

SINCERITY, A STORY OF OUR TIME
by John Erskine (BOBBS-MERRILL. \$2.50)

JOHN ERSKINE, after Homer the chronicler of Helen of Troy, has forsaken in his latest novel the private lives of the ancients to investigate those of certain moderns. He calls his novel *Sincerity*, and he is concerned with this vaunted contemporary virtue as it affects the relations between men and women, particularly between men and women who happen to be satisfactorily married. He adopts and extends the theme of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and applies it both to men and to women; and he invents, in order to demonstrate it, an extraordinary and not very convincing domestic entanglement.

Isabel Beauvel, a happily-married and successful novelist, writes an essay upon marriage. She maintains in it that happily-married persons are not nearly so happy as they appear, or even as they think themselves to be. The happy wife resents the ignorance which her sheltering contentment, by cutting her off from half the experience of life, forces upon her. And her husband too suffers from the unintended limitations of a happy home. If he is tempted to live a little more widely and explore the mysteries of existence, he usually suppresses the impulse out of love for his wife and broods over it in silence. Isabel publishes her essay under the name of Nora Helmer, and is astonished by the response from persons of both sexes who cannot confide to their too-contented mates the existence of their vague unrest. Most surprisingly, she receives a letter from her own husband, sympathizing with the views expressed in her essay and asking for an opportunity to meet Nora Helmer. Unwilling to confess her harmless deception, Isabel allows her dearest friend, Mary Allerton, to impersonate Nora Helmer and to interview Winthrop.

After a few weeks of agonized continuation of the hoax, during which all three would gladly have withdrawn had they been able to do so, Mary and Winthrop embark

upon an affair of their own and Isabel departs for Europe in search of the experiences from which her home had sheltered her. Mr. Erskine never succeeds very well in clarifying the psychological processes which lead his characters into their extraordinary conduct. Consequently, the reader is not surprised when, after ten years during which Mary and Winthrop have lived together as husband and wife, Isabel unreasonably reappears and resumes her position as mistress of Winthrop's house. The only appreciable result of the experiment, after the characters had abandoned the attempt at complete sincerity, was the conclusion that, however difficult it may be in this world to be logical, to be at once logical and just is an impossibility. Mr. Erskine is graceful and witty as usual, but the total effect of *Sincerity* is somewhat flat. It is difficult for the reader to regard Winthrop and Isabel as anything other than faintly animated premises in Mr. Erskine's syllogism, and the logic of the syllogism itself is often exceedingly elusive.

MARGARET WALLACE

TOWER OF SAND by Wilbur Daniel Steele (HARPERS. \$2.50)

Too much excellence is a dangerous thing and Mr. Steele, after the continued approval of the O. Henry Award and of Edward J. O'Brien, may find it his undoing. In his latest volume of short stories, what one takes at first for genius seems on second thought to be merely a trick of writing. For the title story and some of the others are melodramatic and highly colored, ending with a sudden unconvincing twist.

But it is competent writing and excellent reading. And it will always insure Mr. Steele an enthusiastic public. The quiet subtle stories, however, convince one that the author could be more versatile. It is in this genre that he has his greatest success and failure. One of these, "A Life", the story of a defeated racing-boat that is cursed with fail-

ure, is marred by sentimentality and lack of any real characterization. But the last one in the book, "Never Anything That Fades", the story of a woman who loathes the fading things in life and a man who desires loyalty and faith, is a superb effort and is as unforgettable as the famous "Bubbles". In another story, "For Where Is Your Fortune Now?", a mere sketch of a situation and personalities, Mr. Steele does a most difficult thing with apparent lack of effort.

All in all, the book is a successful combination of several types. And his machine-made stories are so much better than those of other men that one is captious enough to censure them only because some of his work approaches literature.

THE MAN WITHIN by *Graham Greene*
(DOUBLEDAY, DORAN. \$2.50)

RARELY does a young author in his first novel produce such a satisfying work as this is. Nor does a young man usually attempt such a difficult problem. The book is dramatic, even thrilling, but it is almost entirely a psychological drama.

Andrews, a coward and a weakling, buffeted by circumstances and twisted by a sense of his own inferiority, betrays his comrades, fails the woman he loves, and ruins his whole life. But throughout all he has spurts of most unusual bravery and, at the end, he is almost heroic. Yet the novel is not merely the "case history" of an abnormal. The reader follows it with sympathy and understanding. So vividly is the story told that it has the inevitability one associates with *Lord Jim*. Every phase is well motivated and the end is convincing.

Mr. Greene's style is warm and glowing. His descriptions of the English countryside are very real and very alluring. A sense of values and a feeling for words keep him from sentimentality. The plot, given a bit at a time through the hero's mind, is adroitly handled.

The romantic novel, usually the result of more emotion than thought, is quite rightly an object of suspicion today. But Mr. Greene with something definite to say and an unusual character to develop, has written a modern psychological novel with feeling and much skill. This explains the chorus of praise from British critics and the book's sensational sales here and abroad.

PAUL ALLEN

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL by
Thomas Wolfe (SCRIBNER'S. \$2.50)

AMONG young American writers who have made impressive débuts in recent years Thomas Wolfe is a distinct anomaly: he has not a nostalgic temperament. *Look Homeward, Angel* is not the book of a frayed spirit who is trying his level best to escape through elegiac writing; it is a rich, positive grappling with life, a remembrance of things past untinged by the shadow of regret, of one who has found his youthful experiences full of savor. No more sensuous (not to be construed as sensual) novel has been written in the United States. There is an easy, unforced strength to it that should be the despair of those beginners of the *New American Caravan* who have tossed overboard one genteel tradition only to fall into another. Inasmuch as it is not a novelist's novel, there will be quite intelligent devotees of fiction who will find its rough, fluid pattern too easy for their tastes. The answer to them would be that it is unfair to condemn a good chronicle novel simply because the chronicle, through overemphasis, is now falling out of fashion.

For a good chronicle novel is precisely what *Look Homeward, Angel* is. The story is a familiar one: the life of a family set down as it progresses in time, with particular attention to one member who serves as a focal point. The Gants are middle-class people, living in a resort town in the southern mountains that is called Altamount, but which is probably Asheville, N. C. Eugene Gant is