

Profile of a Mystery Writer

BY JANE SHORE



Leslie Ford

WRITING detective stories—according to Miss Leslie Ford, who ought to know—is a simple and ingenuous art, without tricks, subterfuges, or secrets. The first and hardest thing to do is to begin. It takes Leslie Ford up to three months, depending on how she feels. In any case it is always well after the book was promised for delivery. She then shuts herself up and writes from no words a day to twelve thousand words a day, also depending on how she feels, until she has written the story . . . no parties, engagements, callers, or telephone messages. At the end of each day she calls her husband in to read. Her manuscript is scrawled on cheap paper with poor ink and no punctuation, but in the course of some years he has become competent at making it out. He says, with iron courage, "Frankly, it is putrid." One of those quiet heroisms of private life. Making no attempt to conceal mortification and wrath, Leslie Ford writes it over. "This," he says with false cheerfulness, "is all right." She writes it again until he says, "My dear, this is swell," and means it. At various points she decides the whole thing is painful, says, "The hell with it," and throws it in the waste basket. This is where her husband comes in again. Eventually—it depends on how many days she writes twelve thousand words and how often her husband says, "Frankly . . ."—she writes the last page, goes to New York, and buys thirty-five-dollar hats, her one extravagance. That results immediately in the despair of her agent, who has been trying for years to get her to save her money, and eventually in giving a Parisian contour (a year old) to colored heads in Annapolis, Maryland.

Leslie Ford's rank in her profession dates from "Ill Met by Moonlight," published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1936. That title (Shakespeare) is considered by connoisseurs one of

the best in modern detective fiction; it has the three ideal elements—menace, romance, and a clue to the murderer's identity. Miss Ford's "The Simple Way of Poison" (1937) is a good title too, by Gilbert Murray out of Euripides. "Ill Met by Moonlight" introduced her chief narrator, Grace Latham. Most of her friends think that if you are a follower of Mrs. Latham you know a good deal about Leslie Ford. Miss Ford denies it. Her Colonel Primrose and his "functotum" Sergeant Buck appeared in an earlier story, "The Strangled Witness" (1934). The Colonel, like Mrs. Latham, reflects Miss Ford's belief that mystery romances can be written about urbane, civilized, and witty people. She also thinks that detectives don't have to be omniscient and that it is neither sporting nor intelligent to ridicule the police. She has met police and detective chiefs of twenty cities and never met one who was not competent and courteous. As far as the courtesy is concerned it may bear on the record that Miss Ford is attractive, charming, witty, and resourceful. She dislikes very much to be called charming, but no one who has written about her has been able to find another word for just that.

Before Leslie Ford began writing under that name, she had done several stories with a Scotland Yard background under the name "David Frome." She keeps the two names running coincidentally. Unlike "Leslie Ford's" Colonel Primrose and Sergeant Buck, "David Frome's" detective, the little Welshman Mr. Evan Pinkerton, was partly at least taken from life. Miss Ford was living in a London lodging house when she ran into him. Furtive steps would be heard in the morning; a breakfast tray and polished shoes would be found outside the door. She learned that the mysterious agent—whom she

never saw—was the landlady's husband, and a housemaid pointed him out to her in a group photograph on the landing. Shy, rabbitish, embarrassed, and sentimental, with a passion for crime, movies, and the abetting of young love, Mr. Pinkerton has been called the Charlie Chaplin of detectives. He first appeared in "The Hammersmith Murders" (1929). Miss Ford makes constant trips to England to keep in mind which bus you take to Wormwood Scrubs, what the Tower Hamlets are, how the City Police differ from the Metropolitan Police, and that it is shop assistant, not clerk, round and not around, a quarter to twelve, not a quarter of twelve, and Hatton Garden, not Hatton Gardens. With some help from her English publishers she has never had any trouble, and probably few people in England, where he is widely read, have known that David Frome is an American woman.

She began writing in London in 1928, and has never written a story that was not sold. She describes herself as lazy, actually has great nervous energy, works with grim concentration, and has twice written full-length books in eight days. That was some years ago. She takes more time to it now. Reviewers find her stories notable for intelligence and skill; they are polished, suave, well-bred, and sophisticated. Laid frequently in Maryland's eighteenth-century country houses, they have a velvety surface and witty dialogue. They picture living characters, and show a quick and sympathetic appreciation of the odd and ludicrous and a definite conviction

that decency and kindness are pleasanter and more satisfying than their opposites. Leslie Ford is at her best in doing backgrounds and minor characters (Mr. Hofnagel in "The Simple Way of Poison," Miss Isabel Doyle in "False to Any Man," Elsie Carter in "Ill Met by Moonlight") and fights a tendency to let them run away with her story. She has no interest in maniacs, perverts, and gangsters; her murderers, and usually her corpses, are cultivated and well-mannered ladies and gentlemen. She has been translated into nine languages. Her favorite detectives in modern fiction are Charlie Chan, Mr. Campion, and M. Poirot. The best exposition of how to write mystery stories is Aristotle's "Poetics." There are several simple modern rules, but the only one of any importance is that writing must be done by hand on ruled yellow paper of foolscap size.

The mystery writer's life has harrowing experiences from time to time. Miss Ford was once caught red-handed by the Palace watchman in Williamsburg, snooping around the Canal late at night. A conversation took place, tense at first, beginning:

W. - - - "What are you doing there?"

L. F. - - - "I am looking for a good place to hide a shotgun."

A couple of years ago she was dragged out of a burning apartment house and down a ladder by the Baltimore Fire Department, clutching a cocker spaniel under one arm and a manuscript under the other. The spaniel (Dr. Watson) was all right, but the manuscript ("Reno Rendezvous") cascaded down the ladder and into the gutter. It was salvaged by fire chiefs, police lieutenants, and bystanders. Miss Ford had just finished the sentence, "... something in the atmosphere so tense and alive and wrong that I could almost feel it touching me made every nerve and fibre of my body suddenly taut and aware." She then looked up and was tautly aware that the atmosphere was smoke and the spaniel had retired in dismay under the sofa. It took five minutes to get him out, and Miss Ford barely made it to the window.

Her most harrowing experience was when she finished a particularly refractory book with a frantic burst of forty pages and found next morning that they had got into the garbage. The garbage had been collected, and when a desperate chase through the streets located the garbage wagon, it had been emptied. A three-hours' search on the city dump turned up all forty pages, soiled and malodorous. They are preserved in her husband's unique collection of Fordiana.

Rather than try to write them again Miss Ford would have thrown the whole book away.

Leslie Ford had an interesting life even before she became a "slick" writer. She was the daughter of an Episcopal clergyman, the Rev. Milnor Jones, who was born at Chestertown, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, where the family had settled in the eighteenth century. His father was rector of Emmanuel Church at Chestertown for twenty years and was a member of the board of visitors at Washington College. On her mother's side she is descended from the Calvert family who founded Maryland in 1634.

Her father's work in the church took him into mission fields of the South Carolina and Tennessee mountains and later to California, where



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the subject of this sketch was born. Perhaps having ten brothers and sisters to play with gave little Zenith (Leslie Ford's given name) experience in practising that charm which draws people to her now.

Miss Ford claims to have been brought up, at Smith River, by a squaw in a papoose basket, and she still has the papoose basket. She left there at the age of two, went to high school in Tacoma, Washington, was student assistant in Philosophy, Greek Civilization, and Freshman 1 at the University of Washington, later worked on the old *Dial*. She has a twelve-year-old daughter Janet, a student at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, besides Dr. Watson and an Irish setter stolen from John Marquand, hence called Mr. Moto. Her husband, Ford K. Brown, is on the faculty of St. John's College; and long before her nom-de-plume appeared in large type on magazine covers, Mrs. Brown had injected into St. John's faculty gatherings a dynamic person-

ality which lifted them above the stodginess usually imparted to such affairs. She is tall, slender, vivid, smartly dressed, soignée. She dislikes beaches, water, sun, sports, and "the household arts, refuses to be ill, and hates ineptitude. She loathes travel and travels constantly, loathes horses and is afraid of them and rides whenever she gets the chance. She likes dogs, gardening, Negroes, and the land. Some years ago she bought a farm near Chestertown, Eastern Shore, that her family had owned in 1800. She can talk impressively about soy beans, erosion, rams, and the practices, which a character in one of her books refers to as the sharp practices. She describes herself as being ground under the heel of a tenant farmer, and figures that with great care, study, application, and luck a farm can easily be run for about ten per cent, plus taxes, interest, fencing, repairs, and extras.

Elegy of a Culture

RED STRANGERS. By Elspeth Huxley. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1939. 405 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

FEW novels are simultaneously so engaging and so valuably informative as is this admirable study of African tribal life. Readers of Mrs. Huxley's detective story, "Murder on Safari," will be prepared for excellent craftsmanship, but they will hardly expect such erudition, such subtle portraiture of difficult characters, such penetrating observation and understanding of a remote and mysterious way of life as are here exhibited. This is a serious book, a profoundly interesting anthropological treatise, and, at the same time, a warmly human chronicle of people whose lives, for all their outward simplicity, are as psychologically complicated as the inventions of Balzac or Flaubert.

The narrative begins in 1890. The tribe of the Kikuyu are living under their well-established laws. There is spasmodic war with the Masai, but life in the villages goes on much as it has for many generations. Occasional droughts may destroy the crops and goats may die, but the wisdom of the magicians can always defeat such calamities before they grow too serious. Young men grow to manhood, are circumcised, and become warriors as their fathers did before them. Their wives till the fields and the crops are plentiful enough for goat and man. Some clans are wealthier than others, but the whole community is ordered and happy. Then, about 1902, comes