

Master of Ceremonies to the War

THE CURTAIN RISES. By *Quentin Reynolds.* New York: Random House. 1944. 353 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HENRY C. WOLFE

AMERICA'S most convivial correspondent has done it again. He has written another war book that hasn't a dull line in it. It's his sixth. You may differ from him profoundly in many of the things he says, but you fall under the spell of the exuberant way he says them. He goes all over the map liking people—especially important people—and having them like him. It is a trait that would be maddening in a less virile reporter. But when Mr. Reynolds finds everyone he meets "great," the reader thinks Mr. Reynolds is "great" and devours every last word he writes.

"The Curtain Rises" takes in considerable territory—Miami Beach, Trinidad, Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Russia, North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. Mr. Reynolds left Miami Beach in March, 1943, to get some war stories for *Collier's*. He expected to stay three months and was away over twice that long. On his travels he saw a good deal of the U. S. Army. "Any American," he concludes, "who isn't deliriously proud of our army should have his head examined."

He cannot say too much for the Russians, either. They may be hard to understand, he says, but they're very easy to like. He reports richly and intimately their courage in combat and their way of life in total war. His report on religion in Russia is particularly interesting. "Nobody," he claims, "can ever call this place Godless Russia. . . . By now the government probably realizes that attempting to kill faith is like trying to punch a hole in a pillow." He devotes several pages to the heroic work of American Father Leopold Braun, the only Roman Catholic priest in the country, who has 25,000 Moscow parishioners.

As an example of Nazi ruthlessness and wanton cruelty newsman Reynolds describes Vyazma, "killed by the Germans in March, 1943." In the path of their retreat the invaders dynamited the whole city, leaving only the cathedral and two other buildings intact. These they sowed with time bombs and delayed-action mines. Hundreds of sick and homeless people who took refuge in the two buildings were killed. The bomb in the cathedral was discovered in time; the cathedral was thus the only structure left standing in the ruined city. Of Vyazma's 60,000 citizens, only 716 succeeded in escaping death at the hands of the supermen.

Mr. Reynolds has a good word for the American troops in Iran who are transporting Lend-Lease materials from the Persian Gulf to the Russians. The gulf area has been called the hottest spot in the world, but the soldiers toil on valiantly and efficiently. They get on well with their Russian allies and firmly believe in the credo of their brilliant commander, General Donald Connolly: "The Russian front is merely an extension of the American front."

By way of the Middle East and North Africa the reporter headed into the Sicilian invasion. En route he learned that there are two good sides to the Arab-Jewish question, that the most devout Catholics in the Mediterranean AEF considered the bombing of Rome necessary. Sicily was not easy, he found. The Americans took a brutal pounding there. They gave it back too. In one day Allied bombers killed 9,000 people in Palermo, 4,000 of the dead being German soldiers. But the intensive bombing of Sicily hastened the fall of the island by months and saved thousands of American lives.

Before embarking for D-day in Italy, the bomb-jittery reporter took a holiday in war-crowded Algiers. It was a mad interlude filled with humorous confusion, hilarious discomfort, famous correspondents, radio entertainers, and a fabulous pageant of drinks staged by a mysterious Miracle Man. Almost the only serious note in the Algiers chapter is the glimpse of General Eisenhower at work. This glimpse more than justifies General Montgomery's tribute—"magnificent."

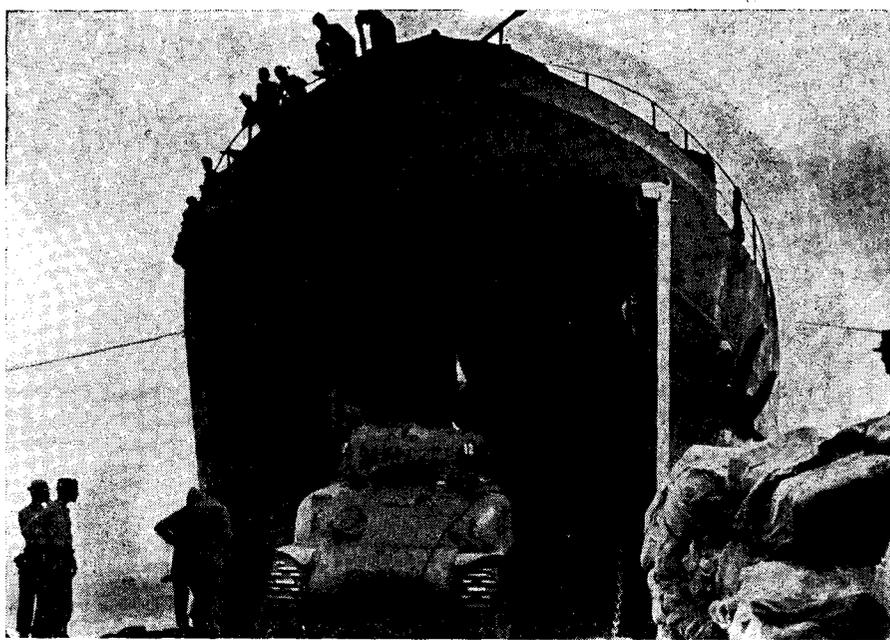
From Algiers Mr. Reynolds set out with the invasion fleet for Italy. It

was the superlative work of our Navy, he shows us, that kept Salerno from becoming another Gallipoli. The Reynolds account of the Salerno landing is memorable reporting. It is much more than the sounds, sights, and smells of a bloody operation in which "the noise of the guns went almost unheard, so powerful was the visual effect." It is more than a human story of what our men ate the night before D-day, how they prayed and fought, of the tragic "Savannah" rocket-gunning, of the hideousness and glory of the modern battlefield. It adds up to the very spirit of the Allies' battle for Salerno and for a freeman's world.

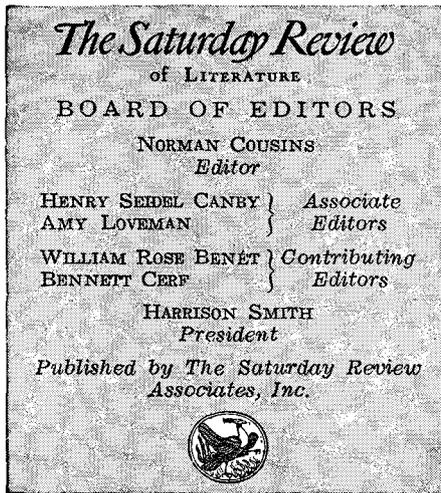
Before the American correspondent took off for home he had a talk with General Montgomery. It was a talk typically and uniquely Reynolds. To most newsmen the ascetic Briton had remained a remote star in the Allied military constellation. Mr. Reynolds simply drove up in a jeep and in no time at all had teetotaler "Monty" offering him gin.

On the jacket of "The Curtain Rises" the reporter has a hearty review of his own volume. "I like the book a lot," his concluding line runs. "I ought to. I wrote it." A good many people will change that last verb to "read" and go along with the ubiquitous author-reviewer.

Houghton Mifflin Company has announced the award of a Literary Fellowship in fiction to Edward Kimbrough of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and a Fellowship in non-fiction to Joseph Wechsberg of Hollywood, California, now in the United States Army. Arrangements for publication have been made with six authors in addition to the prize winners.



Tanks from the new landing barges unload in Sicily.



MORTALITY IN WRITERS

FOUR American writers of wide popularity have recently left us: Irvin S. Cobb, Joseph C. Lincoln, Hendrik Willem Van Loon, and Colonel John William Thomason of the Marines. All were read by many thousands if not millions, at least two were widely known abroad, all were writers in whom one prime ingredient was a humorous philosophy of life, different as these were. Cobb had his roots in the Blue Grass, Lincoln was a Cape Codder, Thomason was of the Lone Star State, Van Loon was our own Flying Dutchman direct from Holland, who first married into the Bowditch family of Boston and later found his true helpmate in Helen Criswell, whom he had met in Greenwich Village.

"Hendrik," as many knew him, said that the book that taught him English was Thackeray's "Henry Esmond," surely a sound foundation! He was a man of great vitality and versatility. His birthplace, Rotterdam, was levelled by the Nazis in the present war, and he fought them in print in every way possible, as well as over the radio. He spoke and wrote ten languages, played the violin, drew inimitably, was a great skeptic, and gave the world a huge enthusiastic flood of history, biography, geography, high fooling, and conversation about the arts. He was able to discourse with great confidence and persuasiveness on Rembrandt or on Holy Writ. His observation, with extensive view, surveyed "mankind, from China to Peru," and wrote a history thereof. If his large scorn for niggling accuracy annoyed the scholars, so much for them! He was a big voluminous man, weighing nearly three hundred pounds, standing three inches over six feet, and his output was prodigious. He communicated his gusto to millions. At his death, he had no fewer than ten separate volumes in process of preparation, one of which was his "Re-

port to St. Peter," of which too little was completed to warrant posthumous publication.

Irvin Cobb was another stout fellow who almost became a legend in his own lifetime. Paducah, Kentucky, is proud of him; all good journalists knew him; he entertained through his writing until, at an advanced age, he found himself joining in the entertainment furnished by the screen. This surprised and diverted him enormously. When people tried to corner him as to his religion he would always reply that he was just an Innocent By-stander. He asked to be immediately cremated without any formality. "I'll be done with after-dinner speaking [at which he was a pastmaster] so why despatch me hence in the regalia of the craft?" He wanted a dogwood planted at Oak Grove, and his ashes strewn in the hole, to fertilize the tree roots. "Should the tree live, that will be monument enough for me." He fancied the famous lines in Stevenson's "Requiem" as an inscription for himself. He abhorred the "dismal note." Among Cobb's favorite public figures he included Professor George Washington Carver of Tuskegee Institute and Rabbi Cohen of Galveston, Texas. He had about sixty-odd books published, and his work was translated into a number of languages. Primarily a humorist, he was also a writer of serious fiction, who gave us a memorable character in Judge Priest, and one particular short-story, "Fish

Head," which is a macabre classic. A selection from Cobb's work would make a book of characteristically American humor, to last for a long time. He stands somewhere between Mark Twain and Joel Chandler Harris in the American pantheon.

Joseph Crosby Lincoln's humor had the tang of New England. His forebears were men of the sea. "For a mile in each direction from the plain little house of the Lincolns every house contained a Cap'n." Lincoln knew cranberries as Cobb knew sweet potatoes. He was a poet, too, his first book being "Cape Cod Ballads." He resembled in looks a kindly old skipper. He immortalized human characters in a particular "neck o' the woods," and made a vital part of our land his own.

John W. Thomason hailed from Texas; and if Hendrik Van Loon could draw with a wild scribbly amateur abandon—which incidentally made his constant map and chart-making so original and diverting—Colonel Thomason of the Marines was a true artist. In pen, pencil, or water color, the free stroke conveying movement and life, which is the mark of the artist born, was always his. As he drew, so he wrote, from his first "Fix Bayonets." His stories were intensively alive. James Norman Hall ranked him with Barbusse and the Masefield who was prose writer in the last war, for that one book alone.

Though Thomason's father was a doctor, his grandfather was chief of staff under General Longstreet. Today the Colonel's own son is in the Marine Corps. Thomason served in the West Indies, Central America, and China, after winning the Navy Cross at Soissons in the last war. In every clime he found material for his stories and drawings, and often sketched on the actual battlefield. He wrote a biography of the great Southern cavalrman, Jeb Stuart, an historical novel about Texas, and the Marines were always in his short stories. How well he would have written of their great exploits in this war, had he lived! It is fitting that a military man round out our picture. But it is most unusual that a military man achieve the genuine artistic distinction in two fields that was Colonel Thomason's. He seemed born with the crafts of writing and drawing both at his fingertips.

All of these men are hard for us to lose! They exemplified the largeness and variety of our democracy. They demonstrated its geographical elbow-room. About them there was nothing petty or mean. Their works remain with us; and in that sense only we are not the poorer for their going.

W. R. B.

From Easy Words

By Elizabeth Phelps Stokes

FROM easy words bayed up a tree
By the hounds of literacy,
Good Lord, deliver us!

From prolific plurals, verys,
All loose letters without heed,
That like incontinent cats
Slickly live and vastly breed—

Till promiscuous and ill
They waste to ghostly claws
That maraud and kill.

From fights begun
Because of words
More cutting than swords;
More ranging than guns;
More maiming than bombs;
Words tearing apart
More than the wars they start;

From patterns new words create,
Fastening like fur to man's estate,
Good Lord, deliver us!
And have pity,
As on the mew and the purr!