

THE NEW BOOKS

Art

THE STORY OF ART: The Lives and Times of the Great Masters. By Regina Shoolman and Charles Statkin. *Halcyon House*. 1940. 332 pp., with index. \$2.95.

Imagine a colossal senior essay by an enthusiastic but rather ill informed and wholly immature aspirant who has recently discovered art and wishes to record his discovery, and you will have about the literary and critical quality of this book. There is an error of one sort or another every three or four pages. The style, generally unidiomatic, runs from turgid flights through badly novelized bits and commonplace narrative to occasional vulgarities. Now and then the compilation, especially on the English school, is fairly competent and intelligent. The author's choice of "Great Masters" is at least highly personal. For example, Mme. Vigée-Lebrun, Sancret, Hoppner, Troyon, Rosa Bonheur, and Daubigny are rather fully treated, while Masaccio, Antonello da Messina, and Mantegna and Piero della Francesca are barely mentioned. Such is the fate of Géricault, Delacroix, and Daumier. Ingres is ignored.

It is easy to see why such a thing should be written; entirely mysterious why it should be printed in small folio and furnished with 120 inferior but probably expensive color illustrations. Possibly for the multitude of half-baked readers, half-baked authors must rush into print, but why should reputable publishers abet the rush?

F. J. M., Jr.

AND HE SAT AMONG THE ASHES: A Biography of Louis M. Eilshemius. By William Schack. *American Artists Group*. 1939. 303 pp., with index. \$3.

In sponsoring a series of monographs on living artists, the American Artists Group concerns itself less with how posterity will evaluate their achievements than with presenting material—personal, social, artistic—which can best be gathered in the subject's lifetime. Mr. Schack, a Boswell to Eilshemius in this second volume of the new series, combines sympathy for the Job-like afflictions of the Mahatma of 57th Street, with a healthy detachment. The results are both lively and informative, even though the biographer occasionally reflects the odd banality of Eilshemius's own poetic style.

Mr. Schack clarifies, without attempting literally to "explain," the remarkable unanimity with which Eilshemius's paintings were snubbed by fellow-artists, by the public, by dealers, and by critics; and the record is one of which neither the artist's generation nor ours can be proud.

Had recognition and patronage, however, come earlier, one questions, on the evidence of Eilshemius's mental makeup which these pages contain, whether the man's creative powers would have been ripened thereby. Eilshemius had Van Gogh's defiance of convention without the latter's profound humility and love for his fellows. He had Cézanne's obstinacy without Cézanne's capacity for self-criticism. Incapable of thinking through any problem, personal or artistic, the painter whose landscapes are small masterpieces of lyricism, of fresh insight into nature, carried on to old age without maturing, in part because his contemporaries were so obtusely unaware of his gifts, in part because of an anarchic personality which would not or could not attach itself to sources of growth and renewal. The hero of his plays, novels, poems, and letters is himself. He awards himself an M. A. degree, and prints an advertisement in the *Sun* which describes him as Educator, Extractor, Amateur All Round Doctor, Mesmerist-Prophet and Mystic, Reader of Hands and Faces, Linguist of five languages, Ex-mimic, animal voices and humans, etc. He is the child who never grew up, and who screams and makes faces to demand attention. This is the tragedy, or more properly the pathos, of the untidy and broken-minded old man of seventy-five who now alternately curses and cajoles visitors from a wheel-chair in 57th Street.

O. L.

Fiction

THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT. By Anne Pence Davis. *Macmillan*. 1940. 307 pp. \$2.50.

The world-in-little once more appears in a novel, the microcosmos this time being a North Texas department store. As Miss Davis describes it, Stacy's is the center not only of windy, sandy Plainstown, but of the lives of those who work in the store. To some it is a jealous mistress, to others a fostering mother, to all a benevolent tyrant.

Following a conventional pattern, the narrative is divided into four parts, one for each season of Stacy's year. It begins in the Spring, when fashion outstrips the weather, progresses through the installation of summer air-cooling, continues with the College Style Show and the Pioneer Day Parade of Fall, and winds up in winter after the Christmas rush. There is an equally predictable set of characters: the aloof head of the store, Mr. Stacy, the merchandising man next to him, buyers, advertising staff, window dressers, faithful old employees, less faithful young employees, beauty parlor operators, loyal night

watchman who gives life for store, wife neglected for Stacy's, and negro janitor.

But however typed and unaffecting the characters may be, the author unquestionably knows the mechanics of running a department store. She gives the lay reader pause by demonstrating what back-breaking, brain-cudgeling work precedes and follows not only every seasonal change but every day's routine.

As for the customer's always being right—the conceit is ironic. Customers whom Mrs. Davis has observed at Stacy's (and Stacy's is a representative American department store) take the firm at its word and consider themselves right in returning goods after damaging it, in taking out a fine garment to be copied and sent back, in obliging the clerk to "gift wrap" each of the nine-cent handkerchiefs bought on sale. They become furious if the French Room cannot transfigure their lumps and bulges; they snag stockings with their rings. In the washrooms, where they tuck away stolen merchandise, cut the towels, deface the walls, and clog the plumbing, they are at their nauseating worst. They are customers. They are right.

S. C.

TITANIC. By Robert Precht. *Dutton*. 1940. 368 pp. \$2.50.

The White Star liner *Titanic* sank after colliding with an iceberg on Sunday morning, April 14, 1912. When she went down, 1,500 of her full crew and passenger list of 2,208 were carried with her. The world, less accustomed to a daily ration of horror than it is today, was profoundly shocked. The

"A small but unforgettable masterpiece."

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Ake and His World

by Bertil Malmberg

"This is not a child's book; it is one of the world's best books about a child."—MAY LAMBERTON BECKER, N.Y. *Herald Tribune Books*. Illus., \$2.00

FARRAR & RINEHART, N.Y.

disaster was viewed as a warning by the religious, a technical blunder by the scientific-minded, another symptom of a reckless era by the philosophical. In the ensuing years some forty-three books and pamphlets have presented the picture of that fateful maiden voyage; extant are poems, memoirs, films, histories, proceedings, memorials, and relief reports in half a dozen languages.

This is extraordinary coverage. The mere facts about the *Titanic* and their testimonial to human dignity and courage in the face of death still produce shudders. The same cannot be said for Mr. Precht's novelistic orchestration on a plan that suggests the author's admiration for Thomas Mann's "Zauberberg." He sees it as an allegory: it was not merely the sinking of a ship but of a period, and the "Titans" aboard were only the first of an obsolescent class to meet extinction.

The intention is praiseworthy, the method almost as old-fashioned as the jacket illustration. All characters, real and imaginary, are painted in broad black-and-white strokes denoting either Virtue or Villainy. The already incredible tale is over-embroidered with wordy philosophical dialogues, economic and historical discussions of a studied and peculiarly Germanic profundity heavy enough to have sunk the ship without nature's intervention. Some of the invented melodramatics concern (a) rich and silly virgin seduced by blackmailer; (b) inarticulate secretary passionately attached to her employer; (c) tall, handsome blonde brother and sister on the verge of incest; (d) thieves trapped in strong room—Thief One murders Thief Two then.

Expansion of the tale to include all decks of the ship doesn't seem to have made it more thrilling; it has more impact in the encyclopedias. Possibly this is because they consider the ship as a beautiful, swift-moving thing of steel. Mr. Precht sometimes makes the reader feel that the *Titanic* was constructed of solid concrete. G. C.

THE TWENTY-FIFTH HOUR. By Herbert Best. Random House. 1940. 321 pp. \$2.50.

The apocalyptic literature of that next war which has become the current one is herewith enriched by one more volume. It does not differ widely from its predecessors. There is the familiar statement of the technical elements of the universal catastrophe—those old friends, unrestricted aerial bombing and disease warfare, resulting in the collapse of all governments. There is the usual effort to focus the general tragedy through its effect on surviving individuals—in this case a lieutenant from a British regiment and a girl who had taken a tubercular brother to an island in the Caribbean. Nor is it new in its implied comment that another (this) war will make necessary the reconstruction of civilization out of some other system of thought than that of Western Europe.

But these elements have become common to the entire school of literature. Without the thesis there would be no book; without imagining a destructive process more explosive than the likely slow decay there would be no survivors from the golden age and hence no novel. It is therefore probably not quite fair to remark on the unoriginality of a work that merely happens to fall into the same frame of reference as several others—notably John Collier's "Full Circle."

Within that frame this is a good specimen. It has smoothness of execution, a good narrative style, interesting action. Once the somewhat implausible basic postulate—of a European war of mutual extermination—is accepted, the detail of what follows is both convincing and eloquently put. And to the final complaint that the characters are types rather than individuals, it is surely possible to answer that this is a novel not so much about the fate of men as of Man.

F. P.

International

SHANGHAI: CITY FOR SALE. By Ernest O. Hauser. Harcourt, Brace. 1940. 323 pp., with index. \$3.

This is a story of Shanghai, fifth largest city in the world, as seen through the eyes of a newspaperman and writer on Far Eastern affairs. Mr. Hauser, who was stationed in the Orient in 1935 and again in 1938-1939, has conceived Shanghai as a doomed city; a city which has "given up the ghost," and been for sale since its capture by the Japanese in 1937. His history is thus slanted along gloomy lines. Events fall into a pattern which emphasizes discord, strife, turmoil, uncertainty. Through it all the "White Man," the "taipan," the "Shanghai gentleman" live precarious lives.

The narrative opens with the coming of the "foreign devils" in 1843 on the British man-of-war *Nemesis*, the shelling of the Woosung forts, the capture of the walled city of Shanghai, and the subsequent opening of a

little settlement on the river bank as a port of trade. It comes to a conclusion with the Sino-Japanese war of 1937.

Mr. Hauser packs his book with historic data but he lacks sympathetic understanding of Shanghai. He does not feel its heart beat, or appreciate the courage and vision of the men—both Chinese and foreign—who have raised it to importance as a trading city. His talk about the "taipans" and the "Shanghai gentleman" is outdated. Shanghai residents—internationals from all the world—and Chinese, have been drawn together as never before in the face of Japanese aggression. The twelve miles comprising the International and French Settlements (undestroyed during the war) house some three million persons. More than 20,000 White Russians have dug a place for themselves there. Some 25,000 refugees from Austria and Germany have found haven there as well as hundreds of thousands of Chinese from the back country. There is no city in the world as generous as Shanghai.

Mr. Hauser feels that whether Japan wins, or China, Shanghai for the foreigner is finished. He is not, however, without opposition in this belief. At a recent lecture at the Town Hall in New York, for instance, Admiral Harry E. Yarnell spoke of Shanghai as a great and gallant city, commended the American consular officials stationed there, acclaimed the work of the American missionaries, educators, and physicians, and was warm in his reference to American business men who have stayed by their post through clash and strife.

If the Japanese win the war the international laws protecting American interests in China must be enforced. If the Chinese win, on the other hand, Chinese foreign relations will, in all probability, be adjusted and there will be greater opportunity than ever before for American business, for the Chinese government will seek foreign capital for carrying out the great industrial program so disastrously retarded in 1937. E. L. B.

ANSWERS TO QUIZ No. 12

1. Voltaire.
2. Currer Bell.
3. Artemus Ward.
4. Mark Twain.
5. E. M. Delafield.
6. Ouida.
7. Lewis Carroll.
8. George Sand.
9. George Eliot.
10. Mrs. Silence Dogood.
11. Ik Marvel.
12. Ossian.
13. Saki.
14. Anthony Abbot.
15. O. Henry.
16. AE.
17. Josh Billings.
18. Anatole France.
19. Pierre Loti.
20. S. S. Van Dine.

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An account of "the Mother of Parliaments", showing the precedents, conventions and practices under which the British Parliamentary System works.

**CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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Books into Pictures

THOMAS BURTON

HERE are several recent books which this department commends to Hollywood as likely motion picture material:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THE WAR YEARS. By Carl Sandburg.

Here is the material of a great motion picture that in matter and content is much superior to "Abe Lincoln of Illinois." As a poet and historian, Carl Sandburg has an eternal and understanding touch that Robert Sherwood never had. Sandburg is better able to understand this groping for expression of humanity.

"The War Years" contains scene after scene that could become great moments of motion picture history. There is Washington itself, full of office-seekers and gay parties and sellers of pork and shoddy and paper shoes. There are the men in office and out who hate Lincoln—and who in scene after scene bow to the will of the lean, black-dressed man with the chin whiskers. Lincoln comes through these volumes as a great statesman. His simple attack on pomp and snobbery is shown in page after page. Such things are natural screen material.

As for drama—what could be greater than Early's attack on Washington—when the Southern general held Washington in his power with 30,000 barefooted, hairy followers and let it go because he didn't know the city was empty of troops? Or the moment when England was ready to declare war, and Lincoln had them call off the war by freeing three prisoners of war? Or the day of the speech at Gettysburg when he knew he had left a son behind who was deathly sick; when his wife was slowly going mad; when his own Cabinet was plotting against him; when the Copperheads were whispering that the hopes of the Union lay dead in the peach orchards at Gettysburg; when after he had delivered a great and stirring address, the people just stood there staring up at him—not lifting a voice or a hand and he left the field feeling his speech had failed and all that he had said and done was a failure? This is motion picture material.

And what of the great drama of his death? Would any writer of plays ever have dared to put such a dramatic finish on his work? Lincoln, his work done—his heart feeling for the South—tired—30 pounds underweight, goes to relax at a play. In the background a fool and a madman is plotting his silly and bloody little putsch with a handful of demented storm-troopers. The drama climbs as the plot starts; the plotters gather, make mistakes, carry out a few of their plans, and then—as Lincoln sits smiling at the native actors, Booth strikes . . . flees in the night with a broken

foot and a boot full of blood, and Lincoln goes into his last sleep, as one of the men around the bed, thinking perhaps of history, mouths the line—"Now he belongs to the ages . . ."

And who shall play the Lincoln—Sandburg's, America's Lincoln? Raymond Massey is that Lincoln. I said so when I saw the motion picture he had made of the younger Lincoln—and having seen the picture again I know he will make a great Lincoln of the war years. Sandburg should write his own motion picture script. No man living knows more about Lincoln—and a greater virtue is that no one feels so closely the spirit and the mood of the man who's story this is. Sandburg is an artist of environment, an expert among native linguists. Great sections of "The War Years" are almost pure cinema in their flow of scene and action and comment. The great stirring chapter on Lincoln's funeral procession is a climax that few productions will be able to equal.

★ ★

THE NAZARENE. By Sholem Asch.

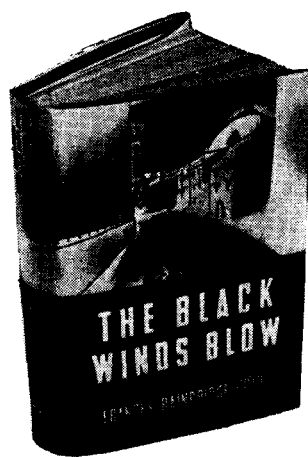
The motion pictures have again and again touched on the Christ theme and failed. The most dreadful was the

multi-million dollar artcraft production "King of Kings." "The Nazarene" is a fresh version with many new approaches to the Christ story. It is not written in the grave, sepulchral manner so often used by writers of this theme. Sholem Asch presents his material in a great story with an interpretation that is as timely as "Grapes of Wrath" and as interesting as the over-publicized "Gone with the Wind." Hollywood does not know its own strength. It is surprised every time it hatches out a great picture. Here is a theme and treatment which should surprise them again.

★ ★

SINCE YESTERDAY. By Frederick Lewis Allen.

Behind us lie the Threadbare Thirties, crystalized into yesterdays. Over our shoulders we can still see the last decade marching backward along the halls of history with a forced jocularity. It was a decade that we will not soon forget, a decade whose events may see the shattering of our shortening civilization or a new hope for man. Only an illiterate idealist would call it a happy decade. "Since Yesterday" should be the base from which a motion picture history of the Thirties will be built. The whole spirit and madness and nerve-tearing lament and turmoil can be captured in a simple style, telling of people and events as they slide toward the Second World



Second
printing

Frances Bainbridge Colby's remarkable novel is "adroit, moving, observant . . . She has a wicked eye for the follies of social intercourse."—N. Y. TIMES BOOK REVIEW.

The Black Winds Blow tells the story of a woman who moves in exactly the same sewing circles as Santayana's Mrs. Alden and Marquand's Mrs. Apley.

(\$2.50, Harrison-Hilton Books, N. Y.)