

FIVE RISING STARS IN AMERICAN FICTION

By Charles W. Ferguson

BY this ungainly title I wish to designate a bevy of novelists who within the present season have risen to envied heights in a crowded firmament. Of the five, three had no reputation beyond their immediate relatives a year and a half ago. From meagre beginnings and after some measure of suffering, they have leaped into national fame — examples of the rule of youth, of the suddenness with which reputations can be made and abilities recognized in latter day America. They have lent credence to the American tradition that yon tow-headed boy may one day be president, for with their first novels they have reached overnight pinnacles which Stevenson and others were years in scaling.

It matters little that the majority of these stars have reached their zenith and will begin to descend when their next novels appear, that another is luminous but undoubtedly seasonal, that only two are more or less fixed. It suffices that within a time when more good books are being written in America than bad ones in England, these novelists have wrung from weary critics a bold admission of worth, have sent these same critics yelping on the trail of new and adequate adjectives. Without hawking or pandering, they have placed their wares upon the counter and seen them gobbled up through pure desire. In a sentence, they have done what thousands of others would like to do.

One other achievement must be chalked to their credit: these new

young novelists have fused new blood into a body of writing which a year ago threatened decadence. From the whigmaleeries of young intellectuals they have turned to a more serious chronicling of the inner mind. From the unprofitable whanging of Rotarians they have turned to the beam which is in their own eye. They have chosen subjects far more difficult and amazing; hence they are leagues more interesting than those naive sophisticates who a year or two ago were supplying us with accurate photographs of the village mayor and his repressed daughter. They have answered the question, After unalloyed realism, what?

Notice the audacious task Eleanor Carroll Chilton assigned herself in "Shadows Waiting". She essayed to write a "melodrama of the mind". In less capable hands the result would have been a messy phantasmagoria, yet this young woman with a first effort and a gallant flourish has rated the genuflections of widely distributed critics. As for her background, Miss Chilton is the daughter of an illustrious sire. Her father represented West Virginia in the upper house of Congress before fist fights were so common in either house and when "senatorial dignity" was not a derisive term. She herself received the heart of what passes for educational advantages in this day. She attended Miss Masters' School at Dobbs Ferry, Dana Hall, and Smith College, from which she was graduated in 1922. Later she sojourned in London and Oxford for

two years, doing independent research in the British Museum, becoming saturated in mediæval romance and Greek mythology. Her interest in Greek mythology, however, started when she began to read, and her work in mediæval romance had little or no effect upon the intensely modern novel she has written; nor had her interest in the church fathers or in comparative religions, though her knowledge of Christian history is quite evident in many passages of her work. She has no philosophical career to flaunt, yet in "Shadows Waiting" she has attacked the question of reality in a way as plaguing and assiduous as it could possibly have been. It was in answer to the problem, What is reality? that she wrote her book, but I doubt that many readers will ever suspect her purpose.

For two years she kept secretly brewing an idea. She made no notes, put no pen to paper, until one day at eleven o'clock when she was doing something else the spirit came upon her and she felt strangely moved to write the first sentence of "Shadows Waiting". After that she worked smoothly, indefatigably. Ten hours, sometimes twelve, she wrote each day for six months, then hied her novel off to a publisher. Today, after her period of splendid madness, she is in the care of a physician and her novel is discussed wherever discriminating readers congregate.

What is chiefly interesting about her book is the fact that it was not written for an audience. She felt that few would be interested, and she was more or less right in what she thought. "Shadows Waiting" will never pass "Beau Sabreur" in copies sold, but, none the less, an audience has arisen in America to appreciate what Miss Chilton so capably wrought. She

wrote a book for herself and found thousands awaiting it. Her book was written with enviable disregard for prevailing tastes, and not in protest against these tastes but quite sincerely.

Why, then, has her book met with success? Apart from the fact that the prose is supremely good to look upon, the explanation lies partly in the fact that she has caught and made articulate what so many of her readers would like to say. Her prose, it is true, is sufficient. It is so able that it never needs to rely upon poetic devices for its effect. But, what's more, Miss Chilton, born in 1898, has something to say to our generation, or something to say *for* our generation. In a queer admixture of the ancient and modern in character, she has dealt with life's problems in no way that will please the righteous but in a manner that will prompt admiration in the ungodly.

I fail to see the beauty in her work unless by beauty we mean a symmetry of prose. She has dealt harshly with life, has penetrated its putative mysteries with irreverent mind, and she has set down the insecurity and banality of existence in a most unflattering way. She deals with neurotics, but many of us approach neuroticism. Her characters are covered with a sheen of unreality, yet their nudity is all the more obvious. She has given us a glorified mental realism. By her slight concern for circumstances, she has been able to deal with inner facts and attitudes. Her book is thoughtful and provocative, and not one for babes and sucklings. She is not a young novelist who will "bear watching"; she will bear reading. If the John Day Company ever decide to blurb their books, I should like to try my hand on one for "Shadows Waiting".

John Gunther had considerably more theatre to mark his rise to fame. In him dwell the romance and glamorous experience which we sedentary Americans heartily admire. The day "The Red Pavilion" was published, Gunther was "dodging bullets in the desert back of Damascus and wiping fleas off my face". Could one pick a more strategic position to occupy the day his novel was released?

Previously Gunther had in desperation thrown up a good job in Chicago, the scene of "The Red Pavilion", and gone to London in search of high adventure. He was soon hired by his old employer, the "Chicago Daily News", and sent upon assignments in various parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. His novel was accepted first by an English publisher and became within a few weeks a best seller in the British Isles. On January fourteenth the House of Harper won the competition and imported it for American trade. Swinnerton heralded it abroad and Walpole chimed in, though with not so much enthusiasm. In America Ernest Boyd has been its most reliable advocate.

If the author's background yields itself to publicity, the time and method of his writing the novel are no less dramatic. He wrote "The Red Pavilion" for amusement during a two months' holiday on a small island in the Mediterranean, called Porquerolles.

I vacationed strenuously for two days and then started a novel. I didn't have a title, a character, or an idea. But somehow it came out. Two friends were with me. They started writing novels too. It became a race. Metaphorically speaking, we set up a large blackboard, and on the blackboard every idea, phrase, suggestion, name, or other item mentioned in conversation was set down. This was common property. I fear I grabbed off more than my share. Anyway, I won. That is, I finished the R. P. before the others finished their manuscripts.

I suspect that there must have been an erudite chemist on that island, for Gunther's training doesn't justify his knowing as much of chemistry as "The Red Pavilion" shows. The story is light, a bit futile, but it is extremely learned in many of its passages. Richard is the young advertising man who makes experimentation with test tubes his avocation. Shirley is his former wife who returns for one week—the week the story covers. The title comes from Francis Thompson, "the red pavilion of my heart".

All the characters are taken from the sophisticate bohemians of Chicago. (It will be a revelation to many readers to know that there are bohemians in Chicago.) By far the most original conception is that expressed in Leon Goodman, who writes bad poetry and longs to suffer. He has a penchant for terrible methods of death and finally decides, after a demonstration of impotence in the presence of a girl who has at last managed to lose her virtue, to commit suicide by poisons which Richard gives him. Before his purpose is accomplished, however, he is run down by a bus and dies ignominiously in a hospital.

Shirley and Richard turn out to be star crossed, and Richard, to save his dignity, at last deserts Shirley, for it was Shirley who had flown before. In Shirley, Gunther presents an artist every whit as good as Gottlieb is a scientist. What she says of her hands, for she is a sculptress of no mean reputation on both sides of the Atlantic, will linger in the reader's mind and doubtless influence his conception of art. I have never seen a better statement of the manual philosophy. I have visions of countless readers discovering their hands for the first time when they have read "The Red Pavilion". On the whole the book is easy

to forget, yet many of its events and ideas enter the fibre of one's experience and recur long after the book itself is forgotten. The author has done an odd piece of work, an uncanny thing, but he has done it well enough to merit the chorus of praise he has received both here and abroad.

Ernest Hemingway is another expatriate who has written a first novel this season. He lives in France, partly the scene of his novel. He visited the United States last in the spring of 1926 and now declares himself eager to come back here to live. He was born in Illinois, the onetime habitat of Bruce Barton, Stuart P. Sherman, and Franklin P. Adams. His boyhood, however, was spent in Michigan. He has published previously a volume of short stories under the title, "In Our Time". Most of these were written from Paris and reached American readers only indirectly through "The Little Review", "The Transatlantic Review", and "This Quarter". "In Our Time" brought him wide critical renown and paved the way for "The Sun Also Rises", which has passed its fifth printing in America.

His father was a physician. In childhood it was his wont to accompany the old gentleman on calls and many of his experiences are reflected in his short stories. Indeed, "The Sun Also Rises" is quite obviously written from his peregrinations in France and Spain. He has a keen reportorial eye, trained from long newspaper experience and a congenital ability to observe and record accurately. He took an active part in athletics. In preparatory school he was a football star. Like Cohn, the butt in his novel, Hemingway was an amateur boxer and, unlike Cohn, one of some distinction. Before the United States

entered the war, he went abroad with the American Ambulance and later enlisted in the Italian *Arditi*. He was wounded three times and was decorated by the Italian government for a distinguished war record.

By far the most interesting thing about "The Sun Also Rises" is its title, for the average reader delights in knowing that it comes from that most pessimistic book, Ecclesiastes. Mr. Hemingway uses it to connote that general futility which exudes from the tale he tells and the life he depicts. His cast is made up of young expatriates who stay drunk most of the time and consequently say a great many very funny things. We have the pleasure of drunks without having to take them home. As one colossal round of sin, his novel is excellent and makes superb reading for a dry American audience. Bret, or Lady Ashley, as she is alternately called, is a most amusing and pathetic character who can't pin her affections definitely upon any one man. All the characters are treated with the sympathy they deserve. The novel as a whole affords good weekend diversion. It leaves the impression that the author must be a very wild fellow, a gourmand. Yet the fact abides that he is a respectable chap under thirty, with one wife and two children, and anxious to return to the United States of America where prohibition supposedly reigns supreme.

Leonard Nason also writes from France. His novel, "Chevrons", which has taken its place alongside "The Big Parade" and "What Price Glory" for the accuracy and realism of its war depiction, deals with his experiences in the service of America during the World War. He was born in Somerville, Massachusetts, three years before the Spanish American War and was

attending lectures in Norwich University when the war to end war came. He enlisted in the 18th U. S. Cavalry and gained immediate promotion to the rank of a sergeant. This branch was soon changed to the 76th Field Artillery and in consequence Nason became a sergeant over a set of old troopers who proceeded to make his life miserable until reductions and transfers in France weeded out the old troopers and left him ranking sergeant.

His first battle was at Château Thierry. He was an observer and liaison sergeant. He was wounded at Château Thierry, or, as he confesses, probably scared stiff. He didn't care what they called it as long as they didn't send him back to the front. But hospital life got intolerable and he went back to his command, not waiting for authority. He reached his regiment on the night of the St. Mihiel drive, went through it, hiked to the Argonne, and was shot through the belly by a sniper October 4th.

That ended the war for him. Its activities were no more, but he was to suffer as acutely as Sergeant Eadie did on that interminable journey of the cow train that carried him once more to a hospital. For Nason's ship was wrecked on the beach of Fire Island, about two hundred yards from shore, New Year's Day, 1919. "That was a sad morning", he says. "Fifteen hundred wounded men, most of them cripples, shipwrecked, and a howling gale. . . . We went through hell for four days. All we could think of was that after going safely through the perils of submarine and mine, and having braved the dangers of an unpleasant death by shell, grenade, and bullet, it was too damned hard to be drowned right in New York harbor."

Immediately upon his discharge from the army Nason returned to

Norwich, and was graduated in 1920. He married the same year and took a job adjusting claims for an insurance company. Finally, after the arrival of his first daughter, "the clothes that my wife's family had given her and those that mine had given me when we were married began to wear out". He declares that he spent several days of the company's time in deep thought, whereupon the idea that he might write took hold upon him. He had written in college. In fact he had once been kicked out for an unduly frank discussion of the military department. He bought a book on "How to Become an Author" and from it took the one idea that he must write of what he knew intimately.

The result was an immediate magazine success with war stories and later his book, "Chevrons", which led him once more to France for the acquisition of material. Meanwhile, through his poetry he had become known also as "Steamer" on the Chicago "Tribune". When "Chevrons" came along, its worth as a war depiction was immediately recognized and Nason's financial problems were more or less solved. Since its appearance his stuff has been in demand. Though he still lives in France, he says he knows a better country and he plans an early return to these shores.

It sounds seditious to say that the humor is the feature of "Chevrons". Yet I believe it is so. When I read it one idea kept bearing down upon me: the absence of patriotism among soldiers. It was grim business that Sergeant Eadie had to do, yet he did it with rare good humor, and in the most hazardous moments he could not forego stooping to steal a dead major's field glasses. The theme which runs throughout is the manner in which wound stripes were regarded by those who

had none. Sergeant Eadie was finally compelled to tear them off, for his battalion could never be quite convinced that he had been legitimately hit.

I suppose no young writer of the present day has been admitted so readily to the seats of the mighty as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and I rejoice that competence can draw so much publicity as her career indicates. What the critics have to say about her reads like a page of Fleischmann's yeast indorsements. I am not sure but that she has been confused in the minds of some with a vanishing cream. Certainly it cannot be gainsaid that she has written the strongest novel of this vermilion decade. Some are disposed to dispute with Cabell and Mencken in their intemperate comments upon Frances Newman. There will always be those who dissent from the world's view of John Erskine. But I do not understand how anyone can fail to agree that "The Time of Man" is beyond the touch of critics. It is native, but that is incidental. It is written beautifully, but that is not the whole of it. It possesses what, for want of time and a better vocabulary, I would call influence. "The Time of Man" does things to you when you read it.

Miss Roberts is a Kentuckian by birth and rearing. Her father's pioneer ancestor came into the state through the Wilderness Trail with one of the early Boone expeditions. After graduating from high school she spent several years trying to get strong. She then had an opportunity to go to the Colorado Rockies to live, and went eager for experience. She lived there several years, happy and lonely, climbing and walking in the early mornings, coasting in winter, knowing birds, chipmunks, and beavers and many sorts of people.

In these years I presume "The Time of Man" must have taken shape, for Ellen Chesser had that self sufficiency which is bred in mountains and in loneliness. I never felt as sorry for a woman in my life, nor did I ever want more to be like one. On many a page I wanted to swoop down upon her home, abduct her in my high power car, and put her down in the Hotel Commodore. But how silly I should have been, for she was beautiful (as a character) in longing, probably ten times more beautiful than she would have been in realization. I feel, too, that Miss Roberts must have had that same longing those years in Colorado. She went, at last, to the University of Chicago, where she studied philosophy and language, receiving a Ph.B. degree in June, 1921. Now her home is in California.

She has published heretofore a volume of verse, "Under the Tree". Her publishers tell us, and I wish they hadn't, that she would rather have written "Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate sings" than any other line in English. Why should she, when she has written so many better lines? It is as though Dreiser had expressed envy of:

The man worth while is the man who can
smile
 When everything goes dead wrong.

It is impossible to close without the obvious comment that the ladies have led the field in serious work this year. In a sense, the women have chosen heads, the men tales. They have shown, by and large, more originality, more energy, and certainly more courage.

Now that I have taken the trouble to read the books and write the article, I may be indulged certain private views regarding these various stars. It should already be apparent that I regard Miss Roberts as a constellation.

She could be Orion, or the Milky Way, if you prefer. I like to think of her as the Milky Way because, should the light of that group fade, we should never be aware of it for 35,000 years. Already Miss Roberts has thrown off enough light to keep her in the firmament for many a year to come. Only one thing can diminish her popularity with the future generations: her book will probably be required in classroom reading and that means that children will be taught to hate her. Miss Chilton, I like to think of as Sirius, for astronomers tell us that this star is really two but that distance destroys the space of several million miles between its component parts. This suggests that Miss Chilton will never be fully comprehended by our generation, but she will always be looked upon with admiration, and a few will descry her dual qualities.

Nason seems to me somewhat analogous to the North Star. He is reliable, and he will probably stay in one place while others revolve about him. Hemingway and Gunther must be seasonal, very luminous in their time, Mars and Mercury perhaps, but destined to descend periodically and rise again. Their luminosity is not so great as that of the distant stars, but it appears to be greater, for they are closer to the earth. They will be pointed out by admirers and looked upon quite favorably whenever their time comes to appear.

Mass production has had its evils, yet it has given us a new literary cosmogony, an enlarged and ever more expansive firmament. If anyone doubts that the old stars had better look to their lights, let him read and ponder the season's contribution to American fiction.

NEW YORK

By Charles Norman

O THOU New York, towering above the bright
 Unimmaculate cities of the world,
 Hurl'd firmly into the air like a god's song
 Strongly begun and frailly ending in
 Thin towers of magnificent array:
 Daytime and starlight have made beautiful
 Dull stone and struck it tingling, and the soft
 Lofty sky expanse of wind blowing there
 Fairly, has eased the brittleness, and time
 Chimes over thy towers with the marvelous
 Hushed bells of sunset and moonrise, and stars
 Faraway spinning through infinite wind
 Dimly.

O thou New York, men having made thee
 Sheerly beautiful, stand thou forever.