

Personal History

by

V I N C E N T S H E E A N

with a new introduction by **T H E A U T H O R**

**T H E
M O D E R N L I B R A R Y
N E W Y O R K**



PERSONAL HISTORY

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TO R. P.:

Neuer beleeeue though in my nature raigh'd,
All frailties that besiege all kindes of blood,
That it could so preposterouslie be stain'd,
To leaue for nothing all thy summe of good:

SONNET 109

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK was written in 1933 and 1934 and was published in January, 1935. When it appeared, the economic depression of 1929-1932 had been succeeded by a widespread belief that human thought and effort could correct the conditions which led to such catastrophes—a belief expressed in the United States by strong mass support for the New Deal. A formidable accretion to the power of Fascism as an ideological challenge had been made by Hitler's régime in Germany after 1933. An awareness of problems as being world-wide, of ideas as having contemporaneity and space-extension rather than gradual development, was quickening in minds exposed to modern communication. Fear of war, increased by the rapid preparations of Hitler's dictatorship for a coming struggle, directed much attention to foreign policy. The book appeared at a time when many people were in a frame of mind to receive it well, and it was widely read.

It had not been out more than a few weeks when the policy known variously as the Popular Front, the Democratic Front or (among Communists) the Dmitrov Line, became an official doctrine of the Communist International and led to the formation of alliances between progressive groups of all shades of opinion from centrist liberals to Communists in a struggle against Fascism. The war in Spain broke out the next year and brought this policy of alliance to its highest power not only in Spain, but in all countries where the wider meaning of the struggle was appreciated. The war in China reached new extremes of aggression, new phenomena of union and resistance. The years when this book was running through its regular editions happened to coincide with years when the social and intellectual climate in the United States was hospitable to such books. There were other books which treated similar material in a rather similar way, and all reached a large public. It began to be clear that a particular experience, if related to the gen-

eral, was capable of suggesting general ideas or of interacting with them in such a way as to form part of the consciousness of the time. This was perhaps the chief way in which the wave of semi-autobiographical and semi-political books, chiefly by foreign correspondents, of which this was an early example, differed from the volumes of reminiscence long known in one region of literature. Books of memoirs had dealt with the personal past, had been reminiscent and anecdotal; these books used the past as material for the comprehension of the present, and passed easily from the particular to the general and back again. It has often been said of this book that it was "new," in the sense of not fitting properly into known categories; but the "newness" thus remarked was, of course, a social characteristic, arising most of all from the need here expressed—and generally felt—for a relationship of the single experience to the many in which it has been cast. The relation of the one to the many is one of the most ancient problems of philosophy, but there is perhaps no time in which its urgency has been felt as it is now by masses of human beings. A book which attempts to deal above all with that ancient problem, but in terms of the contemporary mind, and in the form of simply narrated experience, is bound to seem a little new whenever it appears.

Mr. Bernard Shaw said to me, about this book, that it was the expression in an individual form of "the sickly conscience." He did not trouble to explain, and it took me some days to remember, that this was the phrase used of Solness in Ibsen's *Master Builder*. Mr. Shaw went on to say that he found the same phenomenon in a number of modern books otherwise dissimilar, and named T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as particularly akin to this one. I was at the time so bemused at finding myself thus compared and classified (and by such a judge) that I did not adequately follow all Mr. Shaw's analysis. Its crystalline brilliance as it flowed over me left only a question in my mind like the question of the drunken peasant in Synge's *Playboy*: "Is it me?" And yet much of what he said stuck for weeks, and as I thought it over I decided that it was not I alone who experienced the sickly conscience, but that

many thousands—perhaps even most—of my contemporaries were alike in this, and that the book was read by many of them for no other reason. Certainly the whole of modern society has a sickly conscience, and if some books express that phenomenon individually, it is only one more proof that books are, like their authors, the product of the conditions of life.

I leave to the judgment of the editors the question of why this book, describing a single evolution in experience through the decade 1918-1929, should merit continued attention in such a collection as the Modern Library. Any claim I wished to make to such continued attention was embodied in the title. I thought of those two words in their separate and combined meanings—that the book should be both personal and a history, both subjective and objective, and that the proportions of each element should be determined not only by the accident of the author's own experience, but by the relative importance of the two in a modern life. I meant to indicate that the purely personal would be omitted—so that everything personal included would have some relationship to the general—and that the purely historical would be scarcely touched. It may be seen that this has nothing to do with "autobiography," and in fact much essential material for autobiographical writing is ignored in this book. It is, I suppose, a hybrid form, and is neither personal nor historical but contains elements of both. I need scarcely say that I was convinced while I was writing it that it would find very few readers, and nobody was more surprised than I was when it found many. That it survives into this collection of permanent or semi-permanent work is an indication that the subjective-objective stylization indicated in its title—the claim of a double nature—does somehow correspond, as I had obscurely felt, to a reality in the experience of the contemporary mind.

VINCENT SHEEAN

November, 1939.

CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
I The Modern Gothic	3
II Journalism	28
III The Rif	91
IV The Rif Again	125
V Desert Gardens	176
VI Revolution	198
VII The Western Cities	327
VIII Holy Land	359
Index	431

Chapter 1

THE MODERN GOTHIC

THE ARMISTICE came when I was eighteen. What it meant to the war generation I can only imagine from the stories they tell; to me it meant that we in the University of Chicago, that mountain range of twentieth-century Gothic near the shores of Lake Michigan, went out of uniform and into civilian clothes.

The world has changed so much that it seems downright indecent to tell the truth: I was sorry when the war ended. I fumed with disappointment on the night of the false armistice—the celebrated night when the American newspapers reported the end of the war some days before it happened. We were all patriots then. We knew nothing about that horror and degradation which our elders who had been through the war were to put before us so unremittingly for the next fifteen years. There were millions of us, young Americans between the ages of fifteen or sixteen and eighteen or nineteen, who cursed freely all through the middle weeks of November. We felt cheated. We had been put into uniform with the definite promise that we were to be trained as officers and sent to France. In my case, as in many others, this meant growing up in a hurry, sharing the terrors and excitements of a life so various, free and exalted that it was worth even such hardships as studying trigonometry. So we went into uniform and marched about the place from class to class like students in a military academy; listened to learned professors lecturing about something called “War Aims”; lived in “barracks”; did rifle drill. The rifles were dummies, and the “barracks” were only the old dormitories rechristened, but such details made little difference. We played at being soldiers for a few months with tremendous seriousness, and then the glorious uproar to which we had been preparing

our approach suddenly died down. Our part of the war had been a prelude to something that did not take place.

And when demobilization came at last the prospect of returning to the regular life of the University had become repellent to me. I had nobody to persuade but my mother, who was still too thankful for the Armistice to make many objections. Consequently I went job hunting and spent three months as secretary to a millionaire builder and real estate operator in the Chicago financial district. It was there, hanging out a window above the crevasse of LaSalle Street, that I watched the Black Hawk Division come home. Waving flags and the thump of a military march were enough to stir me to any extravagance; we all shouted and waved and winked back the hysterical tears. Those were patriotic days.

My employer was an odious little man who had quarreled with his wife and disinherited his son because the latter wanted to go on the stage. He was a brilliant entrepreneur, the little man: he used to point with pride to the ceilings of the skyscraper in which he had his office, saying, "That ceiling is a good six inches shallower than the law allows. You can always arrange things if you know how. I got eight extra storeys into ~~this~~ building by that little detail." When I inquired if the building was likely to fall down he sniffed contemptuously. "Buildings don't fall down," he said. The building did start to fall down some years later, was condemned and demolished. By an unfortunate accident, its builder was not buried under the ruins.

He sent me on one occasion to collect rents from the impoverished tenants of a village he owned in Indiana. It was a horrible experience from which I escaped as quickly as I could, but the thought of it came back to me for years. The tenants of the wretched little Indiana town worked in a coal mine belonging to my employer when they worked at all, but they had not worked for many months. They lived in houses belonging to him (if you could call such hovels houses) and bought their food from stores belonging to him. I was to collect what I could of the back rent owed on the disgraceful shacks in which they

were obliged to live. I was a failure at the job, for the sight of the life into which children were there being born disorganized whatever efficiency I possessed as a secretary. That day in the little mining town was my introduction to capitalism at work, and it filled me, even then, with disgust. I blamed the busy little entrepreneur as well as the system of which he was a part, and it was not long before the idea of continuing to work for him became insupportable. "Business" (if this was business) bored, irked and revolted me, and I determined to do whatever I could to avoid being involved in it again.

In the spring of 1919, therefore, I went back to the University and stayed on throughout the summer to make up for lost time. My education up to then had been a sorry failure. I had never made any headway with science, mathematics or the classical languages. Of the first two I remembered nothing; of the second I remembered just one Greek sentence, *enteuthen exelaunei* ("and the next day he marched onward")—this not because it had any stirring significance for me, but because it marked the welcome end of nearly every chapter in the *Anabasis*.

I had derived, it was true, considerable pleasure of a low order from some other academic pursuits in my first two years of college. I had come to the University knowing some Italian, German, and French (particularly French), and could easily make a better showing in these subjects than my contemporaries. My favourite trick had been to register for courses in which I was unlikely to encounter anything I did not already know. Such conduct was lazy and dishonest, but you could make out a good case for the theory that young people were all lazy and dishonest when they could be. Certainly what the undergraduates called "snaps" (i.e., courses easy to get through without undue effort) were always crowded in my day at the University. The football players, the social lights, the pretty co-eds, and all the other students who regarded study as an inconvenient detail in college life, rushed to inscribe themselves for "snap" courses. I was in a more advantageous position than some of my fellows for wasting time, since more

courses were "snaps" for me. I could go to a series of lectures on Victorian Prose, for example, and be confident of hearing nothing new; similarly, in French, with the novels of Victor Hugo or the plays of Molière. I had read altogether too much in the two languages, thanks to a bookish childhood. There was thus a group of studies open to me at the University in which I could, without working or learning, impress my instructors sufficiently to make a good record.

More than two years of my three and a half at the University of Chicago had already been wasted in this way. It was a kind of confidence game of which the victim was, of course, myself. I did well enough in the subjects I already knew to make up for my failures in the subjects I did not know and was too lazy to study. I was too undisciplined, too indolent, and too dishonest to force myself to learn what did not interest me. And it was not until that summer of 1919 that I began to realize the silliness of such an approach to what ought to be one of the great experiences of a life. The University of Chicago in summer was invaded by hordes of earnest men and women from the smaller colleges and schools of the Middle West, working towards their master's or their doctor's degree. These thin, spectacled myrmidons, humpbacked from carrying armfuls of books up and down academic steps for many years, filled the cool gray corridors and covered the green lawns I had always thought reserved for pretty girls and long-legged youths. The summer school, I discovered, was an altogether different affair from the ordinary academic year. If you tried to talk to a summer student during a lecture, a cold glance through glittering spectacles was the only reply. The brilliant hot sun of a Chicago July threw into merciless relief all the unloveliness of these dank visitors from the provincial colleges of Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. Their presence was somehow unbecoming, both to their surroundings and to the general fitness of things. I resented them for two or three weeks, and on the few occasions when I saw my vacationing friends, the undergraduates who had finished their college year in June, we were exceedingly witty about the looks, manners, lives, and

minds of the pitiable summer students. There were probably not half a dozen of these bookworms, we calculated, who could dance the fox trot decently. /

But as the summer study advanced I became more and more uncomfortable about them. They were not beautiful, but neither were they ignorant. They were always putting me to shame, somehow or other. I was not to remember much about most of the studies of that summer; only one was vivid in retrospect. It was a fairly advanced course in French—the poetry of Victor Hugo, all of it, including every pitiless line of *La Légende des Siècles*. The instructor was a visiting bigwig from one of the Eastern universities, a Frenchman with a German name. He used to conduct the course in an informal fashion, lecturing some of the time, reading occasionally, and starting discussions whenever the spirit moved him. It was assumed that students in such a course as this would be mature and educated enough to know something besides the actual subject matter itself. Comparisons were always popping up, were constantly invited. Most of the students—there may have been twelve or fifteen, men and women—were well past thirty, and probably all of them taught French literature somewhere or other. In that company, through July and August, I first began to be ashamed of my evil ways, and no amount of smug scorn for the bookworms could disguise the fact.

“Vous trouverez ici sans doute que Hugo a beaucoup emprunté à Chateaubriand; n'est-ce pas, Mademoiselle?” the professor would inquire innocently, smiling across his desk at an eager spinster from Indiana. And then off she would go, talking about Hugo and Chateaubriand in a French accent that would have been incomprehensible to either of those gentlemen—but talking, just the same, with information and intelligence. The professor would argue with her; others would join in; and it appalled me that I could not even follow their battle from afar. I had never read a word of Chateaubriand; my interest in Christianity was almost nonexistent; I had no real idea why it had ever seemed intellectually important to Victor Hugo or to anybody else. And I looked at the summer students

in amazement. Their excitement over such subjects actually brought colour to their wan faces; they could smile, make jokes, go through all the movements of living organisms when their attention was aroused.

My salvation was that the instructor was a Frenchman. If he had been an American or an Englishman he would have seen at once that my glibness in French was a sheer accident, and that I actually understood nothing of the turmoil through which Victor Hugo had lived and written. But, being French, the professor had a natural prejudice in favour of hearing his language pronounced correctly. In spite of all their knowledge and interest, most of the students in this course had abominable accents; it seemed to be a rule among American school teachers. I had learned French so young that all the laziness in the world could never rob me of a fairly good pronunciation. Consequently, when I had occasion to read some of Victor Hugo's detested verses aloud, the professor would lean back in his chair with satisfaction. This, combined with a prudent silence when the discussions were out of my depth, gave the good man the idea that I really knew something of the subject, and I finished the course with an unjustifiably handsome record.

But something important happened to me during the summer of 1919, thanks chiefly to the Hugo poems. I had been realizing with increasing clarity, week after week, the superficial character of my own mind. I was nineteen, and I knew nothing. The fact that I could speak a sort of French had nothing to do with me; what credit there might be for that should have gone to the devout and kindly Irish priest who had tutored me in it for years. Of the actual meaning of French literature I knew far less than the scrubbiest high-school teacher from Iowa. The struggles of men's minds—whether of contemporary minds or of those like Chateaubriand's and Hugo's, long gone to dust—meant nothing to me at all. I had existed without realizing that it seriously mattered to anybody what men believed, or under what form of government, in what structure of society, they lived. The summer's study gave me no love for the poetry of Victor Hugo: on the contrary, the