

The state of literature in Europe

BY STANLEY VESTAL

WHEN I received a letter from Joe Brandt asking me to write a story on the topic printed above, I thought Joe must be spoofing me. There he sits, boss of the University Press which puts out the one and only magazine covering the subject—*Books Abroad*—and asks me, who for a whole year have been five thousand miles away, to tell his readers what they know already. Plenty of Europeans read *Books Abroad* to keep up with themselves, as a matter of fact. And so, to paraphrase Will Rogers, I will say, on this subject all I know is what I read in *Books Abroad*.

However, one gets in the habit of humoring editors, and I thought I could perhaps satisfy Joe by writing something about the work Isabel and I have been doing in France. The trouble is that she doesn't show me her work until she has finished it, and so I have no information to impart. As for my own book, *Sitting Bull*, I must confess that, after three years of hard work devoted to the great chief's history, I am a little tired of the subject.

It may be interesting, however, to consider some aspects of the life of writers as one sees it in France. Writers, as a rule, begin in Paris, and—if successful—end on the Riviera. They begin in Paris because, when they begin, they don't know that there is any France outside that city, because they want to associate with other writers (poor things!), and because it seems romantic—and cheaper—to live in a garret. But the tourists won't let them be. They have driven Bohemia out of Montmartre to Montparnasse, and now it is announced that hereafter the boat-trains will stop at the Montparnasse station, instead of St. Lazare, flooding the Quarter with curious folks from Main street. Where the writers will fly to next, who can say?

After six weeks in Montparnasse, where we saw the celebrities who haunt the Dome, that giant cafe which is the pivot of the night life of the Quarter now, we entrained for Nice and the Maritime Alps. After all, when you have seen and talked to one chap in a

garment made of towels, or wrapped in strange oriental robes with a beard a foot long and no socks, you have (presumably) talked to them all. Since Ghandi ruined the cotton business, such costumes have failed to cause a flutter. Anyway, Isabel and I don't care for expatriates, as a rule. We liked the Riviera better.

Down there writers and artists are more interested in life and work than in each other—a sign of maturity, in my opinion. Long ago, when writers first began to haunt the Blue Coast, there was organized a league or association (I forget the exact name), a kind of club for the international group who pushed pens down there. One day Isabel and I were walking in Nice, and saw their brass door-plate. We went in and made inquiries. The list of names was long, and the first twenty all "big" ones. But as long as we were in Nice, we never saw one of these famous fellows anywhere near the clubrooms. Later, the secretary confessed that the members wouldn't get together, and that they had had to give up the annual dinner because most of the members couldn't bear the sight of each other. Since then the organization has been moved to Paris, where the list of famous members will doubtless cause a rush of beginners to join—and perhaps revive—that moribund association.

There is, it is true, a colony of more or less Bohemian folk at Cagnes, a small town west of Nice; but it never seemed typical of the permanent literary residents. It is only a spot of Paris transplanted with all the Parisian tricks. It is lost in the prevailing color. If hard times hit France again, it may spread, of course; for the Bohemian life is only camouflage for failure and poverty, as a rule.

No, the "big" names on the Riviera are not attending literary teas; you will find them in the bars, casinos, the sporting clubs, the best hotels. You may see H. G. Wells lunching with Charlie Chaplin at the Provençal, Juan-les-Pins. You may have pointed out to you the yacht of E. Phillips Oppenheim in the harbor

at Antibes, or catch a glimpse of Edith Wharton's villa at Hyères. But it is seldom that anyone sees, or even hears, of such well-known people meeting or seeking each other. Why should they? What, for instance, have the three writers just mentioned in common—except pens and incomes? No. The Riviera is not Paris. What is it?

The French Riviera is the Paradise of the Middle-Aged. I do not suggest this in the cynical belief that only middle-aged writers can afford to go there. Nor do I refer to the obvious fact that nearly everything is old-fashioned and apt to please people mature enough to look back with pleasure upon the days of their childhood. No. By Middle-Aged People, I mean persons who (whatever their years) can have a wonderfully good time doing what they *like* (whatever that may be) without caring whether it is fashionable, or naughty, or not—people who can enjoy themselves without criticism, and without caring what others may think. Such people find the Riviera delightful.

Down there, people take their pleasures decorously, joyously, unobtrusively. Not even soldiers are expected to be snappy there; even smart society has a good time and is not visibly bored; the whole life moves along at an easy, Southern pace, full of warmth, color, and beauty. And living at a family hotel in Nice at the height of the season is considerably cheaper than similar living at home.

In Paris one sees drunkenness, tourists and Bohemians just as tight as lords. Whiskey, spirits, cocktails are in demand, and Americans especially are demanding them. But on the Blue Coast most people are content with wines and beer, drunkenness is extremely rare, and a man caught spoiling the bouquet of a good vintage by smoking a cigar with it, would feel so ashamed he would crawl under the table. People have learned to savor life, and get the most out of it without haste and without failure. A mellow region. And all this has a direct bearing upon the state of literature in Europe.

I know it is a popular superstition that the climate on the Riviera is enervating. Nonsense. I personally never did so much work in my life as on that coast. The blue, steady weather day after day, week after week,—what could be better for a long stretch of hard writing? And when, after six hours in the study, one steps out for a breath of air and a walk, one need not get tired looking for diversion. That is all around, and for the most part, inexpensive.

For the American, life is especially agreeable. America sets the pace; our ways—or what pass for our ways—are

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122-foot derrick; the rhythmic chug-chug of the "mud-hog" pumps, the swearing of the roustabouts on the derrick floor; the creaking of the rotary table and the grinding of the drive chain—all goes into the outdoor talkie version of a drama unusual in itself. Everybody and everything out in the oil field talks, except the "oil operator" who stands off from the derrick with a solemn look. Maybe the well "is running low" or "may hit Georgetown." He walks about wondering and pondering how long it will take the truck drivers to bring over "that string of 6-5/8's," and thanks his lucky stars that the drive chain hasn't broken. The operator is the man who does the worrying, all of the derrick crew being day-laborers with definite tasks—and the drilling contractor "gets so much for every foot" he drills.

At best, oil-field life is far from being pleasant. Riding atop caterpillar tractors or behind ten mule teams, hauling boilers and rig-irons. Sleeping in crowded shacks. Joining up twenty-foot lengths of drill pipe. Climbing derricks to the crow's nest ninety feet above the derrick floor. The steady fight against time, in the rush to beat the offset operator to the prolific pay.

The wildest fiction about the milling, throbbing flow of humanity in the boom region is that everyone hopes to "get rich off of oil." There, in East Texas, they have been attracted, like bees, from all parts of the nation. There are the drifters who expect to "horn in on some of this oil while the getting is good;" the geologists who have turned to trading; the efforts of the salaried supply representatives to invest some of their earnings in "close-up" royalty with the farm-owners who likely as not are "holding out" for \$500 an acre for half-royalty. The settlers who had sold a lease on their land for \$10 an acre back in 1929 in order to keep off the wolf from their door now realize, as the derricks constantly hedge in around them, that they were "blame foolish" for giving away their "acreage" for literally nothing.

A striking note of the boom development is the urge to build. This was well exemplified in the mushroom-growth shack towns like Joinerville (named after the field discoverer, C. M. Joiner of Dallas, Texas) and Turnerville, which grew up overnight near the gushers. First, field workers would pitch tents alongside the paved highway. An enterprising business man would come along and put up a frame store, with a canopy extending over the two "Gulf Gasoline" pumps in front. This was followed by a cafe, a drug store, a garage, and a hotel. Then supply dealers sensing the trend of drilling activity, would put in a "shop." A long structure

with a large sign in front marked "DANCE" was a retreat for the oil workers. Two rows of single-story shacks, rarely a double story, would soon line the highway for a quarter of a mile. A cross-road leading to the field marked the center of "town." In short, another Main street was created.

When an oil boom strikes a town, neither serenity nor age-old contentment can long fail to answer its call to action. Tyler, seat of Smith county (west of the field) was as pretty a picture of a calm and settled town as a retired man could hope for, but it didn't take very long for the natives there to take advantage of the boom, reluctant as they appeared to be about the coming transformation. Cafe owners remodeled their interiors, installed player pianos and hired Hawaiian guitar trios for dinner entertainment. The erudite studio photographers made field trips out to the rising derricks and thus became "oil field photographers." The Blackstone hotel, already the largest in East Texas, added a 64-room addition. Corner locations in the business section soon became one-stop tire and oil stations. It was truly a wonder, how this settled town, where Civil war veterans grow older, could react to an oil boom with such renewed activity, after eighty-one years of contentment among the riches of cotton, peaches and roses.

In the various county courthouses (the town centers) of the area, the din and clatter of batteries of typewriters flanking either walls of the halls, greets one's ears as he makes his way to the county clerk's office to record an instrument. It is a frenzied, deafening clicking that never ceases as eight-hour shifts of stenographers keep up a machine-gun staccato the full twenty-four hours. "The instruments must go on record" their Underwoods, Royals and Remingtons seem to say as they sing on into the night. The male stenos remind one of the oil company clerks he sees back in Tulsa.

A characteristic of the East Texas farmers was that a majority of them were truly settlers, having lived on the land all of their lives; receiving their allotment from their parents and relatives who had made their homesteads roundabout after the Mexican war ended in 1846. With further agriculture on the prolific lease impossible and foolish, the newly-rich farmers moved away from their homes for the first time in their lives; a migration from country to city was in store for those whose lands were located in the prolific pay-sand belt. It proved to be forty miles in length, four to seven miles in width, and covered nearly a hundred thousand acres.

A year has rolled away since "Dad"

Joiner brought in his pool-opener on Mrs Daisy Bradford's farm out among the sand hills. Now the boom is over and the brokers and investors have heeded the call to the next oil boom—northeastern Colorado. The dilapidated frame houses with curled-up shingles that two generations of settlers called home are now empty. Their plows and harvestors are rusting near sheds that now shelter lease cars. The unruffled, slow drawl of the former inhabitants has been replaced by the curt, brief commands of the field superintendent addressed to his lease-workers. In the transformation of the region, a forest of derricks has replaced a forest of pines.

Truly, until a year ago, the settlers had lived off "the dew of heaven" converted into the form of peaches, roses and cotton. But from "the fat of the earth" has sprung another empire, far richer in its potentialities, more widespread in its effect on civilization.



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the fashion. It requires no effort to be up-to-date: the films and dance-music in vogue there are already familiar to the American visitor. And to speak French with an American accent is considered ultra-smart just now. One drops into such an environment without a struggle; it is all beautifully arranged.

A pleasant region, where one can work hard, live inexpensively, and enjoy without wear or tear. And judging by the quantities of stuff the resident writers turn out long after they should be in the Old Soldiers Home, it must be good for writers. In fact, they seem to live forever there.

I will admit, however, that inasmuch as the depression hit the states as soon as I left for France, it may be something has gone wrong with literature on the Riviera since I came home again. But if anyone will stake me to another Fellowship, I undertake to return and set matters right.



Written in Norman

Part of the new book *European Dictatorships* by Count Carlo Sforza recently published by Brentano's was written last winter in Norman while Count Sforza was lecturing at the university according to a letter written by him to President Bizzell. Count Sforza will deliver the inaugural address for Geneva university November 4 when he will speak on "The Policy of the Roman Church from the Congress of Vienna to the Latern Treaties (1815-1929)."