

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

SAGAS OF THE FORTUNE MAKERS

By Louis Sherwin

COMMODORE VANDERBILT. *By Arthur D. Howden Smith. McBride. \$3.50.*

CERTAIN RICH MEN. *By Meade Minnigerode. Putnam. \$3.50.*

JACQUES COEUR, MERCHANT PRINCE OF THE MIDDLE AGES. *By Albert Boardman Kerr. Scribner's. \$3.50.*

"WISE men and Gods are on the strongest side," chirruped the jovial Sir Charles Sedley, whose daughter became the mistress of King James II. A motto I piously commend to all biographers, especially in the United States. The lack of it left us for many years poisoned with an insufferably mawkish, hag-ridden conception of nineteenth century America. The fortune makers, the men of real ability and vitality, were held up before us as villains all. We were taught to look at them with the sickly vision of the Sunday school and the priggish envy of the Socialist lecturer. Serious biographers avoided the really interesting figures in the history of the republic, magnificoes of the railroads, mines and counting houses. They asked us to admire instead the floundering gesta of flatulent "statesmen", the pompous posturings of reformers, the sanguinary blunders of soldiers.

To any one with a groatsworth of wit it is quite obvious now that the best brains of this country in the last century went into what is loosely described as business. Even the least stupid of the clowns in Washington were a feeble lot compared to such stout sons of Belial as Collis P. Huntington and Commodore Vanderbilt, the subject of this lively, though partisan, biography by Arthur D. Howden Smith and one of Meade Minnigerode's "Certain Rich Men". Unscrupulous they were, to be sure, and grabbed whatever

they wanted that was not nailed down. It is true that they bribed legislatures, which probably was shocking. But it can hardly be urged that they corrupted the animals. You can't corrupt a carbuncle.

Men like old Van Derbilt (as he always signed himself) were fashioned by and for their times. Obstinate and weaker fellows who got in their way — which turned out to be the way of progress — they ruined without compunction. Such competitors as they could not buy up they devoured as voraciously as a Russian Kommissar will gobble a tubful of caviar. But even Meade Minnigerode, who takes the less admiring view of the cantankerous Commodore, admits that "the country gained by it, he and his stockholders profited". It is quite apparent, for instance, that if our country's solons had had their way we should still be having to change trains three times between New York and Chicago. In order to accomplish the necessary work the railroaders had undertaken, it was necessary either to bribe the cattle or shoot them, an alternative patently expensive and impractical.

Howden Smith has achieved a spirited piece of work, graphic, informative, even exciting. He freely admits the ungenial commodore's erotic wanderings, his brutality towards his family, his Boeotian manners and military habit of speech. (Like Bugs Baer's grandfather, Cornelius Van Derbilt never used oaths except in conversation.) All of which adds enormously to the picturesqueness of the character. For he was, after all, an amazing old Roman. When you consider that his greatest achievement, seizing a group of decrepit railroads and building them up into the New York Central system, was not even begun until he was in his seventieth year you are bound to be infected by some of his biographer's admiration.

On the other hand Howden Smith does unquestionably lean over a trifle in defending the brutalities and slantendicularities of his character. He minimizes, even champions the stock-waterings that Van Derbilt perpetrated. He faintly attempts to excuse the incarceration of the hapless Sophia in an asylum. In this book there is no approach to the ironic temper of Lytton Strachey nor the judicious attitude of Minnigerode. It frequently lapses into the romantic, even the heroic, strain and the popular magazine writer crops out in many passages. The imaginary conversations with which it is freely adorned may add artistic verisimilitude for some readers. Many of them are too questionable, to my mind. The research has evidently been done with the utmost pains, but a bibliography would add considerably to the value of this biography.

Minnigerode's "Certain Rich Men" includes sketches of Stephen Girard, John Jacob Astor, Jay Cooke, Vanderbilt, the mountebank Jim Fisk and that amazing, unspeakable pair, Daniel Drew and Jay Gould. Naturally, none of these sketches pretends to compare with the exhaustive work of Howden Smith. Nor is any of them in Minnigerode's best vein. I have read a much better account of the Stokes-Fisk feud and the Astor narrative as well as that of Daniel Drew leaves me unsatisfied. Nevertheless, an interesting collection, on the whole, especially the story of Jay Gould.

In "Jacques Coeur" we have a bird of a different feather altogether. A fascinating tale, despite the rather dry style of the author. Imagine the son of a shopkeeper in the Middle Ages who became the foremost merchant prince of his country, manufacturer, ship-owner, Minister of Finance and Ambassador, soldier, sailor, adventurer, Maecenas, the favored friend of Popes and Cardinals. How could even the most desiccated of historians spoil the biography of such a man? Jacques Coeur, the obscure clerk of Bourges, contributed as much to the success of Charles VII as Joan of Arc and Dunois. He was shipwrecked and captured by corsairs. He acquired a fleet that was famous in every Mediterranean port. His signature was honored all over the Levant

and Asia Minor. His cargoes enriched his own country and made him the wealthiest man north of Genoa. The king he had helped to a throne turned upon him, imprisoned, tortured, banished and tried to ruin him. His own employees thought enough of him for the hardest of his captains to effect his rescue and escape from France. And it was a Pope who finally procured his vindication and the restoration of part of his confiscated fortune.

Arthur Boardman Kerr's valuable contribution thus demolishes the prevalent idea that a son of the poor could not climb to celebrity and power in the Middle Ages save as a priest. It also gives a comprehensive interesting account of commerce, banking and customs, of the relations between the banking houses of the merchant princes and the sovereigns in the Renaissance. The style of the book, while dry, is lucid. Perhaps I am wrong in believing the grand manner would have been more suited to the history of such a brilliant and versatile life.

At any rate, it is the first attempt to tell in English the tale of this gallant and amazing fellow. For which all felicitations are due the author.

A RENAISSANCE KNIGHT AND SOME LADIES

By Lorine Pruette

THE PERFECT COURTIER. *By Julia Cartwright.*
2 vols. Dutton. \$10.

THE WOMEN OF THE MEDICI. *By Yvonne Maguire.*
The Dial Press. \$4.

YOU may not come to Urbino by train. If you are wise and properly humble you will approach it by foot, over the old Roman road or the Umbrian way from the headwaters of the Tiber. We came to it one evening in the clear twilight, when the changing light made the little city on the hill more incredibly lovely than any mortal place has the right to be. We had come like pilgrims, staff in hand, walking in the dust, acquiring fleas, following the high Italian roads that take you always across mountain-tops; we had come fearfully because we could not quite believe all that we wished to believe. Step by step and town by town we