

In the Black Belt

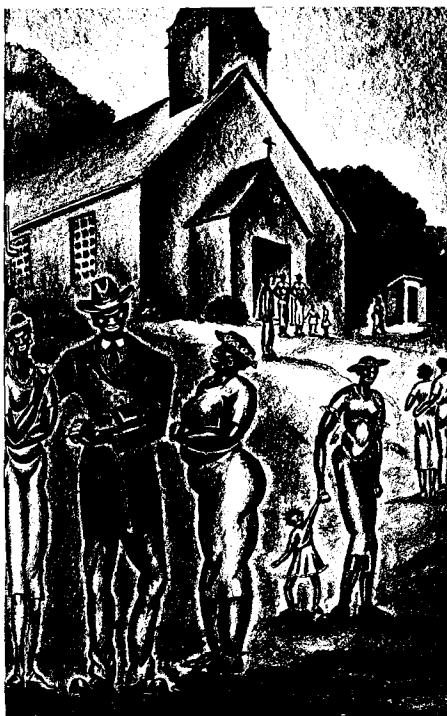
GOD SHAKES CREATION. By David Cohn. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1935. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT RYLEE

THE region of the State of Mississippi known as the Delta is a long plain lying between the hills and the Mississippi River which, in Mr. Cohn's words, "begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg." Mr. Cohn's easy-moving study of that region is amazing for two things: complete sanity and absolute authenticity. No one familiar with the Delta could doubt the facts he presents any more than he could doubt the existence of the hoary cypresses and the swamps they grow in. And when he deals with the white-black problem, the Delta's Cross, Mr. Cohn is a fervent and successful seeker after intelligent and fair pictures. The Delta has not often been so dealt with.

Most of "God Shakes Creation" is devoted to the Negroes themselves, their crimes, loves, and religious practices. The white people are treated chiefly in connection with their attitude toward and relationships with the Negroes. Mr. Cohn has none of the common lust to be sensational, though his many illustrative anecdotes often achieve bright color. He makes no attempt to offer a solution for the Negro problem, but rather gives us the present facts about the some 300,000 Negroes in this area, outnumbering the whites three to one.

And the facts are true and depressing. The Delta Negro has no great in-



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telligence. This seems to be inherent. The very white people who try hardest to help him feel that the Negro himself places the greatest obstacles in their way. The Negro regards work as the evil necessity of life; he works as little as possible, saves nothing for the future, indulges his sex instincts in complete freedom, believes in magic and visits hoodoo doctors. Yet he has a frequently shrewd sense of humor and is full of melodious song. He is often a lovable character.

The book can be criticized only for being incomplete. A more exhaustive historical and sociological study is sorely needed. For example, along with malaria, yellow fever, and the Mississippi River, one would be interested to know something of the enervating effects of heat and political corruption, both of a savage order, on the Delta people. The present economic picture is left untouched and it is all-important to the Delta. It is highly probable that the large plantation is forever doomed. And the mechanical cotton picker, now generally accepted as a fact, if released, would bring more change across the face of Mississippi than Grant's army.

But these are minor quarrels. Mr. Cohn has broken hard ground. Mississippi will find his material as familiar as the black earth and cotton rows. But for those outsiders who want facts to complement the fictions of the past few years, this book, though incomplete, is a mighty good start.

Robert Rylee, author of a recent *Book-of-the-Month Club* selection, "Deep Dark River," comes of a family long resident in Tennessee and Mississippi. His own novel laid its scene in the latter state and took a Negro for hero.



ALONG THE RIVER

Drawings on this page by Lucian Dent from "God Shakes Creation."

Derring-Do in Old Provence

GOLD OF TOULOUSE. By John Clayton. New York: Kendall & Sharp. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

STRANGELY enough this novel turns out to be the first volume of a romantic trilogy of which "Dew in April," published some time ago, was the second. It is unusual for a trilogy to appear in this sequence.

I found "Dew in April" vivid and stirring, and I find much the same qualities in the present book. But the life in the convent in "Dew in April" seemed to me somewhat more original and difficult material than, for instance, the sadism of Raymond VI of Toulouse and all the horrors of dungeon and torture chamber early in the present volume. Yet this is the book in which one should first become acquainted with the gargantuan bulk of Fraire Hilarius (who appears also in "Dew in April"). Mr. Clayton differentiates his characters in a clear-cut manner. One of them, with as much personality as any, is, in fact, a horse—the black stallion, Baltazar, charger of Señor Don Marcos de Nizana y Léon, the hero of the tale. La Blanca Rosa, lost Mountain Moth, the only child for whom her Northern father is still quartering the seas in lonely quest, is certainly all that the heroine of a romantic historical novel should be! The wicked Count of Toulouse, who is not to be confused with Raymund of the First Crusade (as this story is laid two centuries later); the great tun of a friar; the dark Spanish hero; these are some of the figures of the tale, set against a background of thirteenth-century Provence and involved in Simon de Montfort's bloody crusade against the Albigensian heretics, one of Mother Church's more ferocious forays which laid waste a gay and smiling land. You can easily perceive, therefore, that there is plenty of action in the book. Those who in their youth followed with bated breath Gerard and Denis through the pages of "The Cloister and the Hearth," or exulted in Stanley J. Weyman's "Under the Red Robe" and "The House of the Wolf," will find the same sort of excitement here. The story gallops along with gusto—and we can see Hollywood gobbling it up. But, for all that, it is written often with real beauty, and the research behind it appears to be sound. Mr. Clayton possesses no mean dramatic—not to say melodramatic—gift and creates the right atmosphere for a tale of derring-do! It may be old formula, but Mr. Clayton is a born story-teller and, inasmuch as he has obviously thoroughly enjoyed writing this romance, one enjoys reading it. The third volume of the trilogy, to be published next Spring, will be called "The Anger of the North."

The BOWLING GREEN by Christopher Morley

Hunting Mark's Remainders

"I WAS having a good enough time seeing them hunt for my remainders" said Huck Finn on Jackson's Island, while the ferryboat went cruising to and fro—filled with people and firing cannon, "trying to make my carcass come to the top."

Very likely Mark himself would recall that scene if he could hear all the literary critics, this month of his centennial, booming away. The carcass won't come up by solemn gunfire as to whether Mark was really a tragic frustrated figure; whether he was Huck himself, the bad boy locked in and disciplined and forbidden to curse or smoke; whether he was a pessimist, or a clown, or a raging radical seduced by shekels. Huck himself lies behind the log, "powerful lazy and comfortable." Mark Twain was, in the deepest meaning of the word, a humorist; and the one quality that so few of his commentators (I except the admirable Leacock) have brought to bear upon his work is a sense of humor. Dreadful as it seems to have to say it (to a generation confident of its own ultimacy) William Dean Howells—writing *My Mark Twain* in the immediate sorrow of his friend's death—dealt with Mark in more deeply observant ken than most critics since. "A humorist," said Howells as long ago as 1901, "in whom the sense of the droll is never parted from the sense of the dreadful."

Every detonation of the boatload of critics is an honest charge, well rammed and loudly exploded; but so far as I can see these blasts of blank do not bring up the carcass. For Mark, like every great artist, was the creature of a thousand moods; every man in his humor. He was the loaf of bread plugged with quicksilver (these were the humble witchcraft of the body-seekers). Of the great creators it is usually best to know nothing but their work. To *Huckleberry Finn* one can pay the highest tribute one ever pays to any book: I wish to gosh I'd never read it so I could have it all before me. To be a boy again reading it that unforgettable first time—and very likely missing many of its subtlest touches. And then I am reminded of an extraordinary statement in Van Wyck Brooks's truly brilliant *Ordeal of Mark Twain*, a book which set the fashion in Mark Twain criticism for some 15 years; a book of flashing insight and of noble spirit, but which did as much harm as only a brilliant book can do. "Who does not see in the extraordinary number of books about boys and boyhood written

by American authors" (said Mr. Brooks) "the surest sign of arrested moral development." That is what I mean by approaching the work of a humorist without a sense of humor. And the famous comic passage about the "solitary oesophagus," not a very good joke I grant, Mr. Brooks bitterly instanced to prove that the tendency of Mark's humor was "to degrade beauty." Mr. Lewis Mumford, more aggrieved still, brooded over a fatuous message that Mark wrote for Walt Whitman's 70th birthday (certainly a silly letter, probably hounded out of him by some committee) and found it evi-



HUCKLEBERRY FINN

From the first edition

dence of Mark's "fundamental barbarism."

The damned human race, as Mark called us, never shows its invincible stupidity more plainly than in its extraordinary querulity about its great benefactors—instead of simply enjoying their gifts. Obviously Mark Twain's humor was freakish and often crude; his speeches, as they exist in print, the merest occasional guff; his philosophic and religious notions, which he innocently supposed so rending, are childish banal; the long-announced notebooks and secret writings do not seem to contain any very startling revelations. They are not only posthumous but posthumorous. He was "spoiled by civilization," says one biographer; he was "frustrated by life" say others. But what the deuce? Being spoiled and frustrated, and yet getting in a few good licks here and there, is the first premise of existence. Pure spirit is spoiled and frustrated by the mere fact of having to be incarnated

at all. Chesterton once wrote a delicious piece about those frantic liberators who are always wanting to release something or other from the very condition of its being. If you free a tiger from the humiliation of wearing stripes, said G. K. C., it is no longer a tiger; if you beg a triangle to burst from the bondage of living in three sides it perishes lamentably as a triangle. Civilization may have currycombed Mark a bit, but also it gave him the impetus to be something more than an Artemus Ward. It spoiled Bret Harte too, but Harte wrote some pretty grand tales. My sympathy is all with those wise and peaceable folks who all these years have been reading and enjoying *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn* (the other books are fast fading out) quite unaware that they are supposed to be Freudian testimony. Huck and Nigger Jim go drifting down Endless River, and behind all the learned argument I hear their voices. "It warn't often that we laughed—only a little kind of a low chuckle." And I occasionally recall what everyone else seems to have forgotten, the Author's Notice:—

"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot."

It has been encouraging to observe the general sanity, one might say the general decency, of the homage brought out by this hundredth birthday. As in the case of Anatole France (the two, so different, show interesting parallels) the depression is over. Young doctrinaires will always, every so often, crowd aboard ferryboats to shoot cannon. It does no lasting damage, often much good. The air has been cleared of some hypocrisies and false idolatries; now, until some new theory of literary ontology becomes modish, they will let him alone to be the multiple entertainment which was his destiny. There was good reason why Mark Twain shot up to apotheosis and then, in the recent era of horsewind and general deflatus, had to suffer such horrid expounding. He fitted perfectly into a Great American Legend (we've seen it lately in Will Rogers). That is, that a man risen from rough and tumble pioneer circumstances can make merry at Kings and Emperors, outwit philosophers and scholars, hobnob with financiers and generals, take apart foreign languages and cultures and show how funny they are, know more about Shakespeare than people who have spent their lives studying him, and more about religion than the Archbishop of Canterbury. To the American mass, the largest articulate mythopoeic group, this doctrine