

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.

Portrait of a Musician

VERDI, THE MAN IN HIS LETTERS. As edited and selected by Franz Werfel and Paul Stefan. Translated by Edward Downes. New York: L. B. Fischer. 1942. 446 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by GILBERT CHASE

IN the Library of Congress card catalogue, the literature on Wagner takes up eighteen inches, that on Verdi, three inches. This indicates the disproportionate attention that has been given to these two operatic giants of the nineteenth century. I say "disproportionate" advisedly, because it in no way indicates the relative artistic stature of the two men. It proves nothing save that Wagner was the better showman, and that his life was richer in those lurid aspects that hold such a perverse fascination for mankind. There was tragedy and passion in Verdi's life, but he never exploited them for self-advertisement. The bally-hoo that was made over the première of *Aida* disgusted him. He never wrote an autobiography, but if he had, it would have been an honest one. He wanted his private life to be purely his own concern. "Why should anyone go and drag out a musician's letters?" he once exclaimed.

Verdi, the sturdy Italian peasant, was an honest, rugged, straightforward individual whose idealism was tempered with plenty of common sense. He was firm, shrewd and strong-willed, but never arrogant or conceited. His most famous letter is also the shortest, and gives a complete picture of the man: It was written after the first-night failure of *La Traviata* at Venice in 1853.

Dear Emanuele: "Traviata" last night—a fiasco. Was it my fault or the singers'? . . . Time will tell.

What simplicity! What honesty! What serenity!

In this book we get two portraits of Verdi. One is the biographical introduction contributed by Franz Werfel, whose novel, "Verdi," (1924), is a masterpiece of psychological characterization and artistic insight. Displaying the same qualities in a smaller frame, Werfel in some eighty pages traces both the inward spiritual development and the outward historical significance of Verdi's career, preparing the reader for the unconscious self-portrait that is to follow in the letters.

As Werfel points out, Verdi does not reveal himself directly in his letters. He was not concerned with self-revelation. As for love letters, certainly he



—From the Book. Courtesy Arturo Toscanini.
Verdi

wrote them—says Werfel—but they have not been found. His correspondence consists mostly of shop-talk—about contracts, singers, librettos, impresarios, theatres. But what shop-talk! Here we see the composer actually at work, attending to very detail himself, from the choosing and shaping of the libretto to the last rehearsal and after. How fascinating it is to watch him planning an opera on "King Lear," wrestling scene by scene with the difficulties of a drama "so tremendous, so deeply involved" that it could not be conceived by ordinary operatic standards. To his librettist he writes, "We must treat it in a completely new way, on a grand scale, without any regard for convention." This sentence is revealing. It confirms what is evident to any discerning student of his music, that Verdi was not a convention-bound manufacturer of operas, but a creative artist of the first magnitude, with vision and courage and an unquenchable determination ever to surpass himself. At seventy, after a silence of fifteen years, when everyone thought he was through, he surpassed himself with *Otello*. And at eighty, with a vitality little short of miraculous, he surpassed himself again with *Falstaff*, the perfect musical comedy. Verdi and Shakespeare—that alone is a subject on which volumes could be written.

No one who is seriously interested in opera can afford to overlook these letters, now made available in English for the first time. Admirably translated and arranged, with helpful but not burdensome notes, fortified with a list of Verdi's works and two indexes, the correspondence is a welcome addition to a steadily growing literature—and one which is bound to increase, even though it may always lag several inches behind the inordinate Wagnerian output!

Traveller to Cathay

VENETIAN ADVENTURER: MARCO POLO. By Henry H. Hart. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1942. 284 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

AMONG other marvels related by Messire Marco Polo after he got back to Venice, was the tale of Cipangu, an island which he had not seen but which lay, he heard, in the ocean some fifteen hundred li eastward of Cathay, peopled by a warlike, idolatrous race, given to eating the flesh of their enemies and other abominable practices, but "civilized" and so rich that their temples and palaces were roofed with gold. When Christopher Columbus, the Genoese, sailed from Palos, about two hundred years later, it was much in his mind to find that half-fabulous island of golden roofs. One could wish that, as sceptics then believed, it had been wholly fabulous, and that neither Columbus who dreamed of opening it to Western trade nor Perry who did so had ever been able to find it. Then, besides greater benefits, books of quiet excellence like this one of Dr. Hart's would not be in danger of being neglected because of the noise the idolaters of Cipangu have lately been making in the world.

Dr. Hart's book should not be neglected. In the long run, of course, it will not be. Although it is now some six hundred and fifty years since a Venetian adventurer brought back to Europe the first good account of the Far East, and although a bibliography of the books about Marco Polo since that time would fill a longer volume than Dr. Hart's, this is the first biography of the great traveller in English (and indeed, as far as I know in any language) which combines competent scholarship with the readability and picturesqueness which Polo's extraordinary story deserves. It is a short book, "as readable as a novel" (would that most novels were, indeed, as readable!) and it is singularly lacking in pedantry or pretentiousness, but phrases which impress the casual reader only with their aptness or vividness, are likely to impress the scholar with the broad learning and patient research from which they have been coined. You may take it not only as a charming companion on a voyage to Messire Marco's far off times and lands, but as a reliable guide. It will carry readers to lands at present closed to them. The Stanford Press has printed it as handsomely as it deserves; it is a pity that the many interesting maps and illustrations are not more sharply reproduced.