

Rude Folk in a Mountain World

THE HILLS STEP LIGHTLY. By Alberta Pierson Hannum. New York: William Morrow & Company. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMAYER

THESE are certain books which we read with pleasure but with no great excitement, and there are others which we read with excitement but with dubious pleasure. Yet many of those which quickened momentary pulses have died in the memory, while a few of the less precipitate ones have so mellowed in memory that they have taken on a quiet but determined life of their own. Mrs. Hannum's first novel, "Thursday April," is one of those whose vitality seems greater today than when it was printed two years ago. Its curious combination of ordinariness and fantasy, of ease and intensity, is emphasized by her new story.

In some ways "The Hills Step Lightly" recalls one of the finest first novels ever printed in America, Elizabeth Madox Roberts's "The Time of Man." If Mrs. Hannum's work is less suggestive and symbolic than Miss Roberts's, it is more direct; though it is neither as rich nor as dramatic, it has something of the same conviction. It, too, moves in a world of poor mountain-folk whose labors are as drab as their locations are rich, a world of gnarled realities set to rude poetry.

The story could not be simpler. It centers about Deborah Deane and never leaves the acres in western North Carolina which she tends. At the beginning of the tale she is a girl of ten; in the last chapter she is an old woman of seventy-five. Two men govern her life: the man for whom she bears a child at the request of his childless wife and whom she subsequently marries, an upright, hard-working, and happy-hearted farmer; and an unquiet fiddler and shoemaker who, puckishly, walks in and out of her life, and whom she buries in the end. The sixty-five years covered in the story might have been spread upon a panoramic canvas; instead, Mrs. Hannum has chosen to paint her heroine in a series of selective panels. Without stressing the native backgrounds she has brought out local color with extraordinary skill and subtlety. The hunting episodes, the tall tales, the legends of witchcraft, are so intricately woven that it is hard to separate the central story from its clustering episodes. The reader moves among these people with immediate intimacy. He is at home, incongruously enough, in the primitive interiors; every stick of farmhouse furniture has a mean-

Deborah, for example, justifies the coming of love to her lover.

"Thar's nothin' wrong about hit, Jil-son. We couldn't he'p hit, and hit's beautiful."

Jilson smiled ruefully. "Mebbe we couldn't he'p hits comin' to us, Deborah, but we don't need to set hit a chair."

This is a book about which too little may be written or too much may be said. It is not a sentimental nor a novel story. But it is a warm and moving one.

In the Byrne Vein

THE LAUGHING JOURNEY. By Thomas Lennon. New York: The John Day Company. 1934. \$2.

Reviewed by ROBERT B. MACDOUGALL

THE rhythms and cadences of Anglo-Irish prose are unmistakable. Whether they have been forced in a literary hothouse is beside the point. Donn Byrne had them, and now Thomas Lennon puts them into his first novel, a gay, tragic fantasy of Ireland and the Irish. Readers who are gratified and enlivened by the Celtic temperament as represented in the Byrne tradition will find this story of Shane Erskine's rebellion a thing of joy. Others may not like it so well, feeling that this tradition is hardly nearer the truth than was the old-style "begorra" stage Irishman. But truth or no, this journey of laughter is seductive; it has sentiment, warmth, bravery. It will have no traffic with the small or the mean, and its philosophy can take a firing squad in its stride.

Shane Erskine's rebellion, which came to nothing though it caused the death of many well intentioned Irishmen, might have taken place in almost any decade of the late nineteenth century. The question of actuality is unimportant. At any rate, Shane Erskine's father was Shane Conor, a fireman in San Francisco, who had never seen the lad until the rebellion had failed and the son was near the end of his days. The girl, Rosaleen Fair, had met Shane Erskine twice, however, before she sailed for the United States, and neither one of them had ever forgotten the other. She, too, returned to Dublin only when the mischief was almost completed and Shane Erskine was running from the English soldiers. But Shane Conor, and Rosaleen Fair, and the Lord Abbot, head of the monastery where Shane Erskine had once gained sanctuary, were with him at the end, as was fitting. The conclusion of the story is genuine tragedy.

It must not be thought that "The Laughing Journey" is a sad or doleful book. It

The Two Catherines

(Continued from first page)

dalized her mother and her matriarchal grandmother by insisting on going to her father's office to help him in the business, and on his deathbed he called her his son and told her to take his place. So Catherine, in the third quarter of the last century, when marriage was the only career for a nice girl, took hold of Hanson's tottering cigar business. Thereafter, for twenty years, Hanson's was one-half—and a perfectly distinct half—of her life. The other half was given, in the early years, to a fascinating young artist husband, Richard Temple, for sake of whose

beaux yeux Catherine had declined a faithful adorer and most desirable match. It was this clean-cut division of her life into halves—by day the keen, alert woman of business, by night the ardent wife of a passionate lover—that made tragedy for Catherine, and that forms the main theme and the essential merit of Miss Leslie's story. The very qualities that made Catherine successful in business—her possessiveness, her instinct to bend people to her will, her reservation of one-half of herself—made her unsuccessful first as wife and later as mother. Sensual Maria, for whom Richard left Catherine, told her many years later: "He wanted you as wife, and you made yourself his mistress. He could have had them two-a-penny. Richard was half-woman. And you—half-man, for all the little lady that you were!"

This almost Freudian motif Miss Leslie handles with consistent skill and delicacy. It is at once the foundation on which her principal character is built and the thread that binds the diverse persons and incidents of her story into a unity. As a result, through all its long course the book holds together and commands interest. In addition, one must admire the author's skilful characterization, especially of the women of her story (the men are not always so distinct), and the careful workmanship with which she has built her successive scenes and reproduced the atmosphere of the period.

I believe this is only the second book of Miss Leslie's to be published in America, the first having appeared some years ago. It is an auspicious introduction, a distinctive achievement in the over-crowded field of the family novel.

Robust Romance

CAPTAIN NICHOLAS. By Hugh Walpole. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1934. \$2.50.

MR. WALPOLE is exercised about the morals of the younger generation, and still more about the cynical attitude it takes towards its own failings and those of the world in general. So he has written a romantic novel to show that right is still right and wrong is still wrong, that God's in His heaven and all's right with the world, that virtue will still triumph, if it is given half a chance, in spite of all that the cynics may say.

As the vehicle with which to convey this robust optimism, Mr. Walpole selects a middle-class English family in which a miscellaneous assortment of relatives—husband, wife, and mother-in-law, uncle and aunt and three children—like little birds in their nest agree. The ménage is more than Victorian; it is patriarchal. Into this pleasant Utopia stalks the sinister figure of the wicked uncle, Captain Nicholas, holding by the hand his female offspring, a pathetic but most sophisticated little girl called Lizzie, and announcing that he has come to stay.

What Captain Nicholas does to that happy family is limited only by Mr. Walpole's imagination, which is fertile. For the gallant captain is a rogue, if ever there was one, the charmingly genial and handsome black sheep of the family well and favorably known to generations of novel readers. It is not only that Captain Nicholas is a first-class crook, a thief, and a card-sharp; he is also a malignant, Mephistophelian person who hates to see his family so smug and happy and cannot rest content till he has set them all by the ears. He worms an innocent but embar-

assing secret out of the maiden aunt; he gets the daughter to confide in him her love affair with a married poet; he introduces the son to wild women. Worst of all, he gets hold of a most compromising letter written by staid, stuffy old Charles, the husband and father, and sees that it gets to the eyes of his wife, poor, old-fashioned, trusting, rather incoherent Fanny. Nevertheless, as has been hinted,

virtue triumphs in the end, and the reader will be mildly entertained in discovering how that desirable consummation is brought about.

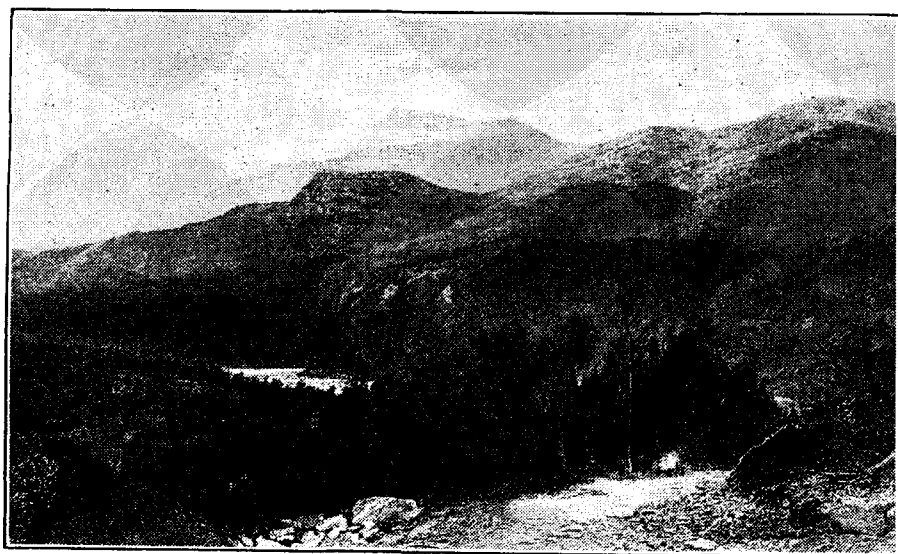
An Amazing Puppet

BIG STEEL. By Leslie Swabacker. New York: The Macaulay Co. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALVAH C. BESSIE

MR. SWABACKER'S story of the rise of one of the great industrial compounds of the garbled history, and provides excellent entertainment. Much technical information here, for those seeking it, on the various processes of steel manufacture, many tantalizing glimpses into the private lives of half-a-dozen semi-fictional personages of the past century. "Big Steel" himself, magnate who rises from bug-infested boarding-houses to a mansion on Riverside Drive that was "a perfect reproduction of a famous French chateau," has a half dozen more or less recognizable ancestors, a handful of genuinely human traits, and a surplussage of the superman. Beginning life as butcher boy and steel puddler, he rose through the sheer force of his superhuman energy and fanatical devotion to steel, to a position of power that rivalled only that of the redoubtable finance capitalist, "G. Z. Barton," whose loans to the Allied Powers brought America into the World War. He is an amusing marionette, and what he has lost in humanity, in his passage through the considerably flawed crucible of Mr. Swabacker's fictional talents, he has made up in sensational activity.

A physical giant, his appetites were commensurate with his size, and they nearly brought him to ruin. Though he started life as a workman, he lost sympathy with his fellows when fate, in the form of a strike, left him captive in the hot sun, with bullets whizzing on all sides. He never forgave labor this insult, and thereafter he was as ruthless as "Henry Schlesinger," who founded the steel industry in America; but, Mr. Swabacker would have us believe, his ruthlessness was not compounded of the lusts for power and wealth, but of the practically religious emotions involved in his passion for steel as an abstraction, as a deity. Steel must be manufactured, no matter how many slaves perished in the process. The machinations of the magnate are traced in simplified detail that makes them understandable, if not quite human; but neither "Big Steel"—Daniel Kelly Caine—nor his associates, wife and daughter, his mistresses, ever come to life.



THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

From a painting by Homer Martin

ing for him; every casual sight and sound is characterized without being theatricalized. Everything is authentic, even the lesser smells of herbs dangling from wooden pegs in the rafters, "dried catnip and honset, pennyroyal and masterroot, smoke that crept up the back wall of the hearth and escaped out into the room from the freshly poked supper fire."

The story itself is so calmly told that its quality is likely to be overlooked. The prose is poetic throughout without straining for poeticisms; a quaint humor often slips into the midst of moments of tension.

is far from that. All the way through, there is humor, some of it broad and quick, some of it—like the two discussions between Shane Erskine and the Lord Abbot, or the expedition along the road to Belfast—in sustained passages where the comic spirit deepens and becomes memorable.

The story is not a masterpiece; no critical microscope is needed to find flaws. But in Mr. Lennon's writing there is so much zest and buoyancy, so much mad courage and sober wisdom, that we have only affection and admiration for what he has done.