

STRICTLY PERSONAL

by Ruth McKenney



"Bread and a Stone"

I DON'T know what gets into literary critics. Sometimes I think the book page gentry must have been born deaf, dumb, blind as a bat, and equipped with a large hunk of granite where the heart should be.

For example. In the last month the New York critics' association has, with many a loud hosanna and chirp of joy, fallen afoul of a mediocre bit of a book called *Storm*. I know it's mediocre because, always a sucker for the printed word from on high, I snatched the book from the nearest lending library and struggled dismally through all 300 pages. After which I took to brooding. For the hero of this "novel" called *Storm*, is some meteorological data, and while weather might be okay in its place, it is definitely horrid when liberally mixed with some of the most awkward, foolishly sentimental, and generally stupid comments on "human nature" I have ever gnashed my teeth over.

Now the literary boys might be forgiven their earnest enthusiasm for the weather if *Storm* were the only book on a desert island, or even the only passable novel of the season. But while thousands cheered for the low pressure area over the Pacific, Alvah Bessie's new book, *Bread and a Stone*, was greeted with either thundering silence or half-hearted squeaks from harried second-string reviewers.

Frankly, my hackles rise. I have often wished I were a literary critic, and never more than at this moment. I wish I could get in the middle of the critics' association, and slam around with a bevy of selected barbs, full of scholarship and pointed literary allusions. Alvah Bessie's book deserves a passionate and logical and first-rate defense, and all I can do for it is to tell you that I read it in

a great gulp, with my heart turning over under me as I finished the last pages. I simply can't understand how this book can be ignored, or passed over with polite phrases, or attacked. I believe, and I hope not mystically, in the fate of good books, and so I know that *Bread and a Stone* will survive the literary critics and live on to touch a thousand hearts, awaken a thousand blind men, strengthen the purpose and sharpen the direction of a thousand men working for a better society.

But I'm not satisfied with the eventual fate of *Bread and a Stone*. I hope people will find out about this novel and find out now, not in 1951. For we need this book; we need its affirmation of hope, we need its burning inquiry into American life, we need its power and passion and tenderness. We are all involved now in the great struggle to destroy world fascism. Day after day we burn with hope and struggle against despair as we read the morning headlines. We need to be reminded for what we fight; we need to be told over and over again that the purpose of the great sacrifice, the meaning of the Soviet blood staining hundreds and thousands of miles on the terrible battlefield, is the brotherhood of man. And *Bread and a Stone* says this simple truth, says it poignantly and directly, so that its readers can never forget it.

Alvah Bessie is a truly versatile writer. *Bread and a Stone* comes directly after *Men in Battle*, a remorseless, brutal, terrifying account of the fight in Spain. I think *Men in Battle* was one of the two great books written about the first act in the fight against fascism. It was a book that exploded with honesty. I know people who didn't like it. They shied away from the facts of life. They preferred

to think of their friends in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion marching romantically off to the battlefield, flags flying, drums beating, and a lively song on every man's lips. But *Men in Battle* demands rereading today, for it tells the somber truth. War is never beautiful, not even for the men who go prepared to die for what they believe. To my mind, one of the most moving passages in modern literature is Alvah Bessie's description of the boys in Spain, hungry, homesick, standing all day and all night on Hill 666, invincible and austere, making one of the great chapters in history. *Men in Battle* is the story of human beings, not plaster saints, and I think it is a beautiful and heroic book.

Mr. Bessie's new book, published only two years after his bloody, fierce *Men in Battle*, is nearly the exact opposite in mood, color, and feeling. True, it centers around a murder, but the murder is an accident, and only serves to bring into strong relief the quiet, tender background of the New England hills, and the delicate relationship between the farmhand and his wife. *Bread and a Stone* is a study of the lower depths of American life, but Mr. Bessie uses understatement for his method. The book begins with the farmhand's fear. The police wait for him downstairs while he sits in his bedroom, feeling doom overtake him. The reader sees the farmhand first as the police must see him, a frightened, wretched, pitiful victim, stripped of dignity. And then gradually through the pages he is revealed in his unconscious strength, until in the last climax, his wife makes him understand his aborted, poisoned life. Running underneath the powerful narrative, is one of the most poignant modern love stories I have read, a relationship beginning in necessity and developing at last into that powerful intertwining of lives and emotions that spells the end of human loneliness.

It is very difficult to put into words the almost blinding pain the reader must feel in the closing pages of *Bread and a Stone*. Mr. Bessie has put down so simply and so explicitly the origins of the farmhand's doom. He has revealed—through the man's late awakening to hope—the potentialities of this human being, so that when at last the state destroys his life, the reader feels a passionate protest at this waste, this terrible waste. I can think of no more powerful argument for socialism than this novel—to give every man his chance at life—every man, even the least of us. The waste of human life is the greatest charge against the society in which we live. Alvah Bessie's new novel writes that truth in words of fire.

Bread and a Stone demands reading. It is a call to arms that none of us can ignore, a weapon in our struggle that we cannot afford to leave unsheathed. I hope every one who reads this column will get a copy of Alvah Bessie's new book. It is a storm greater than the one the literary critics are writing about; it is a passionate protest against man's inhumanity to man.

BURIED again and again by mortal enemy and disappointed friend, prefabricated housing is once more haunting the news—this time in connection with the nation's defense housing program. With the recent curfew on civilian building non-essential to defense, the government becomes the nation's biggest buyer of new building. The very nature of the defense program demands the speedy filling of large orders for similar or identical buildings. At the same time, the reduction of civilian building will mean the liquidation of many small entrepreneurs—contractors, architects, speculative builders, etc. Now these small producers are in the majority—and because of the loose and backward organization of the building field—constitute the biggest single barrier to industrialization. Government contracts for defense work will require larger organizations, more efficient production methods, and more capital than, most of these independents can lay hands upon. Thus, superficially it would appear that all pre-conditions for a big prefabrication industry are here. Whether it will appear, however, depends upon the moves of the administration in a time of crisis.

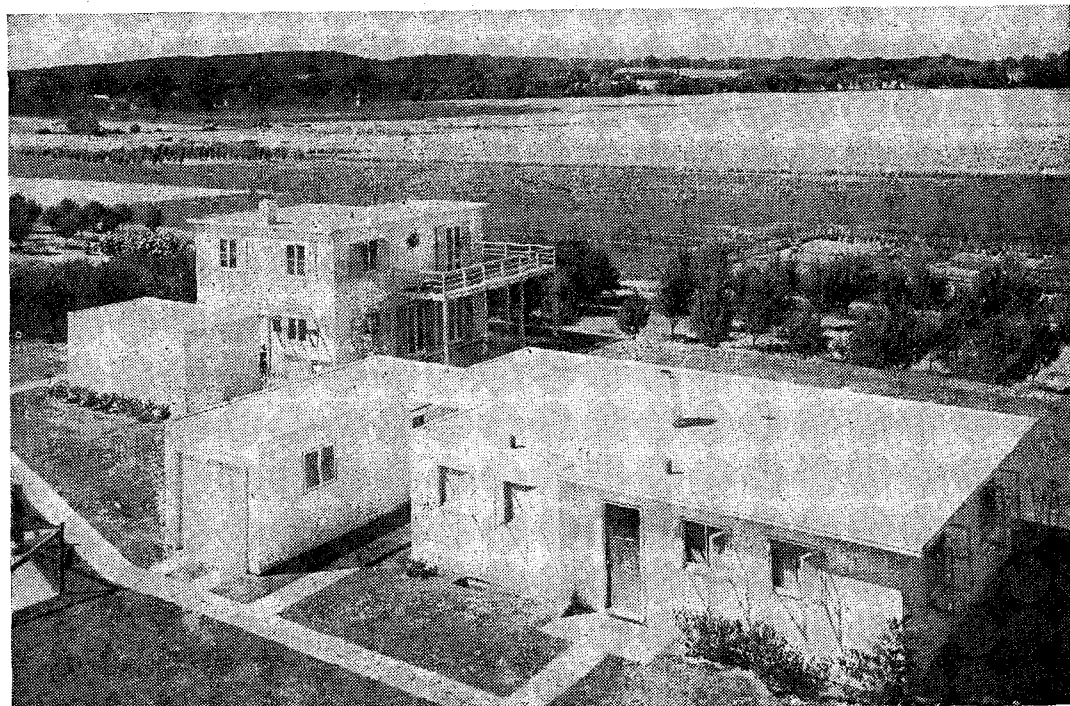
WHAT IS PREFABRICATION? The term implies large-scale production of completely shop-fabricated and shop-assembled houses—like ready-made clothes which can be worn out of the store or radios which can be plugged in on delivery. For houses, this would imply that up to ninety-five percent of the labor had been moved from scattered building sites into central factories: only under such controlled conditions could house production be genuinely industrialized. There are many structural systems today which are called by their sponsors "prefabricated": few of them actually merit the term. For mass production of factory-made houses demands larger plant facilities and more capital than today's small independent "prefabricators" possess; and beyond this lie problems in transportation, retailing, and financing which only big industry could hope to solve.

Faced with this situation, most of our current producers have attempted a compromise which lies somewhat less than halfway between the prefab and the conventionally built house: the *packaged* house. Here conventional structural systems are rationalized so that floors, walls, ceilings, and roof can be fabricated as panels in a central shop and trucked to the site for assembly. In several current defense projects, this central shop is merely a huge circus tent raised in the center of the project itself. Such panel houses represent no particular technical advances: they are of conventional design and materials, and employ conventional techniques in assembly—carpentry, bricklaying, plumbing, etc.

Yet even this limited degree of rationalization can result in lower costs and improved quality. This is a very important result of the repetitive or serial production of any article, and holds for houses as for war planes or women's underwear. Thus, in a recent housing

MACHINE-TAILORED HOUSES

From belt-line to lot. The story of the prefabricated home. What it is and where it's going. Obstacles in the industry's development.



Courtesy Museum of Modern Art

PREFABRICATED HOUSES made of special plywood panels.

project in the southwest, thirty identical small houses were erected in quick succession. The structures were conventional in every respect (not even any panels) and the workmen all regular craftsmen. The first house required 1,250 man-hours to build; but by the time the crew got to the thirtieth house, they had rationalized their work to a point where only 560 man-hours were required. In repeating the operation only thirty times, they had reduced the necessary labor time by fifty-six percent!

It is incorrect to assume, however, that the only advantage of prefabrication is reduction in necessary labor time—and hence cost—per unit. Of even greater importance are potential improvements in quality. Prefabricated houses promise totally new standards in comfort, convenience, and healthfulness. Of course, to a certain degree, the benefits of prefabrication are to be found in even the most conventionally built house today. Most of the "raw materials" from which it is assembled are in fact industrially processed before they reach the site: cement, lumber, nails, brick, glass, roofing. And all typical house equipments—plumbing fixtures, oil burners, frigidaires, electric lights—are finished industrial products.

It is not the degree of processing of the individual components, however, but rather the level of their assembly into a finished product, which determines whether the house is a real prefab. Just as in the production of autos or planes, the decisive operation—both in lowering costs and improving quality—is

that of final assembly. This stage is a limiting technological factor. Until it is fully industrialized, the spectacular potentials of prefabrication will not be released.

WHAT holds prefabrication back? A decade of disappointed speculation as to why prefabrication has "failed" cannot change the fact that the industrial production of houses is being held up by economic and not technical problems. The peculiar character of the building field, its backwardness relative to other areas of capitalist development, is basically due to the ownership of land by a large and disparate class of rentiers. The pervasive influence of the rentier cuts across every relationship in the building field and ultimately dictates its backwardness. Technical advance is more sporadic and uneven here than elsewhere for, by and large, mortgage and banking money is technically as well as socially conservative. Its opposition to large-scale planned operations is evident in the policies of the large banks, the insurance companies, even FHA and HOLC—government agencies which are frequently staffed and dominated by the "real estate interests."

Now it is obvious that the production of a house is not finished until arrangements are completed for a piece of land for it to stand upon. Each transaction, therefore, automatically involves the rentier, who wants his cut and is strongly enough organized to get it. Against this setup the small independent prefabricator is helpless. Support could only come from industrial capital—i.e., from the manu-