

## SOME NEW NOVELS

By Miriam Colgate

WHEN you were young did you like blood-and-thunder tales of hardy, self-reliant, rough-talking men in buckskin who spent lonely winters hunting and trapping, conducted pack-trains across unmapped dangerous mountains and deserts, overcame Indians, starvation, and assorted hardships, and came roaring into frontier towns hell-bent for a spree? If you did you will probably like Harvey Fergusson's new novel *Wolf Song* (Knopf; \$2.50). For he has caught the flavor of good Western thrillers, and has added to it a romantic, dramatic love story told with more sophistication than you used to find in the books that kept you away from your schoolwork.

"Up from the edge of the prairie and over the range rode three", the story begins. They had with them six pack-mules bulging with beaver. "Hump yourself, you goddam mule! This outfit's bound for Taos!" Beaver meant wealth. Taos meant a spree. Ho, you *muchachas*, get ready for the big doin's! Hump yourself, you goddam mule! This chile's half froze for liquor!

One of the three was Sam Lash, come to the West from Kentucky when still in his teens, drawn by the stream of travel going past his door toward the Missouri and the Indian country beyond. Several full years of frontier jobs had hardened him into a first class mountain man — and "a mountain man goes on until he gets rubbed out". Only Sam seemed pretty well able to take care of himself, at least with Comanches, Apaches, greasers, bears, and other incidents of the Southwest a hundred years ago.

But at the Taos party, in his new buckskin pants and purple shirt, to the tune of "Turkey in the Straw", he met and danced with Lola Salazar, high-bred, high-spirited daughter of a wealthy Mexican who had killed many Indians in his time, now ruled his house with iron hand, and hated gringos. Lola was waited upon by many servants,

and courted nightly by an unexciting lover whose guitar-strumming and singing of many *versos* could not put out of her mind the blonde hair of her girlhood love, now hanging from an Apache belt. Sam, too, had light hair — and he was a wild, uncomforted man who slept on the hard ground — a man aching with need of all a woman has to give.

Then follows a swift tale of elopement, sad parting while Sam goes hunting, recapture of the daughter by stern parent and twenty men, battle to the death with an Indian on a lone war-path, and finally the kindly intervention of Sam's friend the padre. The story is told at a rapid, interest-compelling pace, with convincing Southwest color and well-chosen incident. It makes good reading. It will make a good movie.

*Jalna* (Little, Brown; \$2), in memory of the Indian station where they had met and married and begun the business of building up a family, was the name the first Canadian Whiteoaks gave the estate they founded in the new world. It is *Jalna* with its three conglomerate generations of rowdy, sensual, courageous, cruel, sentimental Whiteoaks that Mazo de la Roche has managed to get into a story as luxuriant as India and as clear as a Canadian winter. The portrayal of a dozen hardy egotists nagging, fighting, adoring each other is a task that an older craftsman than Miss de la Roche might well have dreaded, but she has carried it off triumphantly. The Whiteoaks are all well drawn, from the centenarian ancestress of them all, a ludicrous tyrant, to the nine-year-old wheedling imp at the end of the line; and for good measure and contrast the author has thrown in two young alien wives, confused and bewildered by the surging family life.

The faults of the book are faults of generosity — too much material, too many characters, an embarrassment of incident. With so much to convey the method could

only be rigidly objective, and though one emotion crowds another through all the pages of the book they pass too rapidly to carry conviction. For the same reason the characters fail to be quite human. With the exception of young Wakefield, who is delightfully and tenderly seen, they are as brittle and brilliant and circumscribed as bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. They shift and settle in this grouping or that, and for a moment the design is new; but the novelty passes, and the bits of glass are endlessly the same.

But after all Miss de la Roche has spiked the guns of criticism with her choice of a title. It is *Jalna*, founded by the Whiteoaks and growing in them and around them and finally at their expense into a life of its own that the author has chosen to celebrate, and not the Whiteoaks themselves, who are only *Jalna's* transient cells.

*Barberry Bush*, the heroine of Kathleen Norris' book of the same name (Doubleday; \$2) was half-awake, and very much afraid of what she was beginning to understand about life and love. And so, partly because he seemed to make fewer demands on her, and partly because the man she should really have married was infatuated with the wrong girl, she married a young poet, Barry du Spain. But Barry's detachment and coolness were illusory; he seemed detached because he was incapable of devotion except to himself. He was extraordinarily sulky and bad-tempered, even for a poet of fiction, and when he ran away to New York — leaving *Barberry Bush* with one toddling baby and another soon to be born — the love for him that had grown in *Barberry* through nursing him, and working for him, and bearing his children, died utterly. In the meanwhile the man she should really have married had recovered from his infatuation for the visiting divorcée, and was back where he belonged, at *Barberry's* feet. His was the privilege of saving her from the crazed and drunken tramp who menaced her on her birthday night; there was reason enough for her to fall in love with him completely, even if she had not been half in love with him from the first pages of the book.

In the end, of course, *Barberry* is promised her satisfactory lover. These heroines of Kathleen Norris' every-other-book do always manage to eat their cake and have it in the most ingenious ways; they will not divorce and they will not compromise, but Providence looks out for them admirably.

Although this is not a book to delight those who rejoiced over "Certain People of Importance" or Mrs. Norris' tender and humorous stories of Irish-American life, it is full of color and warmth and vitality.

Charles Norris' new novel, *Zelda Marsh* (Dutton, \$2.50), is one of power. But I didn't begin to feel its power until I had read three hundred and fifty pages. That leaves me in doubt just how highly to rate the book. Had I not been reading it for review, I doubt if I should have gone very far in it. Nevertheless, the last hundred and thirty pages moved me, wrenched tears, and cast a deep though pleasant gloom over the world for several days.

Three men channelized the main currents in the life of *Zelda Marsh* — the man she loved, the man she married, and the man she almost married later. With Michael of her heart she had her first love and her only true happiness. She found him in her lonely youth in San Francisco while she was still in high school, the adopted daughter of a stodgy couple. In this first part of the book I had to accept on faith the dreariness of *Zelda's* surroundings, her charm, her idyll with Michael: I was not made to feel them. This is also true of the tragedy that followed her happiness, and her secluded three years as the mistress of a man who never meant much to her — nor means much to the reader.

*Zelda* escapes from the prison which her early recklessness and misfortune built around her by way of the stage, eventually coming to New York. In this part of the book the background holds interest even when the story itself fails to move. Mr. Norris has given very well the disordered, exciting, difficult, romantic life of lesser figures in the theatrical world: the incessant travelling, the fleeting friendships, the tragedy of job-hunting, the gaiety that goes with "lucky breaks". A small-time actor be-

friends her: when jobless and hungry she finally says yes to his marriage proposals, and they go on tour in a vaudeville act. But her past rises to confront her, the marriage breaks up, severe illness comes, and Zelda goes through her darkest days.

Then quite suddenly Zelda becomes a star: and here the reader's faith must be as a mountain of mustard seeds. Nevertheless, it is only after she is a successful, famous actress that the book begins to cut into the reader's emotions. Zelda seems suddenly to come alive. We feel her happiness in her success; we feel her almost-happiness with Tom, who has everything to offer her and does so; we feel her tragedy as the ties and

mistakes of her youth confuse her life and finally claim her again. Even the events of the first part of the book become real, now, as we look back on them through Zelda's eyes: we see the appeal of irresponsible, boyish Michael; we realize the horror of the secluded years; we understand the cheapness of her actor-husband.

If "Zelda Marsh" comes your way, read it through: the last part will get under you skin, and the ending will leave you baffled and resentful. Mr. Norris has demonstrated again that he can deal powerfully with modern America.—I don't know whether to hope or to fear, for his sake, that the book will fall into the hands of a Boston policeman.

## THE WAGES OF VIRTUE

By Isabel Paterson

A Good Woman. By Louis Bromfield. Stokes. \$2.50.

**E**VEN Wordsworth, though he could not pass an inoffensive primrose by the river's brim without hanging a moral on it,—as George Moore has remarked bitterly—even Wordsworth qualified his description of "a perfect woman", with the reservation that she was "not too bright and good for human nature's daily food". For there is something cloying about excessive virtue, as nobody should have known better than Wordsworth. "Too good to live" is a phrase the Freudians were not needed to explain. That is why society experiences periodical revolts against the name of virtue, and openly avows a preference for publicans over Pharisees. Just now the United States is at the peak of such a reaction; the bones of Anthony Comstock have been exhumed and set in the pillory, as the Restoration wreaked posthumous vengeance on Cromwell; and all the Victorians have been stripped of their hoopskirts and top-hats and made to run the gauntlet of the jeering younger generation. In fiction, the revolt has long been in process; I fancy it has

reached its most explicit expression in Louis Bromfield's *A Good Woman*.

By all the formal standards, Emma Downes really was a thoroughly good woman. She was pious, chaste, industrious, truthful except when driven by hard necessity, thrifty—and successful. When her worthless husband, Jason Downes, ran away from her, she did build up a legend of his having gone to China on business and perished there; but surely she might be excused for saving her pride. Asking no help of anyone in rearing her son Philip, Emma prospered as the owner of a restaurant in the midland town where she lived; and running a restaurant is a hard job. She also managed to run her son, even more thoroughly. She made Philip into a missionary and married him to another missionary, a girl named Naomi, and told them that of course they would postpone actual marital relations indefinitely, because Naomi could not have a child while engaged in mission work in the heart of Africa. Having settled her son's life to her own complete satisfaction, Emma was stupefied when Philip announced by letter that he had lost his faith and was