

natural, hirsute humorists who were liquoring their risibilities in the Silver Dollar Saloon — where men were men, and ladies of leisure had the leisure to listen to gentlemen indulging in the pleasure of natural laughter.

Leacock seems to forget this, though he cites Abraham Lincoln as one of the legendary masters in the art of telling a frontier joke; and this itself is a negation of his thesis that humor flowers in direct ratio to the amount of newsprint available for humorists. Anyone who has read Carl Sandburg's written accounts of Lincoln's humor must realize this after hearing Sandburg's oral testimony relating to the same. We are fond of attributing the backgrounds of American humor to frontier days and associate this dimly with trial and privation. Yet the truth is apparent after second thought: frontier humor was essentially saloon humor. What is the hyperbole of backwoods humor but the inability of a lush to check his jest with a decent amount of exaggeration? He cannot check it, for he has the audience of a group of men who will remain all night to laugh and listen. And what about the effect of meiosis — the art of understatement? Surely it is the joke of the man who has drunk too much to be verbose, since his energies have sunk largely to the business of his remaining erect and facing himself manfully in the saloon mirror between drinks. It is he who is responsible for the faint line, the quick understatement of some vast indignity which he has suffered at the hands of a friend, notably a woman friend. The pioneer editor was the mirror of these manners, but not the mold of their form. If American humor persists today as the freshest among nations, it may be chiefly because Americans are the last men to have had a fling on their own.

Hamlet in a Cutaway

PANIC, A PLAY IN VERSE, by Archibald MacLeish. \$2. 8¾ x 5¾; 102 pp. Boston: *The Houghton Mifflin Company*.

FORTY years ago, Bernard Shaw was saying that, had he a mind to it, he would write his plays in the blank verse of the Elizabethans. He was merely absenting himself, he assured his audiences, from the circle of Marlowe because the British of Shaw's day had long since ceased to speak in verse. It is the thesis of Archibald MacLeish, necessary for his argument in a play, that Americans now speak in the nervous rhythms of the trochee and the dactyl. Voices of men in the streets descend from stressed syllables, rather than rise expansively in the Shakespearean manner. "Its whole beauty and color," the American poet says of his language, "its great vigor and vitality result from the sharpness and distinction of its stresses."

It is an anomaly that Americans, in the theater, are more at home in Shakespearean rhythms than in their own accents — as witness their natural reception of Maxwell Anderson's plays, which, despite philosophies undreamed by olden Horatios, are studiously patterned on the sonorous movement of Elizabethan verse. In *Panic* there is often eloquence, but it is never lofty-launched upon the sea of the grand style. As a working play, its faults are obviously those of symbolism; and while MacLeish has nothing to learn from Anderson as a poet, he can derive many lessons from the Elizabethanist's superb handling of the artistic problems in presenting a dramatic story in verse.

Panic opens badly, with a suggestion of the voices which Maeterlinck used as hocus-pocus to bewilder audiences for many years. It is not enough to throw out atmospheric rumblings of a panic, such as

the great one of Roosevelt's first presidential week. Only when the protagonist of the tragedy, the banker McGafferty, is disclosed with his muse, Ione, is the play capable of movement. From then on—or for about twenty minutes—MacLeish has a play going with great results. Granted that he has used his language superbly and has shackled the speech of the American banker into poetic chains, he has still ignored the main concession he must make to an audience: that of holding his audience tense through the sheer instrumentation, not of verse, but of theater.

Marlowe and Shakespeare, while sensitive to rhythms of the speech about them, were always hammering at the theater itself, using its tricks for every value. MacLeish presents a banker and a mistress, and the chumps out front, in whose speech he is writing, won't smoke symbolism for a minute unless they are fully aware of the realities concretely supporting the playwright's fancy. It is a pity that *Panic*, as a play, must be an artistic failure though a *succès d'estime*. For it would have been an immensely valuable gift to our theater—if MacLeish had succeeded sensationally in breaking the convention of oh-yeah speech, inducing poetry into the ears of the chumps again. It would have broken shackles which are far more irksome than those of rhythm, and irons which every playwright must now feel. Only O'Neill, with his ponderous verbosity, and Anderson, with his face turned to the past, have broken those straps and checks. In most of his verse, MacLeish has gone further, signally, in using living speech than did Hardy in *The Dynasts*, or Robinson in his gropings around New England. The influence upon the American theater, if someone succeeds in such a worthwhile aim as MacLeish's, will be incalculable.

Ladies of Culture

QUEEN VICTORIA, by E. F. Benson.
\$3.50. 5¾ x 8¾; 406 pp. New York:
Longmans, Green & Company.

I CHANGE WORLDS, by Anna Louise Strong. \$3. 6½ x 9½; 422 pp. New York:
Henry Holt & Company.

THERE is no end to books on Queen Victoria, as, stunned, we contemplate the decay of her world. It is much as if admirers of the full-rigged ship devoted their talents to minute descriptions of the figurehead at the bow. Benson cannot possibly lend her life the acid contrast necessary to such a work, for he is the chief dispenser of Victorian memorabilia, and his volume, *As We Were*, successfully concealed, with innate charm, just what the Victorians were.

The chief interest to be found in a biography of Victoria is the attitude of the biographer. Granted that Lytton Strachey presented her unfairly, it must be admitted in the concession that he made a brilliant job of it. Benson treads in fearfully, being of angelic disposition, and sets about gracefully admitting the basis of Strachey's libel, mitigating it with an amused tolerance which never swerves from printing, when pressed, the approximate truth. Where the author of *Eminent Victorians* once toyed wittily with a vast machine of politics, Benson is more concerned with giving a domestic background to Victoria's life, though the facets of her career which must delight all amateur psychologists glitter occasionally by reflection in Benson's amused eyes. Just why such a lush field is permitted to lie fallow, when the psychologists are so thorough in digging into the past, must be only a matter of diminishing royalties if such liberties are ever taken with a Royalty considerably diminished herself.

I read the book with interest chiefly in