

MISS CATHER AND OTHERS

DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP. *By Willa Cather. Knopf. \$2.50.*

THE AMERICAN CARAVAN. *A Yearbook of American Literature. Edited by Van Wyck Brooks, Alfred Kreyenborg, Lewis Mumford and Paul Rosenfeld. Macaulay. Distributed by the Literary Guild of America. \$5.00.*

THE ROMANCE OF VILLON. *By Francis Carco. Translated by Hamish Miles. Knopf. \$5.00.*

IN "Death Comes for the Archbishop", I take it, Miss Cather has taken a sabbatical in order to write a story outside her main line of interests because she wanted to describe the effect of the clear air and sunlight of Mexico and because she wanted to write about Catholic prelates. It is not a story, I think, which those who liked "My Antonia" and "A Lost Lady" will find especially thrilling. Enjoyment of it must come largely from her cadenced prose. It is a story of missionary work in Mexico in the middle years of the nineteenth century and of a young priest's efforts to introduce Christian morals and civilization into a community of heathenish and animalistic Mexican peasants. It seems to me a formless sort of novel in which only one character comes to life and that character only for a moment. That was when Father Vaillant shooed the Mexican cook out of the kitchen, and prepared a roast that he could eat. For the rest I read the novel with a constant satisfaction over the limpid prose and with a constantly disappointed hope of discovering a theme or a story in it.

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The editors of "The American Caravan" sent out a manifesto more than a year ago which was meant to reach all American writers, outlining the scheme of the yearbook and asking for contributions. It was assumed by the editors that the standardized needs of American magazines were responsible for much fine, fresh, racy literature of American life going unpublished. The editors asked specifically for contributions of the sort that ordinarily do not find a ready market — fragments from unfinished work, plays, short novels, narratives in verse, groups of poems and sketches, and short stories which violate some editorial taboo.

The result of this search for original material is embodied in a huge book of 800 closely printed pages, made up of prose and verse from seventy-two contributors. Had the contributors known in advance what the fate of the book would be, I have no doubt that many of them would have been more eager to be represented by their best work. I suspect that most of them expected to receive little or nothing for their contributions, because whatever royalties would be forthcoming had to be distributed pro rata to a great many people.

But the book had the good fortune to be selected by the Literary Guild, which meant an advance order of (I believe) about 25,000 copies, besides the impetus thus given to the sale of the book in the bookstores. The editors were able to send sizable royalty checks to surprised contributors during the first week after the book's publication. One poet, it is said, received \$250 for his poem, which was more than he had ever received altogether from magazines during his career as a writer.

The contents of the yearbook are so various and their merits so different that it is impossible to review it within any reasonable limits. Only a few things may be said of the book as applying to the separate contributions and to the book as a whole: the prevailing mood of both the prose and the verse is tragic; the point of view of the writers is disillusioned, sardonic, or pessimistic; there is no humorous relief except Witter Bynner's verses and the subjects are usually life in the raw.

The best things in the book, to my mind, are: "Lazarus Laughed", by Eugene O'Neill, of which only the first act is printed; the suppressed verses from William Ellery Leonard's "Two Lives"; Ernest Hemingway's grim short story, "An Alpine Idyl"; Isadore Schneider's long narrative poem of a misunderstood man, "The Temptation of St. Anthony"; and Edmund Wilson's "Galahad", the story of sex education of an ardent young Y. M. C. A. student.

The O'Neill play is but an appetizing taste of what promises to be O'Neill's most powerful and most unactable tragedy. The Leonard poems leave one rather gasping by their

unrestraint and shaken by their power. Isadore Schneider has sustained his theme through a long and difficult narrative in verse without any visible flagging of inspiration. Hemingway's "An Alpine Idyl" is about an animal-like peasant who stood the frozen corpse of his wife up in the barn and used the teeth of her open mouth to hang his lantern on while he was working at night. The body could not be buried until the thaws of spring and when the peasant applied to the priest for burial of the body, the priest at first thought the woman had been murdered, because her mouth had been twisted out of shape by the weight of the lantern. The peasant accounted for the twisted mouth stolidly and without seeing anything reprehensible in his actions. A gruesome tale, written with great economy of detail. Wilson's story is a tragi-comedy of the awakening of sex consciousness and a satire upon Y. M. C. A. welfare workers. It seems a little out of date after Wilson's similar treatment of a similar theme in "The Undertaker's Garland" and after Sinclair Lewis' novels; but it is an entertaining bit, with excellent dialogue.

Next in the line of excellence I should place the three stories by Margery Latimer, Edna Bryner, and Gertrude Diamant, all three of them writers whose names, I believe, are unfamiliar to magazine readers and all of them destined for distinguished careers. Much of the material in "The American Caravan" might have appeared in this magazine if it had been submitted to us, so I am inclined to think that it would have been published in others if the authors had used good judgment in choosing the magazines to which they submitted their work. On the other hand there are a number of contributions in the yearbook which I could readily see are not what editors call good magazine material and yet I enjoyed reading them and was glad that the editors of the yearbook had created a place for such material.

"The American Caravan" is to be an annual publication and the editors are to be congratulated both upon their idea and upon its result. So great has been the success of the first volume that they will doubtless have a vast amount of excellent stuff from which to make selections next year. Inevitably they will have to reject some poems, articles and stories as "not quite suited to the present needs of 'The American Caravan', though this rejection does not necessarily imply any lack of merit", and so, in time, another asylum may have to be provided for the homeless manuscripts which not even "The American Caravan" can make place for. The editors of this yearbook are men of taste and culture and they have a healthy enthusiasm for the experimental and unorthodox forms of literary expression. My chief regret upon closing the volume is that the editors themselves did not each contribute some prose or poetry.

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It is Francis Carco's notion that François Villon was a sensitive and well-bred lad, diffident and weak-willed, who came under the domination of evil companions through a pathetic desire to be accepted as a regular fellow. From this apparently sound assumption, M. Carco has written a novel of Villon's life which is illuminating without being especially impressive, and full of fine scenes without being especially dramatic.

It would seem that M. Carco had deliberately suppressed every impulse he had to make Villon the "beloved vagabond" of the popular cinema and musical comedy imagination. As a student of the lower depths of Paris, about whose denizens he has already written one novel, M. Carco is qualified to present a veracious picture of the mental habits and the ways of life among the thieves and panders Villon associated with; and as a poet and a writer of sensitive prose, he is also qualified to portray the soul of an artist under poverty and ugliness.

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

SINCLAIR REVEALED AND HAWTHORNE OBSCURED

By John Macy

UPTON SINCLAIR: A STUDY IN SOCIAL PROTEST.
By Floyd Dell. Doran. \$2.00
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE: A STUDY IN SOLITUDE.
By Herbert Gorman. Doran. \$2.00

THE first two volumes of the George H. Doran Company's Murray Hill Biographies of American men and women of letters have been published.

Floyd Dell on Upton Sinclair was due to be an excellent combination, and it is. The subject is interesting and the biographer has given it the additional interest of his own personality and fine treatment. He admires his man, praises him enthusiastically where praise is due. But he keeps his balance beautifully, lays a firm friendly hand on Sinclair's faults, and is not guilty of the uncritically warm adulation which leaves the reader of some biographies cold and sceptical about the heroism of the hero. There sits a man (if Sinclair ever has time to sit) portrayed with objective fidelity and the imaginative skill of the true artist in biography. This study in social protest is rather the study of a person, a temperament, and a critical examination of the work of a powerful, original, if defective, artist. The social protest is there because Sinclair has been protesting all his life, and Dell knows thoroughly the society from which his protestant emerged and against which he has fought a continuous winning and losing battle or succession of battles. The book is a history of "radical" thought of the twentieth century and of the "conservative" forces which made and largely defeated that thought.

Twenty years ago, when "The Jungle" took the world by storm, many of us who are

contemporary with the now middle-aged but incurably youthful Sinclair were both jubilant and perplexed. We were socialists and we thought the world should be turned upside down by this terrific work. We were literary and we knew that here was a great novel, passionate, terribly beautiful, written by a man who knew how to write, an artist. Then things got mixed up, because life is mixed up, and Sinclair is a paradoxical clarifier and stirrer of the mess. When you went to your friends who were only literary, who, as Bill Haywood used to say, did not know the difference between anarchism and arnica, and when you tried to interest them in the book as a book, a remarkable piece of writing, they could not see it because it was sordid and the work of a socialist, a fellow who had deceived us with the spurious "Journal of Arthur Sterling". And other friends — working socialists, radicals, labor agitators — rejoiced in the book as a tract, a contribution to the "cause"; and were not much interested in the fact that an authentic new novelist had appeared in American literature. Some such confusion or contradiction has muddled the career of Sinclair all his life, and the reason is that the confusion is in him as well as in the social order. He is two men, at least two, at war with each other and yet strengthening and inspiring each other.

The artist as propagandist, as reformer, is very old and often met in literature, as Sinclair has shown in his penetrating but characteristically one-sided essay, or pamphlet, "Mammonart: An Essay in Economic Interpretation", which in spite of its sub-title is an original and important essay in literary history and criticism. I have not the book on my shelves, so that I do not recall his examples, but one can easily recall a hundred cases of men who wished to do something for