

The Man in the Street and Life

TILL I COME BACK TO YOU. By Thomas Bell. Boston: Little, Brown. 1943. 219 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

THOMAS BELL here neatly wraps a social sermon in an absorbing little story. Whether he has always been as skilful (in the much-praised "All Brides Are Beautiful," for example), I do not know, for this is the first book of his that I have read; but in this one it is a pleasure to watch him work. His fluency betrays no hint of a cheap facility; he practises extreme economy without the use of ellipsis; his character criticism is unsparing, but never sadistic or self-righteous; he plays on our romantic sentiments while avoiding sentimentality, either of an out-dated kind or the fashionable sort that passes as hard-boiled; and, best of all, he writes with a simplicity that is strikingly uncommon in an age when troubled styles are so often the instruments of troubled minds. Yet, despite all his neatness and all his skills, he has not succeeded in perfectly integrating sermon and story.

Action, save for a few reminiscent passages, is confined to a Sunday afternoon and evening. Miley Brooks, a young machinist with a good job, who has enlisted in the army, is to report for induction on the morrow of the tale. He plans to spend his last civilian day with the Bridges family, in whose house, "in the heart of the Brooklyn plain," he boarded for three years after coming to New York from a Middle Western town where he was born "on the wrong side of the tracks." He knows that an entire clan will be assembled as usual for Sunday dinner and supper: Mr. and Mrs. Bridges; their son and wife; their married daughter, with her husband and baby; Florrie Bridges and her hard-to-marry boy friend. He is also fairly sure that Sally will be there—Sally, whom he has not seen for several months, Sally, whom he stopped seeing because Miley Brooks thought he had other things to do before settling down to marriage.

We follow Miley to Brooklyn, through a typical Bridges's Sunday afternoon, made up of routine actions, stereotyped conversation, conventional sentiments, and violent clashes, during which, character by character, each member of the family circle is candidly revealed. We watch Miley come to the realization of what Sally means to him; the sudden discovery that, now he is going into the army, they cannot be married too soon. We follow them

back to Manhattan and the crowning moments of the day, to the end that is but a beginning.

Meanwhile Miley has expressed his social philosophy in verbal conflict with Florrie's Wall Street boy friend (the only character who seems at all contrived; set up to be knocked down) and has elaborated it for Sally's benefit while she has been lying, sympathetically but perhaps a little impatiently, on his couch. Miley left Greenfield, where he "did not count," to find a place where he would count, where he would feel at home. New York City did not fill the need, but, while collecting guide books, he kept on believing he would some day find the place that would. Now he knows that the kind of world he has been looking for does not exist. It must be built, by "the common people" who "can do anything in the world if they work at it hard enough"; by people like himself and Sally. But first they must fight for their right to build it, and Miley knows it is easy to tire of fighting. Mr. Bell sums up his philosophy as follows:

Because the fact is, you don't have to do any fighting at all if you don't want to. You can let it lick you, the way it's licked Old Man Bridges. Or you can get enough of what you want to keep you satisfied, like Dave. Or you can sell out for any favors that might get thrown your way, like Eddie. Or you can never even realize there's a fight going on, like Nick. You have a choice. And I guess the only reason you don't take an out like that is because you happen to be the kind of guy you are... And being the kind of guy you are you can't live with your eyes closed, or pretending that something makes sense when it doesn't.

According to the best contemporary thought, these convictions of Miley Brooks are faultless. Yet, oddly, he seems least himself and least valuable as literature when he is uttering them. The mouthpiece through which Mr. Bell would speak usurps the place of the whole man he is creating. Some readers, of course, content to value Miley solely for his ideas, will make no literary judgment at all; but those who do make one will find Thomas Bell's talents admirable, his lapses few.



A Tale of Revolution

DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT. By Elswyth Thane. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 1943. 317 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by P. V. D. STERN

BY this time almost every phase of America's past has been used by historical novelists in search of material, but the Revolutionary period still holds first place in their affections. They have done it from every point of view—British, Loyalist, and Rebel. They have treated it realistically, romantically, and now sentimentally.

For in Elswyth Thane's "Dawn's Early Light" all the good people are very, very good, and the few incidental villains are very, very bad. Even the battle scenes do not seem unduly harrowing. The reader expects them in a novel of the Revolution, and there they are complete with costumes, cannon, and cockades. It is hard, though, to forgive such a moss-bearded device as having the young heroine come through the battle lines dressed in her twin brother's clothes and so effectively disguised that her lover does not know she is his sweetheart until the usual wounded breast scene inevitably occurs. And there is, of course, the routine business of the lovers mistakenly assuming that they are each in love with someone else.

Yet, despite many such ancient devices which may seem irritating to modern readers, the story has an ingenuous charm that carries it along. Set against the picturesque background of Williamsburg in its heyday and moving rapidly through the southern campaigns to the final victory of the American forces at Yorktown, this tale of the schoolmaster, Julian Day, and his youthful sweetheart, Tabitha, is always appealing and its narrative magic never flags. There are many good scenes in it—Tabitha being questioned about her learning by Jefferson, the Randolphs, and other Virginia worthies; Julian at the secret headquarters of Marion, the Swamp Fox, both of them with the amused Lafayette who cannot understand the incredible naiveté of these young Americans.

Those in search of a book which can safely be given to young people—or to an elderly maiden aunt—will find this one a godsend. It is likely, however, to go better with Aunt Agatha than with her jitterbugging nieces and nephews. They are probably too sophisticated for so simple and old-fashioned a tale.

WAR BONDS

The Least That Can Be Done

Literary Vitamins for Hollywood

How Books Are Nourishing the Movies

EDWIN SEAVER

SOMEWHERE in one of Victor Hugo's massive novels—I think it's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame"—one of the characters comments dramatically on the relationship between the newly invented printing press and the church. "This will kill that," he says, pointing to the cathedral. Perhaps there still are book publishers who feel the same kind of uneasiness when they contemplate the motion pictures and what they have accomplished in their less than three decades as an industry.

As a symptom of this uneasiness we might cite some of the corny jokes about Hollywood one hears occasionally among publishers, like the one, for instance, about the producer who thought that Charles Dickens was a very promising young writer and ought to be signed at once. Actually, the leading picture companies, through their story departments, have a very thorough knowledge of what's cooking in the book world. When there is more to be known about new and forthcoming books and the people who write them, agent them, and publish them, the astute men and women who head these story departments will know it.

It might well pay some of our publishing houses to have representatives who know as much about the movies. No genius is necessary to sell a Hemingway or a Steinbeck novel to Hollywood. The trick is to sell something less obvious, by thinking in terms of what the movies can use instead of what we would like them to buy. A story editor, when he recommends a book for purchase, has to consider not only the story and the value of the property in terms of the book's sales; he also has to look for a suitable vehicle for his producers, his directors, and his stars. In the same way, a publisher, by thinking of a book not merely as a thing to be dumped on Hollywood, but as dramatic material adaptable to the specific needs of a certain producer, director, or actor, may possibly effect a sale instead of a dud. This is what a good Hollywood agent does, of whom there are very few, and what a publishing house itself almost never does. In short, it's as much to the advantage of a publisher to know the immediate needs of the motion pictures as for the latter to know what a particular publisher has to offer.

The movies are not in the business of selling art or literature, propaganda

or education. They are in the business of selling entertainment to their millions of cash customers. But entertainment is a very flexible term, broad enough to include anything from "Blondie" to "Mission to Moscow" to "Jane Eyre." What counts is box office, and, as the public's tastes and interests change and are reflected in the sales of different kinds of books, the movies also change. A few years ago it was practically impossible to interest Hollywood in what *Variety* called "hick pix"—that is, movies about small town life. "Stix Nix Hick Pix" read the famous *Variety* headline, which, translated into publishers' English, simply meant that people in rural communities wanted to get away from it all when they went to the movies. Today, on the other hand, the success of books like "The Human Comedy," "Happy Land," and "Colonel Effingham's Raid," reflecting a resurgence of popular interest in small-town life, have radically altered the Hollywood attitude. All of these books have been bought for the screen.

Ten years ago it would certainly have been impossible to sell to the movies books like "Mission to Moscow" or Ambassador Dodd's "Diary," or

"Victory Through Air Power." But, if these are the books people are reading or talking about, these are the books they want to be seeing on the screen, and for a limited time a new market for Hollywood sales is open to the publishers. Needless to say, this condition is subject to change without notice. In a few years such books may be a dime a dozen so far as the movies are concerned. And, if, right now, Hollywood seems to be buying better books, it is not because story editors have suddenly become *littérateurs*. It is because they are sensitive to what people are reading and talking about, and have a sound weather eye out for the market.

THE picture is not essentially different from what it was twenty years ago; it is merely better organized. At that time a producer named Richard A. Rowland was being bothered by a publishing firm that wanted him to buy one of their books—a novel with a title that sounded like something out of the Bible. Rowland kept turning the publisher down; he hadn't read the book, didn't know anything about it, and didn't want to. Then one Sunday he happened to glance at the book review section of *The Times* and noticed an advertisement featuring this book. Down at the bottom of the ad was a line that attracted his attention: "Twenty-first printing." The fact that one book could have gone into twenty-one printings started Rowland thinking. Maybe there was something here after all.

The next day he got the publisher



Still of the moving picture version of Ernest Hemingway's "For Whom the Bell Tolls," produced by Paramount.