

The Astor Family And Their Era

THE ASTORS. By Harvey O'Connor.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1941.
488 pp., with index. \$3.75.

Reviewed by DENIS TILDEN LYNCH

THIS is a history of the Astor family from 1784, when John Jacob Astor, son of a German butcher, settled here, down to the contemporary doings of the so-called Cliveden Set. It is not a pleasant history. But that is the fault of the Astors.

How William Waldorf Astor bought a peerage after two unsuccessful attempts to buy a seat in our own House of Representatives is almost as notorious as the criminal neglect of the Astor slums. But few of this generation know of his studied affronts to the land which gave him birth and a fortune so large that he could humor his most extravagant fancies. He presented to the Royal United Service Museum the battle flag of the U. S. frigate *Chesapeake*. This standard waved over the dying Lawrence as he gave his last command: "Don't give up the ship!" In the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which Astor also acquired with gold from his noisome tenements and other New York City properties, he wrote: "I never wished to live at Brookdale where Hawthorne went to



Vincent Astor chats with his mother, Lady Ribblesdale.

learn that wealth is nothing, nor should I have been content at Walden with the contemplation of nature and a daily plate of Thoreau's bean soup." He also bought with American gold a family tree which transformed his humble German ancestor into a scion of a noble Spanish house, a transformation accomplished by inventing an imaginary person and juggling a date by thirty years. Anything they coveted, if for sale, was theirs. One of milord's sons outdid his father's journalistic ventures by buying *The Times*, the Thunderer itself. Little that is unworthy, bizarre, or scandalous in the careers of the Astors and their kin, is missed or muted.

The work represents considerable research; but a little more would have made impossible such passages as: "It was said that a triumvirate really ran the city: (William B.) Astor, Alexander T. Stewart, and Cornelius Vanderbilt . . . Astor and Stewart had one interest in common: the protection and advancement of Broadway. New York was preëminently the city of one street." These three never ruled the metropolis; and New York as a one-street city is as romantic as the fleeting references to the big day's loot of the Tweed Ring, the manner of the Ring's exposure, and the characterization of Fernando Wood, a proven swindler with an unclean tongue, as "brilliant and cultured." The filth of this groggery graduate, in affidavit form, is available at any large library. Someone gulled Mr. O'Connor into believing that "the only authentic voice of the slums was heard in the Socialist papers," and that "it was left to a young Danish reporter (Jacob Riis) . . . to see the slums as they are and mix compassion and indignation in his description." Nearly two decades before Riis saw an American slum, Horace Greeley started the fight against these breeders of crime and disease, and other journals—socialist papers were then unknown—followed the *Tribune's* lead. And far abler writers than Riis recorded the horrors of the slums before and after his arrival here. John Jay, a firm believer in the Republic, is set down as a leader of "the Federal aristocrats."

These lapses do not impair the indictment of the owners of the Astor slums for avariciousness and brutality. Vincent Astor, the "most prepossessing of all the American Astors" to Mr. O'Connor, is not named in any of the counts. But the presentment occasionally suffers for want of unity, notably in its treatment of William Waldorf Astor.

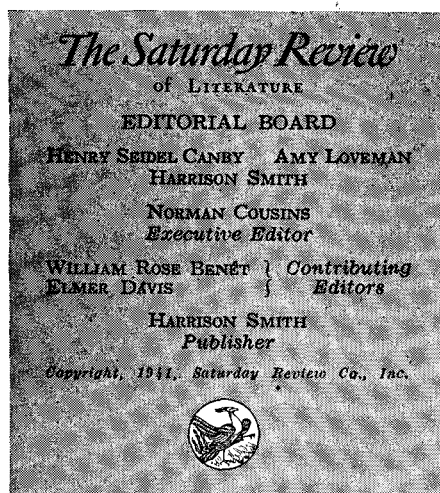
Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

CHINESE IN LITERATURE

Chinese characters are not often portrayed in occidental literature, but when they are they are generally admirable and unforgettable. Briefly described here are ten outstanding Chinese whom you must have met before. Do you remember them? Allowing 5 points for each one whose name you recall, and another 5 for the story in which he appears, a score of 60 is par, 70 is good, and 75 or better is excellent. The answers are on page 18.

1. A member of the Honolulu police force, this brilliant Chinese detective was ever ready with an apt and scholarly quotation.
2. An accident led this lubberly boy to discover the art of roasting pig.
3. On a plot of ground measuring ten miles in area, this Chinese emperor had a stately palace built which had running water and natural refrigeration.
4. With a smile that was child-like and bland, this heathen Chinese proceeded to trim a couple of card sharps at their own game.
5. Gold extorted from a frightened refugee and precious stones stolen by his wife were the foundation of this land-hungry farmer's fortune.
6. By means of a magic lamp he built a palace with 24 windows, all but one being set in frames made of precious stones, and his father-in-law, a sultan, exhausted his treasury trying to finish the last window.
7. This Manchu princess, who played beautifully on the harpsichord, looked 18 although she was really 64 years old.
8. When a drunken and brutal prize-fighter had driven his 12-year-old daughter to live in a Limehouse bagnio, she was rescued and cherished by this friendless Chinese sailor.
9. When Gerrit Ammidon sailed home to Salem, he brought with him this high-born Chinese wife whom he had married to save her from death.
10. A young Venetian missionary converted this charming little daughter of Kubla Khan to Christianity and finally married her.



CULTURAL SOLIDARITY

THERE is a good deal of non-sense written and spoken about culture and cultures. You might suppose that the only reason for the recent novel prize contest conducted jointly by Farrar and Rinehart and *Redbook Magazine* is the opportunity offered by the publication of fine Latin-American novels to learn more about the vital and interesting peoples to the South. But culture means more than the satisfaction of curiosity. The influx of Latin-American books into American English, and the reciprocal movement of our books southward, has a much greater importance than this. Culture is more unitary than it is diverse. It is the age-long struggle of the few, wherever they may be, against the far older forces that bind the mind and dull the spirit of the individual, and make societies anti-social in everything but the mechanisms of tyranny and toil. Find a creative writer, not the prostitute of dogmatisms, whether in China or Chile or Chicago and you will find an imagination more like than unlike the imagination of his fellow creative writers everywhere. This is why freedom of speech, so hard won, has been regarded as precious, by minorities at least, in every nation. For without reasonable freedom of speech, it becomes impossible for the like-minded in the essentials of fine living to know that they *are* like-minded, and so keep up what will always be an endless fight against blind force, against perverted egoism, against wilful distrust and hatred of normal human nature seeking life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

When the barriers of geography and language are broken down, as through the Latin-American novel contest, the humanities of the Western Hemisphere also are enriched, and concern with what man must have in order to stay human becomes, to put it in the lowest terms, a little more intelligent.

H. S. C.

Home Is Where

By Louis Hasley

LIGHTS that have been on all day in offices begin to vanish, one by one. The bitter January has been forgotten since morning, with lunch in the house cafeteria.

The last typist scatters a few tat-a-tat-tats on the inert air

closes her desk, rushes to catch her girlfriend in the washroom.

All over the city, men rise from their chairs, button their coats, and say:

"That other matter, Miss Brown, will have to wait till tomorrow."

At 5:05 stepping into the elevator goodbye to all that. . .

With tired shoulders they go forth to live heart singing, body crying rest

"Take a Heated Cab to Any Part of the City."

Air lays quietly a cold compress along the soft flesh ("Must get the baby's medicine, the snapshots, the groceries") and fingers tingle quickly in thin gloves.

"Huxtra! Huxtra! Thirty below zero predicted tonight! Paiper, Mister?"

"Here, boy. Predicted for where?"

"North Pole. Paiper! Huxtra paiper!"

Home will be

warm, with soft lights, not the red jumping of the jitterbug neon. Home will be quiet with music not the hectoring concertos of typewriter and telephone the hornbark of scolding motor-cars.

Home is where we live

(is where we escape living)

is where we die (and cannot escape dying) . . .

is the building-block of the state

the nerve ganglion of the church

the last repository of Promethean fire.

Home is where the day ends where we pay rent to wait for eternity where we go when we die where we are forever going.

The bus with steamed windows (standing room only) hurtles along the causeway

nosing familiarly to friendly curbs.

At 5:40 this man of all the city enters warmth light tranquillity, sets the groceries on the kitchen table.

"The baby?"

"Sleeping and better. The snapshots?"

"One spoiled."

"The others?"

"Perfect."

"Just a glimpse—

then supper in a jiffy. . . ."

He took the welcome of a low chair and soft light

(home is the evening paper)

then read his daily letter from the world to which he never wrote.

Something of business ennui,

something of supper odors disturbed the vision, for he could not see

beneath the seeming candor of the words

the teeming blueprint of the world's tomorrow.

His wife was not surprised when, calling supper, she got no answer. For often she found him sleeping as tonight, the comics still unread, the paper fallen to his knees.