

come across another who found occasion to mention Aristotle at all. We think it probable that here we hit upon a fragment of an age-long tradition, coming through the Christian centuries, but embracing the mythological creatures, the gods and sages of antiquity, preserved at any rate in part in a pictorial form by the Byzantine icon makers. Peasants of the Western Islands still speak of 'the Greek woman.' From this traditional storehouse the old painters took their materials. The world for them was a great temple of which the walls were frescoed with the creations of the human fancy and the shapes of the illustrious dead.

In the serene atmosphere in which these pictures were painted, we are far from a world of greed and lust and blood. A Director of Propaganda of Liberal and Humane Ideas (if such a functionary existed) would do well to scatter these post cards about by hun-

The Nation

dreds of thousands. Liberalism, humanism, if you like (it is the same thing), is the sacred cause which poets serve. They diffuse a large unselfish view of things together with which Prussianism cannot live. To-day in these lovely frescoes we can find a parable. The stream through which St. Christopher strides, and in which the mermaid swims, is the world-stream. Black or leaden-gray by night, the dawn will show it grass-green and crystal clear, and in the full warmth and light of the sun it will take on such colors as were on the sea in the image of the world before the Creation, as it lay in the mind of God. The dumb giant, the great, strong, inarticulate common man, struggles through the ice-cold flood, carrying and saving for us all the precious burden of justice and freedom and peace. So, at least, we are told, and we try to believe it. We hope it is so. But it is still night, and we need the hermit's lantern.

SHADOWS

I LIE and watch the shadows on the wall—
 Strange shapes of bird and beast that come and go;
 They are but faery-forms of things I know—
 The firelight flickers redly over all.

It is too dark to read; I lie and dream.
 Without, the night has lit the first pale star;
 Peace in my chamber reigns. The things that are
 Are mingled strangely with the things that seem.

Life is but half a dream, wherein we see
 The shadows of those things we may not know;
 Yet do we trust the forms that come and go
 Hold forth a promise of a world to be —

And, till the creeping darkness covers all,
 We lie and watch the shadows on the wall.

Chambers's Journal

By Allan Sanderson.

THE READING OF BIOGRAPHY

BY THOMAS SECCOMBE

It is less a question of how to read biography, than what to read and in what order, for at present there is no guide through the mazes of the subject. Biographical literature is a maze without a plan. The art is in its infancy. There is no philosophy of undressing in public as yet, and the whole idea of mental *déshabille* was *nil* before Sterne. A great number of people want to know the expected, their imagination wants help in realizing the external trappings and stages of a career. It is the career they are enamored of. They want the details of the bill-of-fare of a successful life, with something in the nature of a second-hand experience of *la vie publique*. They are the public for the abiographic life, or the life that is no life, the two volumes of platitudes published by permission of the family council, undertaken at their request by the recognized man of letters, who collects the material for each chapter into a separate envelope, gives the whole thing a vigorous shake, diffuses an air of rosy benevolence over the countenance, and leaves most of the subsidiary parts of the picture — the hair, the lace, the boots, the periwig — to the 'prentice hands of his secretary or amanuensis.

But there are readers who seek the unexpected. They want to know the secrets that the career invariably hides, and from St. Augustine downwards there have been self-revealers to respond to these cravings. Foremost among these for all time probably is Jean Jacques Rousseau. While Field-

ing was endeavoring to present a graven image to be the exact semblance of the species Man, Jean Jacques determined to effect a similar purpose. But, he argued, the only typical man I know or can know is, myself. He proposed, therefore, to turn himself inside out, and this he did with as much sincerity as is compatible with literary passion. By devious routes and with varying objectives, St. Simon, Montaigne, Pascal, Flaubert, Heine, Tolstoi, Anatole France, have sought to publish 'realities,' 'real life,' the subject-matter of the biographer. Nor have we lacked great articulates who have 'looked into their hearts and wrote.' Very thorough, very English, completely undogmatic, foremost stands Pepys. Pepys practised autobiography in secret like a hasheesh eater; but we have plenty of avowed confessors, such as Haydon, Mill, Herbert Spencer, Mark Pattison, Father Tyrrell, and the author of *Father and Son*; and there are implicit 'My own story' tellers in abundance, in the front rank among them George Borrow and George Gissing. In spite of the declared phlegm of the English, there seems to be more biographic tinder lying about for sparks to alight on in England than in any other country. Ours is a country of Non-conformists, and our *Dictionary of National Biography* is a monument to the ubiquity of the Nonconformist divine.

Before Queen Anne, biography was an unknown art. The vanity of men of letters (which is capable of most things) may be deemed to have begot-