

A Stirring Story in Verse

EACH TO THE OTHER. By Christopher LaFarge. New York: Coward-McCann. 1939. \$2.75.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

SINCE the days of Owen Meredith and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poets have attempted to write novels in verse. Robert Browning, indeed, succeeded in giving us one for the ages in his extraordinary presentation of all sides of a crime in "The Ring and the Book." But there the peculiar tale was excavated from the past. The attempt to tell a modern story in accentuated rhythms has rarely been successful. But at last, I think, in "Each to the Other" Christopher LaFarge has succeeded in writing a living book possessed of all the novel's virtues, enhanced by supple and finely varied verse, which, while it seldom or never rises to the level of intensely memorable poetry, embodies a robust and dramatic story—a semi-autobiographical and semi-invented tale of youth, love, and marriage—of firm structure and emotional strength.

"Each to the Other" may not be the most significant of stories, and yet, despite sociology and economics, wild beasts of dictators, and the general state of the world, human society is (and always will be) so organized that the relationships between men and women are the most important matters in life. Tom Cottrell, a young man of breeding and an artistic and aristocratic background, frankly one of the privileged, possessed of no great fortune but without the necessity to worry about making a living—an active, imaginative, impressionable and distinctly likable youth—falls under the spell of a variety of successive women and preserves in his marriage of real love no faultless faithfulness. But he is one of the truly fortunate ones, in that he has the ability to learn from life. Most of us never do. Mr. LaFarge's book is about as far from being a tract about marriage as any novel could be, yet it does prove what all brave married people have always known, that if the requisite effort is put forth, the troublous state of matrimony—in a way quite an unnatural state for many men and a number of women—can be made a noble and rewarding thing.

The poet, however, did not write his book to give you a moral. He wrote it out of the compulsion of his own life, which obviously he has had a fine time living. He transformed the matter of his memories and diaries into a fabricated story where everything is changed around, but in it beats a living pulse because, in the fundamentals, it is his own story. As one who is still encountering the pitfalls of a somewhat similar attempt with utterly

different material, the reviewer can understand Mr. LaFarge's difficulties. What stirs immediate praise is the construction of his story, a matter in which poets are particularly liable to err, with their love of language for its own sake. I believe the book could have been edited and shortened to its advantage. But it was allowable for the author to be at ease in the elbow-room a novel affords. To a small section of the reading public, which simply cannot stand a story that is not told in prose, "Each to the Other" will, unfortunately, remain a sealed book. But I am quite sure that the great majority is going to acquire from this highly readable story a taste for more of the same kind. They are, perhaps, unaware that

Mr. LaFarge has given them something like this before, in "Hoxsie Sells His Acres," a study of Rhode Islanders old and new. Many more should have read that at the time—but it was "poetry" and their minds were closed. Now, however, they have a much superior book, in story, characterization, dramatic values, beauty, and terror; and they cannot afford to pass it by.

The portraiture throughout is that of a master: the grandfather (destined to live in literature), the convention-bound mother, the Negro body servant, many another character in the tale, including the mad assassin—but you'll have to do your own finding out about him. Mr. LaFarge leads off his sections of the story with mobile sonnets and varies his rhythms with great expertness. He has complete command of his medium. He has done a difficult job extremely well.

Soil, Sea, and Sentiment

WINE OF GOOD HOPE. By David Rame. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THIS is a first novel, richly promising, by David Rame, a young South African. It is a long novel stuffed with good things, "good measure pressed down, shaken together and running over." The hero's peregrinations take him from his African wine farm to adventures at sea, revolutions in South America, a rubber plantation in Malaya, a mangy Bohemianism in London, the clattery life of Greenwich Village, the elegance of Bar Harbor, the Pyrenees, finally back to Cape Town.

It is not merely a picaresque string of adventures, for the novelist would have us believe that Tony Lemaire is Hamlet as well as Ulysses. Almost half the book (the most satisfying part) is devoted to an affectionate description of Languedoc, the wine estate, and an account of the Lemaire family, the extraordinary family of individualists who reside there. Inevitably there is Tony's matriarchal grandmother, a flywheel of common sense and acid humor in a household of sharp personal conflicts and in the general disorder resulting from the family disease of restlessness and wanderlust. Tony's parents, brothers, sisters, and cousins are sharply individualized and entirely credible. Tony is introspective, and as he passes from one unhappy adventure to another he masochistically flays himself for his weaknesses. After five hundred pages he exorcises the demon of vagrancy and returns humbly to his patient sweetheart and his beloved Languedoc.

"Wine of Good Hope" is written with genuine distinction. David Rame obvi-



H. S. Latham

David Rame

ously has a love of words and exactness, but fortunately an even greater love of the soil, the sea, and the sound qualities in the heart of man. There is just enough gently mocking, intellectualized humor to quench the threatening sentimentalism of the love story and of Tony's search for his defaulting father. One wishes, however, that the hero's adventures were not so consistently squally. Whenever Tony puts to sea, there is sure to be a shattering storm; when he joins an Easter trek, the procession is harassed by floods; when he crosses a mountain, there is an avalanche; when he has an affair, one is reminded of Poe's vulgar phrase, "prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion." Such extravagances in so adult a novel are somewhat jarring. The quiet virtues of Rame's excellent prose and sound character study afford ample pleasure and excitement for the reader.

Fighting Painter

DIEGO RIVERA, HIS LIFE AND TIMES.
By Bertram D. Wolfe. New York: Alfred
A. Knopf. 1939. \$6.

Reviewed by OLIVER LARKIN

THIS book has some of the qualities of a fresco: lively contrasting colors, abundant detail, vigorous and absorbing action. Two volumes by Mr. Wolfe have already described Rivera's work at two periods in his career; these 407 pages of text and 167 illustrations portray the Mexican "monster of fecundity" from childhood in Guanajuato to the year 1939. Intimate association with Rivera, and access to the painter's correspondence and other papers, enable Mr. Wolfe to narrate the European wanderyears; the partnership with men like Modigliani, Kisling, and Picasso in the "rapid dance of isms"; cubist experiments with "hidden universal structure"; the impact of Italian mural art on a man in search of a social-monumental painting which could nourish and inform the masses of his own countrymen; an amorous career involving three wives; the long succession of conflicts with individual and group patrons,—Mexican Governments, Soviet Russia, the Communist Party, the custodians of "culture" in Detroit, the dictators of artistic reputability in New York City, the proprietor of the Hotel Reforma. These chapters include such fresh and useful material as, for example, the story of Rivera's projected reforms in the San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts, his relations with Elie Faure, glimpses into the devious mind of Vasconcelos, and certain letters relating to the Rockefeller Center episode which prove not only how hopeless was Rivera's attempt to base his mural on the "fuzzy verbiage" of the assigned theme, but how ruthless was the destruction of the mural.

Comparison is inevitable between Rivera and Orozco, who, like Ingres and Delacroix, became "two unwilling chieftains of the rival feudist bands." The Dartmouth Orozcos would seem to disprove Mr. Wolfe's assertion that modern society is too complicated for Orozco to grasp, that "his masses are multiples of nonentity," that his art lacks social affirmations, and that, as Rivera himself put it, his work will never "fill a mural role as part of a harmonic construction." The author quite properly reminds us, however, that one need not reject Orozco in order to praise Rivera, or vice versa; and he quotes the more laudatory phrases Rivera has applied to his colleague.

In attempting an estimate of Rivera's achievement, his biographer writes that "even on walls his facility at times has hurt him," and suggests that time will separate success from failure by "that pruning and rearrangement which his [Rivera's] 'biological' urge will not per-

mit him to attempt." The book ends with a question: "What reasons of clique or faction or interest, what waywardness of the painter, can justify to the future the blank spaces and the wasted years?" This remains the crucial question concerning Rivera; the others follow from it. How much of the Mexican's work is of enduring quality because embodying what Wolfe calls knowledge "felt as well as known, reacted to as well as apprehended, absorbed until it becomes 'second nature'"; how much embodies material crowded beyond endurance, described minutely rather than felt deeply, garrulous but not eloquent? Is the career

of this richly talented painter to be charted as an ascending curve which culminates in the great wall of the National Palace; or do those earlier frescoes which the painter now thinks of as mere "populism" possess in greater degree the "masculine and simple" quality he seeks? To what extent have those recurrent crises which have made Rivera the most turbulent of modern painters arisen from the inevitable conflict between revolutionary artist and reactionary patron; to what extent are they attributable to the ruthless egoism, the lack of self-discipline, the guerrilla temperament to which so many pages of this book bear witness? Laymen, artists, and critics who attempt to answer these questions will find that Mr. Wolfe has provided material which is indispensable for their purpose.

At the Amazon's Mouth

FEUDAL ISLAND. By Desmond Holdridge. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HASSOLDT DAVIS

THOSE who read that excellent travel book, "Escape to the Tropics," will recall the humor, verve, and authority with which Desmond Holdridge writes of both small and large adventures. His new book describes a social anachronism, the feudal society operating successfully on the island Marajo, in the mouth of the Amazon, which a few white families have dominated since the days of the Brazilian Empire. Though the brown retainers are still so dependent upon their patron that they can leave the ranch only with his permission, they are completely happy and economically secure; a suicide has never been known among them.

Holdridge and his wife spent the rainy season on one of the larger ranches, and joined in the round-ups and the great hunts for crocodile and wild buffalo. Oxen were broken to the saddle there, for horses could not travel through the swamps. The customs of the island, the dances, the magic, were diverting if not

always hygienic, and the author was particularly interested in digging for pottery, of uncertain origin, in the burial mounds; an art had been buried with it, for the modern natives were so unskilled in handicraft that they dug up and used the ancient vessels rather than attempt to reproduce them. Of more immediate interest were the other white visitors to the ranch, the ex-lion-tamer and the radium prospector, both German, who were suspect to the government, for Brazil was then having considerable trouble with the powerful Integralistas, the representatives of Nazi Germany.

Holdridge has a quick ear for the turn of dialogue or the sounds a ghost might make when walking through his waste basket; it is important for him to note the exact "eenk-a-da-unk-a-dunk" of his complaining saddle beneath him. His eye delights to find the view down a crocodile's throat "esthetically pleasing. In fact the whole animal is a functional joy, without a gadget on it. . . ." His nose revolts at the stench of a crocodile wound in human flesh, and his palate enjoys good rum. A man of great sensual gifts is Holdridge, and he imparts them extremely well.



Cowboys dragging canoe through the Mondongos, with a squall approaching. (From "Feudal Island.")