

# With Faith In the Lord

THE BRIDAL CANOPY. By S. Y. Agnon. Translated by I. M. Lask from the Hebrew, "Hachnassath Kalla." 389 pp. New York: Schocken Books. \$5.95.

IN THE HEART OF THE SEAS. By S. Y. Agnon. Translated by I. M. Lask from the Hebrew, "Bilvav Yamin." Illustrated 128 pp. New York: Schocken Books. \$3.95.

By RICHARD M. ELMAN

THESE works by Israel's Nobel Prize laureate for literature are laced with the intoxicating liquor of holiness. At the death of one pious Jew, S. Y. Agnon tells us, "He accepted all troubles and distresses with joy, and would say that all the misfortunes of the world were as nought against the future joy of being in the Land of Israel." Thematically, the books share in the life-affirming sentiments of the Psalmist David: "I will give thanks unto the Lord with my whole heart;/ I will tell of all Thy marvelous works./ I will be glad and exult in Thee;/ I will sing praises to Thy name, O Most High," although the language, the images, the references to "This World" or "The Next World," or to "The Land of Life," or to the "Light of Life," are derived even more directly from that vast body of lore and commentary which was the culture of the God-fearing Jews of Eastern Europe.

Thus "The Bridal Canopy" is a picaresque depiction of the journeying forth of Reb Yudel, a poor but pious Hasid, to observe one of the numerous commandments of his God by providing his three eligible daughters with dowries so that they may marry and be fruitful. Reb Yudel and Nuta the Wagoner, his companion, have been compared to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. They wander the face of 19th-century Galicia and environs, encountering many strange and comic happenings. Episode follows episode; anecdote is unfolded inside of anecdote; and disputation vies with disputation. The reader is not confronted with characters in a novel in their fullness but with exemplary or typical behavior and commentary on that behavior, the whole embellished—like those elaborate silver decorations which are mounted on the Torah—with Mishnaic and Talmudic allusions. And with legend, hearsay, delight in the many wonders of the Lord God of Hosts through whose Sanctified Name a bridegroom is eventually obtained, and then another and another, "wedding causing wedding, as folk say," and Reb Yudel and his wife, Frummet, are rewarded with more than just "transient successes." "At the end of their days," Agnon writes, "it was their merit to ascend to the Holy Land to be given light by the Light of Life."

Similarly, "In the Heart of the



Seas" is the journeying forth of some pietists to ascend the Holy Land of Israel. En route, they witness many strange and miraculous occurrences, are tested, arrive, kiss the Sacred Earth and give thanks. Once again the narrative is as tricked with allusions as some rich silken prayer, scarf, and always it is elevated, controlled, made hallowed. In both works there is even a good deal of characteristic Hasidic paradox and whimsy, as if the very singsong of Hasidic disputation were being imitated and, therefore, hallowed.

Thus one wonder-rabbi abjures an innkeeper en route: "And how do you know . . . that the Holy One, blessed be He, requires your congregational prayers? Maybe what He wants of you is a glass of brandy and a dish of buckwheat groats. I assure you, this fine meal you serve wayfarers is as sweet to Him, as you might say, as any of the fine hymns of praise they chant to Him in the town."

These, then, are celebrational works in which the putatively sanctified universe of the pious Jew, hallowed by his observance of the Commandments, has been transposed from the lyric simplicities of the Psalmist upon the homely landscape of Eastern European Jewry. But for these same pietists of Eastern Europe such a transposition did not, alas, redound to the sanctity of the Lord God of Hosts. Just a few years after "The Bridal Canopy" was written, they were being herded into gas vans and before fusillades.

Their prayers were not answered. Their "enemies" were not "turned back." Neither did they "stumble and perish" at the Lord's presence. "The Nations" were not "rebuked." The "wicked" were not "destroyed." Neither was their name "blotted out forever and ever." What was largely



blotted out, uprooted, turned to "waste place," was the very culture which these works celebrate; and it seemed to some as if the words of the Psalmist had the taste of ashes in the mouth.

To put the matter so is not to indict Agnon or his Jewish pietists for a lack of prescience. When "The Bridal Canopy" was originally published in this country in this same translation in 1935, not even the most prescient wonder-rabbi, brooding over the Holy One's vengeance of old, could have foreseen the extremity of the Jewish plight. Nevertheless, the fact of God's failure to "minister justice" to his "peoples with equity" does set limits on our ability to appreciate such celebrational works.

FOUND reading these Agnon works a tedious experience. It was humiliating to be so bored by one's own ignorance of the minutiae of the Jewish tradition. After a while it was even boring to be so humiliated. It has been said that in Hebrew he is the great stylist of a kind of quiet, laconic prose as tense and taut as a harp string, but that is precisely what gets lost in these translations, in which the sing-song lilt emerges as doggerel and archaisms are pronounced. As English, they are literate, even elegant, cultural monuments which I am sure will be great successes on the coffee tables and in the Judaica shops of Jewish suburban communities, but they give no real hint of the author's literary merits. So it is as if one has come upon an excavation site littered with pot shards of a variety of exotic hues and decorations, in which the structures underneath have all been painted over so that neither their architectural forms nor their decorative arrangements are visible—and then one re-

members that the site upon which one has been feasting one's eyes is that of a charnel house.

Not that I wish to suggest that Agnon's work is entirely free of that agnosticism and that sense of horror which seem to be the destiny of many Jewish writers in our age. There are some early stories about assimilated European Jews which are fraught with spiritual uneasiness, a sense of human precariousness, and the terror of human possibilities. There is also that fascinating and unique parable, "Forevermore," in which the scholar, Adiel Amzel, after a lifetime spent seeking to uncode the book of the destruction of the city of Gumldata ("the pride of mighty nations until it was reduced to dust and ashes") finds that he can only succeed by condemning himself to a leper colony.

Even those works which are of the tradition have moments when their sunniness is made relevant. Thus, in "Days of Awe," his monumental compilation of legend, commentary and tradition about the holy calendar days of the Jews, Agnon tells us that when "there was a cholera epidemic in 1848, Rabbi Israel Salanter posted announcements in all the Houses of Prayer of Vilna on the Eve of Yom Kippur, urging the people not to fast on that holy and awesome day, and to cut short the recitation of the liturgical poems of the day, and to go walking in the fresh air." The rabbi ate a roll before his congregants and instructed them that "much is permitted where there is mortal danger, and the life of a single person was dearer in his eyes than all the wealth in the world." If Jewish holiness is to survive after the Holocaust, one presumes that it will have to be based upon such acts and not upon any blind faith in the sanctity of the Divine.