

# The Spigot of Marseilles

TRANSIT. By Anna Seghers. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1944. 312 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

IT is always gratifying to watch the author of a best-selling novel depart, in his following book, from artistic methods which had proved so successful, and turn to completely new means of psychological interpretation. This is exactly what the distinguished author of "The Seventh Cross" does in her latest novel. In fact, every new reality demands for her a new expression—and the world of this smallish volume is both real and new.

True, the characters of Miss Seghers's story are again homeless fugitives from tyranny. But their problems have grown immensely since the seven inmates of that pre-war concentration camp saw one single goal only: to get out of Hitler's prison, and out of the Reich. Now they have seen and experienced more—and the world being what it was around '40 or '41, they are no longer sure of the innate decency of all people non-Nazi. Clandestine fascism has closed in on them, and slowly their confidence in men has given way to a kind of sad cynicism, maturing in them in spite of themselves. That complex situation now calls for a style of presentation different from the straightforwardness of the plain people who formed the cast of "The Seventh Cross." And Miss Seghers has admirably succeeded in creating that style by producing a peculiar *chiaroscuro* and an ever-shifting twilight atmosphere which—not only through a certain similarity in scenery—reminds the reader of "Quai de Brume," that superb French film of several years ago.

The story, then, is about a German refugee—Seidler is his name—who during the turmoil of the occupation of Paris chances upon the secret of a man's suicide, and into the possession of his papers. He has never known that man, a self-exiled writer of some repute. Escaping to Marseilles, he there happens to meet the author's wife who some time earlier had deserted her husband for another man (for whom she cares equally little), and knows nothing about the Paris suicide. Only after that meeting does a certain error on the part of the Mexican consul gain its significance for Seidler—a convenient mistake which prompts him with mounting audacity to assume *vis-à-vis* the authorities the identity of the dead man.

For he has fallen in love with Marie, and soon learns how desperately she

is searching for her husband; she wants him to sign some papers which, among others, will enable her to leave for Mexico together with her lover. By impersonating the deceased writer, Seidler indeed manages to straighten things out for the woman, while she remains unaware of his doings. An hour before her (and her lover's) departure, Seidler at last tries to confess his sentiments, and to tell her the truth. But with all the alleged proofs of her husband's helpfulness in her possession, Marie refuses to be-



Anna Seghers again writes of homeless fugitives from tyranny.

lieve in the non-existence of the undiscoverable man. Seidler, who meanwhile has also managed to get his own visas and ship accommodation, decides to stay behind. And over a glass of *rosé* he tells his story in the casual and slightly self-deprecatory way Joseph Conrad's narrators used to tell theirs.

It has to be admitted that the chain of accidents and the amount of contingency on which the plot and its denouement rely are not always entirely credible. What makes Miss Seghers's story nevertheless so convincing is the human authenticity of her characters, and the masterly panorama of Vichy Marseilles, that "tiny spigot through which the world flood of Europe's fleeing thousands sought to pour."

Often as that heart-choking picture has been drawn before, both in factual reports and fiction, Miss Seghers's presentation will stir the reader's imagination to its depth. The

wretchedness of petty French officials, the profiteering xenophobia of the populace, the callous indifference of foreign consuls hardened by the perpetual sight of bottomless misery, the demoralization of émigré life, hourly shifting from hope to despair and from despair to new hope—all this comes to full life through scores of episodes which appear and vanish, as if singled out by a searchlight penetrating the mist. A peculiar thematic role is played by that "system" of visas, transit visas, *sauf-conduits*, and exit permits, which, chasing and overtaking one another in their respective validity, make each actual departure seem to be something akin to the solution of a manifold mathematical equation.

It is not without interest to compare Miss Seghers's work with Arthur Koestler's recent "Arrival and Departure." In a way, her hero calls to mind that other fugitive and his inner struggle. They both reach a plane of uncanny calm amidst a bedlam of human tragedy. But while Mr. Koestler's protagonist breathes freer the thinner the air grows on that detached plane, Miss Seghers's refugee, despite his almost serene matter-of-factness, ever deeper entangled in the maze of his feelings, accepts in the end the miracle of selfless love, and faces his guilt. "For suddenly grief for the dead man swept over me," so he concludes his story by telling of Marie's leaving. "We were staying behind together, he and I. And there was nobody to mourn him in that country shaken by war and betrayal, nobody to do him the final honors, as they say, but myself, seated in a café near the Old Harbor; I who had quarreled with the other man over the dead man's wife."

## FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 47

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. The solution to Crypt No. 47 will be found in the next issue.

DFM TPDGNRN BHJTL FMJ  
QFJHCPDRQ JMMN HA DFM  
BPVASD-DJMM HEMJ DFM  
BMVV.

—BPVD BFRDCPA.

—LHAZ HW CGLMVW.

## Answer to Literary Crypt No. 46

A REACTIONARY IS A SOMNAMBULIST WALKING BACKWARD.

—F. D. ROOSEVELT.

—RADIO SPEECH.

# It Happened in Brancaster

*THE NIGHT IS ENDING.* By James Ronald. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1944. 477 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

**T**HIS melodrama of manners will remind older readers of the novels of Charles Reade. Mr. Ronald does not write so often at the top of his voice though he can, to vary the metaphor, pull out all the stops in such a scene as the wretched Gerald's efforts to escape from the police after he has murdered his friend Benny; but he has Reade's trick of theatricalism, of clothing his heroine with a rather pinchbeck and self-conscious nobility, and of juxtaposing incredible goodness and sweetness with intolerable vileness and cruelty. His occasional use of modern psychological jargon does not in the least detract from the old-fashioned simplicity of his characterization. And he has Reade's power of story-telling and of holding the reader's attention.

Ruth Malvern is the only child of Johnny Malvern, a genial, shiftless, lazy scion of the family of which Lord Wavendon, his uncle, is the head. Though disowned by his family, he continues to touch his uncle for odd hundreds now and then, and otherwise lives by sponging on his friends, gambling at cards and horse-racing, and those dishonest shifts (not excluding cheating at cards) which secure a man against the need to work but not the chance of prison. Johnny escapes jail: when it seems inevitable he evades it by going out of his mind, leaving motherless Ruth with no resources but her character and her brains. After a sordid period as a schoolmistress Ruth, by an odd chance, finds herself the owner of a bankrupt shop in the slums of Brancaster, a dirty industrial city near Manchester. She also inherits three children, David, Joan, and Gerald, of whom Gerald is a thief and liar, Joan a vain little flibbertygibbet, and David a boy of strong character, unselfishness, and industry.

Some readers will be annoyed at the fairy-tale quality of Ruth's progress with her task. She makes the shop a going concern; she helps the children; she reads for the law and becomes a solicitor, and she clears up one of Brancaster's most disgraceful and insanitary districts. To those who know England, especially Lancashire, it is queer that never once in her progress does she come across any priest or minister of religion to help her in her Augean tasks; but she does gain the love and help of the

poor working-people among whom she lives. Her best helper is Dr. Andrew Murdoch; and in the portrait of this obstinate, honest, over-worked Scotch physician Mr. Ronald is really successful. It is the nearest he gets to life-like characterization; though even Murdoch has to have the conventional bullying, adoring "old servant of the family" to do for him.

"The Night is Ending" must, however, be read for the excitement of certain episodes, the careful study of the small shop in England and the shop-keeper's problems, and the grim, all too truthful, account of how Mosley's black-shirts gained their toughs and their dupes in the less savory quarters of such towns as Brancaster.

For these things one can forgive the unreality of the principal character, the weakness Ruth shows to her father whose boasted charm dissolves into snobbish vanity—but Johnny is fortunately so cut out of



—Louise Plympton

James Ronald

the whole cardboard (highly colored) that one does not care in the least at his too-long delayed death. After that, with the unwilling aid of the pantomime ogre Wavendon, Andrew and Ruth marry, and the story ends on the 1st of September, 1939.

## Politics and Patriotism

*THE MOCKING BIRD IS SINGING.* By E. Louise Mally. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1944. 394 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

**M**ISS MALLY has undertaken a great American story in this novel of the Old South as it disappeared in Louisiana and the New South as it began in Texas. Indeed, the changing South is only scene for greater forces and changes. Miss Mally has put together the culture of New England, the grace of old New Orleans, and the revolt of the 1848 German refugee to make a testing and a fusion with rougher and readier Americans on the raw frontier. The American story is well understood and realistically presented but the romantic story of Therese Beaumarc, warm-blooded romantic, unhappily married to a God-fearing money-loving Scotchman, seems almost a sentimental distraction from the greater background drama of the book.

Miss Mally has used splendid and veracious American material in her description of the operations of nineteenth century American businessmen from blockade-running to railroad building. The central figures of her Old South are not plantation owners but city merchants whose mercantile contacts ran to England and New England, who knew Paris and Boston as well as the Mississippi country. She understands the profits of pol-

itics and the neat manner in which men can combine politics and patriotism. She writes with knowledge of the speculative push to fortune in the development of Texas, and of the drama in real estate, in cotton and cattle, and the deadly dramatics of tight money.

Against such robust material Miss Mally has written the sad story of Therese who loves but cannot marry her cousin. She is not only the perfect New Orleans beauty; in Texas she is also the delectable cultured lady on the uncouth frontier. Miss Mally never ceases to adore her own heroine but the very romantic superiorities with which she endows her make Therese seem both not quite real and not quite honest. Indeed, it seemed to me that if Miss Mally had only slightly altered her softness for sharpness in the portrayal of Therese she might have produced a fine, satirical figure of the phony Southern belle and elegant matron. As written, however, I was left with the feeling that perhaps it was not financial failure which caused her cold husband to kill himself but maybe the strain of living with such a romantic paragon.

If Miss Mally has disastrously fallen in love with her own heroine, she has nevertheless drawn her in a real world of men and women straight out of the stream of American history. Altogether it is a book which misses distinction but lacks little else.