

THE CALIFORNIA LITERATI

BY GEORGE P. WEST

FOR many years now the cultivation of the arts has been one of California's major industries. Every school-child in the State learns that it is speedily to become what Greece and Italy might have been if their people hadn't been brachycephalic and hence addicted to immorality. Elsewhere art and its practitioners—the art-artists, as the late Mayor Hylan called them—have a tough time bucking the American current, but in California they have seats at the captain's table. Realty syndicates employ poets to write their advertising, and there is a general accord between business and culture. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce published recently a proclamation officially conferring on the latter a status second only to that of real estate and manufacturing, and pledging its ceaseless efforts for Bigger and Better Art. Little theaters, pageants and open-air bowl concerts are epidemic. If you look for Doc Kennicott of an evening you are likely to find him carrying a torch in "Sister Beatrice," and Mr. Babbitt is telling lunch-clubs that culture pays when he is not too busy rehearsing as Falstaff for a little theater revival.

Up San Francisco way they take their culture a little more quietly, but its place is just as firmly fixed. A practising poet is secretary of the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce, and in San Francisco itself every rising young business man tries for membership in the club where Kipling and Stevenson loafed and art has always been enthroned. A professor in the University of California gives popular lectures on "California: A New Voice in World Literature." Short-story courses, poetry clubs, and writ-

ers' leagues flourish by the dozen, and the local postal receipts are swollen by the flood of eastbound manuscripts. So it becomes pertinent to ask what all the shooting is about and to examine the trophies of this mass assault upon the Muses. What bellows pumped up the divine afflatus, and what has it produced?

The triumph of art in California had to be won. The present-day boosters talk as if the air and soil of the State had always bred a love of the beautiful as naturally as they breed fleas and realtors. But it is not so. Two conceptions had first to be implanted in the Californian mind by all the devices of the advertising art. These were, first, that California is physically another Greece and destined to nourish the perfect race, and, second, that its Spanish background and romantic past constitute a rich and stimulating tradition, adequate for the inspiration of all who take pen or brush in hand. Neither notion had any standing in the early days. Bret Harte vented a positive dislike of the California climate and scenery in waspish verses now buried deep in the old files. Mark Twain worked in San Francisco as a reporter from 1864 to 1866 and spent a Winter in a cabin on the Mother Lode. It was a California newspaper that sent him to Honolulu, and it was a San Francisco audience that acclaimed him on his return and so placed him on the road to fortune as a popular lecturer. Yet he disliked the State and never revisited it. His friends of the "Jumping Frog" days knew him no more after that first sensational success.

The truth is that the Forty-niners and their successors were desperately home-

sick when they were not digging or carousing. Their California consisted of San Francisco, today a picturesque and charming city but then only a sand-hill swept by winds and fogs; Sacramento and the other valley towns where they outfitted, and the lower foot-hills of the Sierra. The inland towns lay in a monotonous flat valley. And the lower foot-hills had few of the charms that are associated with the Sierra. They are hot in Summer, their pines grow above bare sandy soil, and their roads are dusty for six months in the year.

As for the famed Spanish background, the "old Spanish families" were not even Spanish in those days. They were merely treacherous Mexicans, lazy and no-account. Frémont set the fashion for those that followed him when, at San Rafael, he ordered Kit Carson to shoot two estimable and unoffending young *caballeros* out of their saddles in cold blood. It was the Mexicans who taught the Americans all they knew of placer mining and even provided the word itself, yet a favorite sport of the Argonauts was to round up all the Mexicans at the diggings, and herd them into a corral after shooting those who protested. One of the first laws passed by the Legislature of the new State in 1850 excluded aliens from the mines. Californians began early at the 100% business! A native son of the best covered-wagon tradition, the late Josiah Royce, has told the story and excoriated his fellow-Californians in a style that would satisfy Oswald Garrison Villard.

It was a rough and rowdy crowd that swarmed in to dig for gold and trim the suckers. They obscured and all but obliterated a life charming enough, the life of the ranchos and missions along the Coast and in the valleys of the Coast range. A sprinkling of Yankees, Englishmen and Irishmen had settled and intermarried with the Spanish. They led an easy-going life of grace and dignity. The gold-rush pushed it into corners, and what followed did worse. The best of the Argonauts returned to their homes after liquidating the California ad-

venture. They returned and fought the Civil War and then settled down to the chores that followed it. The others remained. Disappointed men from the mines found their way into all the old settlements and the loveliest valleys, and there squatted on the lands of the Spaniards and cheated or bullied them out of their titles with the aid of the new Yankee courts. The process was hardly favorable to the nourishing of a romantic Spanish tradition. For their peace of minds the Yankee squatters needed to believe that the Spanish were a low lot, and it remained for later generations to rescue the genuine values of that old Homeric society.

But the neglect has long since been assuaged. Later generations have done the job with the utmost thoroughness, especially in Southern California. The older American communities in Central California,—San Francisco, Stockton, Sacramento—still rest on the Argonaut legend. But south of San Francisco Bay Bret Harte long since gave way to Helen Hunt Jackson, and the influential classic became, not "The Luck of Roaring Camp," but "Ramona." Mrs. Jackson died in San Francisco a year after its appearance, in 1884. But John Stephen McGroarty arrived in time. There is a triumph of the pen! McGroarty still flourishes, although his life and deeds are already historic. A gentle and lovable man, he has spent most of his working life as a minstrel for the Los Angeles *Times* and its following. The ferocious General Harrison Gray Otis discovered him in the eighties, and for forty years he has been filling the scrapbooks of Southern California with verses celebrating the padres and the dons and singing of the new Greece that is to arise there under a Christian sky. He is romantic and sentimental yet forward-looking, and his reverence for the padres is matched by his reverence for the empire-builders of today, who wear Rotary badges and lay out subdivisions. His *magnum opus* is the mission play performed for weeks on end each year during the tourist season at San Gabriel,

and he directs also an annual pageant got up by a big tourist hotel to please its septuagenarian jobbers, bankers and shopkeepers from the Mississippi Valley. If Los Angeles does not put up an heroic statue of McGroarty when at last he leaves us, it will be gross ingratitude. Next to the palm-tree, that ugly exotic which symbolizes all the ineffable delights of this earthly paradise for the retired mid-Western farmer, McGroarty has done more than all the roaring boosters and realtors to sell Southern California to the old ladies who fill its bungalows and its hotels. He is a fine old chap at that, simple and genuine about his dithyrambs. Meanwhile Mrs. Jackson's Indians have gone progressively to ruin, pushed back to worthless land and abandoned to disease and starvation by a State that boasts of its riches.

II

It was, after all, inevitable that California should set pens and typewriters to work. For it abounds in the exotic and the picturesque, and these are the things above all others that suggest art to the American mind. They suggest art just as the sight of a woman smoking until recently suggested prostitution. It is virtuosity in life and nature that moves us to expression. For obviously art has nothing to do with sane, normal, every-day living. So every person with an itch to write uses his first leisure hour in California to begin a manuscript. The proportion so afflicted is probably no greater than in Illinois; it is merely that a larger proportion have there achieved that leisure to write which is the dream of three Americans out of four. "If I ever get time I'd like to do a little writing myself. I've always figured I might be pretty good at it."

The Spanish phase was a gold-mine. But there were richer diggings near by. Cattle ranching still survives in California and the adjoining States of Arizona and Nevada. Even before the movies came, California was filling up with drug-store cow-

boys from Chicago and Cleveland who pounded from their typewriters a prodigious output of fiction celebrating the shooting sheriff, the bad man and the heroic cow-puncher with a Yale degree hidden in his past. The market for this trash was enormous, and no other branch of the California writing industry can boast so many operatives. They are mainly scribblers from Eastern cities with little first-hand knowledge. Zane Grey and Harold Bell Wright are the stars of this school. Some of their followers are decent chaps, taking this way to escape the city rooms of newspapers, or fighting tuberculosis, or both. They go to their typewriters in the morning with groans. But most of them take their dreadful stuff quite seriously. They form writers' clubs and penwomen's leagues by the dozen, and zealously scan the trade journals recording the needs of the magazines that print such shoddy.

In California but not wholly of it are the script-writers of Hollywood. Such ideas as the movies have must come through them. They work in a medium in which standards exist and comparisons are possible. You can forgive a rough-neck director. You can respect the camera-men and the lighting experts. Art directors such as Cedric Gibbons do honest and even beautiful work. But for the script-writers the only charitable thought I can evolve is that most of them are, like the makers of Western fiction, pathetic refugees from the copy-desk, the re-write grind and the press-rooms of police stations and divorce courts. The movies grew over-night from a dung-heap, financed on a shoe-string by men who had come to them from honky-tonks or gents' furnishing stores in mean streets. The first writing fell to the hands of newspaper men of a mentality too low for the city room—the sort of reporter, graduated from copy-boy, who gets fired and turns up as press-agent for a tent-show. Los Angeles' journalistic detritus drifted thus into the movies, and when everything turned to gold they shared the glamor with the rest. Thus they stayed on, and

their ideas remain in vogue to this day.

But no writer with anything to say and the talent for saying will stay long in the movies. His work is respected by none of the swaggering illiterates who manhandle it into the finished product. Directors and producer-stars like Chaplin and Fairbanks have done creditable things, but scarcely a writer has left Hollywood who was not poorer in reputation in proportion as he was richer in purse. The only exception that occurs to me is Laurence Stallings, whose one screen story fell by rare luck into the hands of a competent director. But Hollywood will tell you, characteristically, that to King Vidor and not to Stallings belongs almost the entire credit for the success of "The Big Parade." If a picture flops, the writer is good for the blame, but if it succeeds, it always appears that his story had to be discarded in toto, and that only the director's genius saved it from failure.

There is another conspicuous group that also lies outside the range of distinctively Californian writings. Its members are the heavily-upholstered employés of George Horace Lorimer and his competitors. They take up residence in California to wear plus fours and play golf with their fellow-plutocrats while they fight high blood pressure and expanding waist-lines and the other stigmata of prosperity. Peter B. Kyne, Rupert Hughes, Montague Glass, Samuel G. Blythe, Harry Leon Wilson, Gerald Beaumont, Hugh Wiley,—the list could be extended to tedium. H. M. Rideout, Kathleen Norris and Peter Kyne are native Californians, and Wilson and Stewart Edward White know their West and use it intelligently. The rest are there just as retired Chicago bankers are there. Two or three are sound and even brilliant craftsmen, but as a group they merely seduce the young and fix the place of writers in the popular mind as somewhere between that of investment bankers and that of movie actors. They stimulate production and must be taken into account in any explanation of California's enormous output

of manuscripts. But they are not Californians. Neither is Upton Sinclair, who established his residence in Pasadena some ten years ago to the horror of that pious community. In a bungalow on the edge of town he writes his pamphlets, and leads a sinless life, and receives an occasional pilgrim, while hordes of Iowans, Indianians and Kansans, stopping in Southern California on their way to heaven, watch in vain for confirmation of their theory that Socialism goes with free love and dissolute living. There has been injustice in the world for a long time, but Sinclair discovered it only yesterday. After thirty years, he still boils with moral indignation. But he carries on his crusades with gusto, and he is a refreshing and salutary force.

III

I have left to the last the only group of genuinely Californian writers worth mentioning. San Francisco claims most of them, and in them it has something to show for a physical setting and a cosmopolitan population that have always promised special stimulus to the artist. When you have set up names like those of Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, Frank Norris, and George Sterling, you at least have something to shoot at. Bierce, a veteran of the Civil War, came to California with his bent fixed and his talent developed. He can hardly be numbered among the State's products. With his negative answers he was a death-man, a denier of life, of a genuine but slight talent, and hence the last writer in the world to inspire others.

Not so Frank Norris. In "McTeague," "Blix," "Vandover and the Brute," and "The Octopus," he lifted California fiction to its highest level. He got the essence of San Francisco into those books, and they remain distinguished performances. Yet a rereading of the best of them, "McTeague," will disclose its weaknesses. Norris was a gifted and honest man fighting the genteel Pollyanna tradition and infatuated with Zolaesque realism. He loved ugly details

for their shock value. In "McTeague" he is the literary slummer, never getting very far inside his characters, always standing a little to one side as the genteel guide, and reveling a little too frankly in the literary values of squalor. His death prevented a development about which we may speculate in vain. His brother Charles alone follows him, an honest, pedestrian novelist with solid virtues but lacking Frank's brilliance.

Jack London's memory is yet green. He had an enormous influence and following among the promising young men in the California of his time. Then the he-man complex, the raw-meat, rough-neck afflatus, seized his mind like a dementia. He bought acreage and stallions, became a Nietzsche for bar-tenders and ranch-hands, and wrote drivel for the Hearst magazines. His personal tragedy was no greater than the demoralizing influence of that débâcle on the youngsters who followed him. If Jack had come to that, of what use for them to breast the current?

Sterling remains by far the most engaging living personality in California letters. The beautiful work that he has done was already archaic in form and spirit when he began writing it. Indeed, it is his loyalty to the old conception of poetry as otherworldly glamor that endears him to us. But sensitive youngsters are sensitive, among other things, to the æsthetic fashions of their times, and the more promising of them esteem Sterling without trying to follow him.

San Francisco has beside a vast number of able journalists and journeymen fiction-crafters to its credit. Until the Sunday magazine supplements edited in New York blighted an indigenous effort, its Sunday morning newspapers and the old *Bulletin* under Fremont Older were excellent training-schools and they turned out any number of competent men of the school of Will and Wallace Irwin and John O'Hara Cosgrave. Today the canned feature from New York and the new floor-walker editorial policy, with its intolerance of any pun-

gency or saltiness whatever, have destroyed journalism as a training-school for writers, in San Francisco as elsewhere, and bright young men from the colleges now knock at the doors of advertising agencies and bond-houses where once they courted city editors.

San Francisco has had its men and its moments. But the sum total is disappointing. Here is a city in many respects more civilized than any other American town,—a city always free of Puritan taboos and free too of the notion that a man must enter business if he is to be worthy of respect. Within recent years I have known Theodore Dreiser and Edgar Lee Masters to surrender to some quality they got in the air of the place and yield themselves to uncritical eulogy. I have seen one of the most bilious of New York editors give way against his will to the same spell. Yet almost nothing happens. There isn't a respectable monthly magazine or weekly journal published in the place. Instead there is a succession of still-births,—amateurish sheets with neither money nor brains behind them that print drivel for a few issues and then die. The rather large minority of intelligent people are strangers, one small group to another. No restaurant, club nor journal pulls them together and makes them effective. Mrs. Gertrude Atherton started a local chapter of the P. E. N. two years ago, with Charles Caldwell Dobie, the short-story writer, as secretary. But its dinners quickly degenerated into assemblies of obscure ladies, each clinging to some forgotten one-book success. Mrs. Atherton herself has done her generous share in contributing to the degradation of California letters. With genuine gifts as a story-teller, and with a vitality and gusto that carried her free of the genteel taboos, she has become our contemporary American equivalent of the Victorian Englishwomen who delighted servant girls with their titillating fictions,—almost but not quite an American Elinor Glyn. Elinor herself, by the way, has become an all but permanent resident of Hollywood, where

she adorns the intellectual circle presided over by Marion Davies.

When an honest and distinguished piece of California writing does appear, it has to look for its appreciation in the East. Clarkson Crane succeeded in winning only abuse or neglect from the literati of San Francisco Bay when he published "The Western Shore," a starkly objective picture of life at the University of California which struck some of us as being the first successful attempt to depict college life without the juvenile romanticism of every other writer from Owen Wister to Scott Fitzgerald. It dealt with the rough-necks who go through college on a shoe-string, eating over greasy counters at midnight and hanging around billiard-rooms in dirty corduroys. Yet about all the California critics could see in the book was Crane's violation of the proprieties in including among his characters the tragic figure of a young instructor of homosexual bent whom they thought they could recognize.

And when Robinson Jeffers burst into print for the first time with a full volume of remarkable verse, he made scarcely a ripple in the State's literary pool. Here was poetry of undeniable freshness and power, poetry with the tang and smell of the Monterey Peninsula and the coast below Carmel. The New York critics went to extremes in uncritical praise, but in California persons with literary pretensions have either never heard of Jeffers or speak of him with indifference or sneers. The always-generous George Sterling and a few others must of course be excepted.

Meanwhile first-rate people keep coming to California. You find them tucked away here and there and stumble on them where you expect them least. I recently found a whole nest of them on one of the stupidest of Southern California's suburban newspapers. Some day they will find one another, orient themselves as a group, and take possession. After all, the boosters are right. California is in fact a noble land, fit for the breeding of a noble race. It becomes necessary to assert this quite soberly, for

the State has become so identified with the yapping of boosters and their bullying of helpless minorities that those without personal knowledge are inclined to believe nothing good of it. It suffers because the very large number of intelligent people living within its boundaries are detached and unorganized and often indifferent. Many have come to the State with the deliberate intention of living their own lives and letting the heathen rage. Robinson Jeffers in one of his verses reflects on the short-comings of the human race and then consoles himself with a final line: "This world's well made, though." In many parts of California it is, indeed. It is exceptionally well made.

The fact has been put forward as being in itself a preventive of fine letters, on the theory that one is fulfilled by the beauty of one's surroundings, and left without need to escape through writing or other forms of creative effort. Others have suggested that Californians play too much to leave time for the hard discipline of the arts. There is truth in both theories. But they are not satisfying. They are no more satisfying than life in California even at its best is satisfying to men with active minds. For every respectable writer living in California there are six who have gone there, loved the land, tried to remain, and after months of unproductive agony fled to the brick and coal smoke of Eastern cities. I can think off-hand of six—Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Robert Herrick, Sinclair Lewis, Frederick O'Brien, and Van Wyck Brooks. My theory is that they were simply lonely, and that they were lonely because the intelligence of California remains unorganized, voiceless and ineffectual amid the clamor of its realtors and its heresy-hunters.

One able and aggressive journal that would print only good stuff and damn the rest would, I believe, make over the mental life of the Coast in a few short years. As they say in football, the material is there. What is needed is a good coach, one who knows how to swear.

EDITORIAL

Ah, at evening, to be drinking from the glassy pond, to have—oh, better than all marrow-bones!—the fresh illusion of lapping up the stars!

TAKE the thought from Patou, the forward-looking houn'-dog in Ros-tand's "Chantecler." Let him stand as a symbol of the whole melancholy company of crib-haltered but aspiring men, their hands doomed to go-getting but their hearts leaping into interstellar space. Patou, lifted to his hind legs and outfitted with pantaloons, would have made a capital Rotarian. Condemned by destiny to a kennel in a barnyard, he yet had that soaring, humorless Vision which is the essence of Rotary, and the secret, no doubt, of its firm hold upon otherwise un-poetical men. For even in the paradise of Babbitt, Babbitt is vaguely uneasy and unhappy. He needs something more, he finds, than is to be found in bulging order-books, in innumerable caravans of prospects, and in belching chimneys and laden trains. He needs something more than is to be got out of blowing spitballs and playing golf. So he searches for that something in the realms of the fancy, where the husks of things fall off and their inner sap is revealed. He reads the dithyrambs of Edgar Albert Guest and Dr. Frank Crane. He listens to the exhortations of itinerant rhetoricians, gifted and eloquent men, specialists in what it is all about. He intones "Sweet Adeline," and is not ashamed of the tear that babbles down his nose. Thus Babbitt, too, is tantalized by a Grail: he seeks it up and down the gorgeous corridors of his Statler Hotel, past the cigarstand and the lair of the hat-check gal, and on to the perfumed catacombs of the lovely manicurist and the white-robed chirotonsor. *Non in solo pane vivit homo.* Man cannot live by bread alone. He must

hope also. He must dream. He must yearn.

The fact explains the Rotarian and his humble brother, the Kiwanian; more, it strips them of not a little of their superficial obnoxiousness. They are fools, but they are not quite damned. If their quest is carried on in motley, they at least trail after better men. And so do all their brethern of Service, great and small—the Americanizers, the Law Enforcers, the boosters and boomers, and the endless others after their kind. At first glance, one sees in these visionaries only noisy and preposterous fellows, disturbing the peace of their betters. But a closer examination is more favorable to them. They are tortured, in their odd, clumsy fashion, by the same ringing in the ears that maddened Ludwig van Beethoven. They suffer from the same optical delusions, painful and not due to sin, that set the prophets of antiquity to howling: they look at Coolidge and see a Man. What lures them to their bizarre cavortings—and it is surely not to be sniffed at *per se*—is a dim and disturbing mirage of a world more lovely and serene than the one the Lord God has doomed them to live in. What they lack in common, thus diverging from the prophets, is a rational conception of what it ought to be, and might be.

II

It is somewhat astonishing that 100% Americans should wander so helplessly in this wilderness. For there is a well-paved road across the whole waste, and it issues, at its place of beginning, from the tombs of the Fathers, and their sacred and immemorial dust. Straight as a pistol shot it runs, until at the other end it sweeps up a glittering slope to a shrine upon a high