

Valor and Blind Courage

VEIN OF IRON. By Ellen Glasgow. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1935.

Reviewed by JAMES BOYD

AMONG a few people who were talking about books not long ago the question was raised why the American writer lacks, as we say of horses, staying power. Beginning with Mark Twain and coming down to a number of current names which the reader is at liberty to supply for himself, we said that a writer's career in this country consisted more often than not of a brilliant piece or two of early work and then diminuendo or eclipse. Many answers were given—it does not require a large literary gathering to supply many answers to any question—but one of the most interesting was that the American writer has no strongly held, consistent attitude toward life. At the beginning he or she writes out of fresh childhood memories and out of a childlike blind gusto for the world which carries the possessor triumphantly beyond the age where a man, if he is ever to do it, must begin to find himself, then ebbs and leaves him stranded and defenceless. As an exception, an example of the opposite, the name of Ellen Glasgow was brought in. Certainly she is one of the few well known American writers of today who has within her the principle of growth. Her earliest books, I imagine, were pretty modest ventures. I have not read them. But in her list of eighteen works of prose she has moved steadily forward to a position all the more deserved because it is hard-won. And I think that the basis of this movement lies in her point of view. It is not strikingly original, in fact its strength lies in its long ancestry, but it is held tenaciously, with wit, with tenderness, with shrewdness, and, above all, with passion. By virtue of it, all she does has momentum and direction. Each time she writes a book she puts her gradually increasing skill to the service of a long-held single aim.

This skill of hers has been, I suppose, not easily acquired. It would be possible to find more facile, greater talents—one could say that of Dreiser, too, for instance. But as in him, and in some ways even more strikingly, one can see in her the power of belief, of a deep, unwavering interest in life's significance, to gain effects almost in defiance of the medium.

The good title of her new book, "Vein of Iron," strikes the key, a key on which it ends with untheatrical but convincing power. We start with a little girl, Ada, in a village of western Virginia, and we see, living together in narrow circumstances, her father, a minister deprived of his charge because of his philosophic writings and his search for truth; her mother,

a fragile and a little flighty but brave and happy woman, who had given up being a belle of the tidewater for love; the patient, ever-helpful maiden aunt, and the gaunt, able grandmother, literal-minded and fearless daughter of pioneers. Here, at the start, Miss Glasgow sets herself technical difficulties and surmounts them. In each of six successive chapters she shifts her viewpoint and goes inside a different character. Such shifts almost inevitably make the reader conscious of the story-teller behind the scenes, and when they come at the outset of a novel they necessarily deter its initial momentum. But each chapter has a density of texture which enables it to stand alone, and the sixth, the portrait of the mother, is a triumph and a delight and a model of what portraiture in writing should be.

The story, once launched, is a simple one. There is the son of a Calvinistic widow, a promising rebellious boy, crowned with romance which as he grows up is warped to the bitterness which springs from lack of hardihood. The thread of the narrative tells how he is trapped and stolen away from Ada by the spoiled, mean local belle, and how through the years which move, now fast now slowly, he and Ada find each other and themselves again. No summary could be more inadequate; this tale of these two is merely the lightest sort of framework for the adventures, sometimes in fact and always of the spirit, of a striking group of characters, chiefly the Fincastles, Ada's family.

The method of presentation is characteristic. Miss Glasgow is a woman, a wise and strong one, and part of her strength has always been that she has no desire to write like anything else. We have then a woman's sense of values, the interest in the minutiae of life, the comprehension and development of detail in apparent obliviousness of the relative importance of things. Miss Glasgow sometimes treats big moments with an almost scandalous casualness and turns to accumulate little moments with the unerring and happy instinct of a bee. This reversal of emphasis is accentuated perhaps by the fact that the ability to write live dialogue is the most uncertain of her gifts. At first glance this would seem to be a serious defect. This is the age of live dialogue, and by the term we do not mean dialogue which reproduces speech as it is, but something much more skilful, dialogue which produces the illusion that it is being spoken. In the hands of Hemingway the effect gained by extreme skill in selection, in timing, in hidden music, is very striking. With him old methods have been reversed: characters do not create dialogue, dialogue creates the characters. In this field technique can go no further. He is but one, if the chief, of many writers who have taught us to look for tension, speed, lightness, and a sense of immediate actuality in the novel's spoken word. It is therefore interesting to see how profoundly our emotions can be stirred, our attention held, by a novel which does not avail itself of this instrument and which, on top of that, most resolutely declines to capitalize the opportunities for drama.

The secret lies, I think, in the author's

(Continued on next page)



JACKET DESIGN FOR "VEIN OF IRON"

theme and in her point of view. The vein of iron which runs through her characters is courage. Blind courage in some cases and in some misguided, sometimes obtuse to the point of truthlessness, sometimes sweet, natural, oblivious of itself; or, again, darkly groping with strength and subtlety toward the insoluble enigma of this world. In a narrative sustained and given color by wit, by insight, tenderness, and the sense of beauty, we see this courage under its varying forms in contact with life's problems, great and small. And such is the nature of courage and so well is this nature understood and treated that, whether great or small, the problems that confront it assume equivalent significance. Just as in "Robinson Crusoe" each detail, however trivial, holds equal interest as being part of the struggle to survive, so here the petty and the humorous take their full place beside the tragic as throwing light upon the central quality in operation.

Moreover, this spectacle, absorbing enough in itself, is presented by a talent that has the gift, by apparently simple means, of endowing solitude, the passive moment with movement, beauty, even drama. Here, for instance, is Mary Evelyn, Ada's mother, and half an invalid. Abigail is their colored servant, and Horace their old hound.

Turning her head on the back of the chair, she looked out into the night where the shutter flapped at the side window and the wind had risen in gusts. Outside in the troubled darkness she heard the breaking of boughs, the rustle of dead leaves on the ground, the small tongues of wind lapping the walls under the ivy. Inside (she touched Horace with the tip of her toe, for he had growled in his sleep) there was the glowing centre of life. She had much to be thankful for. Nobody was ill; nobody was hungry; nobody she loved was out in the cold. Aunt Abigail had a good fire, and Horace (she glanced down at his black and tan head) was warm on the hearth.

But I must keep Ada happy, she thought the next minute, I must keep her as happy as I have been. For it was true, looked at from any angle, she had been happy. Life had been eager, piercing in flashes of ecstasy, tragic at times beyond belief, but never drab, never tedious; never, not even at its worst, when John was standing his trial, had it been ugly.

This passage strikes the key of the book and of the way in which it is written. At the end of the novel, as here, courage through all defeats works out some indestructible fragment of triumph. As you close the final page of "Vein of Iron," whether you agree with all or any of its patterns, with all or any of its methods, you will recognize that you have had the experience of reading a work of wisdom and integrity, written with a single purpose by a woman with a single heart.

Readers of The Saturday Review will recall the pen portrait of Mr. Boyd printed in the issue of June 29 of this year, and the review of his recent "Roll River."

The Daughter of Debate

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTLAND AND THE ISLES. By Stefan Zweig. New York: The Viking Press. 1935. \$3.50.

Reviewed by J. E. NEALE

"SURELY of all the women who have made their mark in the world," writes Mr. Zweig in the Foreword to his biography of Mary Queen of Scots, "no other has been the theme of so many dramas, novels, biographies, and discussions." Who will doubt it? In death even more than in life Mary Queen of Scots has enthralled and disturbed the imagination of men. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries her tragic story was enacted on the stage in the Jesuit and monastic schools of Germany and Belgium, and in the Tyrol became the theme of an interesting folk-drama. As for the printing press, the standard but incomplete bibliography of works relating to her which were published in what we may call the prehistoric period, before 1700, contains over 280 items; and probably no one knows or would dare to guess how many have been published since.

It was in the middle of the eighteenth century that the pioneer of critical studies of the Casket Letters appeared, and in the light of the vast literature to which it directly or indirectly gave rise, the simple faith of its author is amusing. "I soon perceived," he wrote, "that the chief controversy—namely, whether Mary was guilty of the murder of her husband, Darnley, at Kirk o' Field—was a matter that might be easily settled with certainty." Even today, individuals may think they have reached certainty, but we are far from unanimity.

The controversy has attracted writers of many vocations. In recent years we have had a Major-General arguing that Kirk o' Field was a plot of Darnley's to blow up Mary: Darnley—we might say—was hoist with his own petard. We have also had a writing expert prove that a palpable copy of one of the Casket documents, which in his innocence he mistook for an original document, is a forgery. For the most part these writers have been

amateurs and their books might appropriately bear the legend, *Aut viam inveniam, aut faciam*.

Mr. Zweig, Mary's latest biographer, is not a historian but, like Lytton Strachey, a littérateur practising biography as a branch of letters. The distinction is not derogatory nor meant to be. It undoubtedly exists and with Mr. Zweig's "Mary Queen of Scots" as with Strachey's

"Elizabeth and Essex" is the clue to the strength and weakness of the book. The littérateur borrows from the craft and exercises some of the liberty of the novelist. He is interested in character and psychology and indulges in imaginative reconstruction more freely than the historian who is forever conscious of unmalleable facts and haunted by the words, "We do not know." Now character and psychology are legitimate evidence in human story, and it may be that the littérateur, who is



MARY OF SCOTLAND

more skilled in handling this evidence, will arrive at sounder conclusions than the historian; provided always that he does not run foul of documentary evidence, rightly interpreted. There are elements in "Elizabeth and Essex" which are excellent examples of Strachey's superiority, but it is equally true that where his lack of skill as a critical historian led him, for example, to rely on a thoroughly unsound modern study of Elizabeth's health, he wrote fiction not biography.

Much the same judgment may be passed on Mr. Zweig's book. Quite rightly he refuses to sit on the fence over the controversial question of the authenticity of the Casket Letters and Mary's complicity in the murder of Darnley. Appropriate perhaps in history, it would be ruinous in biography: the fence is an impossible place for anyone with an acute appreciation of character. In Mr. Zweig's eyes, Mary's tragedy was one of passion and he calls in his sense of character and his appraisal of the psychology revealed in the Casket Letters to cut the Gordian knot of controversy. The method is sound, and if one believes—as I personally believe, it being my business to wander in this baffling maze—that the conclusions are not incompatible with the documentary evi-