



"An American Family"

Henry Kitchell Webster's Considerable Novel: The Things It Attempts and to Some Extent Achieves

THE novel in which Henry Kitchell Webster has essayed to write the story of *An American Family* is a noteworthy performance. It is not an unqualified success; indeed, in some important respects it does not succeed at all; it does, however, accomplish one thing which a number of excellent American novelists have striven to accomplish and which they have not managed. It gives with admirable perception and proportion a picture of the intermittent struggle which we characterize, in our more cheerful or perhaps our more euphemistic moments, as "industrial unrest."

Appearing serially in a magazine the story was called *The White Arc*. A note in the book explains the change of title: "*An American Family* is more accurately descriptive of the substance and spirit of the story." This is true in the sense that the first title was not descriptive at all and the second describes rather wrongly. Mr. Webster does bring all the members of the wealthy Corbett family of Chicago into his narrative; but his book is essentially all about one member of that family, Hugh Corbett, the odd one; about Helena Galiez, the agitator whom Hugh married, and about Jean Gilbert, who was not a Corbett at all. Other Corbetts than Hugh figure importantly, notably old Gregory Corbett, the grandfather, founder of the family fortunes; but they are never the main interest, individually or as part of a family unit.

Which suggests that if you really want to write the story of a family, American or other, you cannot do it by writing, or while writing, the story of the family's "black sheep" (meaning, again, the odd one, the peculiar child; Hugh's morals were above reproach). In saying this there is no finding fault with Mr. Webster, who, as the facts show, didn't set out to write a family chronicle. He did set out to write some chapters in the life of Hugh Corbett, and the fact that his novel expanded until it became, in some measure, a family chronicle, is just so much to his credit, as being that much beyond and over his original intent.

Mastery of Difficult Material.

The first half of *An American Family* is the first half of a very wonderful book the last half of which has not been written. No doubt it will be some day, and the day can't be very distant. The thing that makes the first half of Mr. Webster's novel so much of an achievement is his precise mastery for his purposes of exceedingly difficult material. Nothing more unsuitable to the novelist's use than strikes, syndicalism, problems of production and economic-social troubles is lying around loose. Just because this stuff is lying around loose novelists, hunting for construction stuff, are always picking it up and trying to build with it. Let us recall one or two instances. There was Ernest Poole, who used it in *The Harbor*. And when he had his skeleton up the whole thing collapsed like a jerry-built theatre—collapsed before the drama he had ready could be staged for us. There is Helen R. Martin, whose *Gertie Swartz*, *Fanatic or Christian?* and *Maggie of Virginsburg* read for whole pages like leaflets at an Emma Goldman meeting. There is—but we haven't room for a roll of defeats.

The point is that industrial struggles and all thereto pertaining can't be picked up as they are and a novel built out of them. Writers ought to know this. Writers know they can't take life and



out it up into lengths and call the lengths novels. What they have to do with the crude material is to smelt it down. It's ore. The stuff of a thousand novels is in it, if you work it right.

Mr. Webster seems to be the first American novelist to have arrived at an appreciation of this fact, in respect of what a professional writer might call "the labor stuff." He has really worked over it and worked it over. He has melted and refined until he has got a thing he can use without fear of his story "buckling"—and burying its thousands of readers under tons of tractarian matter while the dust of socialist argument chokes to death their interest in the story. The narrative of Hugh Corbett's life requires some account of a strike; very well, he gives some account of the strike, as much as is necessary, no more. He gives it to the extent that Hugh Corbett saw it and participated in it; to the extent that Helena Galiez figured in it; to the extent that it brought the man and woman into relation with each other. He does not try to write a history of labor in the United States and a prophecy of the next ten years.

Somewhere a Flaw Develops.

Last week we printed a letter from a reader who praised us for the habit of refraining from telling what a book is not. "You don't waste 98 per cent. of your space telling people what the book isn't," said this friend. Well, there are times, about once in six months, when telling what a book isn't is a real service to the reader. This is such a time. Any one who has waded through the novel in which the author mounts a soap box while the story goes to pot and who knows that a strike is one of the events recorded in *An American Family* will thank us for saying that Mr. Webster's novel isn't another good fiction gone wrong.

You go booming through the pages of this record of Hugh Corbett, the odd one, with

mounting delight and satisfaction until you get half way, or rather more than half way, through. Then somewhere, the presence of a flaw makes itself manifest. For some time you feel that you can put your finger on the flaw, but after you have finished the book you aren't so certain.

Hugh Corbett is the son of Robert Corbett and grandson of Gregory Corbett. The family owns an immense vehicle manufacturing business. Robert Corbett is the urbane son of an aggressive old man. His wife is an aristocrat by birth and has license to behave as she pleases—takes it, anyhow, a way aristocrats have of doing. Hugh's older brother, the younger Gregory, is an able American business man; he and Hugh grate each other. Hugh's sister, Constance, comes nearest understanding him and is the link between him and his family. Even that link snaps after Hugh marries a strike leader, the daughter of a Pole and a Hungarian Jewess. Jean Gilbert is the daughter of an army officer and Ethel Crawford, whose brother married Hugh's sister.

The book starts with the first meeting of Hugh Corbett and Jean Gilbert and ends—

By Godfrey! as the Colonel would say. Is that where the flaw lies?

This is several kinds of a story, as we've indicated, and among other kinds it's a story that can't be spoiled by tracing the main outlines of it. The pattern is here, not the whole tapestry, and we can indicate it with-

out taking one whit from your enjoyment of the depth, detail and richness of coloring which make *An American Family* well worth your while. To get on: Does the story end with Jean's love of Hugh? No, for she loves him from the moment she sets eyes on him. With his love of her? No. With the mutual confession of their love? No!

It ends when Mr. Webster has killed Hugh's wife, the indolent Helena, and cleared the path of respectability for the mutual and confessed love of Hugh and Jean. He does it all with the highest plausibility, to be sure, but—he does it. The note of conscious preparation creeps in on page 308 (there are 452 pages) and thereafter in a hundred little twists and turns of the story the reader is uneasily aware that the novelist has an ace up his sleeve in the game that he and every novelist is always playing with his characters.

An Unsettling Book.

Now the trouble about a piece of artifice like this, the terribly unsettling thing about it, is that it makes the reader suspicious of everything else in the book. He wonders if Jean is all Mr. Webster cracks her up to be, for instance, or if a fellow who required being understood so extensively and continuously as Hugh Corbett was wholly worth the expenditure of time, energy and imagination necessary to understand him. And so on. Such doubts are dangerous and frequently fatal. If they aren't in this case it is because, after all, in delineative detail the novel is worthy of strong praise; because, in its contour and much of its content, it is a noteworthy piece of writing; and finally because in such portraits as Helena Galiez, old Gregory Corbett and, caricaturishly, in Mrs. Robert Corbett the author has put his people on paper to the life.