

THE SEAMY SIDE

By Burton Rascoe

HOME TO HARLEM. By Claude McKay.
Harpers. \$2.50.

PERVERSY. By Francis Carco. Translated
by Ford Madox Ford. Covici. \$2.50.

ETCHED IN MOONLIGHT. By James
Stephens. Macmillan. \$2.00.

"HOME to Harlem" is a book to invoke pity and terror, which is the function of tragedy, and to that extent—that very great extent—it is beautiful. It is hard to convey to the reader the impression this novel leaves upon the mind, just as it is hard to convey the impression that a blues-song leaves upon the mind. One reads, one hears and the heart is touched.

Out of his individual pain, Claude McKay, the poet, has fashioned his lyrics; and out of his impersonal sorrow he has written a fine novel. "Home to Harlem" is a story involving the lives led by the lost generation of colored folk in the teeming Negro metropolis north of One Hundred and Tenth Street, New York. It is a story not of the successful Negroes who have done well in the trades and professions and have built themselves homes, sent their children to school, and engaged in civil and social pursuits of a sober and respectable nature: it is the story of the serving class—longshoremen and roustabouts, house-maids and Pullman porters, waiters and wash-room attendants, cooks and scullery maids, "dime-snatchers", and all those who compensate for defeat in life in a white man's world by a savage intensity among themselves at night.

Most of the scenes of "Home to Harlem" are in the cabarets and gin-mills where jazz bands stir the blood to lust in an atmosphere as orgiastic as a pagan Saturnalia. But there are scenes, too, on railroads dining-cars where cooks and waiters have scant respect for Pullman porters and feuds are carried on between chef and pantry-man. And there are scenes in buffet flats and in the barrack quarters for railroad employees

in Pittsburgh and in the small rooms for which a steep rent is paid in over-congested Harlem.

"Home to Harlem" is not a novel in the conventional sense. The only conflict in the mind of Jake, the hero, is as to whether he will keep on working at whatever insecure, underpaid drudgery he can find to do on the docks, in the stoke-hole of a steamer and in dining-cars or turn his handsome body and good looks into the shameful asset of a "sweet-man", kept in luxury on the earnings of a woman. The only conflict of wills engaged in by the hero is when he takes a girl away from his former buddy, and anger and hate flare into being, with drawn gun and open razor. When the book closes and he is going away to Chicago with the girl to start life anew, he is the same wondering, indecisive being he was in the beginning, who "preferred the white folks' hatred to their friendly contempt" and found a sinister satisfaction in the fact that the white man is too effete to know the sensual pleasures of the blacks.

Jake's meagre story is drowned in the humid colors of Harlem life and his individuality gives way before the startling presence of the "Rhinceros", "Gin-head Susy", Madame Laura and the Yaller Prince. Even the educated Ray, toward whose education and refinement Jake has an admiring deference, seems somehow to come to life more strongly than the figure of the illiterate longshoreman. The "Rhinceros" was a dining-car chef who was a martinet loathed by his underlings for his efficiency as well as for his honesty and eccentricity. The "Rhinceros" "had a violent distaste for all the stock things that 'coons' are supposed to like to the point of stealing them. He would not eat watermelon, because white men called it 'the niggers' ice-cream'. Pork chops he fancied not. Nor corn pone. And the idea of eating chicken gave him a spasm".

After a long feud, one day the "Rhinoceros" called the pantry-man a "bastard-begotten dime-snatcher", which rankled, because the pantry-man was illegitimate; and the revenge he planned and executed against the "Rhinoceros" is one of the most engaging episodes in the book.

"Gin-head Susy" paid for her men and would not let them waste energy in work, and Madame Laura ran a house in 'Philly' and was treated like a *grande dame* in the shops on Fifth Avenue, and the Yaller Prince wore nigger-brown clothes and yellow spats and got his crap-money and his keep from a woman who guarded her dark-skinned property with a possessive and vindictive eye.

The language of "Home to Harlem", whether Mr. McKay is setting forth dialogue in a perfect transcription of Negro slang and dialect or is telling his story in the Negro idiom, is a constant joy. A big black buck "lazier" down the street; another chap is "sissified"; Aunt Hattie remarks concerning some imported liquor offered her, "Ef youse always so eye-filling drinking it, it might ginger up mah bones some", and a sadistic yellow-brown girl inciting her new lover to attack her former lover cries "Hit him, Obadiah! Hit him I tell you. Beat his mug up foh him, beat his mug and bleed his mouf! Bleed his mouf! Two-faced yaller nigger, you does eberv low-down thing, but you nevah done a lick of work in you lifetime. Show him, Obadiah. Beat his face and bleed his mouf".

Mr. McKay is not at all solicitous toward his reader. He makes no case, he pleads no cause, he asks no extenuation, and he doesn't explain his idiomatic phrases. There is no glossary at the end of the book as there was to Carl Van Venchten's "Nigger Heaven"; and the unsophisticated happily will read whole pages of this novel depicting the utmost moral degradation without ever knowing what it is about. And this is just as well.

"Perversity", like "Home to Harlem" deals with life in the lower depths. It is the story of obscure urgencies for love, dominance and sensual satisfaction among people to whom the profoundest fact in life is the

need for money. It is the story of a boy, his sister who is a prostitute, and her sustainer in a mean street in Paris. It is a story of abnormalities, of hideous and distorted lives, and yet there is enough of simple humanity in it to make it a drama in which the most blameless can feel the emotion of recognition. The abnormal, of course, is never a dissociation from the normal but an exaggeration of it or of one phase of it.

Take the ingredients of "Perversity". A youth lives in the same house with his sister, whom he loves with brotherly affection. His vitality is low; he has never been in love with anyone; his life is one of arduous toil from which sleep is the only satisfaction he gets. For a long time he refuses to inquire into his sister's way of supporting herself, and even when he begins to suspect that this way is not honorable he deadens his thoughts with an indifference which he finds easy to maintain because he has the mind of a slug.

His sister takes as lover and sustainer a brawny and sadistic sailor who supplies some pitiable need that she requires to keep going. The brother discovers the relationship and it pains him. He can do nothing about it really, since he earns barely enough to support himself; and his sister's destiny is for her to work out, because the need of money for meagre food and shelter is paramount to both of them. No less, the brother takes a moral attitude toward the man who lives upon his sister's earnings and who has supplanted him in his sister's affections.

The sailor takes a dislike to the brother as intense as the brother has for him. He soon finds that the brother is a craven. He plays upon this. It gives him a psychic satisfaction. The fear that he is able to inspire in the brother is more pleasurable to him than his relationship with the sister. He beats the sister and betrays her with her money without complete relief for his perverse feelings; and then he proceeds to torture the brother with a knife. He stabs him and draws copious blood in a revolting scene. The craven brother procures a revolver for revenge and shoots the sister in an hysterical conflict of resolve and fear wherein he had planned to murder the sailor.

This climax saves the story from utter drabness—a drabness that is intensely dramatic nevertheless. When that poor, harried girl responds to the call for help from her distracted brother in his tortured delirium and crumples beneath the insane fusillade of bullets meant for the person who had tortured them both, there goes through the heart of the reader a terrific wave of pity.

“Etched in Moonlight” is a collection of seven short stories by an elfin master of phantasy, humor and poignancy. They are not Stephens at his best, for he is a great genius and these stories are sketches set down without having been thoroughly thought out. But slight as they are in revealing to the reader, unacquainted with Stephens’s work, the quality of that Irish *raconteur*, they are better than most of the stories you would be likely to find in any given collection.

Except when he is re-telling the stories of Irish folklore, Stephens’s people have a peculiar characteristic. The wives are always shrewish, voluble and practical, and the husbands are always easy-going, ineffectual, child-like and charming. He writes of humble folk, and about them he is always philosophic. “There are meek people, poor people, cowards; and they are meek and poor and cowardly because they want urgently something or other. The man who has a desire is condemned to be a slave; and he shall have outgrown his desires before he attains it. But the like breeds the like, and he will find a new desire in time to prevent him losing the other fetter. He is obedient, and he is the backbone and prop of all tyrannies and systems of tyrannies. On thy belly shalt thou go, and God help us! our heads are full of bellies.”

Stephens excels in description: “His ears were put on so unhandily that you might have sworn he put them on himself, and a glance told you that he was an unhandy man”; and of a drunken man, “He took two steps to the left, then two steps to the right, then he took one step in front—and then he halted again; readjusted his nose to the compass; spat on his hands and had another try at it”; and “Now and then he tried to kick out of his path a rock that was eight

feet deep and twenty feet round; now and again he waved a bush from the road with the gesture of one who will be obeyed. But he was cheerful, he was tolerant, and when these objects refused to budge he went round them and laughed at their discomfiture. ‘They,’ he said, ‘would never think of going round me’”.

Franciana and Other Items

ANATOLE FRANCE ABROAD. *By Jean-Jacques Brousson. Translated by Pollock. Robert McBride & Co. \$5.00.*

PREFACES, INTRODUCTIONS AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED PAPERS. *By Anatole France. Translated with a foreword and notes by J. Lewis May. Dodd, Mead. \$2.50.*

THE GREAT AMERICAN BANDWAGON. *By Charles Merz. John Day Co. \$3.00.*

JEAN-JACQUES BROUSSON, for many years Anatole France’s secretary, is also France’s most conscientious and most gifted Boswell. There have been others who were foresighted enough to take down things they heard France say—Paul Gsell, Nicholas Ségur and Michel Corday—but none of them had the special advantages enjoyed by Brousson. He was France’s friend and confidant as well as his secretary. He was with him at all hours of the day. He saw and heard him in negligée and when he was quarrelling with Mme de Caillavet. He kept pests away from France when France was engaged in writing and he heard what France said about his visitors after their backs were turned. He dug up material for France in the library and protected him in his efforts to deceive Mme de Caillavet about the way he spent his hours. During all this time, nothing escaped him. When the master was cross or brilliant, amiable or full of spleen, benign or grumpy, Brousson faithfully set down his comments or complaints in words that are preserved to us now. They have the very flavor of France’s writings.

In this second book of records of France’s private conversation we have mainly to do with that disastrous period when he went to the Argentine to lecture. France and Madame de Caillavet had been getting on each other’s nerves and there had been some