

The Kaiser's Jolly Roger

THE CRUISE OF THE RAIDER "WOLF." By Roy Alexander. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1939. 270 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by EDWIN A. FALK

THIS is a timely book that tells an exciting story. One July night in 1917, when the World War was ending its third year, the captain of the new steamer *Cumberland*, one day out of Sydney, broadcast an S.O.S. stating that the vessel had struck a mine. However, as no Allied minefield was located in that vicinity and the experts persuasively argued that no German mine could have been laid there, it was established to official satisfaction that the disaster must have been caused by some internal combustion.

Exactly three weeks after the destruction of the *Cumberland*, there sailed from the same port the passenger steamer *Matunga*, bound for the captured German colony on New Guinea, but she never appeared at her destination. All efforts to trace her were fruitless. The bewildered public authorities pondered all kinds of plausible and preposterous explanations of this latest mystery of the sea and finally accepted the hypothesis, suggested by the instrumental recording of seismic disturbance in that region, that the vanished *Matunga* had been engulfed by a tidal wave.

The truth, however, was that the instantaneous surmise of the skipper of the *Cumberland* had been correct; she had struck a mine. The enemy had done the "impossible," and, for the first time in the white-man's history of Australia and New Zealand, had brought warfare to their waters. The mine that had waylaid the unsuspecting *Cumberland* had been planted by the German raider *Wolf*, which also had looted and sunk the *Matunga*.

Ingeniously concealed upon this innocent-looking raider disguised as an ordinary neutral freighter were a formidable battery of guns, torpedo-tubes, and a collapsible seaplane. Their chief function was to permit the seizure of fuel and food from vessels, such as the *Matunga*, encountered en route. The *Wolf's* primary mission, different from that of Count von Luckner's *Seeadler*, the *Moewe*, and those other few German armed merchantmen that were able to elude the British blockade, was to anchor 458 percussion mines in remote bottle-necks of British colonial traffic. Events proved that a nerve-racking voyage of fifteen months

and 64,000 miles in latitudes ranging from the Arctic through the tropics almost to the Antarctic was necessary to accomplish this task, but it was accomplished. Under the very noses of the British imperial outposts, the *Wolf's* mines were laid off Capetown, Aden, Colombo, Bombay, Singapore, and New Zealand, in addition to the field off Australia where the *Cumberland* met her fate. The vessels sunk and seriously damaged by these mines and sunk by the raider herself represented an aggregate of over 200,000 gross tons.

A vexatious problem for whose solution no preparation had been made was that of preserving the secrecy of the cruise after pirating other ships. Obviously, their passengers and crews could not be released, because even a delayed report of the mine-laying operations would have nullified their value. The only alternative to making these unfortunate people walk the plank was to keep them aboard the *Wolf*. A few women had to be provided for in this way, and men of all ages, ranks, nationalities, and races were stowed in the after-holds containing the mines that gradually were being disposed of. As additional ships were captured, this improvised jail became increasingly overcrowded until it was a veritable Black Hole of Calcutta afloat, foul with filth, vermin, and disease.

It is remarkable, therefore, that this account of the cruise of the *Wolf* by one of her long-suffering prisoners, an Australian radio operator, should be written not only with a full comprehension of the raider's point of view but also with such admiration for her exploits that the reader feels impelled to echo the exclamation: "A great ship. A great cruise. A great commander."

The author supplemented his recollections with painstaking inquiry into the facts of the cruise that fell outside of his first-hand observation. This was not as simple as one might suppose, because the secrecy surrounding the dispatch of these raiding expeditions rendered the meager paper records very difficult to piece together.

Although the introduction indicates that the tale is told for the quality of adventure and romance that it possesses in high degree, the book also is interesting and valuable, especially during the present renewal of Allied-German maritime warfare, as a serious contribution to naval history. For this reason its lack of an index is to be regretted.

Mr. Falk is the author of "Togo and the Rise of Japanese Sea Power."



Underwood & Underwood
The Hardings in Washington

The Ohio Gang

INCREDIBLE ERA. By Samuel Hopkins Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1939. 457 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS is an old-timer. He exposed the patent-medicine vendors of poison in the first decade of the century. He was grouped with the intransigent reformers around *McClure's Magazine*, and later the *American Magazine*, and still later *Collier's* in the Hapgood-Sullivan regime. He has a sixth sense for graft and a life-long hate of grafters. For several years he has been assembling the material which one finds in this bitter story of the incredible era that began with the outbreak of the World War and came to a climax with the death of Warren Harding. After this, no man can write of that era who does not consult Adams's book.

Through its pages Harding walks a contradictory figure blurred by a cloud of contradictory qualities—a man with a kind heart, noble aspirations, limited intelligence, a poor education, and very little common sense. He lived on and by his emotions, by friendship, by a high Fourth-Reader patriotism, and by a desire to be loved by his followers. He was an easy victim of the grafters who came to be known historically as the "Ohio gang," and Mr. Adams's book is a story as much of the Ohio gang as it is the biography of Harding.

Mr. Adams has compiled faithfully a book of sources, assembling material with great care. However, he has edited his material with a pitchfork. It is all there—the important, the insignificant, and the mill run of Harding stories. The tale is told with meticulous detail, but it would have been a better book if its story had been a little more coherent and given a little more continuity. However, it is an earnest, honest attempt, and a readable book. It tells the story of the blackest era in American history since the days of Grant.

Morgause and Her Family

THE WITCH IN THE WOOD. By T. H. White. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1939. 270 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

IN Mr. White's second Arthurian novel we have the land of Lothian and Orkney, that is, of King Lot—who is off to war with a grown-up Arthur; and we have *in situ* King Lot's witch-queen, Morgause, and her four boys, Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth, who are a handful—and to these in a magic boat come our friends Sir Pellinore and Sir Grummore, the very thought of whom starts us laughing. And we also have Sir Palomides, the boys' tutor, who, because he is a Saracen, talks a kind of English strangely like that of Charlie Chan. (We don't think Mr. White quite brings that off.) There is plenty of episode, of course. The killing of the unicorn is quite horrible, but sorts with the barbarity of the time—like training modern totalitarian children to exercise with bayonets. St. Torealvac is an Hibernian character of much merit: Morgause's false motherliness, horrible beauty-baths, and quarrels with her husband make her excruciatingly real. At the end, Morgause meets Arthur—the “upshot,” as P. G. Wodehouse would say, to be Mordred.

We understand that some people are saying that the miraculous Mr. White's novel is not so good as his first; and they are right for two reasons. One, a sequel hardly, if ever, does strike the reader with the same surprise as was the result of the impact of the original—by the nature of things, how could it? Two, it is undeniable that “The Sword in the Stone” was richer in variety of episode and in brilliant shift of attack than is “The Witch in the Wood.” There is nothing here like the Wart in the hawks' mews with Colonel Cully. Nothing such pure poetry as his first view of Sir Pellinore in the wood before the latter turned out to be his own ridiculous self. Nothing so wildly funny as the tilt between Sir Pellinore and Sir Grummore.

Nevertheless, “The Witch in the Wood” is a good healthy slice off the old roast. Mr. White still displays those qualities of scholarship and high fantasy which endeared him to his former readers. He is, tangentially, the most expert satirist of things British who has appeared for a long time, just as he is the greatest lover of the great qualities of his fellow-countrymen and their noble land. All he has

to do for one particular reader, at least, is to keep on along the same tack. In our time we have so loved, among moderns, only Lord Dunsany. Perhaps T. H. White should be cautioned against turning them out too fast. Meanwhile, if you think we've given you much idea of the contents of the present book, you're wrong.



T. H. White

Seventh Ave. Local

PARDON ME FOR POINTING. By Arthur Kober. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1939. 251 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

ARTHUR KOBER'S wit and marvelous ear are hardly news, but the forty-two sketches here do serve to define him more clearly than before. They show his talents in greater variety, for he can do as incisive and destructive a sketch of the Broadway cowboy or the Hollywood genius as of the Bronx papa. They show also the limits he has himself definitely set for his work. This ought to be clear, of course, in the definition of caricature. If you want to know the true complexity of these city people, their total reality in terms of personal quirks and dreams and individuality, you don't want Kober at all. He is not a psychologist or a novelist or a poet, or even a thorough reporter. But if you will grant that caricature means to suggest by exaggeration, and to give an illusion of wholeness while yet offering only a little of the external data—then you will see that Kober is a first-rate literary caricaturist, as effective with the bold, slashing line as anybody writing that sort of thing. This is an album of bold, swift, distorted pictures, based upon characteristic gestures, racial traits, clichés of speech, episodes blacked out for effectiveness. But as you turn the pages and see these chorines, directors, yes-men, writers, actors, or just clucks, they add up to something: an astringent criticism of a sham world. We do not mean to be weighing down Mr. Kober's book with a message, but the fact remains that it is not only a funny book.

Success Story

SAM. By John Selby. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1939. 346 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JAMES GRAY

MR. SELBY'S Sam is a twentieth-century buccaneer who makes good clean fun of scuttling ships and inviting his rivals to walk the plank. He has his own rudimentary ideas of sportmanship but is troubled by no faint glimmering of an ethical concept. So, as he roars and bullies, curses and elbows his way to enormous success, he is able still to think of himself as a reasonably good fellow.

At the moment when Sam becomes belligerently on the make, he happens to start drinking with a newspaper man in the town of Centropolis. His pockets are full of the winnings of an all-night poker session; he needs to make an investment and start a career. He acts on a drunken impulse to buy a failing daily, and out of that beginning improvises a campaign in civic leadership as ruthless, as cynical, and as engrossing as any that has ever been recorded.

John Selby has created a wonderfully and horribly detailed portrait of Sam. One believes in the relentless honesty of the study, senses the strange, deflected energy of the character, is repelled by his gross appetites and his intellectual perversities. And still one thing keeps Sam from being as impressive as he might be: he never grows or changes. On the final page he is no better and no worse than he had been on the first.

A sense of movement might have been given to the book if some effort had been made to show Sam demoralizing the life of those about him. But Sam is surrounded by puppets. Most of them are as cynical as he and as venal. Even Sam's beautiful wife and her courtly lover never catch up one's imaginative loyalty. In their vague way, they seem too well protected against Sam. They even exploit him a little. The identification with Sam is so close that the style, too, becomes his own. The tone is lusty, profane, colloquial. With Sam's own gusto the book pounds on to the end, always readable, never subtle. John Selby is a sort of latter-day Sinclair Lewis. There is much of Babbitt in Sam and there is even something of the pattern of “Dodsworth” in the novel's design. That may be why the judges, remembering that Mr. Lewis is a Nobel Prize winner, have chosen the work of his intellectual successor to represent America in the 1939 All-Nations Prize Novel Competition.