

Negro Low Life

SWEET MAN. By GILMORE MILLEN. New York: The Viking Press. 1930. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WALTER WHITE
Author of "Flight"

NO myth has been clung to more persistently than that only southern white people can truly understand the Negro. Gilmore Millen in "Sweet Man" gives the most convincing proof yet presented that such understanding of Negro psychology is possible. As a Negro I could, and probably would, have read the book and believed the author a Negro had I not learned from the jacket that Mr. Millen is a white man and was born and lived in the South.

Few more exciting novels have been written in these United States within recent years. For Millen possesses the narrative gift to an extraordinary degree. He takes John Henry, whom women could not leave alone, from the time of his birth during a Mississippi flood through various amorous adventures which would have made Don Juan himself envious, through to his death in Los Angeles in the bedroom of a golden-haired, blue-eyed charmer from whom John Henry could escape only by killing her and then himself. The tale has extraordinary fidelity to spirit. It details clearly and objectively the problem of being a "good Negro" farmer in Mississippi in battling the boll-weevil, too little or too much rain, and, greatest evil of all, unscrupulous, thieving, white landlords. It takes one through the glamorous life of the "line" of Memphis's Beale Street on through to John Henry's life as chauffeur and lover in Hollywood. Through it all John Henry moves with calm assurance, seldom having to worry about such mundane necessities as food, clothing, and a place to sleep. Always some woman is eager to supply these and other necessities.

Do not imagine, however, that the story ever sags or becomes simply a listing of sordid love affairs. Were John Henry less a carefree vagabond, the story unquestionably would sink to be a repetitious catalogue of mistresses—black, brown, yellow, and white. That, fortunately, never happens. I know no more poignant passage in contemporary literature than that telling of John Henry's and Ida's struggle—Ida is the one woman he married and whom he really loved and never forgot—to raise a cotton crop which would establish them and give them security. The story of how their white landlord robbed them of their crop, and in doing so swept out from under John Henry all hope and ambition, has no single word of propaganda or preaching in it. The reader suffers with John Henry and is filled with resentment against the unscrupulous parties to the thievery.

It takes courage of a high order to write a story like "Sweet Man" and especially for a southern white man to do it. It treats courageously certain phases of Negro-white life as no novelist has yet had the courage to write. In two episodes Mr. Millen hints at what might happen, and many times has happened, in the south, but he does not quite have the temerity to do more than hint of these episodes, preferring instead to take John Henry away to Hollywood for that development. Such a criticism, however, is a minor one. "Sweet Man" is strong meat, but only the squeamish will fail to enjoy the superbly told tale, and they will at least learn a good deal of what Negro low life can be in a Southern setting.

In the Shadow of Death

A FLOCK OF BIRDS. By KATHLEEN COYLE. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1930. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GLADYS GRAHAM

THE Russians have a saying to the effect that the soul of a man is a dark forest. And it is such a forest, dark indeed, that Kathleen Coyle with fine restraint and yet with merciless directness, exposes in "A Flock of Birds." It takes courage to read the book; it must have taken tremendous courage to write it. For the author follows undeviatingly for forty-eight hours, and the reader must follow after, the thoughts, the fears, the memories, and the faint hopes of a mother whose son has been sentenced to execution. The novel is bounded by the personality of this woman. No single event is presented save as she sees it. The book is a perfect example of the subjective method; there is never the slip of a sentence nor a second into the outside world yet it has the form and resilience so often lacking in the stream-of-consciousness novels. These qualities are gained through the meticulous crafts-

manship of the author and through the strong, un-sentimental fibre of the mother's mind.

One realizes in reading this novel, example by contrast, how exclusively concerned with the drifting, egocentric, and defeatist type of personality most of the novelists of mental flux have been. Kathleen Coyle shows that the lines within consciousness can be as clean cut, in the recording, as the lines outside it. Only this tough-mindedness, this constant balancing of idea against idea, this checking of the impulsive by the rational keeps the novel from being too agonizing to be effective. In this mother, who is not permitted to lay down her life for her son, we find a woman forced in upon herself by the weight of distasteful sympathy and publicity. There is no decent spot where she can be alone with her tragedy. She is beset by talk and plans and emotionalism. Caught between her instinctive desire to do something, anything, and her sure knowledge that all effort will be quite futile, she stands out in her passive dignity in the midst of the surrounding hurried activity. She is no simple character to be read at a glance, but Miss Coyle is adequate to the implications as well as the expressions of this personality she has created.

The background for the story is Dublin in 1919, the period of the Black and Tans, and it is through a political killing that the son has been imprisoned, tried, and condemned to death. A brother and a sister not in sympathy with his views are eager in their attempt to bring pressure to bear to save him. His fiancée refuses to think of his cause as lost and goes about getting names on a list for protest. The sense of the necessity for haste, the surprising little jealousies that can arise at such a time, the constant though unconscious insistence upon personal expression, give a chaotic reality to this novel of life where death shadows every page.

Reality Imprisoned

A TRUE STORY. By STEPHEN HUDSON. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1930. \$3.50.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

MR. STEPHEN HUDSON is a singular phenomenon in literature. In the last ten years he has written five novels, all issued under a jealously guarded pseudonymity. All of them interested the critics, but not the general public. Several of them were interesting experiments in form: "Myrtle" presented the heroine as she was seen by nine persons who loved her; "Tony" was a story told by means of a monologue not delivered by, but addressed to, the principal character, and spoken by his brother. All of them presented (though not in chronological order, and with some overlapping) parts of the life of a single character, Richard Kurt. Now it appears, from the prefatory note to "A True Story," that they were all preliminary studies for the story of Richard Kurt, of which this is the final form. There can hardly be another instance of an author who took up the study of a certain problem at the very beginning of his public career, and worked at nothing else until, ten years later, he brought it to a conclusion.

The finished book is the story of a delicate, sensitive boy in the most sterile of social classes, the rich *rentiers* with no responsibilities and no real position in the country. His father is a German, and Richard spends much of his time on the Continent, so that he has no chance to put down roots of his own. He has no taste for finance, no encouragement toward any other career, no necessity for a career at all; he becomes a mildly ironic looker-on. His qualities conspire with his defects; his fineness becomes weakness. He proposes marriage to a vulgar, mercenary girl, and though he is disillusioned by the way she hurries on the wedding with an impatience which ought to defeat itself, he will not withdraw his word, and marries, open-eyed, a woman who does not love him. The marriage takes place about halfway through the book after which his attempts to escape his destiny are very slight.

The book will suffer, in the eyes of most readers, from the heroes' want of decision; "A True Story" will scarcely have a greater popular success than its predecessors. Indeed, it may perhaps have less, for Mr. Hudson has cut down his material with a real austerity. We are left none of the novelties in form that might possibly have been called "stunts"; there are none of the brutal, gilded dissipations of "Tony"; there are no artificial attractions left to the stripped, simple story. There is no longer all of that, for of the earlier drafts almost all of "Richard, Myrtle

and I," in which Richard found happiness with a sympathetic woman, and the whole of "Myrtle," which showed how lovely the woman was, are cut out of the final presentation of the story. Myrtle appears, but if you want a happy ending you must imagine it; Mr. Hudson will give you none. The same asceticism pervades the entire book; if Mr. Hudson thinks it a pity that the deracinate class he writes of is on the increase since the war, he does not say so; he will have nothing to do with morals or significances. You must content yourself with the story, for what it is worth: the story of a man, not a great man, whose life was not strictly tragic, but continuously unhappy.

To a small group of readers, this book will make a great appeal. It is an austere book, but a rich one; it is full of characters and incidents, and all is green and vital growth, or it would have been pruned away with the rest. Besides its fulness and vitality, it has a moving, even a haunting quality that is hard to account for. Part of the secret is in the style, which has an exquisite lucidity like the finest glass, whose beauty is to be invisible.

But there is more than that. One is reminded of an essay by the late C. E. Montague, in which he said that writing might be either a process of building up, like a sculptor modeling in clay, or of cutting away, like a sculptor boldly carving in the marble; and went on to suggest that certain writers had with huge labor reared themselves a huge quarry of conception, only in order to pare it down to the ultimate imprisoned perfection, the finished work. Mr. Hudson is one of those. By virtue, one must suppose, of innumerable rewritings, published and unpublished, the story, commonplace enough if summarized, has the compelling quality of reality; one is stirred, not because these things are said to have happened so but because these things happened. Whoever is concealed by "Stephen Hudson," whether or not Richard has any more historical reality than Romeo, Mr. Hudson has one great reward, the unquestionable right to call his book "A True Story."



An Epistle

DEAR HENRY—
Life has weathered us since we
Walked in all weathers, being young,
and talked
About it and about persistently,
Not caring for how long nor where we walked.
New England uplands could not tire our feet,
Nor Catskill thunderstorms delay us long;
And if our rhapsodies were incomplete
As the day waned, stars canopied our song.
For it was song, our chatter, though we deemed it
Stiff argument! It was our new blood singing
"Life is a noble pastime!" So we deemed it
To be, and it was so then. We were bringing
(An unguessed sacrifice?) youth's brief renewal
Of hope once more unto an old grim jaded
Mad-melancholy race, named Man. Fresh fuel
Cast on the graying embers ere they faded!
We could not guess how weary our elders were,
How dull their pulses, drab their minds, how dead
Their souls and senses to the infinite whirr
Of heavenly plumes about them! When they
said
"Vanity, vanity—!" we laughed. It was
The sly quaint way of elders to complain.
We heard them as the bees. A somnolent buzz
Drowsed in our ears unnoted, "Life is vain."
And now—that whirr of heavenly plumes? Long
sped?
No; you, old scout, still track it from afar,
Nor miss youth's lilting impulse as you tread
Bravely the dust of this too-earthly star.
Still something blithe and undefeated gleams
Out from your presence, something not afraid
To trust the sanctity of your young dreams
Whose power you rejoiced in—and obeyed.
And though the beating of strong wings has died
Out from my being's rhythm, yet even in me
Because you still go springingly, my pride
Forbids the last defeat of—"Vanity!"

LEE WILSON DODD.

The BOWLING GREEN

Desk Cleaning

THE learned and inquiring Dr. J. Schwartz, proprietor of the Ulysses Book Shop, 187 High Holborn, London, listed the following item in a recent catalogue:—

TENNYSON (Alfred) The original Cape (dark navy blue, with velvet collar, a few moth holes)—it was given by Alfred to his son, with the cloak goes a handmade oak box (for eternal preservation), and a card of Mrs. Alfred Tennyson (wife of Alfred's son, that the cloak is the "originale"). This mantle of immortality can descend on the shoulders of anyone who is willing to pay the price of £7. NOTE.—Curiosity seekers are warned that it cannot be sent on approval. If I don't sell it I'm not worried at all, as it fits me well, and can also be used as a blanket or a wrap to keep the icy blasts of chance off.

I at once sent a London client to have a look at this garment; it seemed to me it would be excellent to have it hanging in the locker at the SATURDAY REVIEW office for the use of the staff during sudden showers, and to cross 45th Street for lunch at the Hotel Unabridged. To my dismay my agent reports that he did not purchase it as it looked "somewhat small" for the editor of the Bowling Green. But it was my hope to have seen it draped on the lean lyrical clavicles and scapulas of the Phœnician.

Which reminds me that another literary association of much personal glamor, Mark Twain's Heidelberg drinking-horn, is still at the Union Square Book Shop, 30 East 14th Street, New York. This curly and cornucopious vessel was refreshed to its original purposes a year or so ago in Hoboken, when its present owner kindly allowed us to dust it out and rededicate it. The Union Square Book Shop is always original and has the merciful gift of humor. In a recent catalogue it lists a series of "Low Spots of American Literature." At a recent auction the Union Square Book Shop listed a letter from the physician (Dr. J. J. Moran) who aided Poe's last hours. This letter dismisses the ancient rumor that Poe died in the odor of alcohol. Dr. Moran wrote in 1878:—

He did not die from delirium Tremens or Mania, had no smell of liquor upon his breath or person when received into the Hospital of which I had the sole charge. . . . The scandalous story should not, and I think has been forever set at rest, by the statement I made in affidavit. . . . He was sent to the H. about 10 o'clock a.m.; was found lying on a bench by the side of a large house. . . . I paid the hackman who brought him, and nurse attended, and paid for his coffin, wife and lady friends made his shroud. . . . In my attention to him he said I was very kind, and asked "Where am I?" I answered "in the hands of friends." He said: "the best friend to me would be the man who would blow my brains out with a pistol." . . . He said "wretch that I am, Sir, when I behold my degradation & ruin! What I have suffered and lost and the misery I have brought upon others; I feel like I could sink through this bed into the lowermost abyss below, forsaken by God & man, an outcast from society" . . . after much more and answers to various questions, he said "Dr. I am dying" to which I replied "I fear it is so, put your trust in your Saviour, there is mercy for you." He then said "write to my mother Mrs. Clemm and say Eddie's no more." I said "look to God for salvation. . . ."

Strange and sometimes ghastly glimpses are revealed to those who have an eye for booksellers' catalogues. One in a happier vein occurs in the always cheering broadside of the Hampshire Book Shop (Northampton, Mass.) where a first edition (1642) of that nuggety old Thomas Fuller's *Holy State and Profane State* (and only \$12) is described as "a week-end book." It is indeed; one of the greatest. If it had chanced to have been made fashionable by Collectors, that incomparable book would be selling at ten or twenty times the price.

Stephen Hunt, bookseller of Southborough (near Tunbridge Wells), Kent, England, has a pleasantly informal way of inviting his clients to drop in. He calls his shop The Sign of the Huntsman, and utters a special mating cry for American wanderers. It pleases us to think that some afternoon this summer some gallant subscriber of this Review may be having "tea served in the bookroom." Mr. Hunt's advice is:—

Take the train, after breakfast, from Charing Cross, or London Bridge, or Cannon Street to Tunbridge Wells. A post card will ensure your being met at the station and

driven to the Sign of the Huntsman. Or if you prefer to be unannounced and independent the buses run every ten minutes from the station to Southborough Common.

Once on the premises, you may browse undisturbed until lunch in a seventeenth century farm house nearby.

Then if your craving for first editions is sufficiently appeased, let us drive you out to Penshurst Place, the ancient castellated residence of the Sidneys, all the treasures of which are open to public inspection several days a week. Or to the site of the old residence of William Penn, or to the Pantiles, where you may "take the waters" of Tunbridge Wells as Johnson and Beau Nash did in their day. (Rumour whispers that it was only the tonic effects of the Tunbridge wells that enabled Johnson to run some of his longest sentences up against a period!)

If you prefer to remain among the books, afternoon tea can be served in the bookroom at whatever hour you please.

American customers who came to see us last season will revisit the Sign of the Huntsman as a matter of course. Whether you are a wholesale trade buyer or a private individual seeking books for personal study, you are heartily welcome.



PRIZE COMPETITION!

Just by chance the other day I came across one of the SATURDAY REVIEW's printed regrets: viz. the formal slip which has to perform the uncomfortable task of declining a contribution. It seemed to me that it was not particularly felicitous in phrase; it is adequate in polite formality but a magazine supposedly specializing in the graces of rhetoric should hope to be unusually nice in so delicate a message.

The printed slip now in existence speaks thus:—

The Editors of *The Saturday Review of Literature* regret that the inclosed manuscript has not proved available for publication. They appreciate its merits and wish to thank the author for submitting it.

I should like to see a better Rejection Slip than that, and will offer an appropriate (but at present indeterminate) Reward for the best brief statement submitted for the purpose. I do not mean anything humorous, for a judicious formula of declination is a wholly serious problem for an Editor. Please address any suggestions in this matter to Miss Loveman, c/o the SATURDAY REVIEW, and do not expect too prompt a decision as I shall of course submit my favorites to the rigors of the rustivating Editor.



Francis F. Davis writes that he has discovered flaws in the formula we printed for determining the date of Easter. He encloses some reckonings (which we have not checked) apparently showing it fallacious; he concludes that the formula was "probably never invented by Gauss."

We will go over the figures Mr. Davis encloses when opportunity serves; in the meantime it seems only honorable to put his caveat on file here.



I have often wondered how the Idle Hour Book Shop, in Trenton, N. J., got along. Mrs. J. L. Bodine of that city kindly sent me a clipping of its opening advertisement, in 1927, which had a spirit of unusual liveliness. This was its ejaculation in the *Trenton Times*—

From the Panchatantra to Confucius; from Homer to Darwin to Jesus & H. L. Mencken to Elmer Gantry—we know our onions!

No whimpering sales-clerks to push out overstock. . . . The Idle Hour Bookshop knows all the books it sells and rents out.

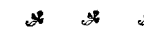
Do you want satire; romance; fun; religion; or hokum?—Ask us; and in a trice we'll lead you to their respective fountain-heads, all-a-spurt at the Idle Hour Bookshop.

We sit up nights conning books by the bushel. . . . We breathe books and sweat them. . . . Even our nightmares, what time we do sleep, are books, books, books!

Join up at the
IDLE HOUR BOOK SHOP
19 S. Warren Street
Just Below State—Open Every Evening



We do not often remark upon books not yet published, but there are two quite singular novels on the way which will cause large surprises. One is *I Am Jonathan Scrivener* by Claude Houghton; the other *Seed on the Wind* by Rex Stout. The latter particularly is likely to cause some holding up of hands.



At the top of the 34th Street escalator on the Long Island side of the Pennsylvania Station is a large box, in facsimile of a gigantic book, for the deposit of gifts to the Merchant Marine Library Association. The rhyme painted on the box is not unworthy of commemoration for its pleasing naïveté:—

The Men of the Sea crave books to read
To while the weary hours away.
Will you Help to Fill this Crying Need
And leave a "Book" as you Pass Today?

If the M. M. L. A. cares to give us a list of some of the books dropped into that box we'd be much interested.

Speaking of "books" in quotation-marks, as above, there are match-books. There was a curious pang, while lighting a pipe, to notice that the folder of matches was printed in solemn black and gold and bore the legend Stephen Merritt Burial and Cremation Co., and a rather depressing photo of Rev. Stephen Merritt with the subscript SAFETY FIRST.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

The Green Mountain Boy

ETHAN ALLEN. By JOHN PELL. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1930. \$5.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MACDONALD

MR. PELL has written what is doubtless the best life of Ethan Allen that we have, and in so doing has made a contribution of importance to the history of Vermont and the American Revolution. Of Allen himself the picture is colorful, as was his career. Born in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 1738, of English stock, Allen saw a little fighting against French and Indians in 1757, then turned to mining ventures in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and after the peace of 1763 went to what was later Vermont, where he jumped quickly into the thick of the controversy between the settlers and New Hampshire and New York over jurisdiction of the region, and after organizing and directing the exploits of the Green Mountain Boys became formally their commander. Mixed with the rough and ready handling, often picturesque, of the New York intruders went a good deal of activity in land speculation in which his brother, Ira, also joined.

The capture of the British fort at Ticonderoga, shortly after the battles of Lexington and Concord, is, of course, the best known and most theatrical of Allen's exploits. Mr. Pell is disposed to accept as authentic the famous "In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress" with which Allen is said to have demanded the surrender of the fort, on the ground that "a man's statement of his own words should be accepted unless there is conclusive evidence to the contrary or unless the man is an habitual liar." Allen was not a liar, and there is at least no evidence that disproves his form of words. He was less lucky a year or two later when, in a wild foray against Montreal, he was forced to surrender, was sent a prisoner to England and thence back to America, and remained a captive on Long Island until early in 1778, when he was exchanged. As soon as he was free he paid a visit to Washington at Valley Forge, then returned to Vermont.

From this point Allen's career was both stormy and devious. The refusal of Congress to recognize Vermont as a State in the face of the opposition of New York and New Hampshire led to the formation in Vermont of an independent government, between which and New York, and to a lesser extent with Congress, there was persistent hostility until 1790, when statehood was finally attained. Allen held no civil office under the interim government, but he headed the militia and took a hand in such politics as came his way. Before long, however, he became entangled in the British intrigue which aimed to detach Vermont from the Union. The affair was obscure, and even Mr. Pell's laborious researches do not make it clear whether Allen and his handful of associates really intended to accept the British overtures, or whether they played with the suggestion as a means of forcing the hand of Congress and securing the admission of Vermont as a State. There is no question that Allen was rather widely regarded at the time as a Tory at heart, and the outlook was decidedly dangerous when the preliminary peace of 1781 abruptly ended the episode. One more opportunity for theatrical display came in 1786, when he visited the Wyoming Region of Pennsylvania where an independent movement was being agitated. In Vermont he was land poor, and times had changed, but he was still a popular hero when, in 1789, he suddenly died, alone with a Negro servant, while returning on the ice from South Hero to the mainland with an ox-load of hay. Six platoons of soldiers fired volleys over his grave, and his friends recalled that he had once told them that "he expected to live again in the form of a large white horse."

Mr. Pell has ransacked the sources, and lumped his authorities in an appendix which serves well enough for verification if one will take the trouble to use it. A lively style, reinforced by occasional appeals to the imagination, makes the book very easy reading.