

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Adjectives and Whodunits

SIR:—In your issue of April 5, Judge Lynch, the scintillating appraiser of whodunits, turns the statistics on those of the last quarter. 91 were published, he says, including the Ghastly, the Unmentionable, Eleven. Of the total "about 20 per cent is really good stuff." Statistics are unreliable; he says so, and I believe it. But I am tempted to turn them back on him. For I have often wondered, as my eye ran over his choice and varied epithets, seldom two alike, how so many current mysteries can be so good. Can the level of these fly-by-nights, here today and gone tomorrow, really be so high? Let us look.

In the *SRLs* of last January, February, and March Judge Lynch placed 70 titles in his coveted boxes. (Yes, I know that the novels *published* in those months may not be the same as those he *reviews* during the same time, but there should not be much difference.) Ergo, he names only the best, and leaves out not only the Ghastly Eleven, but other mediocrities. Well and good; but yet, 20 per cent of 91 is 18.2. Does he give high praise to only 18? Not so; by my reckoning, he rates 30 titles outstanding. At least, I should say that when a novel earns such a term as "Class A," "For connoisseurs," "Extra Good," "Stellar honors," "High grade," "Commendable," "Good thriller," "Top drawer," "Yes, sir," etc., etc., it is "really good stuff." By my reckoning, also, only some 14 of his qualifiers indicate something average to poor.

Now, I understand perfectly that Judge Lynch avoids mention of the items he would rank as "punk," "stale," "fishy," if he stooped to use such terms. Enough that he must read them; he has a right to dodge, along with libel suits, the insipid chore of typing out their titles. But does not the Judge's enthusiasm run away with his severity? 30 per cent high quality? He is not Judge Lynch, he is Master Goodheart.

Now, I myself am no judge of whodunits. I seldom read them, finding other diversions more entertaining and relaxing. I drive a car in traffic to quiet my nerves, and usually put myself to sleep with a copy of *The Nation*. Mysteries have been running so long that the search for an unused solution leads very far from possible reality. So I am the last person to challenge Judge Lynch. I should not raise the little issue at all, did it not seem to me a microcosm of the whole world of book-reviewing.

If we run through a few issues of the *SRL* of five years back, of ten years back, what do we find? One novel after another rated as "splendid," "soundly philosophic," "surely the best of the year"; the historical works are "exciting and significant," the travelogues "monumental efforts."



"Mark my words, there's something phoney about all this."

Where are these titles now? Does this country actually produce so many masterpieces that they drop into oblivion by the score? Or are reviewers loath to apply universal standards to what arrives at their desks? Certainly they are entitled to pass in silence over the weakest. But also, your subscriber is entitled to a genuinely critical guide.

S. G. MORLEY.

Berkeley, Calif.

## Movies and History

SIR:—Your magazine recently published a very timely letter by Oswald Garrison Villard criticising the picture "Santa Fe Trail," which greatly misrepresented the life of John Brown. It is to be hoped that Mr. Villard and many others will continue to raise their voices in a mighty protest against the distortion of historical figures and facts in the pictures. So many great people and events in history have been so grossly misrepresented. This, in a measure, is most dangerous to the young, who often get an impression which will be as lasting as it is false. To the grown ups it is nothing less than an insult to their intelligence and education to see a historical picture which is a very poorly presented history lesson to say the least. Educational groups should put this protest into real action and demand that history and people should be presented with truth. Is it possible that the picture producers do not know that truth is not only stranger than fiction but far more dramatic?

(MRS.) FLORENCE MUNSAN.

Jersey City, N. J.

## Show of Hands, Please

SIR:—I guess no one has said anything about it because there is a fear he may be alone in his ignorance, but I see no point in kidding ourselves any further—the *SRL* Literary I. Q. quiz is too difficult, and it's about time all of us came out into the open and admitted it. I'm not the literary moron these quizzes make me out to be and I'm sure the same holds true for my fellow readers, if only they wouldn't be afraid to say so.

FRANKLIN YOUNG.

Cambridge, Mass.

## Information, Please

SIR:—I am writing a book about Clyde Fitch and the New York of his time. I am especially anxious to get in touch with people who may have known Mr. Fitch socially, or worked with him in his productions. I am also eager to get a fuller list of theses that may have been written about him, and letters that may have been unpublished.

NEWTON TAYLOR.

New York City.

SIR:—I wonder if you could help me run down this quotation: "A republic if we can keep it." I think Willkie used this in his campaign and that he said Franklin said it during or after the Constitutional Convention. I am not interested in whether Willkie used it. I want to find out whether Franklin said it, when he said it, and where, and how.

FLORENCE SELBY.

Eagle, Idaho.

# Westchester and the Revolution

*THE NEUTRAL GROUND.* By Frank O. Hough. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1941. 526 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

IT'S a placid country, now, but it wasn't always so placid. The streamlined cars swoop up and down the great parkways; the modified-Dutch-Colonial-salt-box houses, complete with oil-burner, forsythias, and first mortgage, are neat against the evening when the commuters return. But in "The Neutral Ground," Frank O. Hough recalls another and different Westchester—the fertile county of big estates, bad roads, and poor tenant farmers that was torn apart and ravaged by that First American Civil War that we call the American Revolution.

Mr. Hough, a practised novelist, builds up his background skillfully. Two months after Lexington and Concord, Westchester itself was calm and peaceful. Already, some of the great families were picking one side and some the other, but weather and crops were still the chief concern of the farmers bound to the soil. Even in New York City itself, the crowds that turned out to cheer George Washington were just as ready to turn out and cheer Governor Tryon. "In short, I doubt if there is a region anywhere in the Colonies more indifferent to the struggle that is developing and less prepared to face the issue should it be forced upon us," said Sam Hilton, the solid young squire of Hilton Manor, to his more dashing friend, Rob Trowbridge. And, of course, he and Rob were sure to be friends no matter how they differed in politics. But, once the wind rises, men's resolves are straws in the wind.

Rob Trowbridge joined Montgomery and the Continental Line. Sam Hilton went with Rogers's Rangers—like many a Loyalist, he had been willing to support the Continental Congress in its protests against Parliament, but to him the Declaration of Independence, if carried out, would mean the end of the America he had known. Both men were honest, both fought well, both suffered in more than the body. In between stood the Van Drusens—including the beautiful Catherine—insisting that they were neutral and willing to receive either side if they could be let alone, at "Neutrality Hall." They weren't, in the end, due to Mrs. Van Drusen and the sinister Maxwell Bartlet—and the war rolled over them, too.

An exciting story in itself—and there is plenty of excitement—"The Neutral Ground" is distinguished by the even-handedness with which Mr. Hough

deals with both sides of the quarrel, and by the characterization of the chief male figures. He denies idealism to neither of his heroes. He does not gloss the deficiencies of the Colonial militia. He shows Rogers sober—and Rogers drunk. And he shows the wear of war—the war of foraging and ambush, of burned houses and homeless refugees that is bound to happen when the lines sway back and forth and people are caught between them. Sam Hilton, the idealist, finds his tenants killed by his own soldiers. Rob Trowbridge, desperately struggling with the aid of the hardbitten Westchester Guides, to keep the Lines in being, finds himself turned into "a combination policeman, horse thief and master spy." And, after the war is over, Lieutenant-Colonel Trowbridge finds his title no asset in re-establishing himself in civil life—and Sam Hilton must seek a new life in Nova Scotia. Yet, for all his realism, Mr. Hough does not weight his dice.

Much, very much has been broken—and a new nation made.

The larger historical figures who enter the book come in plausibly and naturally. There are excellent sketches of Burr and Arnold, a good portrait of Rogers, a really first-class one of Washington. The Westchester Guides are admirably handled and the development of Abe Kronkhyte from country bumpkin to cool, daring, and ruthless partisan is excellently done. The women are much more conventional—Catherine Van Drusen is dashing enough but no Scarlett O'Hara, and the conclusion that brings her to Rob's arms at last is forced and melodramatic. Ellen Hilton is an amiable shadow but not much more, and some of the earlier pages of the book are overloaded with exposition. Neither as long nor as comprehensive as "Oliver Wiswell" and lacking something of Mr. Roberts's driving force in the descriptive passages, "The Neutral Ground" is a fairer and more balanced book. A sound historical novel, it should rank with the best of the season.

## Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

### ISLANDS IN LITERATURE

"There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away," and only books will give you stop-over privileges at the islands briefly described below. Have you visited them lately? Allowing 5 points for each island correctly named and another 5 for the author who created it, a score of 60 is par, 70 is good, 80 or better is excellent. Answers are on page 14.

1. All manner of wild life, from penguins and monkeys to kangaroos and buffaloes, inhabited this island, on which Mr. and Mrs. Robinson and their four sons were shipwrecked.

2. To this island, "where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow, nor ever wind blows loudly, but it lies deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns and bowery hollows crowned with summer sea," a famous English king retired to recover from his battle wounds.

3. The citizens of this island, all of them birds, were happy until a half-blind monk baptized them, and, as a consequence of having acquired souls, they acquired the evils of civilization too.

4. On this island, which floated in air and was inhabited by mathematicians and musicians, the food was served in geometrical shapes.

5. Escaping in a balloon from the besieged city of Richmond, five Union sympathizers were carried thousands of miles to an uncharted volcanic island in the South Pacific.

6. Quarantine marooned, among other travelers, a missionary and a prostitute on this island where the rainfall was 300 inches a year.

7. A vivisectionist used this island as a laboratory for the creation of quasi-humans from various forms of lower animals.

8. By means of fake channel lights, a retired Russian officer succeeded in wrecking ships that approached his island and thus kept himself supplied with the biggest of big game, man.

9. When two Republican gondoliers became king of this island, they proclaimed every department of government equal in rank and everybody the head of his department, with the result that they had to do all the menial chores around the palace.

10. When, in 1855, a shipload of orphans, their governess, and the ship's doctor were cast away on this tropical island, the Victorian style of living was established and remained unchanged for 67 years.