

Colonial Lost Lady

THE GENERAL'S LADY. By Esther Forbes. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

WHEN Dilly Lavendar queued up her red hair like a man's, put on ploughboy's smock and overalls, and started to tramp from Prides Falls, Vermont, to Providence, Rhode Island, in spite of there being a revolution on foot in the not-yet United States, she didn't realize just what she was getting into. And neither does the reader who embarks upon Miss Forbes's newest novel. For here is a book that begins with a dash and a flourish, reminiscent of the older school of historical novels—a pretty, young heroine, disguised as a man and marching along with the ragged Continentals—and then, just when we are ready for all sorts of picaresque adventures, gives itself a shake and turns into something entirely different. The pretty, young heroine isn't really the heroine, the dashing opening merely serves to get her an introduction to the leading character, and, instead of picaresque adventure we are to have a psychological study not of Dilly Lavendar but of Morganna Bale Milroy, the Tory beauty who married her rebel General to save her family's fortune, and hated him after that. And, once that study begins, it is worked out with skill and intensity. Miss Forbes gets to her destination—indeed she does. But there is a certain impishness about her method of getting there that made one reader wonder whether any of her ancestors were Corriganes.

For the book draws in instead of spreading out—concentrates upon the house at Fayrely and the fateful figure of its small, elegant mistress, seen first through the puzzled, admiring eyes of Dilly, her protégé, seen more clearly as the book progresses and Dilly comes to know more. Morganna Milroy was dainty, aristocratic, an egotist, and a devourer. Yet she had a spell. It worked upon Dilly, the country girl, it worked upon red-faced, able General Milroy. It haunted Alan Brann, the paroled young English officer she had nursed three years before till it drew him recklessly back to her. But it did not work upon her stepson, Claude, nor on Phillis, her Negro servant, nor on the repressed and venomous Catsey Millis who wanted to marry Claude. And out of the spell and its workings, came the pistol shot that ended the life of General Milroy and the murder trial that followed. It is hardly fair to Miss Forbes to give the denouement of the trial or the denouement of the book. Suffice it to say that it is an excellent and convincing trial—the trial of Morganna Milroy and Alan Brann for the murder of Morganna's husband—and that it does not turn out exactly as you expected it would. You did not expect a

murder trial at all? Well, that is Miss Forbes again, or the Corrigan side of her.

In the figure of Morganna Milroy, with her ruthlessness, her charm, and her curious passion, Miss Forbes has drawn a very convincing witch-woman, with certain resemblances to the late Mrs. Mannon and certain ones to another lost lady, but with a very decided flavor of her own. The book revolves about her and she is the book, but the minor characters are clear and distinct, from Hans Pfalz, the clockwork soldier to Mr. Merrifield, the minister. Alan Brann is human, for all his woodland qualities, and Claude Milroy is human and likable, in spite of being the avenger of blood. And the historical background, as is usual with Miss Forbes, is done with great skill and ease. The people are always people, not wax



Eric Schaal

Esther Forbes "gets to her destination . . . But there is a certain impishness about her method of getting there" . . .

figures carefully set among period furniture, in the genuine costume of the time. Nor does Miss Forbes make the mistake of transferring twentieth-century customs and prejudices to the eighteenth. And may I add that she has a style—and a style that makes her work a genuine pleasure to read? Perhaps that shouldn't be necessary to add. But there are a good many novelists one reads with more duty than pleasure.

"The General's Lady" is neither as broad a canvas nor as copious a book as "Paradise" and those who look for another "Paradise" in it will be disappointed. It stands by its central character rather than by its historical setting, and its mixture of psychological study and dramatic event is Miss Forbes's own recipe. As an unrepentant reader, I must confess that I would have liked Dilly Lavendar to have a book of her own—the book that begins with the first score of pages and then changes. But that was not Miss Forbes's intention. This is Morganna's book—the tragedy of a New England Clytemnestra, vividly and surely told.

Edith Wharton's Unfinished Novel

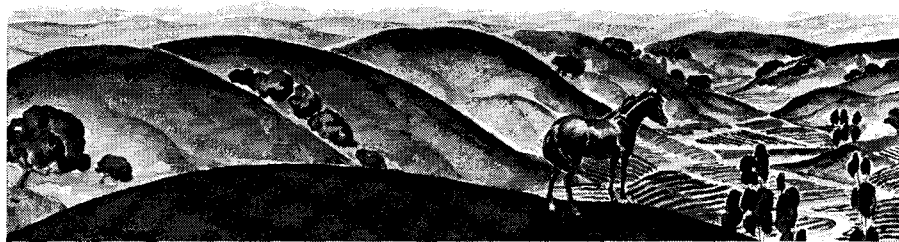
THE BUCCANEERS. A Novel by Edith Wharton. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

THE critics, mostly a low-class lot, used to lay stress on the steep social reredos that lay behind "Mrs. Edith Wharton." (Her name, as Pearsall Smith has lately reminded us, was Mrs. Edward Wharton; the other was a solecism she rightly abhorred, even when uttered by the *London Times*). But Mrs. Wharton herself was not able to take Society very seriously, either here or in London; she took care to live her most intelligent years in France, enjoying such quaint or humorous outcasts as Henry James and Pearsall Smith. And in this last (unfinished) novel she was amusing herself by one final spoof in which she made impartial hay both of English and American fashionable fetiches.

Mr. Gaillard Lapsley, her literary executor, makes eloquent but surely unnecessary apology for the publication of this incomplete novel. It is surely among her most interesting and shrewdest studies. Parts of it are obviously still in plan, and it breaks off just at the point where she is tightening the threads for important and rebellious emotions. Briefly the theme is the importation into England of a group of American Beauties who have been socially unsuccessful at home. An interesting contrast, if anyone cared to meditate it, is the wholly different treatment of a not dissimilar situation in Daphne du Maurier's "Rebecca." There also we have a young female outsider marrying into a great English house; the younger treatment of the theme is to melodramatize and romanticize; Mrs. Wharton keeps to the mood of crisp and tart sardonicism. So, excepting one scene which Mr. Lapsley admires but which I find impossibly Boucicault in tone, she manages some credibility for an otherwise fantastic plot.

But this is a novel in which the defects are precisely as fascinating (to the sophister) as the merits. All of it, even in passages Mrs. Wharton would undoubtedly have given some revision, is done in the agreeable suavity of the fin de siècle. But be not deceived; the great old lady knew precisely and well what she was doing; her plot structure was as formal and as obvious as the seating of a dinner-party, but she had a merciless eye for character. She could portray the *high life* because she had lived it. How pleasing it is that our subtlest observers of British social comedy were (not Henry James, who was terrorized by Society) the Americans Smith and Jones. For don't forget that Mrs. Wharton was née Jones. She remains worth keeping up with.



From the jacket design of "The Long Valley"

The Steinbeck Country

THE LONG VALLEY. By John Steinbeck. New York: The Viking Press. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

STEINBECK is one of the few American writers who refuse to be back-seat-driven by success; he writes what he wants to write, instead of letting the expectations of his public push him into a groove. Yet in this collection of fifteen short stories there is less variety than you would expect, after his last three novels; which may be just as well. The one distinctly off-the-trail story of the lot is a burlesque hagiography, which might better have been left in private circulation. The others all deal with what will soon be known as the Steinbeck country, the regions around Monterey and Salinas; which seems to be populated by suppressed husbands, frustrated wives, brides who cheat unless you horsewhip them, old men who are no good any more, sex-starved spinsters of good family who fool around with Chinamen and then hang themselves, etc. About the only people in the book who are pointed in any direction are a couple of communists who go looking for martyrdom under orders; and even them Steinbeck regards with a faintly ironic eye.

However, if that is what he sees that is what he has to write about; and here is certainly some of the best writing of the past decade. Outside of one or two stories you won't find an ounce of fat in his style; and you could pick forty paragraphs out of this volume that would be fit to appear as models in any textbook of composition. Steinbeck makes his country live and the people live as part of it, as much a part as the horned toads or the buzzards. It is not so much the malice of man that gets them down as Nature, internal and external; the pity you feel for them is the pity you would feel for an animal trapped and doomed. But Steinbeck is not too proud to pity them himself; and if his vision is perhaps limited in scope there are no blind spots in the areas where it operates. He sees clear down through these people, and reproduces them in as many dimensions as they have.

Preferences among the fifteen stories

will differ, of course; but perhaps most readers would agree that the best are the three episodes in a boy's life which have already been published, in a limited edition, as "The Red Pony." The same boy and his grandfather, a worn-out pioneer to whose repetitious reminiscences people no longer want to listen, appears in "The Leader of the People." How much autobiography there may or

American Don Quixote

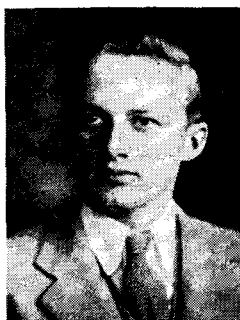
AMERICAN QUEST. By Bradford Smith. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1938. \$2.75.

Reviewed by LOUIS ADAMIC

IMPELLED by a need for greater understanding, Walter Quest, American Don Quixote, sets out to see his country and to peddle on the highways and byways a modern composite of the ideas of Plato, Buddha, and Christ, with a little of Walt Whitman and Emerson thrown in. "If I could get people to thinking it was smart to be strong and good and gentle," he says, "they might spread it around a little and when they found it paying dividends it might begin to take." So wandering all over America, and living according to his notion, Walt is a persuasive example; and returning finally to the little town in Connecticut where he started his journey, he speaks with a greater affirmation.

To a skeptic inquirer he says of his year of wandering:

It gave me a feeling that in a land like this we've got something worth fighting for. It made me feel that in a land as full of differences in race and creed and geography and thought as this there must be a future. And it showed me that in spite of all the misery and hunger and brutality we need to be ashamed of, the dream that started it all isn't dead. It's still the great reality of our land and our people.



Bradford Smith

I imagine that Bradford Smith, too, knows the heartache of having seen, planned, and not quite realized. He set himself an ambitious task and, to my mind, he has come close to achieving his intent. He has done a vast sweeping canvas of America, warm and moving as a whole, strong and beautiful often in detail, executed with keen seeing and, for the most part, sensitive feeling and considerable versatility. The book has in it not only narrative prose, but poetry, dialogues, movie synopses, monologues, and soliloquies, as much variety almost as its subject matter. In quality, however, it sometimes falls short, being too glib and facile, its context too melodramatic, a bit synthetic. But now and then, especially when Mr. Smith writes of the American dream and his faith in it, his prose is equal to his theme.

His chief failure to score the perfect mark, seems to me to lie in the fact that Walt, although anything but dogmatic—in fact, strongly opposed to all isms and formulas and cure-alls—, approaches the scene and problem of America with too many ideas thought through before his great ramble. This makes his suggestions for ways-out sound over-simplified, especially in his story of the factory workers and owner in the city of Kingstown, Pennsylvania. But the book is, nonetheless, a fine, sweeping picture of Mr. Smith's America. It should get a wide circulation.