mr. Dreiser's youth. Nothing in particular happened to him. He had his sweethearts; but what youth has not, and with more rapid frequency, greater moonshine, happier novelty and more signal success than had Mr. Dreiser? During all his years as a newspaper reporter, in Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and New York, he seems to have had but one adventure, to have been witness to or assigned to cover but one catastrophe and that quite by accident. You have but to remember that he was a reporter in Chicago during the wide-open days following the World's Fair, in Pittsburgh when that city was just reaching its apotheosis as a community of steel and poverty, in New York when Richard Harding Davis, David Graham Phillips, Arthur Brisbane and Samuel Hopkins Adams were on the rise as newspaper men, to wonder what Mr. Dreiser was doing when a great deal of interesting hell was popping all about him.

There is an unconscious irony in these revelations. Or perhaps the irony is conscious. There was never a youth who started out in life with a more grandiose impediment of romantic illusions; and there was never a romantic youth who encountered fewer dragons to slay, fewer maidens to rescue and fewer varlets to put in their place than Mr. Dreiser. He had almost no fun at all. He held hands here and there; he missed, he tells us, one or two opportunities; having his breakfast in a diner once he had the momentary satisfaction of an aristocrat when a yokel on the platform of a bleak way station gazed upon him in saucer-eyed envy and admiration; he bought a Stetson hat broad-brimmed enough for Buffalo Bill and a military coat long enough to fit the late Grand Duke Michael Michaelovitch to go courting in; he played up to his relatives once far too effectively for solvency as a man of mark, position and salary; Arthur Brisbane was once kind to him; and he chaperoned a delegation of school teachers on a visit to the World's Fair. But the unexpected, serio-comic, ludicrous-pathetic, Rabelaisian escapades and adventures the cavalieri reporter is usually heir to, Mr. Dreiser never had. His brother, Paul Dreiser, had them, and he was not a newspaper man. One gets an impression of Theodore as a moony, much-troubled, poetic, shy and diffident young man stumbling dreamily, vaguely through the murky streets of Chicago and Pittsburgh, transferring the self pity of his poverty into an easy and comforting pity for the people of the slums, challenging the God of his pious German Catholic parents to answer for the miseries of the world and his own, finding a momentary solace in the flattery of a smile or a kiss, catching a fleeting glimpse of beauty in a sunset, the shadows of a city street, the foliage of a city park, the trim body of a pretty girl, or of a campanile against a winter sky. But his adventures were those of the spirit, not of the flesh.

That is why it was on the calendar that Mr. Dreiser should become a novelist and not a great newspaper man. All the factors of his early life, which may be discovered in the frank and beautiful pages of "A Hoosier Holiday," "A Traveler at Forty," and the chapter on his brother Paul in "Twelve Men," tended to mold him into a man of dramatic imagination, romantically inclined. And life is not dramatic; only art is that. Life is melodramatic, with elements of low comedy relief; and to be a good journalist, a good reporter, one must recognize this truth. Mr. Dreiser was not a good reporter; he might have made a fair to middling editorial writer or a Sunday feature man, for he thought in dramatic terms, with wistful overtones of criticism and of wonder; but he had not the equipment to see events in a cynical, cool light as a spectacle, amusing, pathetic, ephemeral—as ephemeral as last year's great murder mystery. He had much, far too much, soul.

IT MUST be a cause for pain and chagrin to Mr. Dreiser's detractors as a novelist, who urge against him the single score of immorality, to read this book. On the face of it this self-revelation is frank and sincere. Mr. Dreiser has the conspicuous virtue of all great confessors: he does not hide the truth even when it makes him ridiculous. For cer-

tainly he is in turn pathetic and lovable, sublime and ludicrous. He is, like the George Moore of "Hail and Farewell," much and often a booby; he is, like the St. Augustine of the "Confessions," much and often a noodle; he is, like Rousseau, much and often an ass; he is, like Casanova, much and often a vain and comical boaster; he is, like Bunyan and Dickens, in frequent bad taste; but he is forever and always frank, honest and sincere. He blurts it all out. "Here I am," says he, "in all my nakedness. I have tried hard, desperately hard, to find some meaning, some symmetry, some meaning to life. I have thought as much as it is in my capacity to think; I have felt as much as it is in my capacity to feel; I have experimented, struggled, fought, argued to the limit of my capabilities that those who come after me may know something more of life than I. I have learned little, damned

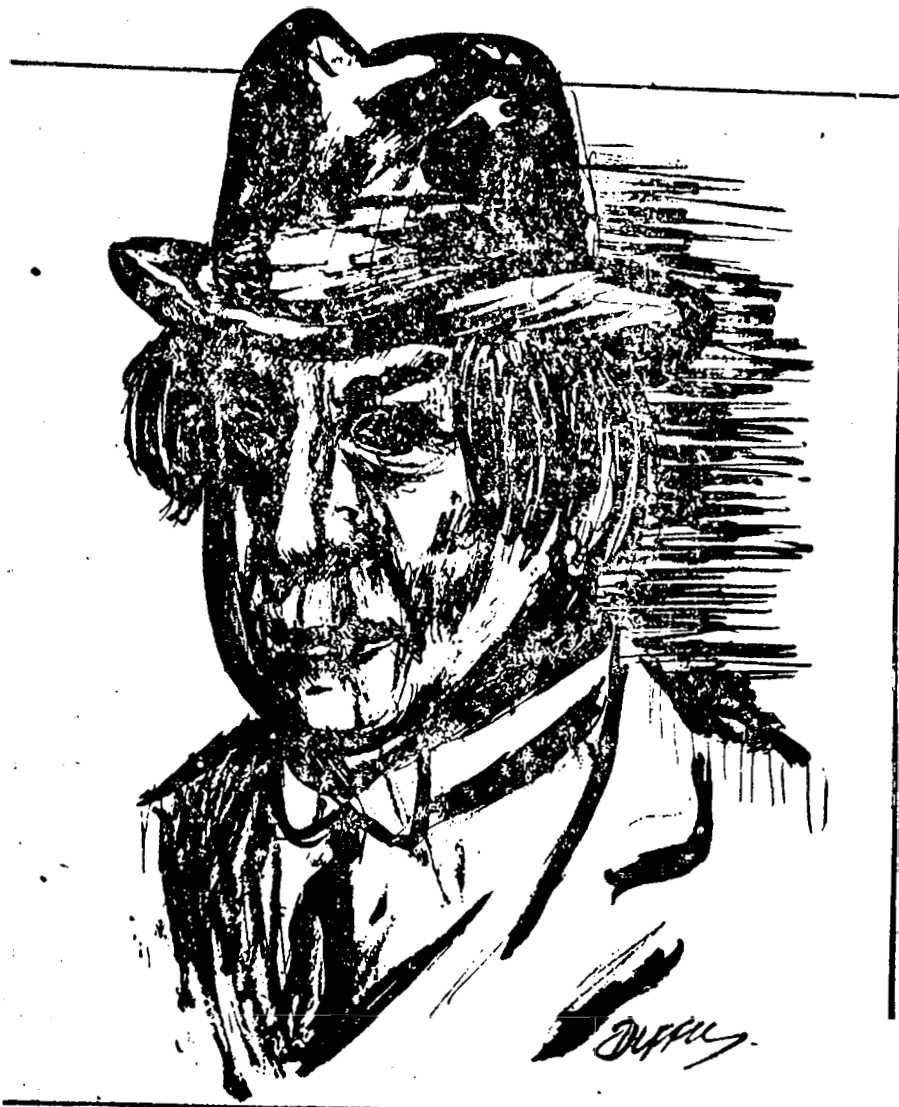
little. My impressions are as confused and disarranged as the life I have seen and experienced. I have a theory, from some scientist or philosopher with whom I could agree, about chemical reactions, laws of attractions and repulsion, the mating force, the instability of dogma, the anachronism of monogamy and all that. I may be wrong. But I am telling you, frankly, fully, sincerely, what my life has been; what I have thought and experienced. Make what you can of it. I am impelled to write it out of the same inner necessity that dictated "Sister Carrie" and "The Titan." If it is valuable to humanity, I am glad. If it is not, well and good; I have had my say."

And what is that life and what has it to say? In a small, industrial Indiana town Theodore Dreiser was born of poverty-stricken, pious, German-Catholic parents. There were far too many children; they had

early to shift for themselves without adequate training and education; there were the bickerings and family quarrels incident to insecure, precarious domestic life. Among the children there were definite evidences of a heritage of talent, even of genius. Paul was a musician by instinct, an amiable and talented man, generous, sentimental, child-like; he became a notable figure of his time upon Broadway as a variety entertainer, and as the author of "On the Banks of the Wabash." There was another brother who had the sensitive equipment of a poet and for whom life proved to be too great a strain; he shined brilliantly for a moment and died abjectly in a house of prostitution.

THEODORE was, curiously or significantly enough, the Parsifal, the Galahad of this family group. It was upon him that the family teaching and training had settled most definitely. To this day he does not drink or smoke and his language is free from profanity or obscenity. He was and is tender, affectionate, still a little credulous and sentimental. His autobiography is an analogue of the spirit of his time. He went, like a boy hero out of a Horatio Alger jr. novel, to Chicago to seek his fortune. His ambitions, as he states them, were definitely material. He wanted to cut a figure in the world. He wanted rubber-tired carriages and fur coats and pretty women in beautiful gowns to admire and love him. There settled upon him the spell of what the psychologists, since the time of the debut of Jules de Gaultier, have called Bovaryism; he eagerly sought to be something quite otherwise than what he was. He was (or rather thought himself to be, for he is really handsome) an ugly, ungainly and unattractive man; and so he wanted women to fall for him in windrows. No one was more surprised than he when, in a measure, they did. A smile swelled his chest, a kiss vastly reassured him, a conquest set him up, made him proud. Utterly without vanity, greed or aggressiveness, indeed a humble, grateful compound of sentimentalism and idealism, it is amusing to consider the gossip and criticism which have made of him an ogre, a Machiavelli and a terrible Don Juan. It was after more than a year of ardent courtship that "I reached a place where I could hold her hand, put my arms about her, kiss her, but never could I induce her to sit upon my lap. That was reserved for a much later date."

In his other contacts with life he was no less ill at ease and without assurance. The office boys in the outer corridor of the editorial rooms of "The World" treated him so rough and disrespectfully that he has not to this day got over it. He pays tribute to their bad manners to the extent of five pages. He was buffeted at every turn by life, by reality; he was sensitive with the sensitivity of an artist; by instinct tolerant, kind, gentle, self-effacing, but no less giving the full meed of his admiration to the dashing, aggressive, successful figures of American life. A saving sense, not of humor, but of intelligence, made him see these men in their proper perspective; it was this sense plus the endowment of his romantic imagination which enabled him to create Frank Cowperwood and Eugene Witla, which stand as authentic and carefully realized figures in American society during its great epoch of industrial democracy. He had, it appears, during the years recorded in this autobiography but two or three literary enthusiasms, Dickens, Hugo and Balzac. It was Balzac whom he wished most to emulate; and it was not, interestingly enough, out of worship of Balzac as an artist. It was frankly because he wanted to know as much of American high life and to mingle in it as Balzac appeared to know. He tells us he loved and suffered and lived with Balzac's heroes and heroines, that they were to him as real as any people he knew. It was such a world that he lived in. No wonder he failed as a newspaper man, for in newspaper reporting there is little room for imagination—life is much too stridently colored for that—and became a novelist. And it is little wonder that he has begun to write his reminiscences out of a failure fully to give his say in fiction, and that he has given us here a book of tenderness and truth, humbly and sincerely told, the poignantly interesting history of a not unusual life, which in its very commonplaceness may serve as a representative record of the barrenness of the average life in elements of adventure and ecstasy.



ARTHUR MACHEN, author of "The Secret Glory," "The Hill of Dreams," "The House of Souls," etc.—a caricature by Edmund Duffy