

# A Talk With Abraham Cahan in Paris

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By M. K. WISEHART.

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**I**D LIKE to tell the story of Abraham Cahan in Paris, but that interesting story must be cut short for what he has to say as to the coming of a literary revolution in America. In the United States those who don't know that Abraham Cahan wrote a novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, discussed in some of the leading French reviews as a piece of real literature from America, probably know that he is the founder and editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*.

As European correspondent Cahan is now living in the midst of things in the Place de la Sorbonne, to be exact, at the Hotel Select, so that when Cahan gives his address to a man that man is sure to say, "Well—is it?" and Cahan always answers, "Not so very." Now there lives at the Hotel Select an elderly French woman who has a case of nerves and is disturbed when, in Cahan's room, voices rise in literary discussion. Once the lady's knocking on the wall shut conversation off altogether, but latterly an agreement has been entered into, formulated by Cahan as follows:

"Madam, let it be understood that when the excitement in my room gets too noisy you are to rap on the wall three times. This will be a signal for the immediate abatement of discussion. If this is not agreeable to you I shall have to hunt another room, as rooms are very difficult to find in Paris."

So it happened that after the third rapping on the wall the conversation of which this is a record—the Pantheon—around the corner from the Sorbonne.

Possibly it was the sight of a khaki clad young American going to and fro through the Place de la Sorbonne that led Cahan to predict, as one effect of the war, obliteration of "fifty years of differences" that have isolated American writers from Continental readers. He said:

"A great revolution is going on all over Europe, but about America I can predict only one revolution positively. That will be in literature, and it will come within a year or so or as soon as people have begun to settle down. The presence of over 2,000,000 Americans in France cannot fail to produce certain results as to our literary tastes. I don't mean to say that the soldier boys and other Americans who have been in France have fallen under the influence of French literature. Indeed, I don't think many of them have read any French literature during their stay in Paris, nor indeed in French literature being read much by the Frenchman himself in these times. The effect will come from deeper causes than mere reading.

"The war and the overthrow of the old thrones of Europe really mean the end of some of our deep rooted prejudices and superstitions. There's a feeling everywhere in Europe that problems both political and literary will be approached now with far more simplicity and sincerity, with more frankness and courage. To my mind certainly the change applies to our artistic standards as well as to politics.

"In the United States I see a vast amount of literary talent of the genuine sort, but I fail to see it in formal literary expression. I see the literary genius of the United States crop up in our daily newspaper work, in some bit of description or psychological poetry by way of introduction to a report of a sensational criminal trial or a stirring public event. There are days when my newspaper is studded with gems of literary talent. Of course it is scattered—a paragraph here or a paragraph there—sometimes a whole column. I find a great deal of beauty, deep insight, telling strokes, artistry of a high order—all this scattered. The beauty of it all is its sincerity, naturalness and unconscious vigor and charm. You feel that it is done straight from the shoulder, not as a stunt. It's not a premeditated offence, but an unconscious outburst of beauty.

"Unfortunately, however, when these very talents take to purveying literature to the magazines or to book publishing houses they become provokingly formal. They get into their evening clothes and

everything they say is calculated, mechanical. There is as little room for sincerity in what they write then as there is in small talk at a high tea. There is more fine writing than imagery and genuine feeling, and there is far more plot and design than life. It is as though these men of talent, when they come to writing literature, let themselves be dominated by plot. The plot takes over their shoulder as they write and tells them to do this thing here and the other thing there, and thus the real stuff of life is pushed aside and left out for mere mechanical effects.

"I have watched the career of many a highly gifted American writer, and it is heartbreaking to see native merit of a high order being polished out of existence to make room for the mechanical devices of plot machinery and character drawing that really draws no character but offers smudges under the guise of character sketches—well-mannered pretence.

"People in Europe give Americans credit for almost supernatural efficiency and inventive genius in the matter of producing cheap automobiles and of transporting a gigantic army inside of twelve months. Also they give us credit for kindness and human sympathy in rescuing a nation like Belgium from starvation, but the European doesn't know that Uncle Sam has a vast amount of literary treasures in his mind and heart. They don't know it, because our novels and magazines don't show it.

"The coming of 2,000,000 Americans and the most conspicuous part played by them in the remaking of Europe cannot help having the effect of bringing the two continents in much closer contact than we ever dreamed; and just as it is absurd to imagine Europe could help buying Ford cars I feel it would be absurd to imagine that we're going to continue producing and reading novels which could evoke only sneers on the part of the readers of France or Italy. I think that England is as much in the process of recasting her literary ideals as we are, except that she is a little ahead of us. England started auspiciously five years ago. She was just

creating a group of new writers, better standards, better taste, but when the war set in her literary progress was interrupted.

"At present I know only one writer in the United States who would get an audience all over Europe—and he will get it, too—and that is Theodore Dreiser.

"American book reviewers who attack his work object to him simply and chiefly because they're not used to appraising work of this kind. He is essentially a European writer of American life. In some of his novels he has been discursive, rambling, journalistically overproductive; but, in the first place, he has produced such a novel as *Jennie Gerhardt*, which I think the best story of real American life ever written; in the second place, every one of his books contains a vast amount of remarkable art.

"His *Financier*, for instance, is far too long and overburdened with detail that would be more appropriate in a historical treatise on commercial life in Philadelphia than in a novel, but at least half of the book is made up of stuff of sculpture-like incisiveness. There are three or four characters in that novel that stand out in one's mind as living creatures of flesh and blood of the ineffaceable kind. The father of the heroine, the old corrupt politician, in his domestic atmosphere and in his public life, is a wonderful piece of portrait painting taken from the heart of life. So is his daughter, the heroine. Take that book and cut it down half, leaving the rest untouched and formless as it might appear, and it is a masterpiece that would be read with eagerness on the Continent. His *Genius* is perhaps half full of journalism that can't be taken seriously, but the remaining 50 per cent. is crowded with living creatures highly individualized, delicately drawn. I can't think of any of the great conventional successes of American literature that offer anything like it.

"Booth Tarkington, for instance, has produced many interesting types and situations, but not in a single instance has he achieved that highest of literary values—absolute artistic sincerity. Trailing

after his most successful effects there is always an artificial taste of design, calculation, clever artifice and essential working for a purpose.

"The reader of literature on the Continent is a cultured man while he reads his novels, just as he is a cultured man when he goes into a drawing room. He has outlived the story of plot and happy ending. Artistic portrayal of life, painting of character, atmosphere, in all their complexities and subtleties—these are his great sources of aesthetic pleasure. Plot, conventional moral lesson and all the rest would be artistic sacrilege to his taste. In this respect we are fifty years behind him, and I feel that one of the effects of this war will be to obliterate these fifty years between us.

"Russian literature of the pre-war period had a growing vogue in England, and because of these qualities that are the very soul of it. As a matter of fact Russian literature is not the only one to-day that derives its inspiration from these artistic ideals. The Norwegians have built up a remarkable literature in recent years that is just as simple and natural, as deep, rugged and real. Knut Hamsun, the Norwegian, in many of his stories is almost as amazingly human as Tolstoy, whom many American admirers have learned to appreciate and admire. Of Nexo's five volume story I would say that the first volume reached a high altitude of artistic strength and beauty, while the rest, to my mind, are scarcely worthy of the author of the first.

"In Italian and Spanish literature there are many fine things to-day. As for the French, two-thirds of Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe* is of the same substance as Tolstoy's or Dostoevsky's and often almost as good. Anatole France is a writer of the first order and Henri Barbusse has wonderful strength and insight. I fear that if any of these writers from Knut Hamsun down had written in English they would never have found publishers."

Don Marquis has written a book called *Prefaces*, and if it ever gets started—!

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