

beautifully rendered realistic integument simply falls away, and we realize the import of Mr. White's artistry.

What is man? Voss in his extremity asks of the spirit of Laura drifting at his side.

"Do you see now? . . . Man is God decapitated. That is why you are bleeding."

And later, Voss sighs: "We rot by living."

"Grace lay only in the varying speeds at which the process of decomposition took place, and the lovely colours of putrescence that some souls were allowed to wear. . . ."

So, slowly, the book reaches its apotheosis in putrescence, the brilliance of decay, ascent by descent, and the whole baggage of mortification as the only road to heaven.

### Dream and Reality

Indeed, the author's propulsion throughout is toward dislocation of the senses. It is no accident that Mr. White writes so beautifully of dreams; and that, unlike the nymphs and sybarites who inhabit American fiction, his lovers have no flesh at all. Reality, which he can render so vividly, is always quivering at the brink of dissolving into the amorphous primal jelly after which this Australian is always hankering. Here, in the swamp, at the edge of nothingness, when man has been reduced to his final extremity, Mr. White—and his hero Voss—finds God. God is the Yes arrived at only after one has exhausted the No: an assertion that has no meaning in terms of living, but only in terms of a whole series of negations. Voss conquers because he fails, Laura is married in her mind only, victorious love is a denial of carnal tangible marriage, and eventually in the slow inevitable round, man dies and is gathered into the earth.

Hence, this remarkable poet of evocation is almost entirely lacking in dramatic sense, and the book is clogged, slow-moving as a lava flow—and as relentlessly powerful. Mr. White has a vegetable vision: Things, people included, ripen slowly, almost imperceptibly, in his pot of earth—and all, from moon to man, turns and turns in a grave dance, a ritual motion that holds and lulls us. He

is not the author to rouse one, or set one thinking; his quality of consciousness suffuses one's own like a sunrise until we are bathed in it, and we see the world—landscape even more than man—in a glow of wonder.

Perhaps that is why this book, with all its Victorian upholstery, is so tremendously impressive. For

wonder is a state of mind rare in our time. We jump or we crack (wise or up)—we don't brood. Mr. White broods: He sees all about him, as Whitman saw, "nothing but miracles." But how far we have traveled from the American's mystic optimism! Now, a sense of wonder serves primarily to feed the necrophilia of a superb artist.

## *They Blamed It All on Her*

FRANCIS STEEGMULLER

QUEEN OF FRANCE: A BIOGRAPHY OF MARIE ANTOINETTE, by André Castelot. Translated from the French by Denise Folliot. Harper. \$5.

Concerning Marie Antoinette it is particularly tempting to parrot the maxim that "Men don't make history; history makes men." The Revolution broke this butterfly, one often hears it said, and in breaking her transformed her into the tragic heroine we recognize her to be. The story of her early flutterings and the story of the breaking are familiar in a general way to most of us, but they have never been told in detail as well as here. M. André Castelot's volume stands out in the field of French biography for its scholarship and readability. It is a shattering human document.

Shattering, in part, because the facts in the case are such that they set free, to a degree that horrifies the reader, vast floods of the satisfaction we take in the misfortunes of others. It is quite simply true that the more excruciatingly Marie Antoinette suffers, the more enthralling her story becomes. A certain trick of the author's technique makes particularly apparent how the tension increases as the book grows bloodier. "For a long time," says M. Castelot on page 3, "Maria Theresa mused at the bedside of the delicate child . . ."; and needless to say, as Maria Theresa muses beside her fourteen-year-old daughter, M. Castelot treats the reader to a bird's-eye view of recent European history (the supposed subject of Maria Theresa's musings). There

is no document, apparently, which states that the empress did any special historical musing at the moment when M. Castelot says she did, and the reader notices the makeshift form of the narrative.

But on page 409 M. Castelot does it again: Marie Antoinette, on the platform of the guillotine, "shut her eyes and felt that she was being dragged to the upright plank. She was tied on. It took long—horribly long. Finally the plank tipped over and she felt the heavy wooden collar fixed around her bared neck.

"A click.

"It was a quarter-past twelve.

"Between the moment she appeared on the platform and the moment the crowd heard the dull noise four minutes had passed."

HAVING absorbed the intervening pages of gathering storm, flight, chase, repeated near escape, insult, indecency, slaughter, and drama both national and personal, the present reader, at least, was in no mood to object to M. Castelot's "It took long—horribly long." What was inane on page 3 is now acceptable as dramatic reporting, in harmony with the supreme moment it describes. In the queen's earlier days, the court intrigues are trivial (who cares whether she spoke to Mme. du Barry?); the details of court etiquette are boring; the king's coronation drags; the affair of the diamond necklace is *too* mysterious; Marie Antoinette and Fersen are a pallid pair of lovers or near lovers, as compared with Anne of Austria and Mazarin or

the Grand Mademoiselle and Lauzun. But once the Bastille falls and the women of Paris march on Versailles . . . Yes, everything "bad" that happens to Marie Antoinette is the reader's gain, and heaven knows there is plenty of it.

But was it history—the Revolution—that turned her into the figure we know? M. Castelot includes in his books some crude remarks—crude in the sense of being unpolished—by "Dr. Paul Ganière, the excellent biographer of Corvisart" (Corvisart was Napoleon's physician) about the physical malformation that made it impossible for Louis XVI to consummate his marriage for seven years, until he consented to undergo an operation. For some time he did not even try to be a husband, paralyzed by fear of his elegant little Viennese wife as well as by the habitual sexual indifference that Dr. Ganière thinks the defect caused. On going to bed he fell asleep at once, and Marie Antoinette remained a wife in name only. Then, falling in love with her, he *did* try. In Dr. Ganière's words: "Night after night, in the silence of the nuptial chamber, this clumsy and well-meaning young husband inflicted moments of real nightmare on his companion without ever attaining the desired result, except no doubt for some defilements on her flesh which these two innocents might believe would result in a pregnancy that would put an end to all the court's gibes."

Those were the years when the queen became noted for her extreme frivolity. ". . . How can one be surprised," says Dr. Ganière, "if the young Queen, undoubtedly endowed with the impetuous temperament which has characterized so many members of the Hapsburg family, appeared to the eyes of her intimates and through them to her whole people as frivolous and capricious? Nearly every night she had to submit to her husband's demands, which, although they might not yet have any real result, aroused without appeasing her senses. . . . By day she tried to lose herself in a whirl of sometimes questionable pleasures. She sought . . . friendships which would appease her ardent need for affection."

And after the successful operation the poor king was so importunate, so clumsy and unskilled, that the queen soon admitted to a friend: "I should be neither grieved nor very annoyed if the King were to develop a passing and temporary attachment. . . ." To avoid his company at night she plunged into later and ever more frantic pleasures; now came the extravagance, the rage for gambling and betting. She bet \$60,000 of today's money that the Comte d'Artois couldn't build a château in the Bois de Boulogne in six weeks, while the court was at Fontainebleau. Nine hundred laborers worked day and night. ". . . As there was a lack of building materials, particularly freestone, lime and plaster, and no time could be lost in looking for them, M. le Comte d'Artois gave orders that patrols of the Swiss Guards should search the high roads and seize all the carts they found loaded with the above-mentioned materials. The price of the materials was paid right away, but as the goods had already been sold to other individuals, there was a kind of compulsion in this method which revolted public opinion." The immediate result was the delightful Bagatelle which we all enjoy in the Bois today; but the larger result . . . ?

#### 'Madame Deficit' and Mozart

Along with the wild spending went an increased snubbing of the older, more conservative members of the court, and exclusive dalliance with her own small fashionable coterie of "bright young people." As a spendthrift she became hated by the tax-ridden populace that had once acclaimed her (now they called her "Madame Deficit"). As a mocker she alienated many of her own class, not deigning even to live with them at Versailles but building for herself and her intimates the Petit Trianon and finally the Hameau. When the storm broke she had to send away her coterie—Mme. de Polignac and the others, the first *émigrés*—for their sake as well as her own. She was left literally almost friendless—part of her tragedy was isolation and near solitude.

The king's shortcomings as a

husband, the giddiness, the spending, the snubbing, the resentment, the rage and revenge of the people—it is all a progression. The Revolution did not make Marie Antoinette; she and the Revolution helped make each other. What is lacking in M. Castelot's excellent narrative is any picture of the poor woman's earliest days. We see the fourteen-year-old girl beside whom Maria Theresa sits musing, but there are only glimpses of the younger child.

"I shall be your husband, shan't I?" said the boy Mozart in one of the Schoenbrunn galleries.

"Oh yes, no one but you!" cried Antonia earnestly, and with shining eyes."

And:

"Her governess, Mme de Brandeiss, wrote all her pupil's exercises in pencil and Antonia had only to go over them in ink. The child herself admitted this to her mother. Maria Theresa then instructed the Countess of Lerchenfeld to take the Archduchess's education in hand."

THERE is little more. Whether she was or was not innately intelligent (M. Castelot seems to tell us both), she was "not able to concentrate" in the schoolroom but "neatly evaded her tutor's reproaches"; later, the revolutionaries with whom she pretended to co-operate perceived her unreliability, both intellectual and moral; and yet during her "trial," the days immediately preceding her death, she showed much shrewdness. With the departure of her coterie, the frivolity of her daily activities had ceased almost at once. Her political standards did not change, but her daily behavior did: For the more serious governess now hired for the Dauphin she wrote a surprisingly keen analysis of her son as she had observed him. Her courage at the end was sublime. She had the truly imperious Maria Theresa for a mother—surely a formidable heritage. But formidable how for good? How for bad? Somewhere back in Schoenbrunn or the Hofburg lie childish secrets—all-important secrets that share with her marriage and the Revolution the responsibility of forming (and destroying) Marie Antoinette.

# Mark Twain Goes West

TOM ARMSTRONG

MARK TWAIN OF THE ENTERPRISE, edited by Henry Nash Smith, with the assistance of Frederick Anderson. University of California Press. \$6.

WHEN the Civil War stopped the side-wheeler traffic on the Mississippi, Sam Clemens, a river pilot, drifted back to his home in Hannibal, Missouri, and was promptly mustered as a second lieutenant into a small Confederate unit called the Marion Rangers. After about two inglorious weeks spent largely in hiding out—Union troops had already crossed the Missouri—he casually left his command and walked back home. In the early disorganized days of the war such decampments were regarded less as desertion under fire than as breaches of military etiquette.

Returning to Hannibal, the former Confederate officer found that his older brother Orion, a Union sympathizer, had been appointed secretary for the Territory of Nevada. On July 25, 1861, the brothers left from St. Joseph for Carson City.

During the next fifteen months Sam Clemens worked with irrepressible optimism as speculator, prospector, mine hunter, silver miner, and for one miserable week as a laborer in a quartz mill. At last, discouraged and broke at twenty-seven, he decided to earn a living by writing. In September, 1862, he became a reporter on the Virginia City *Daily Territorial Enterprise*.

## 'Those Were the Days!'

Mark Twain of the *Enterprise* examines the twenty months the young man spent on the staff of the newspaper, presenting thirty hitherto unpublished letters and reports—some written as Sam Clemens, "straight" journalist, others as Mark Twain, spirited precursor to the modern humorous columnist.

From the first, Sam's reports were personal, imaginative, and, whenever possible, audaciously irresponsible. He began signing his dispatches "Mark Twain" in early February, 1863, and thereafter the

articles into which he "put no end of seasoning" usually appeared over his pseudonym, while factual copy dealing with "cast-iron" items was ascribed to Clemens.

Virginia City lived up to Mark's conception of how a town should conduct itself. The discovery of the Comstock Lode there in 1859 had converted it into the liveliest boom town America had seen. The streets swarmed with fortune seekers—fifteen thousand of them in 1863—and, as Twain later remembered it in *Roughing It*, "Money was as plenty as dust; every individual considered himself wealthy, and a melancholy countenance was nowhere to be seen. There were mili-



tary companies, fire companies, brass-bands, banks, hotels, theaters, 'hurdy-gurdy houses,' wide-open gambling-palaces, political pow-wows, civic processions, street-fights, murders, inquests, riots, a whiskey-mill every fifteen steps, a Board of Aldermen, a Mayor . . . a Chief of Police, City Marshal, and a large police force, two Boards of Mining Brokers, a dozen breweries, and half a dozen jails and station-houses in full operation, and some talk of building a church."

"Those were the days!—those old ones," he said in 1905. "They were so full to the brim with the wine of life; there have been no others like them."

He once wrote that it was the California gold rush that corrupted

America into a money-oriented nation, but in his own Sierra days he did his unavailing best to get corrupted. For a cub reporter his hopes were astral. He wrote his mother and sister back in Hannibal: ". . . if I had any business tact the office of reporter here would be worth \$30,000 a year—whereas, if I get \$4 or \$5,000 out of it, it will be as much as I expect." It is unlikely that he ever made more than \$160 a month out of it, a very modest salary in an inflated boom-town economy, and when he left Virginia City for California he had to borrow money for the fare.

## The Departure

In May, 1864, Twain became involved with the promotion of the Sanitary Fund, the Civil War equivalent of the Red Cross. Celebrating the raising of "\$30,000 or \$40,000" for this cause, he wrote an editorial hinting that moneys collected at a recent fancy-dress ball promoted for the fund by some prominent ladies of Carson City were to be diverted to some "miscellaneous society" back East. Twain was persuaded by his fellow reporter Dan De Quille (William Wright) not to publish this drunken effort at satire, but the manuscript was found later by the press foreman, who had it set and printed.

The resulting explosion blew Mark Twain out of Virginia City. He had directed many caustic lampoons at his friends and kept their friendship; he had bitterly attacked undertakers, swindlers, prosecuting attorneys, and "the telegraph monopoly" (which had recently superseded the pony express) and still survived. So he was unprepared for the withering blast of righteous wrath from ladies working for a Cause. More afraid of ridicule than of guns, he could not bring himself to apologize; instead he wrote a series of formal letters demanding satisfaction of the owner of the competing newspaper who had insulted him. Before this altercation reached the shooting stage Mark left Nevada for San Francisco and the world beyond the mountains, proving to our gain that he who writes and runs away may live to write another day.