
FICTION

HUDSON-RIVER BRACKETED by *Edith Wharton* (APPLETON. \$2.50)

IN *Hudson River Bracketed* Mrs. Wharton tells how an Illinois boy came to New York, saw, and was very nearly conquered. At the age of twenty-three Vance Weston is a promising writer, with one well-received novel to his credit; his fresh point of view meets with favor in the literary circles of Manhattan and he has a regular job with a recently established review. Unfortunately this review, although recently established, is endowed with the cunning of the ages, and has most devilishly got poor Vance to sign a contract which forbids him to write for any other publication for four years. Affairs are complicated by the fact that he has married and is quite unable to support his wife on his meagre salary. In spite of his growing fame, they are forced to live from hand to mouth, in cheap boarding-houses, without enough money for decent food.

One would not expect Mrs. Wharton to stay in this atmosphere for the five hundred odd pages which comprise her book, and indeed she does not. Her hero's wife is a pretty country girl who cannot understand any of her husband's thoughts or ambitions; he loves her but cannot talk about anything with her, which leaves the field open for the Other Woman. Her name is Halo Tarrant; unhappily married to the man who runs the review which employs Vance, she stands for sympathy, intellect, wealth and social position. She shows Vance a world which he never dreamed of; he is lionized in circles where his wife would never be more than tolerated, and which would, moreover, bore her to the bone. This contrast in social condi-

tions, which runs through the book, is fairly effective, but one prefers the author's earlier books, where one could enter the houses of the wealthy without having servants, softly shaded lamps, pictures and luxurious furniture thrown at one in such obvious profusion.

Mrs. Wharton, as usual, writes fluently and with distinction; but her characters, with one exception, are shallow. Her portrayal of Mrs. Tarrant is not sufficient to account for the charm, intelligence and sympathy with which this person is supposed to be endowed. She seems rather smug and limited, however well-meaning; and one cannot understand Vance's respect for her mind after reading the hesitating and superficial criticism which she accords his work when he brings it to her for judgment. Vance himself is unconvincing in that he never grows up; responsibility, achievement and social experience do nothing to make him seem less boyish—indeed, childish. He behaves throughout like a schoolboy. His wife, Laura Lou, is the only real person in the book: the account of her short married life, with a husband whom she knows has outgrown her and death staring her in the face, has genuine pathos.

HARRIET HUME by *Rebecca West* (DOUBLEDAY, DORAN. \$2.50)

Harriet Hume, like Mrs. Woolf's *Orlando*, is the kind of book that no one quite understands but that everyone thinks is awfully good. Miss West does not make quite so many historical allusions as the more erudite Mrs. Woolf, but in the field of fantasy, whimsy and clever foolishness she does quite well in her modest way. Harriet Hume has the horrible gift of being able to read the

thoughts of the man who is in love with her, one Arnold Condorex. Condorex, born to no family and no wealth, is cursed with ambition; he must rise in the world. He looks forward to marriage as a step in this direction; for this reason Harriet cannot be for him, as she, poor fool, is a person of no particular consequence. As he thinks of his plan to marry the plain daughter of a Privy Councillor, and at the same time to keep Harriet (who is beautiful) until the last possible moment, she reads his thought.

She continues to read his thoughts throughout the book in a most embarrassing way; often he has kept doubts of his honesty to himself, but Harriet reveals them, thus taking all the pleasure out of his achievements. (These include marrying Lord Sourdeline's stupid daughter and becoming a Cabinet Minister, not to mention a peer.) Harriet is really a very pleasant little creature, full of wit, intelligence and animated by a very proper regard for truth and honesty. Condorex, although animated by no regard for truth and honesty, is also full of wit and intelligence, so that when the two get together, as they frequently do, interesting conversation is sure to follow.

Not only interesting, but sometimes quite serious, conversation. Miss West has a clear conception of men "on the make"; in Condorex, seen through Harriet's eyes, she exposes them, but with more humor than malice. The book is a *tour de force*, but not a formidable one; like Harriet herself, it may best be described as kittenish.

GEOFFREY T. HELLMAN

THE GOOD COMPANIONS by J. B. Priestley (HARPERS. \$2.50)

ONE CLOSES *The Good Companions* with the conviction that Priestley has written the best book of his career, and written it in happy defiance of all contemporary formulas of novel-manufacture. He has chosen to direct a large number of diverse characters through

a sequence of entertaining adventures; he has treated them objectively and told his tale in a robust and satisfying manner.

The book is initially concerned with a wife-driven Yorkshire wool-worker named Oakroyd, a simple unfortunate; with Elizabeth Trant, an unattached, leisured spinster of thirty; and with Inigo Jollifant, B.A., an embryo jazz-smith and preparatory-school teacher. These three are compelled by circumstance to quit their respective spheres, and go wandering through the English countryside. By way of coincidence and accident they are brought together, and join and reorganize a group of disheartened travelling players, who then proceed to prosper under the label of "The Good Companions".

After that it is all very simple. Mr. Priestley conducts his company from one hilarious scene to another; the adventures are unimportant here. Emphasis, however, must be laid upon his quite Dickensian wealth of characters, and the detailed presentation of each of these queer, lovable people. His humor, mellowed by sympathy for those whom he portrays, is delicate and fine; it retains these qualities even when broadening to farce. His irony is not too efficient; the shafts prod gently. A word, too, may be said of the absence of ragged edges usually discoverable in lengthy, crowded books. Such exemption postulates an undeniable technical skill.

LEO KENNEDY

THE HAWBUCKS by John Masefield (MACMILLAN. \$2.50)

READERS who have come to expect tales of the sea over John Masefield's signature will be delighted to learn that his art can visualize just as keenly for them the life and flavor of the English countryside. The people of *The Hawbucks*, and there are many of them, present varying facets of the typical English character. Masefield casts no glamour over them. To him a spade is a spade. But, though he recognizes its homeliness, its rust spots,