

Balzac and Robinson Notwithstanding

THE HUMAN COMEDY. By William Saroyan. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1943. 291 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

WILLIAM SAROYAN might have called this book "Hamlet," or "Don Quixote," or "The Holy Bible," but it is apparent that the world is too much with him in these war days, and with a new and startling humility the bashful Saroyan asks for this book no more than comparison with the collected works of that old blagueur Balzac. Briefly and brutally, this book does not bear the comparison, because, though Balzac, too, in the manner of his time, was given to windy sermons in the middle of his action, he persistently interrupted his homilies with stern and narrative purpose and generally achieved an integrated story before he was through.

This "first novel" is no more a novel than the daily journals of your maiden Aunt Jane. It deals generally with the lightly related experiences of a fourteen-year-old Postal Telegraph messenger, Homer, and his four-year-old brother, Ulysses. The episodes include a 220-yard hurdle race, the seizure of Ulysses by a painless (being Saroyan) bear trap, the appetites of a fruit peddler's infant, the romance of a telegraph branch manager, the stealing of apricots, and many other matters. Underneath some more or less clever tales runs a vein of reflection which did not originate in the time of Saroyan; nor even that of Victoria.

The problems of Man, how he should behave, the nature of death, the paradox of war, underlie these ostensibly frivolous sketches. Saroyan has always got away with murder in his sentimentally naive sermonettes by pretending to be a mere reporter of a way of life. We are not all Saroyans. The thesis of "There is so much good in the worst of us," is cloying if it is not sometimes relieved by the theme, "There is so much bad in the best of us."

Some of these sketches are amusing, though none as funny as the big high-jumping sketch in "My Name Is Aram," and most of them have the tenderness that is characteristic of all the author's writing, but he has worked his "Good-will to men" prop some way beyond the grounds of reality or even credibility.

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William Saroyan

On a Cattle Ranch

THE HAPPY MAN. By Robert Easton. New York: The Viking Press. 1943. 221 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

NOTHING is more difficult to review, I think, than a first book displaying a certain order of talent. The danger of the reviewer is that he may adopt a tone of condescension or that, catching himself up in a false Olympian mood, he may, in order to avoid complacency, announce the discovery of new talent in terms too noble for the occasion. And there is also a tendency to tell the new writer what to do rather than to evaluate what he has accomplished.

Mr. Easton's "The Happy Man," a series of sketches about life on a great California cattle ranch, is full of good writing. One finds in it a happy union of two rather opposite qualities: the slow, easy rhythm of, let us say, "The Virginian" of famous memory; and a capacity to observe and put down sharply, rich, significant detail. Almost any one of his sketches is a pleasurable experience.

The difficulty is that his book is centrifugal rather than centripetal. His sketches take the ranch as a point of departure instead of focussing upon it. His tales are told, or are supposed to be told, by a young greenhorn after his arrival at the ranch, but even this fiction is soon abandoned in order that Mr. Easton may see the ranch through the eyes of more experienced cowhands. Since there is no dominant point of view, the material fails to be focussed upon the unit of human life that is being depicted.

Because Mr. Easton reports both ably and sympathetically, it is to be hoped that he will in another volume solve the problem of structure which his approach to material sets before him.

Messrs. L.-O.-B.-W. on Pioneer Spirit

THE LAND I LIVE. By Stephen Longstreet. New York: Random House. 1943. 434 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHARLES G. ESCOURT

THE title of this book may be an error of sorts but it is not, as it would appear, a typographical error. It is pretentious and it is tricky; those are the two faults that mar what might easily have been a top-flight novel. Mr. Longstreet does a better job than one of his alter egos, the hero of this book and the author of the recently published "The Sound of an American," David Ormsbee. Mr. Longstreet-Ormsbee-Burton-Wiener and Tiffany Thayer ought to get together and be a baseball team.

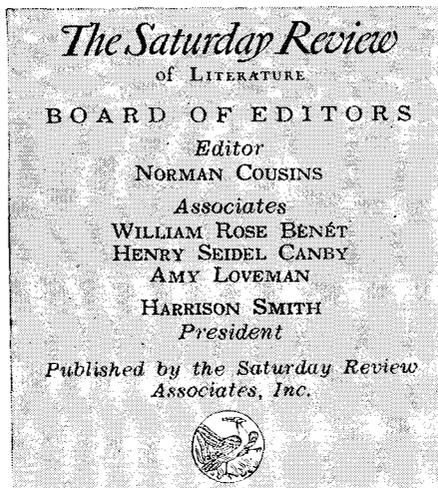
Dave Ormsbee, the narrator of this story, was the youngest of four sons in a family of Allegheny "pioneers"—people returned from the West in the middle 1800's to establish farms close to the young cities. The "Antioch" of this book is Pittsburgh scaled down about two-thirds. Antioch, with coal and steel, squeezes in on the Ormsbees with various effects. It crushes Dave's father and quietly ejects as much of his grandfather as it cannot digest, amoeba fashion. It is excitement for Dave's shrewish, affectionate, unreasonable mother who spends the book and most of her husband's money looking for a million dollars with the dim lantern of her wits, Colonel Sellers fashion.

Dris Ormsbee is the hero of the book however; Antioch squeezes him up and up till at the end of the story he is nominated for the Presidency of the United States. But he has a tortured time of it between his essential idealism and a practical realism that forces him into all kinds of compromises both in his practice of law and his political career.

The love story of Dris is very well done; he is devoted to his wife but can hardly find time for her, so she dies and he marries another one who finds time for him. Dave's own story is the tragedy of never wanting anything enough to make any special effort to get it, not even life.

The other two brothers are largely waste motion in the story, but Vicky, the mother, is memorable.

The whole business makes one feel that if Mr. L.-O.-B.-W. would let the Destiny of Man and the Destiny of America and Oh, the Pity of It All alone for a while and try simply telling a first-rate story he would be quite likely to manage the business and do a corking good job at it.



TRANSITION

WITH the college year drawing towards its close and the prospect of academic halls being given over to training for military purposes, the nation is confronted with a situation which will not be settled when the guns of war are silenced. For we will have then a large body of young men who were snatched from the pursuit of learning when they had barely escaped from the adolescent stage, and who will come back to the universities, if they come back at all, men who have faced death and who in gazing on the bright face of danger have undoubtedly found themselves suddenly aware of values in life which otherwise it might have taken them years of living to grasp. They will no longer be boys whose studies were to be pursued either for the acquisition of a liberal education or as the means to business or a profession but youth hardened in the school of suffering, impatient of fripperies, demanding and entitled to their place in the world for which they have sacrificed the normal happiness of young years. If they are to resume their college education at all, it will have to be in universities which recognize the transmutation through which they will have passed, whose courses will be adjusted to minds matured by the urgency of a transcendent experience, which can offer them light and leading in meeting the enormous problems for which their efforts were spent, and can make college seem a step toward the consummation of that world for which they fought.

The generation which saw the bright hopes of the Versailles Peace fade into discord and strife, saw too the sapping of the ardor of the young men who had helped to bring it about. The literature of disillusionment which represents the best writing talent of the younger generation of America after the First World War was no mere belated development of the trend toward

realism already noticeable in the country before the outbreak of the conflict, or postponed response to the French naturalism which had been spreading outside the confines of its own land, but the sharp realization of the maladjustments and cankers of its civilization on the part of a youth which had gone to battle acquiescent in the common belief that American life was wholly good. They had come back from the war cherishing the vision they had nursed of a land that was gracious, bountiful, and harmonious, and their sharpened sight had discovered it full of imperfections and sores. They came back bringing with them a fund of idealism which, if it could have been canalized, might have prevented the excesses of the twenties and the tragedy of the depression, and which, what with the inevitable let-down which followed upon their release from service, and the relaxation of the national morale, found itself frustrated and was drained off into bitterness against the social America to which they had returned. The writers were articulate and able to express their discontent, but there were thousands and thousands of their fellows who passed through the same psychological experience without having the catharsis of writing.

There will be thousands and thousands and thousands more of American youth this time when the guns cease to fire who will have achieved a premature maturity in the crucible of war,

who will have lived with dreams while they were away, and who will return to a world which, having saved it, it will be theirs to shape. And vast numbers of them will be hardly more than boys whose education was arrested at the threshold of learning, and who will bring to the resumption of their studies an intensity of emotional experience which must inevitably make college living and college work pallid and flat.

What an enormous opportunity and what a fearsome task! If the universities can so shape their curricula that these men can turn their idealism, their discipline, their release into peaceful living into directed effort to consolidate those values for which the war was fought, if they can see a continuum in their lives, the years of sacrifice leading to unmolested opportunity for the fulfilment of their hopes, they will still be able to find in their universities that intellectual excitement which is the best that the college has to give. They will be the lawgivers and the engineers and the political scientists, the teachers and the ministers of the future and if their morale can be maintained at high pitch during the difficult years of adjustment to peace and their spirit communicated to their fellows outside the college walls, they may go far indeed toward building a brave new world. But it will be up to the universities to feed them the food that men demand and not the pap which might suffice for untried lads. A. L.

The Guardians

By Sergeant J. P. Wright

THEY are betrayed, they are defeated;
They know the bungle and confusion.
The rearguard army that retreated

Into a marsh of disillusion.
They are the thinkers and the dreamers
With standards false inoculated,
Who wave no gaily-coloured streamers
Of Church or State in doctrines dated.

Faithless, they have no faith to lose,
So will endure the darkest hour
When strong men pay to death their dues,
And power breaks itself on power.

Young men demoralized, too tired
To turn against your life's betrayers;
Your conduct holds brave men inspired,
Strange guardians of a nation's prayers.