

Emperor Jones in the Desert

FORGOTTEN FRONT. By John Lear.
New York: E. P. Dutton. 1943. 256
pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CARLETON BEALS

PARTS of the Peruvian coastal desert, with its great crescent dunes, its drifting sands that sometimes sweep up a thousand feet or more over the suffocating hills of the Andes, are among the most majestic and foreboding spectacles contrived by Nature. Few places provide a better backdrop for an epic drama. To seek help for their Condor plane, forced down in the heart of the ferociously hot northern section of that desert, Lear and two companions, provided with an umbrella, a bottle of pop, and a banana, blindly crossed through those uninhabited wastes.

It is an exciting yarn, and Lear, besides having the realistic eye of an A.P. reporter, is endowed with enough fantasy to extract much of the weirdness of nature's brutality and the crushing impact of the experience on the minds of himself and his fellow-sufferers. As in the case of his great Shakespearean namesake, the requisite emotions are heightened to heart-break point. Those of John Lear and his companions are drawn to the white-hot focus of sharp likes and dislikes, tempered with morbidity created by imminent danger of death, and sharpened by the petty furies that overtake all men when subjected to physical and mental ordeals almost beyond human endurance and to enforced intimacy. Here is much of the pathological tenseness so typical of Russian fictional characters in the literature of the Czar's days.

Lear's experience is probably as old as man's residence on earth, but as it is the struggle of all life on the planet—even in the cushioned existence of the most civilized and apparently firm societies—the theme holds undying interest, and each individual's adventures are fresh and unique. We recall the Biblical legends, the exodus, the purification of Christ, Dostoevsky's "House of the Dead," Trotsky's escape across the Siberian snows, the numerous records of our frontiersmen. And in these times of arduous war, such accounts multiply: men traveling thousands of miles across the empty sea on tiny rubber rafts or crawling wounded through the jungles. Only a few such adventures are ever chronicled, and as the victims sink into the limbo of forgotten history, the ultimate value of their drama to posterity resides not in the incidents themselves but in the ability with which they are related.

Sometimes literature does better



John Lear

than any realistic account. Perhaps the most successful use of this theme of pity and terror, of man gripped in the horrors of naked odyssey through the desert of despair, is O'Neill's "Emperor Jones." Lear is no O'Neill, but his straightforward account is thrilling and deeply moving. No bird fed the modern Elijahs during their fearsome jaunt, but they found some salty berries, which they munched with grimaces, the juice of which served to wash off the grime of travel.

The story as a story is not strengthened by the asides on Nazi plotters that Lear finds under every bed before the narrative really gets under way, or by his attempts to impress on us the strategic importance in terms of international power politics of the scene of his mishap. His comments on native life and persons are more revealing of his own language limitation, his inexperience with alien minds and customs, than of the texture of another culture. His interview at the very end of the book, with the rebel leader Haya de la Torre—however much is needed such a forthright statement of Haya's platform—is an anticlimax dragged in by the hair.

Lear has made us a sandwich of raw meat between dainty nabiscos. It is almost as if he feels an apology is necessary for relating his stark personal experiences, as if he doubted his book would have sales appeal unless garnished with the political and war worries that beset us these days. But such a story needs no apology, and must find its power and justification, not in external trimming, but within the range of its own emotions, through its internal balance of pathetic pettiness and humorous detail with its intrinsic immortal grandeur.

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HARPER

Five Days in Brazil

CROSSROADS. By *Erico Verissimo*. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1943. 373 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by KATHERINE RODELL

POPULAR novelists in the United States are not infrequently accused of writing with an eye to Hollywood. Here is a Brazilian novelist who has been influenced by Hollywood in a slightly different way. Mr. Verissimo has borrowed moving picture technique to tell, in a series of tenuously related episodes, the story of five days in the lives of his characters. Unfortunately the effect is rather like looking at a series of stereopticon slides. The people in this modern Brazilian city pass one another on the street, or meet casually at work or at play, while their private lives develop, unsuspected by the others. Their roads do cross—but only in the physical sense. There is no plot, no development of the play of character on character. The unfolding of each personality would be identical if three quarters of the other characters were removed from the book. This is all very well in a series of sketches—but it scarcely adds up to a novel.

Some of the situations are vividly

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Erico Verissimo

presented and some of the people come alive, but too many of the characters are types, and too many of the episodes are stock. It is perhaps good for North Americans to realize that the scene where Lady Bountiful visits the home of the dying consumptive, hoping to be surprised by newspaper reporters, plays the same in any country; but it holds little charm other than the dubious one of familiarity.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Mr. Verissimo's characters is their astonishing taste in literature. The poor man who has lost his job is a devotee of Dumas; he spends his last six milreis on a copy of "Treasure Island"—a translation, I presume. The stenographer is reading Rosamund Lehmann's "Invitation to the Waltz"; her employer, the head of a big department store, delights in Edgar Wallace. The dreamy young son of wealthy parents has just discovered Katherine Mansfield, and the daughter of the benevolent lady is deep in "The Sexual Question" by Forel. All of the city's upper crust society appear to be familiar with *Vogue*. This variegated literary fare, combined with the even greater influence of North American movies (a sick boy imagines he is Tom Mix, a pretty nitwit apes Joan Crawford) should provide some sort of a clue to Nelson Rockefeller's committee.

Mr. Verissimo's book ends with a little episode wherein the absent-minded professor starts to write the preface to his masterpiece, unaware that the coffee on his stove is boiling over. "Life," writes the professor, "consists of a series of monotonous and not unforeseen events, repeated ad infinitum." So, alas, does Mr. Verissimo's book.

Yanks in Bogota

PENTHOUSE IN BOGOTA. By *Virginia Paxton*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1943. 304 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by DAVID LOTH

WHEN Charles Harner took the Associated Press assignment in Bogotá, he was achieving the life ambition of most newspapermen to become a foreign correspondent. Out of that assignment has come a book quite different from those which we have grown accustomed to receive from his colleagues.

Of course this book was written by the correspondent's wife, and it does not concern itself much with the news events that were the chief reason for the Harners being in Colombia. It is a cheerful account of the oddities of Yankee behavior abroad, filled with the laughable quaintness of the North American confronted by new sights, new people, new ways of life. Miss Paxton, it is true, feels that the quaintness was on the other side. Her pages would not sparkle nearly so much as they do if she did not think that all of Bogotá except the Harners had been out of step.

She relates with a great deal of gusto and verve the adventures of getting settled in a strange home, the polite surprise of servants and taxi drivers at the unpredictable ways of the Yankee, the excitements of shopping in an unfamiliar language.

It is unfortunate that her powers of observation and talent for description could not have been employed to reveal something of the life of the Colombian people as well as the amusing but trivial antics of the foreign resident. But apparently, except for their household and a few official visits and Harner's assistant, there was no contact between the Bogotanos and the AP correspondent's family. In view of the author's notion that her neighbors were a rather ludicrous, not quite adult species, this is not surprising.

One would guess that the material for "Penthouse in Bogotá" is based on the anecdotes that found the best reception in those gatherings back home where returned wanderers regale their friends with the cream of their travellers' tales. But conversation pieces do not always make the best books, and Miss Paxton is so entertaining that the lack of a real Colombian flavor is all the more regrettable.

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