

People of Crime

NEVER COME MORNING. By Nelson Algren. New York: Harper & Bros. 1942. 284 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BENJAMIN APPEL

MR. ALGREN'S new novel is a knockout. Like a flare of light, it illumines one of our big industries—the crime racket. But the illumination is in human terms, the method of Richard Wright, and not of W. R. Burnett or James Cain.

In general, the crime industry shapes up about as follows. At the center are the millionaire receivers of the take. Revolving around them are the important satellites, the brokers, politicians, corrupt judges, the little-shot bigshots who gear into every wheel of American life. Around the satellites, spin the mob leaders, ward captains, madames, fences. And way out in space, a million million dollars away from the center, are the industry's bread and butter strong-arm lads, the poolroom sharks, the whores, the books. These are the little people of crime who live in the slums of the cities. They are recruited from the garbagemen to take their obscure places in the brothels and in the stolen cars.

"Never Come Morning" deals with some of these bread and butter people, who live in the Polish section of Chicago. Bruno Lefty Bicek, the chief character, is a sort of Polish-American Bigger Thomas. Bruno and Bigger are twins, but not identical twins. Unlike Bigger who ends up defying the whole white world like a human wolf, there is an out for Bruno as there is no out for his associates, Fireball Kodadek, Catfoot, Snipes, Mama Tomek. Bruno has the makings of a good prizefighter. He has the chance to slug his way up and out of hell (and it is a hell where Bruno is betrayed into betraying Steffi, the girl he loves, to the mob's rape) into manhood, a manhood that will also salvage Steffi.

I find that the foregoing merely indicates the broader social relationships in Algren's novel. There is a great deal more here, enough to make "Never Come Morning" tower head and shoulders over most novels as "Native Son" towered over most novels in its publication year. There is the hard bitter poetry of the street argot: "Don't gimme that hustle, Bicek. Don't gimme that executive hustle." There is the Céline-like horror of the split soul with Bruno thinking of himself as: "this Bicek wasn't the one to take advantage of man, woman or child. Just a big clean kid; he'd be a clean champ." There are the superbly done worlds of gang and street.



—Photo Reuben Segel.
Nelson Algren

of cop and jail, of whore and jukebox.

There are also, to my way of thinking, some loose ends. After Bruno gets out of jail, we are not given enough of this "modern Ketchel" (Bruno's dream image of himself) in training gym or in ring. More fundamentally, the Bruno-Steffi relationship is side-tracked. This is the Steffi of whom: "For all his guilt was for Steffi R. . .

He alone had killed her." Instead, Algren's pages present living snapshots of Steffi's housemates, Chicadee, Helen, Roxie, Tookie. I feel the author's own creative outlook has tripped him up. I think Algren is just a bit too fascinated by gang life as gang life, as Wright was to a far larger degree fascinated by murder for its own getting-rid-of-the-corpse sake. This fascination is reflected in the darkness of the title; in the dedication out of Walt Whitman, in dozens of lines and passages throughout the novel.

God knows there is darkness. But there is light, too. Not the light of the Kliegel-like Pollyanna novelists, or the candlelight of the sentimentalist fictioneers. But the living light of ordinary human hopes; the light that flickers both in Bruno and Steffi and that Algren reports to us, even if intermittently in the last half of his book. More of this sense of totality would have helped the novel.

However, these omissions are dwarfed by the powerful positive achievements on almost every page of character, of color, of poetry, of understanding. You will not forget Bruno or Steffi or any of these other obscure Chicago Polish-Americans—no longer obscure because Algren has recreated them for us and made them terrifying and important as Bigger was made terrifying and important by Wright.

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

BROTHER AND SISTER ACTS

Mr. William King, of the St. Louis Public Library, is the author of this week's quiz on famous brothers and sisters in the literary world. How many of them do you recognize? Five correct answers is par, six is good, and seven or better is excellent. Answers on page 21.

1. This devoted brother and sister rendered great dramatic poetry into prose for children.

2. Both brother and sister were poets. The brother was also a painter and sometimes used his sister as a model.

3. The brother was an eminent New England clergyman known more perhaps for his oral than his written word, and the sister helped, by one of her novels, to precipitate a war.

4. A French heritage belongs to this English brother and sister. He has written nearly all types of literature, but the sister finds the detective story her metier.

5. We have Hitler to thank for these twain. They are in the vanguard of new writing in this country, inheriting a talent from their famous father.

6. Their amusing accounts of travel at tender years made these brothers and their sister best sellers recently.

7. An American trio—two brothers and a sister who are usually associated with poetry, its creation, criticism, etc. One of the brothers is a contributing editor of a famous magazine.

8. An English trio who last year won a libel suit against an English magazine. They write belles-lettres. The brothers have rather unusual given names, and the sister affects a somewhat mediaeval type of dress.

9. Sir Edward Burne-Jones was the grandfather of this brother and sister, and they are related to Earl Baldwin of Bewdley and to Rudyard Kipling. The brother, besides being a novelist, has been a scenic designer. His sister has created Pomfret-Madrigal as the locale of her stories.

10. Both of these American novelists have lived in France, but the brother is more Gallicized than his sister. His work inclines towards the serious, while her novels are usually light.

Lewis . . .

I REMEMBER CHRISTINE. By Oscar Lewis. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1942. 266 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE R. STEWART

MR. LEWIS has previously been known as a writer of non-fiction, through his "Big Four" and "Bonanza Inn" (in collaboration with Carroll D. Hall). These volumes are notable for a superlative deftness of style which makes their reading a constant joy, a keen but pleasant ironic humor, and a detailed and vivid recreation of the past of San Francisco.

The qualities of Mr. Lewis's first novel are strikingly similar to those of these earlier books. The fictional situation from which it arises can be briefly summarized. Professor Casebolt—the eminent scholar of California history—has just published his authorized biography of the San Francisco millionaire, James Horton. The book (being what authorized biographies usually are) amuses and mildly irritates a local novelist, the elderly Walter Doane, who had known Horton personally. Doane sets out to prepare his own portrait of Horton. But he is a novelist, also a dilettante and an egoist. His book becomes little more than some personal reminiscences of his contacts with Horton. Actually he is bored, not inspired, by his memories of the millionaire. Finally, the cat is out—Doane's chief interest and therefore the chief character of the book becomes Christine Winton, who for some years was Horton's mistress.

In certain respects this rather elaborate frame exerts a cramping influence. The events are all represented as far in the past, and blood which once ran hot, now runs more cool. Old age, in the person of Walter Doane, looks far back upon youth. On the other hand, Mr. Lewis has quite possibly chosen the technique which is most suitable to his genius. The very personality of Walter Doane, essentially the spectator and commentator, permits an extended development of irony, a richness of humorous annotation, and a charitable exposition of life's follies. Mr. Lewis seems more interested in these fields than in the narration of vigorous action or of emotional crises. Even in such an essentially rough and raw-bone story as "The Big Four," the spirit is often light; "I Remember Christine" is almost a documentary illustration of Meredithian comedy.

The novel shares generously in the good qualities of the historical works. Preëminently it has readability—that curious quality of luring a reader on from sentence to sentence, lacking which even the most noble works of



Taylor Caldwell

literature can become boring. He who begins "I Remember Christine" will not easily put it down unfinished. On one occasion even an old-time group photograph is described and made to seem interesting. In humorous irony Mr. Lewis is still a master. This is nowhere more evident than in his most excellent ability to write—just short of parody—the styles of others. He can give us Professor Casebolt's ponderous renditions of conversation, or the chopped colloquial banality of a Bancroft "memoir." The vignettes of California life are excellent, as would be expected of the author. All of these of course are observed through the mind of Doane (sixty-three, but still vigorous) who views them with just the proper touch of nostalgia.



Oscar Lewis

Caldwell . . .

THE STRONG CITY. By Taylor Caldwell. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1942. 580 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THE author of the two gripping novels about a powerful, ruthless munitions family, "Dynasty of Death" and "The Eagles Gather," has sensibly abandoned, at least for the present, the cynical theme that armament kings promote wars and wreck peace efforts, and in her new novel is content to utilize her vast knowledge of industry, labor, and finance as a background for a strapping "success" novel of the Gilded Age. With no axe to grind, she is able to spend her very considerable talents on characters and story. Neither Dreiser nor Sinclair has given us a more appalling picture of the ugly age of money-madness, when unscrupulousness and rascality paid their highest dividends. "The Strong City" is not a nostalgic story of the good old days; it is a devastating, almost unrelieved portrait of the most grossly materialistic and graceless decades of American life.

Franz Stoessel, a Bavarian immigrant, early is persuaded of the truth of Solomon's proverb "The rich man's wealth is his strong city," and brutally builds, and fortifies himself in, his strong city. He is as callous a rascal as fiction provides. He does not sell his soul to the devil, for he has no soul—only a few elemental passions and fears; he is empty and barren from the beginning, and the final sterility of his life comes as no disillusion and marks no change. There is nothing flamboyant or gaudy in his infamy: his Machiavellian opportunism and carefully planned assaults are never audacious, only cold-blooded and sure of success. Taylor Caldwell is at her best in painting these robber-murder barons. Sharp and vivid, too, are the other characters: the porcine German peasant who marries into power and fortune; the gnome-like dwarf, who seems a fugitive from Scott or Hawthorne; the pathetic immigrants; the sharply individualized children and servants. Equally powerful is the author's descriptive skill,—the ugly, dirty streets, the noisy mills, the squalid shacks of the poor.

Less successful are the long passages of serious dialogue, which are often inertly essayish. Moreover, as in her previous novels, the author invests "The Strong City" with such an aura of violence that it overexerts itself. Taylor Caldwell's novels will be more powerful when she forces her characters to more self-control.