

March, 1915

JULES ROMAINS AND THE UNANIMISTES

A Word of Comment
by Neith Gunnen Holt



JULES ROMAINS

*the present head of the "Unanimistes", a new school
of French novel writers*

JULES ROMAINS, the author of "La Mort de Quelqu'un," published in English with the title "The Death of a Nobody" (Huebsch), is the head of a school of French writers called "Unanimistes."

This school may be explained roughly as follows: They believe that the soul, or personality of a group—of a crowd—may be detached and studied, for the purpose of creative art, as definitely as the soul or personality of a man or of a woman. M. Romains worked out this theory elaborately in his play, "L'Armée dans la Ville," which was produced with startling success at the Odéon in 1911. In that fine drama the clash of the action, the war of conflicting motives, is not between members of the *dramatis personae* but between the groups to which those members belong.

It is, no doubt, because of his preoccupation with the abstract—for he seeks the simple through the complex—that M. Romains has been regarded as the first to apply seriously the ideas of the Post Impressionist painters and sculptors to prose and verse. He has intensity of vision, great vigor of style, and something of the subtlety of M. Bergson. He will be popular, but he has not sought popularity, for he has said that he would prefer to be read by ten men and understood by five, to being read by a million or more and understood by all of them.

Those who read modern fiction for a story—with plot, incident and character study—will put down "The Death of a Nobody" at the end of the second chapter; those who seek an exposition of ethics, or the unfolding of a moral conception, will finish the novel, but possibly with distaste and dissent.

The smaller number who read for the pleasure of obtaining glimpses of a writer's attitude toward life, will rejoice in this book, which is the work of an indubitable artist.

For ability to see the world from his own individual standpoint, and to express what he sees, is the test of a true artist. The minds of most novelists are storehouses of other people's impressions. By careful training a man of intelligence may manage to see the world more or less as Gorky sees it, or Anatole France, or Henry James. It is comparatively easy to define feeling and emotion in terms already familiar to the public.

TO describe a tree, for instance, as Walter Pater described a tree would be for any writer an undoubted, if barren, achievement; to describe a tree, and convey to the reader his own particular and sensuous impressions of that tree, the feelings it arouses in him, the conclusions he instinctively draws from its existence, all this is to approach, as Romains approaches, the rank of a true creative artist.

Perhaps M. Romains' ideas, like those of most men, are not entirely his own; his philosophy may be unconsciously borrowed from older and forgotten thinkers, but these old conceptions, passing through the medium of M. Romains' temperament, as through a pane of faintly colored glass, seem to take on new and subtler shades of meaning.

The description of the tenement house where Jacques Godard died, and the manner in which its occupants were severally affected by his death, is unlike anything else in modern fiction. The account of the journey made by old Godard to Paris, the funeral of Jacques, and the procession through the streets of Paris, constantly arouse in the reader a sense of surprise and awe. All through the book we seem to feel a stimulation as of a suddenly achieved advance in culture; for what is culture but the ability to accept new and constantly varying points of view?