

## A South American Classic

*THE VORTEX*, by José Eustacio Rivera.  
Putnam. \$2.50.

THIS book has for several years been widely and on the whole justly acclaimed as a great South American novel. It is, however, characteristic of the literary insularity of the United States and in particular of its pronounced apathy toward the culture of the Hispanic republics that the American version of *La Voragine* appears so late, in fact seven years after the death of its author. Yet in a broad and significant sense it is an American novel because, breaking away from a servile colonialism that has too long hindered the development of Hispanic literature, it is an authentic record of experience in the Western Hemisphere.

*The Vortex* relates the adventures of the narrator, the young poet Arturo Cova, first in the tropical pampas of his native Colombia where a half-chivalrous, half-carnal love for Alicia has drawn him, and then in the adjoining jungles and rubber plantations whither he is led by desires compounded of that same love, revenge and a lofty egoism. The second part, which deals with conditions on the rubber plantations, is a rare social document. If only for this reason, the book cannot fail to move the reader very deeply; but the novel as a whole is marked by an intensity of emotion and an unmistakable feeling of truth that distinguish it as a work of art.

Rivera, nevertheless, will puzzle the reader in no small degree. Here is a powerful piece of naturalistic writing that somehow does not belong to the tradition from which a Zola or a Dreiser or a Caldwell spring.

The difference between Rivera and our more familiar contemporaries lies not so much in the topic or the setting of the novel, but in a certain reckless, savage and wholly spontaneous manner of describing crude natural phenomena and even cruder human conduct, and in an extraordinary mixture of quixotic and eloquent romanticism, of bold, glamorous exoticism and dashing, verbose lyricism which the poetic Cova has injected into his tale.

Stating it in more general terms, one may perhaps account for the unusual qualities of *The Vortex* by saying that it represents the blending, through the medium of a sensitive and highly articulate imagination, of two cultural and class points of view: a feudal, aristocratic idealism and a primitive, elemental realism. Cova (who must be none other than Rivera himself) is the hero of some 16th or 17th century Spanish romance come to life in a pre-historic wilderness whose dread realities, natural and social, he experiences. The sophistication of bourgeois realism and naturalism, its straining for objectivity and its obsession with the horrendous or the miserable as an end in itself are lacking here. In fact it is Rivera's naïve and obvious sincerity, both in his cloak-and-sword chivalry, his fierce hatred of the jungle's cruelties and his outspoken sympathies with the oppressed, that keep the story from ever becoming absurd or grotesque.

However, it takes a tough stomach to hold some of the dishes that Rivera serves. On the rubber plantations there are tortures for the workers that even Hitler has never heard of. Here "Christians," literally sold into slavery, perish by the thousands, while dead

Indians are not even counted. There are times when Rivera clearly senses the class struggle, and though he understands the immediate reasons for the terrifying human exploitation which he depicts, he is ignorant of the underlying causes and vents his rage and indignation on an inhospitable nature. His efforts to rescue the jungle victims of imperialism end in failure and he does not understand why they were doomed.

FRANK L. GORDON.

## Mansion and Mill

*IN THEIR OWN IMAGE*, by Hamilton Basso. Chas. Scribner's Sons. \$2.50.

IT IS probably a mistake for a reviewer to read over the outline of a novel on the jacket. Since I might as well acknowledge in the beginning that I am a critic of no experience, I will also acknowledge this mistake I made. For the mistake has had an influence on my general opinion of this novel. Here is what part of that outline on the jacket said:

"The head of this household of American aristocrats is a harassed widow who made her millions in mayonnaise. At her palatial Aiken cottage she has gathered her stolid son, married to a girl whose purse is as lean as her blood is blue and her morals purple; her daughter doomed to wed an Italian princeling; a few choice guests, most of them cagging their way through the season.

"The brittle make-believe of their daily lives, filled with polo, cards, drinking, amorous intrigue and petty jealousies is suddenly shattered by the fear of injury from the uncouth masses of Americans who dwell outside the gates. There is a strike in a valley mill-town, suspicious faces are seen on the trim streets and private detectives swarm about the great houses.

"The full impact of this stark fear of reality strikes the Troys and their guests when a young mill hand, who, in his few free hours, had trudged miles of dusty roads with home-made painting outfit to catch on his canvas a breath of the bright beauty of the gleaming estates, is killed by private detectives at the Troy's gateway. They did not know him, some of them had never seen him, but the effect of his brief life and tragic death leads the novel to a dramatic crisis which puts, one by one, these American aristocrats in their proper places."

Some years ago I went from Columbia, S. C. to work for a winter and spring in

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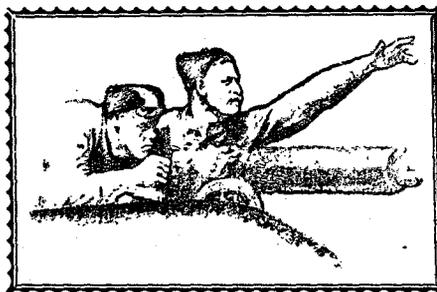
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Aiken County. Part of my work took me to Graniteville and the other cotton-mill towns in the valley between Aiken and Augusta. Many times I passed the estates of the rich people who use their houses for three months or less in the winter. Once, or more than once, I stood outside the gates of these mansions called winter cottages and figured out, approximately, just how many of the families stuffed into the Graniteville shacks could live, with plenty of room and sunlight left over, in one of those mansions.

Because I had been there and seen and realized so many times the contrast of actual and bitter want, ignorance and even degradation with the wealth and (at least from the outside it seemed so) beauty and color of the lives of the rich, and because of the story on the jacket, I read the novel expecting more than I should have expected.

So far as he has gone Hamilton Basso has presented a realistic picture both of the workers and the wealthy people. The workers and the situation at the mill are sketched in sympathetically. In contrast to them many of the winter residents of Aiken, those who possess wealth, the daughter-in-law of the mayonnaise queen, the woman who takes poison and others are shown up relentlessly as empty, foolish people. One of the guests, a painter who gets five-thousand-dollar commissions for painting horses and making love to their owners, is especially well done.

I liked the descriptions of the country around Aiken. The writer, by means of suggestion, gives the feeling of the pine forests where the winter residents go riding, the polo field, the business street of the village, as the winter people call it, on a Saturday afternoon, and the "Valley" where the mills squat surrounded by the shacks set close together. I felt that I had just gone that way myself, again.

But there was a great disappointment. I felt cheated, not only because of what the jacket said, but because the great dramatic possibilities which I felt the book presented in the beginning were not carried out to the end. Something big was there, and what the jacket calls a dramatic crisis which puts the American aristocrats in their proper places did not turn out to be so.

The whole first part, the workers stirring and growing into the spirit of the strike and the rich people becoming uneasy and hysterical because of the strike and their own personal futilities, suggests more than the ending the writer gives us. It suggests more the sort of thing which Zola gives in *Germinale* when the miners march past the house of the frightened bourgeoisie. That is the disappointment. I felt that the writer had summoned himself to a great piece of work, and knowingly or unknowingly failed to carry it out.

It is possible that I have mistaken the author's intention. Perhaps he set out to write a satirical novel about the wealthy and included the workers only in order to emphasize or point up the emptiness and fear

in the minds of those who possess. If this is so then he has done a good piece of work. For me it is not a satisfying piece of work. I feel something like a person who has been summoned to a banquet and finds only a lunch waiting. However, for those who are not too hungry, the lunch is excellent.

GRACE LUMPKIN.

### Brief Review

*SKIN DEEP*, by M. C. Phillips of Consumers' Research. Vanguard Press. \$2.

Mercury in skin bleaches, thyroid in reducing preparations, poisonous hair and eyelash dyes and depilatories—and profits in the maker's pocket. Under capitalism, whatever ingredients you add must equal profit or it isn't good arithmetic. A few deaths, a little blindness, some trifling skin diseases—these are minor debits. Miss Phillips, using the files of Consumers' Research, gives analyses of popular cosmetics and beauty preparations, together with some trade and government data. Brand names of products are given. There is a brief, common-sense chapter on diet ballyhoo, but the comments on the cosmetic industry and its advertising are naive. Miss Phillips urges readers to "work for a Department of the Consumer in each

state and in the federal government." Meanwhile, keep in touch with the Federal Trade Commission and work for the passage of a "model bill" for drug and cosmetic legislation. The author has done a good job is the analytical reporting of harmful and harmless cosmetics. Her philosophical approach to the problem, however, is hardly skin deep.

*NATURE'S WAY*, by Victor C. Pedersen, M.D. New York. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1934. \$1.

As it is small and inexpensive, this little book may have a wide circulation. It is simply a rehash of old ideas about the sterile period in woman's monthly cycle of ovulation and menstruation.

It advocates birth control through limitation of intercourse to the barren period. Dr. Pedersen endeavors to convey the idea that the method is safe and practical. It is neither.

Recently the Catholic clergy and laity have been promoting this idea. One can only assume this sudden interest to be inspired by a fear that as the spawning of cheap labor slackens through scientific birth control, capitalism and the church will both lose their exploitative base. Be this as it may, avoid the "safe period" method of birth control if you would not come to grief.



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