

Gallic Don Juan

PITY FOR WOMEN. By Henry de Montherlant. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1938. \$2.75.

Reviewed by THEODORE PURDY, JR.

PAUL MORAND, who should know, once called the French *professionnels de l'amour*, implying thereby that the rest of Europe and America could only claim amateur status in the oldest of sports. Every so often a book such as this highly provocative novel comes along to demonstrate that there is much truth in this observation.

M. de Montherlant's hero is a literary man who does not believe in sentimental love. He is a devil of a fellow, a sort of latter-day Don Juan with sadistic improvements. His feminine admirers are numerous, and bore him to death most of the time. There is a little peasant girl who stumbles on one of his books, writes him an adoring letter in which her mysticism confounds admiration for the writer with love of God. He answers her, and she goes mad. A longer correspondence unites him with an unprepossessing but intelligent young woman from the provinces. After an interview or two she falls in love with the writer, to his disgust, and comes to bang on his Paris door at inopportune moments. Meanwhile (O miracle!) he has discovered a completely natural person, beautiful and lacking in feminine malice, —in fact just his cup of tea, as he so succinctly puts it. The various stages in this third relationship are painstakingly exposed to the reader, with due attention to technical virtuosity on both sides. As the book closes, the hero is moved to pity the girl, and even the insidious thought of marriage enters his mind. Fortunately Montherlant has another volume in reserve, in which he will no doubt make his protagonist reject the temptation and continue in the paths of cynicism.

"Pity for Women" is free of dubious eroticism, in spite of some clinically detailed love scenes. The essence of the book lies in the hero's diatribes against love-as-women-understand-it. These may be taken as indicating the inward fear of the outwardly ruthless male faced by disarming femininity. In any case, there is some superb writing in these scenes, which are strong enough to make one forget the disjointed narrative and the author's often repellent tendency to pose. Unfortunately, much of the story is carried on in the form of long, self-analytical letters, interspersed with bouts of re-creation. As a result the book is not easy to read. It has insolence and power, and with all its faults and maddening qualities is far above the level of conventional French fiction. Beyond a doubt Montherlant, one of the last representatives of an aristocratic attitude in Gallic letters, is a figure of importance: an egregious stylist, a remarkable psychologist, —everything except a good novelist.



FROM THE JACKET OF "THESE BARS OF FLESH"

Summer Session

THESE BARS OF FLESH. By T. S. Stribling. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN ERSKINE

MR. STRIBLING offers us here an enjoyable fantasy which, if you like, you may call a satire. The story is set in the summer session of a large Northern university. Through some improbable but attractive characters, the book contrasts the South and the North—the South as the Yankee in ignorance imagines it, the North as the Southerner will report it, after a flying trip. As a Northerner, I think Mr. Stribling grievously underrates the motives of the Southerners at the summer school, but perhaps he takes no more liberties than are permissible in comic opera plots.

He tells the story of one Andrew S. Barnett, a gentleman from Georgia, mature at least in years, a former member of the state legislature, and now a country school superintendent. To hold his job, Barnett must have a college degree. He comes North to the summer session hoping to pick up a diploma. Speed is of the essence.

The summer session has a Dean, a comic-strip character, seventy-eight years old. The President of the university takes no summer vacation, but haunts the outskirts of the session to lend a helping hand when called upon. Mr. Barnett's case is considered with sympathy, and an ingenious plan is hit upon, whereby he is made a member of the faculty, and charged with a course on practical politics.

The course is a great success, but complications arise. Unluckily Barnett criticizes a speech by another member of the faculty. An enterprising student in the School of Journalism trails him for a full statement, and plays up the incident in the press as an economic schism in the university faculty. The President and the Dean feel obliged to dismiss Barnett and

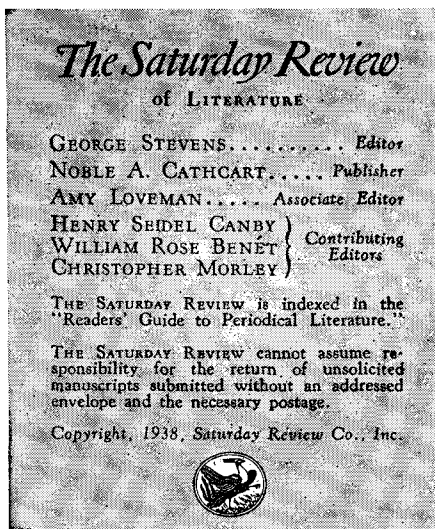
abolish his course; but the author ingeniously works out the plot to enable Barnett to return South, a happy man after all.

Not all the fun-poking in the book is at Barnett, though he bears the brunt. The other members of the faculty tend to be charlatans or idiots, and the students have only flashes of sanity. There is one professor of psychology who lets his students assemble the material for his books, and by this organized effort produces a book a week. There is also an assistant professor who, as long as he is on the campus, has a mind, but at home he permits his child to take the piano apart and use two of the keys as drum sticks for a primitive musical instrument the kindergarten is teaching the brat to make.

If we may assume that Mr. Stribling meant to give us merely an amusing extravaganza, it is easy to praise the book and acknowledge our debt for the entertainment. But if, as the publisher's blurb implies, a serious satire was intended, we must confess that without the blurb we never should have guessed it, and even with the hint we are not sure what is satirized. American education? It has many real faults and foibles, but none, as I know them, are touched on in this book. Here are windmills and men of straw. If students are at times less than perfect, at least those in our summer sessions are among the most admirable, the most sincere, the most heroic. Even the occasional young radicals, whom Mr. Stribling pillories, would have been understood and to a proper degree admired by such a Southerner as Thomas Jefferson.

I've enjoyed the book. Since I must do one or the other, I'd rather enjoy it than take it seriously.

John Erskine, formerly professor of English at Columbia University, is the author of several novels, including "The Private Life of Helen of Troy" and "The Brief Hour of François Villon."



Charles Macomb Flandrau

THERE was authorship in the family of Charles Macomb Flandrau, who died last week at his home in St. Paul. His father, Judge Charles Eugene Flandrau, was a historian of Minnesota. And in 1897, two years after he himself graduated from Harvard, the younger Flandrau published a collection of short stories entitled "Harvard Episodes."

The little book made a sensation. Not only did it portray American university life in which education was a mere pretext and society the main issue. Together with the college rounders, poseurs, and butterflies of the period, it depicted the sentimental idealization of socially privileged and prominent classmen. Indeed, this materialism quite saturated it; and today, the book's importance distinctly is historical. Later, Flandrau reworked his college material for serial purposes. The result was "The Diary of a Freshman."

But in 1907, Flandrau produced a volume of abiding interest. This was "Viva Mexico!" the fruit of years spent on his brother's coffee-plantation in the southern republic. A travel-book, the work represents a world now sunken: Mexico under the "military diazpotism" of Porfirio Diaz. But, a very perceptive, sophisticated performance, and one of the most sympathetic and penetrating of all pictures of Mexicans and their mores, the volume interprets their enduring characteristics. The observation of "the desire, after generations of oppression, of an ignorant and emotional people to assert their independence in small matters"—it is one of the many acute ones scattered through the book—is as illuminative of the causes of recent events below the border as of those which occurred there thirty years since. And as the perceptions and the sensuous color of the subject are expressed with wit and relish and in a lightly, brightly conversational, style, the book possesses an intrinsic charm and occupies an eminent place among the works of its class.

Later, Flandrau went to Normandy and

purchased a villa near Bizy. Several other pleasant volumes flowed from his pen: two collections of personal essays, "Prejudices" and "Loquacities"; and another college book, "Sophomores Abroad." But "Viva Mexico!" remains his best. The tropics seem to have provided the main experience of this man of the world.

PAUL ROSENFELD.

Dinna Ken

THE editorial policy of *Ken*, it is announced in the first issue, is "to remind us of the liberties we now enjoy, that we may be on the alert to safeguard them against attack from within or without."

Everybody will agree that this is a splendid idea. It is a purpose shared by the editors of *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Nation*, *The Ladies' Home Journal* and even, perhaps, by the publishers of the *National Geographic*. Vol. I, No. 1 of *Ken*, now on the stands, proposes to achieve the lofty aim by proving that Hitler and Mussolini are dangerous to the world and thoroughly objectionable fellows, personally. Somebody has hinted all that before, too.

Ken makes its bow with an ample bank-roll behind it, a bank-roll accumulated through the success of *Esquire*. The first issue is difficult to classify, which may well be in its favor. *Ken* isn't a news-mag and Harry Luce of Time, Inc., has nothing to worry about yet. It isn't a picture-mag, so *Life* is safe, too.

In addition to saving the world from dictatorships, *Ken* is going to give, so its publishers declare, a bi-weekly view of "The Insider's World." In short, the low-down. On this score, the first issue is less than impressive. There is a story about some mysterious invention, offered to War Secretary Baker in 1917, which would have ended the war immediately. No hint of the nature of the invention is given, however. A sensational piece about the Hauptmann case is offered. A reporter, it seems, actually wrote on the wall of the Hauptmann closet the telephone number of Dr. Condon which was an important link in the kidnapper's conviction. *Ken* does not, though, reveal the name of this dastardly journalist and the whole yarn sounds pretty fishy.

This is not to say that *Ken* is without interesting articles. We are informed that Hitler is seeking a wife who can rejuvenate him. William L. Laurence writes on the economic significance of Diesel engines. Raymond Gram Swing has an intelligent view of inflation. There is a good article on the possibility of using parachutes on transport planes.

The April 7 number of *Ken* is, as might be expected from the publishers of *Esquire*, big and lush and extravagantly illustrated. There are 138 pages, thirty or more contributors, and a wide variety of articles and pictures. Much remains to be done on typography and make-up.

HENRY F. PRINGLE.

"The River"

MR. PARE LORENTZ'S propaganda movie, "The River," is a beautiful and stirring job. The title is inaccurate, for we get very little of the river itself, but otherwise the direction has been almost uniformly shrewd. It falters only twice. The introduction of the ruined Confederate mansions inspires an irrelevant emotion, for the bearing of the Civil War on soil erosion is a little hard to make out. Presumably we are to think of the unintelligent agriculture that supported King Cotton. But neither Uncle Billy Sherman's bummers nor Marse Robert's order of April 10, 1865, has any relation to that, and better symbols could have been found in Hinton Helper. The libretto at this point only makes things worse: "We fought a war and kept the west bank of the river free of slavery forever." That is not only a non-sequitur in the context but bad history as well: the west bank wasn't free and we didn't fight the war to make it free. This passage has been muffed, and the last five minutes also go astray. They are direct propaganda for the T.V.A., whereas there has been no special pleading in the rest of the film but only a cannily arranged spectacle that convinces by its own weight. The shift from incontrovertible evidence to some highly debatable assertions arranged in a too visible pattern is a shock, and it makes one automatically rear back and ask questions. The effort of such a film should be to avoid that mood at all times, and most of all to avoid it at the end. Any picture of any baby is good propaganda against war, but it loses its value when it makes you look close to see if it has been retouched.

For the rest, "The River" is dramatic and deeply moving, and it drives its points home. All the superlatives you have been reading about it are justified. Mr. Virgil Thomson's score is very fine and effective, sensitively adapted to the shifting moods and emphases of the film, spirited, and nostalgic. The libretto, which has to carry the exposition, is usually inoffensive and sometimes spirited, though the repetitions become monotonous and there is too much radio-announcer's glucose in the bass. The photography is superb throughout. No one can see the film without realizing anew the tragedy of our wasted resources. In spite of the five minutes at the end, few can help being heartened by the evidence that something is being done to repair the waste.

The book that has been based on the film, however (Stackpole; \$2), is disappointing. Still pictures are an anticlimax after the sweep and magnificence and terror that movement gives the original. And when one reads the semi-blank verse of the libretto, instead of hearing it in a darkened theater with one's eyes on the screen, it turns out to be pretty bombastic and pretty absurd.

B. DV.